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**SERVING C*NT: AN INTERSECTIONAL HISTORICAL LOOK AT THE
RECLAMATION OF A TABOO WORD**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR SIMSHAW
PROFESSOR DRAKE**

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Abstract

While the word cunt has been part of reclamation projects for over fifty years in the United States, particularly in the last year (2023) on social media platforms, the revalued word has gained popularity. With increased usage of a slur historically used against women, we're left to wonder if reclamation is appropriate and who is participating in these processes. This thesis explores the trailblazers who began cunt's reclamation — Queer Ballroom performers and women-artists — contextualizes its usage through widely understood reclamation principles, and offers considerations for cunt-curious folks. In a society that has othered and marginalized women and Queer people, forms of resistance matter. Revaluing a slur — especially one that holds intense social power — is an attempt to work against oppressive forces. Hopefully, this thesis will serve cunt.

Introduction

A slightly embarrassing admission about me is that I spend a significant amount of time on Twitter (yes, I know it is called X now). My personal favorite tweets are niche pop culture references, and there are thousands of these saved in my bookmarks. Last year, there was something special happening on my timeline and a pattern became visible in my bookmarks. I was flooded with cunt content, and I loved it. No, I am not referring to a woman's genitals. Over and over again, I saw tweet after tweet about a celebrity, twitter user, or the other "serving cunt." Usually, the tweet was accompanied by a video of said person looking fierce or being unabashedly confident and talented.

This increase of social media posts using the shocking term to describe fierceness was not only happening to my timeline. In 2023, *Rolling Stone* and *Mashable* covered this trend and informed the larger mainstream how "the C-word is everywhere right now and not in a bad way" (Mack). User @Sunfl0wersailor posted "How do you serve cunt in a god honoring way" onto Twitter and received 76.8 million views. Live tweeting during the *Succession* finale, user @kendallhosseini commented: "you're serving cunt? Your father just died and you're serving cunt?" This hilarious tweet received over four million views, two thousand likes and a thousand quotes. Hopping on the *Succession* bandwagon, on May 11, 2023, @adamjmoussa asked, "How do you serve cunt in a way that creates value for shareholders?" As of April 23, 2024, the post received eight and a half million views, nearly two thousand retweets, just over six thousand likes, and 465 people saved the post to their personal bookmarks.

This year's television awards season brought Twitter users many gems, and much of those gems continued to use the word cunt in a positive fun way. Most notably, as the reference for "serving cunt" on the website Know Your Meme, @foldyrhands commented on another post with

pictures of actress Gillian Anderson at the Golden Globe Awards: “wait she lowkey wiretapped the counterparty’s slayquarters at the mothergate hotel.” The poetry of that tweet moved me so much I retweeted, liked, and immediately saved it into my bookmarked folder. X users felt similarly; users viewed the tweet two million times, retweeted it over two thousand times, and gave it thirty-six thousand likes.

While my small world online was becoming oversaturated with cunt content and I began to playfully use the term in real life, I came to the jarring realization that most people around me were not looped into such cuntastic language. When I used cunt in positive ways in conversation, I was shocked when even my most trendy progressive feminist friends looked at me slightly queasy. They were told by their mothers to never say cunt aloud, and I had to check myself: is cunt a word no one, even women themselves, cannot say? As a woman, could I say it? Should I? Should we women say it proudly, as a collective?

These questions were perfectly timed as I began Professor Simshaw’s class, the Op-Ed. In this course, we had various assignments that entailed deep research, consideration of the counterargument, and calls to action; essentially, this was the best place to begin exploring my thesis (even though I did not quite know it would be my thesis at the time). In response to the prompt, “Write an op-ed on a single word,” I wrote a four-page paper on the word cunt and its reclamation. Four pages was a small scope, but I found that there was much to say about this word. Even though I had grasped cunt’s power from a variety of tweets and popular queer content, reclamation projects to decrease the negative valence of the word as a slur have been ongoing for over fifty years. A tension arose though as there were so many angles for this word’s reclamation – who was doing the reclaiming, were they doing it well, were people grasping the value shift, what the goal was — there was not a large academic landscape to roam. This posed a challenge to

my op-ed research, but I continued onwards, and when I shared my piece to be workshopped with the class, I was pleasantly surprised. My classmates were incredibly engaged and seemed to delight in discussion of this taboo topic. Unsurprisingly, in a classroom setting, which can seem off limits to any impolite material, the taboo is ultra-satisfying to discuss. Specifically, for the word cunt, its historical definition as a sexual organ created the taboo. In his book *Mrs. Grundy: Studies in English Prudery*, Peter Fryer says, “Prudery’s first line of defence is the regulation of speech. Feelings of shame and guilt about the organs of sex [...] tend to become closely associated with the words that are used for these things. These words become taboo” (Fryer 19). It follows that the language of sex is tabooed to repress sex itself, and thus, saying cunt has been a no-no.

In the Op-Ed, I appreciated the interest of my classmates and delight and took their questions to heart: “Can a man say the word? Should we say the word frivolously? When do we say it, if at all?” My op-ed was finished, but these questions were unanswered. I am grateful my advisors supported my curiosity in this topic and allowed it to grow to be my thesis. With their approval, I sought out more scholarship on the word cunt. I read as much as I could about the word and learned about cunt’s etymology, its history as a slur against women, how the public felt about the word throughout time, and its relationship with censorship and obscenity laws. As I continued to research the word cunt, something felt missing. I remember learning how to use the word cunt from consuming shows like *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, where gaylect is openly used and celebrated. If presumably many people like me were learning how to use the word cunt from Queer media, why is it then that histories of the word cunt lack meaningful discussion about the Queer community? As we will examine later, reclamation of cunt is not new, and alongside the feminist cunt-art movement in the 1970s, the Queer community has been involved in reframing this word.

I reached out to cultural historian and professor at Johns Hopkins Joseph Plaster, who incredibly generously donated his time to me to speak about cunt. He affirmed to me that this inquiry was academic and valuable and pointed me in the right direction for scholarship focusing on queerness and culture. The contributions to mainstream pop culture from the queer community, especially Ballroom as a subculture, are largely ignored, and this is especially the case in the minimal research on cunt's reclamation. Incorporating this queer usage into my thesis is my contribution to the body of work about cunt as a word, and I hope by taking the time to respect and honor the labor of revaluing the Ballroom community did, others can conduct more research and go further into reclamation of gendered and queer words, consider cultural appropriation, and slurs in the digital age. If given more time, this project would have expanded on those areas of interest.

The internet has what at times feels like an infinite number of spaces to investigate. Because the internet and social media platforms present new problems, thorough discussions of cultural appropriation and cross-cultural linguistic sharing have not been had by scholars. How are people supposed to interact with others they have never met, do not know, and cannot certify the identity they present themselves to be? What does this mean for language usage and language sharing? Because anyone can interact with anyone, the ability to connect and share group-specific language is so rich and complicated. While this thesis does not even attempt to answer all these large questions looming over us TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter obsessed folk in the 21st century, I discuss "felicity conditions," a term that fundamentally means to check yourself — no one can just say whatever they want whenever they to. If you are on a plane, you are not going to scream "fire." Why? It would scare people, and scared people might end up hurt or hurting others. Every conversation exists in a situation's context, and even though we don't realize it, when we speak to other people, often we consider the elements of the rhetorical circle: speaker, audience, message,

context, and purpose. This is why we don't shout "fire" on a plane or in a crowded room. The exact same thinking follows when considering reclamatory uses of a slur.

Knowing how to approach reclamation as a concept and practice – the popular refrain goes "time and place" — allows us to more concretely answer the questions that guided this project on the slur cunt. We know the word's usage online increased in the last year, and it's on the way to entering the dominant culture, so we should take note and understand it to the best extent possible.

Serving C*nt: An Intersectional Historical Look at the Reclamation of a Taboo Word

Do you speak the language? Do you vogue the language? Do you understand the language of cunt?

—Kevin Jz Prodigy, “The Language of Cunt”

In the United States, there are few words more shocking than the word cunt. Those four letters carry a heavy history of misogyny and in the present day have continued to accompany hatred toward women. Just last year, former Fox News host Tucker Carlson was fired for fostering a toxic work environment, “in which misogyny, including the use of the C-word by men on the team” was rampant (Stieb). His producer Abby Grossberg, who said Carlson “made her life a ‘living hell,’” filed a lawsuit against Fox News, and opposing counsel planned to pin down Carlson on redacted messages “that were most demeaning toward women” (Stieb). Slurs featured in and fueled this hostile situation, and in situations like this one, where most of those in power are men, if a man calls a woman a cunt, it is not just a word. Its utterance is an assertion of power dynamics and a reminder of suggested social place with women at the bottom of the social rung. When hateful language is permissible, it creates a culture that more readily accepts other forms of hate.

The twenty-first century has seen incredible advancement for gender equality, but at the same time, inequality, sexism, and violence against women have continued to persist. In 2021, the World Health Organization found that “across their lifetime, 1 in 3 women... are subjected to physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner or sexual violence from a non-partner” (“Devastatingly Pervasive”). WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus reported “violence against women is endemic in every country and country,” (“Devastatingly Pervasive”) and almost always, the perpetrator is a man (Gupta). The “threat of unwanted sexual attention and violence has long constrained” the ways women navigate public spaces, digital landscapes, and

interpersonal relationships (Sobieraj). Studies of verbal aggression in intimate partner relationships find that “language is a central component of abusers’ efforts to gain status and power over women”¹ (Anderson and Cermele 278). In a meta-analysis of 85 studies on intimate partner violence (abuse or aggression occurring in romantic relationships), researchers and professors Kristin Anderson and Jill Cermele found that emotional aggression was “one of the two strongest factors associated with physical abuse,” and abusers use “specific linguistic strategies to objectify, degrade, and tear down the dignity of their victims” (Anderson and Cermele 279). While these studies’ findings are based on romantic relationships, they make clear the power language has a tool to threaten or intimidate.

Alongside a call for more structural efforts at fighting violence against women, Dr. Adhanom Ghebreyesus believes a crucial way to fight this endemic is “to change harmful attitudes,” (“Devastatingly Pervasive”). To do this work, Caroline Criado Perez, author of *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*, says women “need to get better at sweating the small stuff,” which can look like creating space for women to come forward about harassment, calling out inappropriate behavior, or critiquing misogynistic language (Gupta). Criado Perez is right, and coded gendered language, such as the slur cunt, is unquestionably something to sweat over. In fact, intellectuals and activists have been sweating over it for decades.

Since the 1970s, feminist artists and writers have engaged in linguistic reclamation efforts to take power back from cunt’s harm as a slur against women, and they have not been the only group to do linguistic reframing. The Ballroom community for nearly just as long has revalued the word cunt to mean something desirable and ultra-feminine, and this reclaimed usage has gained

¹ See Dutton and Goodman (2005), Kaukinen (2004), Kirkwood, (1993), and O’Campo et al. (1994) for more.

traction online on various social media platforms, becoming more visible in mainstream pop culture. To understand the goals, successes, and state of reclamation efforts for this misogynistic slur today, we first have to understand the history of the word cunt.

Journalist and author Peter Silverton's book, *Filthy English: The How, Why, When, and What of Everyday Swearing*, offers a thorough look at the etymology of the “‘mother of all nasty words’, ‘the ultimate obscenity’ and the most offensive word in the world’” — cunt (Silverton 52). According to Silverton, the history of cunt “is obscure, tentative and disputed” (Silverton 52). While there is not one definitive place of origin, the word likely comes from northern Europe (Silverton 52). There is the Old Norse word *kunta*, and the Old Frisian, spoken in the northwest of the Netherlands, has *kunte* (Silverton 52). The Dutch equivalent for cunt is *kot* but does not have similar “obscene status” (Silverton 52). The *Oxford English Dictionary*, widely regarded as the most exact source of the English language, notes the word is probably inherited from Germanic and “probably the reflex of an Old English form *cunte*” (“Cunt, N.”). Apparent from the use of “probably,” the suggested roots of the word cunt have been debated; while some have argued the Germanic base is essentially the same as the classical Latin *cunnus*, “the -t- of forms in the Germanic languages would not be easy to explain” (“Cunt, N.”). The word has also been linked to the Proto-Indo-European root for woman, “which produced the Greek word *gune*,” which gave us the word gynecological. Eric Partridge, lexicographer and author of *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, believed the root to sound like “cu,” similar to words such as cow and queen, words to him that represented “‘quintessential femininity’” (Silverton 52).

The earliest recorded use of cunt occurred in place names. Around 1230, in Oxford, England existed a street named Gropecuntelane, according to the *OED*. Thirty years later, London had a Gropecunt Lane too as an alley “leading south from Cheapside” (Silverton 53). It was

recorded that the street had shops and businesses in 1349, but it also could have been a place of prostitution (Silverton 53-54). In 1395, transgender prostitute Eleanor Rykener was arrested in the next alley over from Gropecunt Lane for committing a “libidinous act” with businessman John Britby. According to an interview Silverton conducted with John Clark, then-Senior Curator at the Museum of London, this arrest was publicized but most similar incidents were usually not as well recorded, which was likely because of the prostitute’s gender identity (Silverton 53). This arrest, to Clark, “does suggest that men like Britby expected to encounter ladies of negotiable virtue strolling alongside Cheapside in the evening,” willing to “complete the deal among the empty market-stalls in one of the lanes,” maybe Gropecunt (Silverton 53). There were at least six instances of the word used during the 13th century in England, many of which were to name topographical features, such as the *Kuntecliue*, a valley existing in 1246, and *Cuntebecsic*, “a cleft with a stream running through it in 1272” (“Cunt, N.”). Cunt was also seen in bynames and surnames in Old English and Middle English: Godewin *Clawecunte* (1066), Simon *Sitbithecunte* (1167), Gunoka *Cunteles* (1219), John *Fillecunt* (1246), Robert *Clevecunt* (1302), and Bele *Wydecunthe* (1328) (“Cunt, N.”).

Early on, the term cunt described more than just topographical features. Lanfrank’s medical text *Science of Chirurgie*, written in 1295 and translated from Latin into Middle English in 1380, used cunt as an anatomical term: “in wymmen [the] necke of [the] bladder is schort, & is maad fast to the cunte” (Lanfrank 172). In his 14th century collection *The Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey Chaucer also alluded to the word cunt while his fictional characters were engaging in flirtatious behavior (Walls).

The word became more immodest as it was used to describe sexual scenarios, and by the late 1500s, William Lambarde began drafting the first “parliamentary bill to restrain ‘books, pamphlets, ditties, songs, and other works that promote lascivious ungodly love’” (Lister 21). Cunt

was becoming more vulgar than anatomical or topographical. During the seventeenth century, the Licensing Act of 1662 banned any “heretical, seditious, schismatic or offensive” publication “contrary to Christian faith” (Lister 21). Clearly, religious concerns censored what could be perceived as sexual language, and as sex became more repressed, the mere words affiliated with “the body became taboo” (Lister 21). No longer acceptable in its regular form, in *Twelfth Night* (written around 1601), Shakespeare avoided a complete spelling of cunt but still alluded to the suggestive term (Silverton 54). Sociologist Ellis Cashmore also attributes cunt’s taboo to the rise of modesty: “with rules came manners, and with manners came courtesy, and with courtesy came modesty, and the word ‘cunt’ referring to parts of the body that were enclosed, they were secreted away” (Lister 21).

While the word had been categorized as vulgar in some earlier dictionaries, many larger, more regarded dictionaries refrained from printing *such* an obscene word, hiding the anatomical term and only enforcing its taboo. In 1721, English lexicographer Nathan Bailey published “An Universal Etymological English Dictionary,” where he defined cunt as “Pudendum Muliebre” (N. Bailey 228). Soon after, in 1775, English minister and author John Ash’s *New and Complete Dictionary of the English Language* included the controversial term. Ash categorized cunt as “a low and vulgar word, from *cunnus*,” and defined it as “the female pudendum” (Ash 248). Cunt appeared as four asterisks in English lexicographer Francis Grose’s dictionary of slang, *The Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, in 1785, and in the book’s third edition in 1796, Grose defined cunt as “a nasty word for a nasty thing” (“Cunt, N.”). In 1890, *Slang and its Analogues: A Dictionary, Historical and Comparative of the Heterodox Speech of All Classes of Society for More Than Three Hundred Years* included cunt (Farmer and Henley 230). According to Silverton, historically cunt’s usage in the media was an uphill battle and not just from a social etiquette

standpoint; “From c. 1700 till the *Chatterley* trial, it was considered obscene, and it was therefore a legal offence to print it, except with asterisk or dashes” (Silverton 58). This helps explain the layered usage of “quaint” as a passable substitution for cunt. In England, in 1959, D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* — featuring “cunt” 14 times alongside many explicit descriptions of sexual intercourse — became the first literary book to be prosecuted under the Obscene Publications Act 1959. Sellers of the book had been jailed for its obscenity, illustrating how obscene the word appeared to polite society. The Act ultimately amended previous highly strict regulations for the publication of obscene matters (Self).

Paralleling the growing leniency for obscene publications, scholars and participants of mainstream culture (and countercultures) began to defy more modest social norms. In 1961, American-English dictionary *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* featured the word cunt for the first time (Silverton 27). Early in its inclusion in official dictionaries, such as the *Penguin English Dictionary* in 1965 and the *American Heritage Dictionary* in 1969, cunt was again defined as “pudendum” (Silverton 27). While pudendum’s meaning originally applied to all external genitalia, male and female, over time, it began to refer solely to the vulva (“Pudendum”). Pudendum was used primarily as an anatomical term, but because the word was derived from the Latin verb “to be ashamed,” and its usage encouraged a negative view of female sexuality, in 2019, the word was “dropped from the next edition of the official international lexicon of anatomical terms *Terminologia Anatomia*” (“Pudendum”). It was not until 1972 that the *Oxford English Dictionary* would include the term; a representative explained the delay was because of “commercial and scholastic reasons” (Silverton 30).

Perhaps the culture at large was not yet ready to face the word. In 1957, two years before the Chatterley trial, the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s editor, Robert Burchfield, consulted his

predecessor, C.T. Onions, on the matter of including “cunt” and “fuck” in the next *OED* edition, to which they both agreed “the time had not yet come” (Silverton 27). Soon after the trial relaxing obscenity laws, Burchfield wrote an internal report on his decision against including cunt in the *OED*, and his two reasons were because “written evidence of usage was scanty, and [it] was already in slang dictionaries” (Silverton 29). Burchfield began to change his mind though, and in 1962, he began drafting the entry for cunt (Silverton 30). Five years later, the Delegates of The Oxford University Press began positively discussing the inclusion of cunt in the *OED*, but they did require some gentle prodding (Silverton 30). In 1969, someone from the underground countercultural magazine *Oz* registered a complaint to the *OED*; they had purchased a copy of the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, and it did not “contain the word fuck. ‘We would be interested to know the reason for this curious omission’” (Silverton 30). Later that year, on behalf of the *OED* Delegates, D.M. Davin replied, agreeing the question was a “vexed one,” and Davin promised *Oz* that “both fuck and cunt would appear in the next full *OED*” (Silverton 30). When they were included in 1972, there was some criticism over its vulgarity, but an *OED* press officer defended the decision: “‘Standards of tolerance have changed and their omission has for many years, and more frequently of late, excited critical comment’” (Silverton 30). That same year across the pond, American comic George Carlin’s standup routine on the “seven dirty words,” one of which was cunt, aired on a New York radio station and offended listeners so much that it led to a U.S. Supreme Court decision, *Federal Communications Commission v. Pacifica Foundation*. The Court found that even though the content of Carlin’s speech was not obscene, “the FCC could regulate it because it was indecent” (“FCC v. Pacifica Foundation”). Without getting into the specifics of that court case, it is apparent that American culture was not ready to even hear the word cunt.

Thus far, we've seen how in most of recent history, specifically in dictionaries and written works, cunt as a word was too obscene. Stateside, the word's perception as vulgar unfortunately continued to reinforce its power as a misogynistic slur. Author, professor, and former president of the Dictionary Society of North America, Michael Adams explains the harm of misogynistic language: "That's a very old move in all Western languages, and not a pleasant one, that men particularly will use terms about the woman's body to put the woman down... Social control by means of bad language" (Mack). This derogation of women, shown by corporeal language, undoubtedly stems from our culture in the United States that belittles and negatively views femininity. In her book *Encyclopedia of Taboos*, Lynn Holden finds that the female form and vaginas specifically are "so taboo as to be virtually invisible in Western culture" (Holden 265). If female sexuality is present in our culture at all, it is viewed with judgement. American feminist writer Kate Millet accurately expresses this: "Somehow every indignity the female suffers ultimately comes to be symbolized in a sexuality that is held to be her responsibility, her shame [...] It can be summarized in one four-letter word. And the word is not fuck, it's cunt" (Millet 95). Historically, men have used this ridiculous oversexualization to describe women as and make them feel "despised" ("Cunt, N."). Describing a woman's existence solely in reference to her genitalia dehumanizes and objectifies women, and the term cunt used negatively paints their bodies as deplorable.

Cunts — which according to its early medical definition are vulvas — should not be viewed as bad, "despised," or "unpleasant" ("Cunt, N."). Cunts are natural, and for mainstream usage to reflect that, there must be a reclamatory effort at value reversal. In *A Curious History of*

Sex, Kate Lister describes cunt as “the whole shebang, inside and out”² (Lister 18). She continues that “the vaginoplasty business is booming... is it any wonder we can’t cope with the directness of cunt?” (Lister 26). Lister is “#TeamCunt,” and I am too. Not only is cunt an honest word about the body, but it’s powerful. Uttering the word aloud positively is making visible the all too often invisible, which is especially important now in a society so intent on removing bodily autonomy for people with vulvas. Vulvas should not be shameful, or something never spoken aloud. Historically, men have been the users of this word in a way that derogates women and their bodies, and into the present day, women have not been the dominant group using the word about their own bodies. If most of the people who have spoken the word aloud are not part of the stigmatized group the slur affects, the targeted group must remedy this speaker issue by using the word as a positive. Words undeniably can change meaning overtime, and users of language have the ability to alter a word’s value, shifting a term into a positive (Deese 641). By doing this revaluing, groups can chip away at the abusive power a slur has (Popa-Wyatt). To not do anything — to refrain from uttering cunt because it is *oh so taboo* — does nothing to make it any less taboo. In fact, banning the word from everyone and hoping it will die out (which it won’t as long as human beings live in misogynistic society) allows the term to grow its negative fuel³ and ultimately threaten women.

A proactive approach in response to slurring speech-acts is linguistic reclamation.

Reclamation, as defined by major social psychologist Adam Galinsky, is “the process of taking possession of a slur previously used exclusively by dominant groups to reinforce a stigmatized

² It is essential to recognize that not every person with a vulva identifies as a woman and not all women have vulvas; in this thesis, “woman” refers to any person who identifies as a woman.

³ Cunt’s ability to undergo value reversal is unique to its history as a slur; not every negative word should have a value reversal process. Because groups use slurs to alter power dynamics and other minority groups, those words have a greater need to be reevaluated more than a typical word imbued with negativity.

group's lesser status" (Galinsky et al. 2020). Linguistic philosopher and researcher Miheala Popa-Wyatt also conceives of reclamation as a form of socio-political protest, wherein language works to reshape oppressive social practices (Popa-Wyatt 1). Slurs, according to Popa-Wyatt, demean a person on the "basis of their group membership," such as race, gender, sexuality, or nationality. A slurring speech-act not only offends the target of the slur but also affects the power dynamics between the speaker and target in a conversation, either assigning the slur recipient a subordinate role or reinforcing an already assigned role (Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt 2879-2894). Slur utterances make it so that conversation participants are not of equal status; if one person in a conversation is maliciously placed into a subordinate role, they are essentially backed into a corner (Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt 2895). This power dynamic can be threatening for the target and limit them in their speech and behavior due to fear (Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt 2880). While we must recognize that slurs aren't necessarily always threats and do not equally parallel a physical assault, some slurs are linked to histories of oppression and violence, so some slur utterances invoke these feelings and place targets in unstable discursive positions.

Reclaiming slurs can be a method of demonstrating greater group power for the derogated group to the majority, as reclaiming a slur subverts the assumed power the labeler has and consequently weakens the stigmatizing force of the slur. Reclamatory speech-acts, which function as "inferences of group power," shift disparaging descriptors into positive words (Galinsky et al. 2021). Reclamation as a process begins when members of the stigmatized group start to self-label. For us to get a full sense of cunt's trajectory as a reclaimed word, we will examine the phenomenon of reclamation in depth. Galinsky et al.'s widely referenced model of reclamation is divided into three levels: self-labeling, collective labeling, and the out-group revaluing the term.

Although this model is incredibly helpful to understand a reclaimed word's timeline, many scholars concede that identifying exactly where a word falls at any point in time often is difficult.

Self-labeling, the first stage of the reclamation process, arises as a method “of dealing with a potentially threatening interpersonal situation” (Galinsky et al. 236). This stage involves situation-specific interactions where the target defuses the negative valence of the slur. This can look like a member of a minority group using a slur before a dominant group member could in order to neutralize any potential offense. For example, if a person was to trip in front of a large group of people, and the group saw the fall, the person who tripped might strategically, confidently, and publicly refer to themselves as a klutz to ward off any judgement from the group; this occurrence of self-labeling illustrates self-awareness, self-assurance, and confidence to the majority. This self-awareness deescalates the negative force of the word as used by an outsider (someone who did not trip). If the group had seen the seen the trip and decided to comment before the person who tripped could, that individual could be placed in a social “position of weakness,” criticized and othered by the majority for having made a socially embarrassing mistake (Galinsky et al. 238). While “klutz” is a rather silly example, this scenario demonstrates the possibility for someone to be placed in a subordinate social position (Galinsky et al. 238). To remedy a crisis of judgement and derogation, one can take ownership of the pejorative word that can be used against them. At this level, though, the reclaimed label is not yet fully transformed into a positive; the label was used confidently by the target to avoid any harm (Galinsky et al. 237). Because it is used in lone interactions more as a method of self-preservation, there is some positive shifting at this stage but not enough to say the word at large is reclaimed.

For an individual to feel comfortable self-labeling with a derogatory word, according to Galinsky et al., there needs to be some existing level or indication of group strength amongst the stigmatized group (Galinsky et al. 238). This awareness of group strength might empower an individual to use the word in the first place in an intimidating social situation. Using a slur would not work as effectively if the slur recipient did not feel a sense of group power, however limited. Again, humor me in a silly example: if an individual who trips felt like all klutzes everywhere were losers, that person calling themselves that might come across as self-deprecating and enforce the dominant group's negative usage. Self-labeling done with confidence "lead [s] to inferences that an individual who self-labels has power" because they are "denying the dominant group the use of it" and demonstrating their strength in self-awareness and self-esteem (Popa-Wyatt 3). Self-labeling then becomes a positive cycle of power — one believes they have power, self-labels, and feels more powerful, which continues self-labeling and empowers others to self-label by adding to a sense of group power.

Toward the end of stage one, after repeated occurrences in individual situations and a burgeoning "concerted effort by a collective," the possibility of positive reframing the label grows and enters stage two (Galinsky et al. 238). For example, in the 1980s and early 1990s, many members of the LGBTQ+ community began efforts to reclaim "queer," which was a very common and harmful slur for that community. The activist group Queer Nation formed and encouraged gay men to "refer to themselves with the word queer as 'a sly and ironic weapon we can steal from the homophobe's hands and use against him'" (Galinsky et al. 2022). Some members of Queer Nation created the famous "Queers Read This" flyer about queer identity, handed out at the 1990 Gay Pride Parade in New York City, and encouraged readers to take a stand against homophobia and "reclaim the word 'queer' as an act of resistance" (Jusińska 697). The smaller collective of people

trying to reclaim queer, the step above individual self-labelers, was trying to form a larger coalition in the LGBTQ+ community. At the time, the word did not yet immediately become the commonplace term it is today, but that beginning phase of growth amongst the LGBTQ+ community is exemplary of stage two in Galinsky et al.'s model. The growth in usage during stage two also enables pride for the stigmatized group and the label itself "gains more positive connotations" (Galinsky et al. 236).

The third stage represents successful reclamation, wherein members of the out-groups recognize and accept the new meaning of the label (Galinsky et al. 236). Wide recognition of the slur's value reversal is also hard to quantify. Philosophers and researchers Bianca Cepollaro and Dan López de Sa recognize that many reclamation processes can have many varied goals, and so success can be assessed "differently depending on which goal is under consideration" (Cepollaro and de Sa 205). The goal of one reclamation process could be expressing group pride or fostering camaraderie, and the goals of others could be subverting large structures of prejudice. Sometimes, multiple goals may be at play but with differing levels of priority. Although stages one and two in successful reclamation depend on collective self-labeling and revaluing by the dominant group, social groups are not uniform and even those part of an insular community revaluing a slur might not all agree (Cepollaro and de Sa 205). Cepollaro and de Sa offer the word queer as an example of a reclamatory project that has reached the third stage of cultural reevaluation. From those early attempts at self-labeling in the 80s, the word has "since acquired a standard non-derogatory meaning" and is often used by nonqueer people as well as queer folks identifying themselves (Cepollaro and de Sa 204). Even though queer as a reclaimed word is viewed as successful since it has become everyday language, Galinsky et al. recognize that the word's reclamation is not as successful as it could be because many Americans "still do not accept

homosexuality” (Galinsky et al. 243). According to Galinsky et al., cultural reevaluation by the out-group can and should inspire “increased self-esteem” of the in-group, give the label a more positive connotation, weaken the ability to derogate the stigmatized group, provide greater recognition of and reduction in discrimination, and have the stigmatized group become the subject rather than object of inter-group dialogue (Galinsky et al. 236).

Not every word must reach the third stage for the reclamation to be viewed as worthwhile. For many insular communities, language reclamation can be meaningful without having achieved the cultural reevaluation Galinsky et al. suggest, by offering a way to form a small network and build comradery. That can be enough for some words. When considering the extent of usage aside from that of the stigmatized community in reclamation projects, it is imperative to have the achievement of the third stage as an aspiration. For reclamation to be effective in removing the out-group’s power over the slur, the out-group has to realize the slur no longer should function as derogatory and that they cannot speak the term at all.

Cepollaro and de Sa supplement the discussion of successful reclamation with their conditions for felicity, loosely defined as “what it takes for an attempt to reclaim a slur to succeed in counting as reclamatory” (Cepollaro and de Sa 5). A critical condition is the identity of the speaker, as reclaimers are typically members of the ingroup. Linguistic researcher Robin Brontsema eloquently questioned the vitality of reclamation if those who “never suffered from the word as a wound” self-labelled (Brontsema 16). Other scholars believe that a speaker does not necessarily need to belong to the target group but must be appropriately connected to the target group (Technau 2018, Cepollaro and de Sa 2022). An appropriate relation can be, according to Cepollaro and de Sa, “publicly defending the same values... or engaging in the same struggles” as the target group (Cepollaro and de Sa 6). Another condition to achieve felicity is sincerity. If the

individual uses the reclaimed word in a way that can be perceived as insincere, i.e., the speaker not attributing positivity or pride to the word, it cannot be reclamation. A huge aspect of sincerity concerns the speaker's position inside the target group: one must be in good standing with group members because even if a speaker belongs to the stigmatized group, their usage might still be insincere (Cepollaro and de Sa 6). For example, some women find it acceptable to call each other "bitch," including my female friend group. If one of my friends stopped being friends with us, however, and I heard her calling us "bitches," I would question the sincerity of that gendered word's usage. Even though that ex-friend still has the positionality to say the word, the situational context and relationship a speaker has to their audience matters and can change whether the reception is positive, and reclamation requires that upon usage of a reclaimed slur there be a positive reception. Further, if a member of the target group occupies a "very privileged position" and has somehow not "experienced significant discrimination," they might be perceived as not in the position to reclaim (Cepollaro and de Sa 6).

Felicity conditions also rest on the relationship of the speaker to their audience. When a speaker uses a slur and intends it to function as reclamatory, the audience must be able in that situation to recognize the usage as part of the reclamation process. Not only does the audience have to see the speaker meant to reclaim but also the audience has to see the speaker as fit to reclaim (as discussed earlier regarding sincerity and good standing). If there is not successful uptake (understanding from conversation participants that the word positively), then the usage is not felicitous and thus not reclamation. Even if a proud well-meaning lesbian woman calls another lesbian woman a dyke, if the people surrounding the interaction do not know the speaker and target's sexualities, it might come across as hate speech — if there is a doubt that a slur is functioning as hate speech, it is not successful. Cepollaro and de Sa also define another useful

indicator of reclamatory success we will discuss more later: accomplishment. Accomplishment is in essence “whether reclamatory uses achieve the relevant associated goals (expressing pride, fighting discrimination...etc.)” (Cepollaro and de Sa 205).

“Cunt” largely follows Galinsky’s model, but it is important to note that in this thesis, self-labeling as a practice includes individuals in a stigmatized group identifying with an offensive term, even if the term is not a noun (like queer or the n-word). Reclaiming the word cunt, historically a damaging term against women, differs from traditional reclamation processes in that reclaimers do not positively say women are cunts; rather, reclaimers now use the word as a descriptor, functioning as a complimentary adjective (e.g., “She’s so cunt!”). No one is a “cunt” as a noun because we do not equate a person with genitalia, but people can evoke femininity and express that with adjectives. Self-labeling extends to the word cunt as its usage is meant to ascribe positive value to those labeled cunt, reversing its negative connotation. The decision to linguistically modify the word cunt from noun to adjective does not detract from its power — it changes the word to reassert power over it. Changing the meaning of a word, the sound of it, and how it is used grammatically is the ultimate claim of ownership over that word.

The reclamatory efforts of cunt complicates stage two of the reclamation process, when the stigmatized group collectively self-labels and revalues the word. The stigmatized group for cunt would be women at large, but in addition to women reclaiming the word, the LGBTQ+ community has self-labelled too, more specifically Black and Latine gay men and transgender women involved in the Ballroom subculture (M. Bailey 253). Queer people in Ballroom spaces radically transformed and successfully revalued the word cunt, which I will discuss later in this thesis. This is not to invalidate the hard work of feminists who began revaluing the word and

encouraged women to self-label in an empowering way. Some might consider the attempts by women artists and writers to reclaim cunt as failures, as their efforts did not immediately inspire a large-scale shift in usage, but this view of success and failure lacks nuance, and I will address this below.

Reclamation projects at their very beginnings rely on individuals self-labelling. Stage one in Galinsky et al.'s model evolves from an amalgamation of smaller, situational speech-acts to stage two, increased use by collectives. Reclamation has to start somewhere, and that's exactly what women artists did in the 70s and 80s⁴. A notable aspect of third wave feminism was reclamation projects for derisive words about female sexuality, including the word cunt (Reger). In 1970, *Oz* magazine promoted the slogan Cunt Power! on its magazine covers (Silverton 65). That same year in *Oz*, Australian academic and author Germaine Greer appeared naked next to her work, and her essay "Lady, Love Your Cunt" appeared in the underground magazine, *Suck*. Greer's "Lady, Love your Cunt" hoped to inspire women to "regain 'the power of cunt' — via masturbation, self-photography and exercise" (Silverton 65). In addition to attempting to flip "the word through 180 degrees," Greer and other subversive feminists wanted to create "a new culture" where the old cunt, patriarchal and misogynist, was out and the new "feminist" cunt "feminist" would help empower women (Silverton 65). Though Greer was raised in Australia and spent much of her career in England, her book, *The Female Eunuch*, which was released in 1970, became the "best known manifesto of the women's lib movement here [U.S.]," in 1971, according to the New York Times Book Review (Weinraub).

⁴ While I spent time explaining cunt's history, much of which took place in the U.K., this thesis focuses on the reclamation efforts of cunt solely in the United States. There are different contemporary attitudes of the word across Europe, and further scholarship on those localized relationships to the word is needed.

Sometimes referred to as “First Wave feminist art,” the Feminist Art Movement of the 1970s and 1980s involved coalitions of women artists exploring femininity and producing work meant to counter patriarchal standards and objectification in the art world and larger world (“Feminist Art”). Some artists who participated in that movement have also referred to those years as the “Cunt-Art movement” and their work as “Cunt Art” (DeTone 58). Artist Faith Wilding says her Cunt Art was “made for the female gaze, [and] aimed to reverse the negative connotations of a dirty word with a defiant challenge to traditional depictions of submissive female sexuality” (DeTone 58). Cunt-Art had a variety of goals, one of which trying to empower women to have autonomy over their own bodies. Foundational feminist artists such as Judy Chicago, Carolee Schneeman, Judith Bernstein, and Faith Wilding “dealt with the concept of the body from several interpretations: the body of the audience, the body of the artist, the body of the artwork, [and] the representation of the body within an artwork” (DeTone 59). Perhaps the most common image of that movement was the “vaginal image or central cavity,” and this image in art “challenged the male view of the woman as ‘just a hole’ or the phallic lack, [using] Jane Gallop’s terminology” (Hale 64). While it is hard to quantify how much the vaginal image in art challenged that male view, scholar and professor Sondra Hale says, “at the time, the mere representation of the vagina was itself a powerful consciousness-raiser” (Hale 64).

Although Wilding’s motivations centered on reframing cunt, and her work was explicitly about the feminine, she also acknowledged that at the time “we did not fully theorize our attraction to cunt imagery,” which adds another layer as to why this movement during its peak was not widely understood. It was not necessarily 100% intentional to collectively portray a certain image or think a certain way, so even though the goal was under the surface and affected an artistic movement, feminist-artists as a group were not able to organize in the way the second stage of

reclamation suggests. Further, some feminist artists and critics were against Cunt-Art. New York art critic Cindy Nemser felt Judy Chicago's art piece "The Dinner Party" reduced the work of "women artists to a simplistic biologic form" because it included too much direct vulval imagery (DeTone 66). Other critics like Clara Weyergraf disapproved of the art's alleged vulgarity (DeTone 66).

The Cunt-Art movement was a success long term as later feminist artists were inspired to rock the boat. Nearly three decades later, American feminist artist Eve Ensler in her 1996 play *The Vagina Monologues* positively framed the word cunt. There's even a section in her play that asks the audience to chant cunt repeatedly right back at the performers, and this play made the rounds at a handful of colleges and universities in the late 90s. Soon after, British artist Tracey Emin explored the word in *CV: Cunt Vernacular* (1997), a self-video portrait, and *My Cunt is Wet with Fear* (1998), neon art; later in her career, Emin made and sold various cunt-focused pieces, such as *Your Name Try CUNT INTERNATIONAL* (2004) and *A Cunt is a Rose is a Cunt* (2009). In 1998, American feminist author Inga Muscio published her book *Cunt: A Declaration of Independence*, applying positive meanings to pejoratives against women. According to *Curve* magazine, in 2000, Muscio's book was ranked sixth on "a list of 'Best-Selling Lesbian Books,'" and that same year, Muscio was a guest speaker at Penn State University's CuntFest, "an evening of 'woman-centered cunt-lovin' fun entertainment" (Silverton 66). With interactive art and plays and engaging art exhibits, the work produced had individuals actively participating with cunt-art, in efforts to increase the revalued word's popularity. Feminist artists like those mentioned and unmentioned in this thesis began seriously challenging the social taboo, and that's hard work that should not go unnoticed.

In a 2006 interview, Germaine Greer reflected that although she tried “to take the malice out of it [cunt],” and wanted women to say it, “it didn’t work” (Zevallos). Linguistics professor Deborah Cameron told *Rolling Stone* that often because of ingrained cultural barriers, beyond the success of a subculture itself reframing the slur, “there’s a high risk people won’t understand that it isn’t meant to be offensive,” or are not ready for effects of the word reframed (Mack). Cunt not only refers to the vulva but also connotes female sexuality, and historically, polite society has been afraid of female sexuality. Cunt’s reclamation efforts were also tied to progressive ideas of sexual liberation that the mainstream culture was not ready for, preventing its popularity; the felicity conditions for uptake were not met, and many women at the time were not aware or comfortable with being in that feminist artist in-group. Even though the 70s are often remembered as full of radical young people wearing bell bottoms and flipping peace signs, perhaps the more conservative portion of the population was not ready for the in-your-face sexuality cunt evoked in the Cunt-Art movement. In 2024, though, some feminist movements are more evident and welcomed in mainstream culture (e.g. The Women’s March, a more inclusive fourth wave of feminism, etc.). We’ve progressed in many ways, and the receptivity for self-labelers seems much higher. Young people online especially have taken to incorporating cunt into their lexicon, and many popular posts with cunt have thousands of likes, retweets, and shares, illustrating that there is less of a cultural barrier to accepting cunt as opposed to the 1970s.

While some feminist artists did great work making the word cunt more utterable aloud, the Ballroom community really shifted the word into a 100% positive embodiment and framed its reclaimed version as more than or not necessarily sexual. The queer community, like many other marginalized groups, uses and creates language as a “form of rhetorical resistance to a dominant heterosexual world,” and is what rhetoric scholar Mark McBeth calls “Gaylect” (M. Bailey 69).

Much of gay lingo originates in Ballroom spaces, unsurprisingly as Ballroom exists as a kinship network and performance-based culture with its own gender and sexuality systems. For example, if you've ever "thrown shade," "vogued," "served," "slayed," "werked," "spilled tea," or "read" someone for filth, you've used language of the ballroom scene (Davis).

Ballroom culture as we know it today was founded in the 1960s to provide a safe communal space for nonwhite LGBTQ+ people to practice drag. Before the 1960s, most drag balls — talent competitions where performers competed in various categories — were segregated and often discriminated against Black and Latine performers, barring them from prizes and social acceptance. Houses (structured smaller communities that function as competitive teams and chosen families) under Black drag icons in poor and working-class areas in New York began hosting their own balls to make space for oppressed communities otherwise excluded (Hoarau 1); it is fundamental to note that Ballroom as a public culture insists on the value of Black, queer, and trans lives. According to author, curator, and public historian Joseph Plaster, many argue that the first house sprouted in Harlem in the early 1970s when Crystal LaBeija founded the House of LaBeija. In 1972, Crystal and her good friend Lottie presented the first "Annual House of LaBeija Ball," which was the "first of its kind to welcome those from their community, people who looked like them, people who lived like them, people who were them — people of color!" ("Our History"). Though Ballroom is centered on performance, the Ballroom scene is also a "place of refuge for various people to affirm, reconstitute, and celebrate their identities and lives" (Hoarau 3). Ballroom culture can now be found in almost every major city in the United States: Detroit, Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami, and has become celebrated in places globally, such as Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and Mexico (Hoarau 2). Documentaries such as *Paris is Burning* (1990) and *Pier Kids* (2019), music videos like Madonna's "Vogue" (1990), and TV shows like *Pose* (2018) have

increased Ballroom's visibility. While not centered on depicting Ballroom culture, *RuPaul's Drag Race* often references the Ballroom scene and has "served to propel drag culture... to the mainstream of reality television" (Brennan and Gudelunas). Many former contestants have their own social media platforms with millions of followers and successful businesses (e.g., Trixie Mattel, Kim Chi, Bob the Drag Queen, etc.) and drag stars today have high amounts of social capital and possibility to enter the mainstream (e.g., Violet Chachki walking Moschino runways, Jinkx Monsoon performing in drag in Broadway's *Chicago*, etc.)

It should be noted that research on Ballroom culture as part of queer history has been limited and often erased (Hoarau 6). Black queer theorist, professor, and performance ethnographer Marlon Bailey is one of the most prominent Ballroom scholars, and his book *Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit* offers a genealogy of Ballroom communal practices. In a drag ball, different groups compete, perform, dance, lip-sync, and model to embody and satirize constructs of gender and sexuality. Vast categories of performers such as Butch Queens (gay men on a fluid masculine to feminine spectrum) and Femme Queens (transgender women) illustrate how Ballroom dancers perform gender, in ways that "cannot be easily accounted for in the dominant sex/gender/sexuality system" (M. Bailey 69); though categories are set, there is a fluidity and freedom in Ballroom culture unavailable to those in mainstream heterosexual society.

In creating categorizations, some of which utilize derogatory terms, standards of performance are established and ultimately create revalued words. Labels such as cunt, pussy, and bitch "are viewed as criteria" to get 10s across the board, and thus, become attractive and aspirational (M. Bailey 69). In this specific group, the word and category of cunt is positive part of Ballroom culture, completely opposite to an insult aimed toward women in heterosexual society.

The dance form of voguing, a competitive category, has two overarching subcategories: Old Way and New Way (M. Bailey 173). Both categories include dancing and performance techniques such as duckwalks, catwalks, spins, and dips. Bailey writes that, “as performance in Ballroom culture expands, more distinctions and categories are created,” and Vogue Femme, a subcategory of voguing, utilizes the listed dancing techniques. Within New Way Vogue, Vogue Femme has three smaller styles: soft and cunt, dramatics, and performance (a blend of soft and cunt and dramatics). The soft and cunt style “consists of clean, soft, and smooth hand/arm movements in a fluid and flowing way,” according to Detroit queen Diva D Bvlgari (M. Bailey 175). Community-defined values and terms, including category names, “are at the center of the culture,” elevating the feminine. The Ballroom community has historically used words that are derogatory against women and female genitalia as beautiful and aspirational. Outside of Ballroom, if you are a “pussy,” you are cowardly and weak. In Ballroom, if you are “pussy,” you are the divine feminine and superior to all else (M. Bailey 3, 67). If a man says a woman smells like fish, he’s insulting her genitals and shaming her sexuality. In Ballroom, if you are “fishy” or “serving fish,” then you are gorgeous and feminine (M. Bailey 70, 253). If you are “cunt,” then you’ve achieved ultimate femininity (M. Bailey 67). By placing cunt as the achievement of success in a competition space, Ballroom effectively flipped the value of cunt as a pejorative; further, in a space that inherently goes against oppressive white heteronormative cultural norms and operates without the constraints of dominant sexuality and gender, Ballroom performers imbued cunt with a sense of freedom and empowerment (M. Bailey 70).

Drag performers and Ballroom commentators have affirmed cunt’s positive meaning, as ultra-feminine, with music. It would be negligent to not give credit to Kevin Aviance’s 1999

music video for “Cunty (The Feeling),” where Aviance says “cunty” 167 times and “cunt” 54 times. Aviance vocalizes that, “She’s cunt, he’s cunt, they’re cunt, I’m cunt.” Uttering cunt in this context, cunt becomes released from its historical usage, no longer solely a description of anatomy or a hateful term for a despicable woman. Aviance describes this transformation perfectly in the outro: “feeling the mode.” To him, cunt is “an embodiment,” meaning an energy to feel, a way to behave, and how present yourself to the world (Haile). Commentator Kevin Jz Prodigy has numerous popular songs featuring the word cunt, such as “The Cunty Vogue Session” and “The Language of Cunt,” and Beyoncé, in her hit 2022 album *Renaissance*, sampled both Kevin Aviance and Kevin Jz Prodigy. Prodigy narrated her tour performances and gave credit to Kevin Aviance for popularizing “bring[ing] the cunt!” (Haile). In this way, Beyoncé spotlighted this reclamation effort to the masses during her incredibly successful tour.

Having recognized the Ballroom community’s critical influence on the revaluing of cunt, which is largely unrecognized by existing literature, we must now ask who can say cunt. Cunt has been used as a slur against women, and women are still the target of this hate today. Frankly, it would be illogical to exclude women — the target group of the slur — from using the word. Given the labor the Ballroom community has done and continues to do to frame the word as a positive, it would also be incredibly ignorant and disrespectful to exclude members of the LGBTQ+ community who resonate with the term and have helped revalue it. Thus, the in-group of users includes women and queer men as well as people with marginalized gender identities who do not identify strictly as a man or a woman. As we are discussing who can say cunt, let’s remember felicity conditions, which can be understood as “what it takes for an attempt to reclaim a slur to succeed in counting as reclamatory” (Cepollaro and de Sa 5). In essence, if you are going to say it, you better be the right person saying it and saying it right. The speaker being a part of or deeply

related to the in-group is vital for evaluating a successful attempt at reclamation and their sincerity in usage. The speaker must say the word with the intention to reclaim it or imbue it with positivity; there can be no malice or ulterior motive. Lastly, the person must reclaim the word around an audience that can understand the utterance is reclamatory and not hateful — otherwise, what’s the point? These felicity conditions are a helpful guide in accessing reclamatory speech acts, and they also illuminate what inappropriate usage can look like.

This assessment is especially important with the word cunt because queer culture has been capitalized on within mainstream media and functioned as “the latest progressive ‘trend,’” and nonqueer people have gained fiscal and “social currency... from participating and sharing in queer culture” (Bryant 5-6). To profit from Ballroom culture, which was created by and for nonwhite queer people, and not even know what Ballroom is all about, skews toward cultural appropriation. On top of recognizing the feminist artists who shocked the mainstream with a revitalized cunt, a speaker should also recognize that for many people, the cunt they’ve heard about — the largely popular online refrain “She’s serving cunt” — originated in Ballroom. In online spaces, where posts with the word cunt gain thousands upon thousands of likes and shares, and any user can interact with anyone, users should be aware and wary of engaging in culturally appropriative acts (Bryant 88). Ballroom spaces were made to be radically inclusive to those marginalized by our homophobic and racist society, and this foundation should also give users of cunt an awareness that nonwhite women have had their bodies fetishized, oversexualized, violated, and abused disproportionately to white women. Value reversal of cunt is necessary and helpful for all people with vulvas. It is deeply important to also acknowledge that women and members of the queer community can utter the word cunt with negative intentions and not meet felicity conditions; there is misogyny amongst women toward other women and even in progressive, accepting communities

like Ballroom spaces. Just because you belong to a community does not mean you have the appropriate authority to participate in reclamation.

Returning to the question of speaker identity and relationship to the in-group, does this mean that most men, heterosexual and unaffiliated with the queer community, should not say cunt? Well, yes. A fundamental part of the process of reclaiming a slur is having an in-group. Reclamation can have a variety of goals, but at the heart of reclamation as a meaningful effort is taking power back: “it takes ownership over the derogatory label and repurposes it” (Popa-Wyatt 4). To take ownership of a derogatory label, you must be in a position to be affected by the label, thus in an in-group with others who differ from those labeling them. What power would a white heterosexual cisgender man take back in reclaiming cunt? He wouldn’t be taking any back because he is part of the group that historically used the word against women, and he wouldn’t be aligned with a community because he is not singularly negatively affected by the term. Let’s remember that part of taking power back is excluding the group that used the term as a slur originally. Self-labelling “is perceived as a defying act” because you deny the dominant group its use — they are no longer permitted to say something that used to illustrate their social superiority” (Popa-Wyatt 3). This defying act is a form of power “because it contests who can use the term,” and if any single person can say the term in a derogatory way, there is no power gained for the group derogated by the slur (Galinsky et al. 2013, 2021). Further, scholar and philosopher Zuzanna Jusińska believes “it is simply impossible for the widely accepted terms” that have been adopted and used by the out-group to stay “revolutionary” (Jusińska 704). Also, considering the conditions to achieve felicity, a straight heterosexual man lacks authority to reclaim and is not in the in-group, which can mean others might view usage as hateful, which reinforces the harmful power of a slur and goes against the efforts of reclamation entirely. It can be difficult to determine

who is part of the in-group and in the reclamation process, especially because people can find community and belonging in multiple spaces, perhaps ones that are not their own or that at times contradict others they occupy. Mihaela Popa-Wyatt briefly comments on this: “Occasionally, access to the non-derogatory use might be granted to very close friends of targets, say, in banter... but this is a mere extension of the reclaimed use once it received a certain degree of acceptability,” meaning this type of usage is not permitted for every word or at every stage of the reclamation process (Popa-Wyatt 4). In certain situations, with enough felicitous conditions, members of an in-group might find an out-group member using the reclaimed term acceptable, but this is not every time and not the case for every member of an in-group. As a group is not uniform, undoubtedly members of in-groups feel differently about allowing access to reclamation attempts to members of the out-group, and thus, most men yet again should avoid co-opting language not meant for them. Further, out-group members should not initiate reclamation processes on others' behalf as they do not have the authority to. These situations where a well-intentioned member of the out-group tries to reclaim can become problematic because those efforts can easily backfire and “out-group members can easily evoke a role of oppressor” (Popa-Wyatt 4).

If most heterosexual men should not say the word, does that mean cunt's reclamation won't be recognized by the mainstream and considered successful? It depends how you define success. Let's return to Galinsky et al.'s third and final stage: revaluation by the out-group. Popa-Wyatt describes the stage as when “out-groups members accept the positive revaluing of the slur term” (Popa-Wyatt 5). Recognition, however, does not necessitate the out-group saying the slur, such as the case with the n-word receiving more out-group awareness. To Galinsky et al., because certain effects from out-group revaluation are “never absolute and must be considered to exist along a continuum, it makes sense to consider reappropriation of stigmatized labels as more or less

successful at cultural reevaluation” (Galinsky et al. 244). Galinsky et al. preface this conclusion with a concession that the “complete and unqualified cultural acceptance” of a stigmatized group is incredibly rare, and as a result, with his framework, most reclamation efforts have “only been partially successful” (Galinsky et al. 244). Galinsky et al.’s third level with widespread cultural reevaluation would be an ambitious feat for any word, and if a word does not reach that level, that reclamation effort is not necessarily a failure. That partial success Galinsky et al. hint at still indicates some level of usage, which means the reclamation effort is closer to greater recognition by the out-group.

For a more nuanced assessment of the success of reclamation, based on Galinsky et al.’s model and De Sa and Cepollaro’s terminology, we should consider a word’s popularity, its felicity, and accomplishment. Popularity references Galinsky’s third stage but offers a more realistic way of measuring a word’s usage before it reaches that absolute final benchmark of collective recognition and acceptance. Popularity cannot be quantitative, and in the famous words of Justice Potter Stewart, “I know it when I see it” (Floridi). Slightly more helpful is to think of popularity as positive cultural impact, and the reclaimed cunt has notably been in *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, a pop culture phenomenon with more than 200 episodes, 29 Primetime Emmy awards, and since 2015, annual drag conventions in Los Angeles and New York (Langston). RuPaul himself released the song “Charisma. Uniqueness. Nerve & Talent,” and its title is a popular refrain on the show. According to Fenton Bailey, co-founder of World of Wonder, the company that puts on DragCon and produces *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, the attendees from 2018’s DragCon were roughly 60% female and 40% male, and about 60% of attendees identified as LGBTQ+ while 40% were heterosexual (Rao). That year, both DragCons in Los Angeles and New York brought in more than eight million dollars and had a combined audience of 100,000 (Kilkenny). Although those numbers are solely

from 2018's events, the cultural influence from *Drag Race*, which shows some queens from Ballroom spaces and includes queer terminology, should not be ignored; it is certifiably popular. To say that some members of the out-group have not recognized cunt's reclamation would be wrong: a substantial number of DragCon attendees have been and likely will continue to be heterosexual. Even though the out-group as a whole has not received cunt in its non-derogatory manner — Galinsky's third stage — it is necessary to acknowledge its expansion to the out-group and its popularity. It would be irresponsible to pretend the dominant culture in the United States, catered to white cisgender heterosexual men, completely welcomes drag culture, but popularity does not mean every person under the sun has heard and loves the reclaimed word. Cunt has grown out of its insular community and slowly into something bigger, with increasingly more uptake, and that's surely a sign of some success.

Popularity as part of the reclamation process requires felicitous usage, otherwise; we are simply evaluating slurring acts, precisely what reclamatory efforts are working against. It is only logical that a successful reclamatory effort is one where the word is being used in a positive manner by the right people; if a very popular straight man with a large social media following uses the term cunt to poke fun at the LGBTQ+ community or uses it completely incorrectly, it is not a felicitous deployment and not successful, even though it might have been viewed by a large audience.

Another pivotal factor in understanding the success of linguistic reclamation is what De Sa and Cepollaro call "accomplishment." In essence, is the reclamatory act aligned with and moving forward the goal of the slur's reclamation? This is context dependent as some pushes for reclamation can have goals such as: fostering comradery, fighting discrimination, expressing pride, manifesting solidarity, neutralizing the word, or ensuring value reversal (Cepollaro and de Sa 205).

If there are multiple goals, with differing levels of priority, undoubtedly, some goals will be achieved more than others. To different people in the group who may disagree as to the large goal motivating the reclamation process, efforts can be both a success and failure. To some, the popular usage of queer does not indicate accomplishment, as one of the original goals of its reclamation was to resist and counter homophobia and homophobic institutions, and there are still many homophobic institutions and people today. But having queer as a more inclusive term that offers a person fluidity and privacy in how they identify has met its goal and is accomplished because of how many people, queer or not, use the term positively (Jusińska 697). Some scholars believe linguistic reclamation cannot yield lofty goals like fighting discrimination but even if that is true, there is power to be found in self-definition and the process of trying to achieve it. Because of the difficulty of assessing accomplishment, it is not enough to solely use this approach; supplementary to a discussion of accomplishment is popularity. If the goal of a reclamation process is to create solidarity, then we can include in the conversation about success whether the word is popular amongst the in-group. If the goal is wide-spread change, we can see whether the word has permeated mainstream culture, encouraged serious cultural reevaluation, and spurred a positive change in the stigmatized group's place in society.

Popularity can be at odds with other goals, so it's important to remember the primary goal of a word's reclamation process. Significant popularity is crucial for cunt to undergo a value reversal — more members of the in-groups would see that cunt is not a bad thing and be encouraged to say it, and out-groups ideally would see that cunt is not used negatively and refrain from usage. Fundamental to the goal of value reversal, wanting cunt to indicate something positive rather than negative, is the belief that vulvas are beautiful and worthy of love and respect. In a society so puritanical and fearful of vulvas, showing love and respect for the word cunt also

encourages women and people of marginalized gender identities to feel empowered in their bodies. To achieve meaningful value reversal, cunt's reclamation should have popularity, but again, popularity does not mean that everyone can say the word. Cunt should only be said by those in the in-groups; this is an insular reclamation project. But those in the in-groups can say the word and share its positive usage with friends and those in their communities, increasing awareness. Members of the in-groups with large social media platforms or cultural capital can deploy cunt felicitously and help the reclamation project become more accomplished. This is already being done by queens on *RuPaul's Drag Race*, successful Ballroom performers and artists, and social media users on platforms like TikTok and Twitter, so popularity is not an unrealistic goal.

Just because a word is popular does not mean it has been fully accomplished. A word like "queer," which has become increasingly used by the out-group with permission from the in-group and now functions as a commonplace term to describe someone in the LGBTQ+ community, in some ways has still not reached full accomplishment. Even though the word is very popular, and homosexuality is much more normalized than 60 years ago, some of the out-group today, heterosexual people, are anti-LGBTQ+ in serious, powerful ways (e.g. Congressmen in multiple states in the United States removing rights from transgender individuals). If eliminating discrimination and finding group acceptance was the primary goal, that reclamation effort would fail. The popular usage would also have to be in line with its linguistic goals and meet felicity conditions for it not to fail. In discussions of success and failure, we also must remember that in the words of Galinsky et al., "revaluation occurs along a continuum" (Galinsky et al. 243). Failure now does not mean failure forever.

Strictly following Galinsky et al.'s model, cunt is still squarely in the second level of reclamation, where larger collectives begin self-labelling. Even though cunt has increased in

popularity in some news outlets and forms of entertainment, it has yet to be popular in less queer circles. While Ballroom has woven the reclaimed word into its structures of performance, the queer community as a bigger group has not begun to self-label, and women as a larger group have not either. We still are in a stage where subcultures have self-labelled and only now is that seeping into more encompassing in-groups. To get to Galinsky et al.'s third stage, his point of "successful reclamation," out-group members will have to recognize and accept the new label, and for that to happen, cunt has to become more popular. To assess felicity is context dependent but again this thesis' understanding of popularity assumes the conditions of felicity are met. Is cunt accomplished? Not yet. Saying cunt is still taboo. Not enough people realize the word has been revalued and cannot then see the word as having its value reversed. Just last week, I was at dinner with friends and affectionately called a movie cunt. Despite being impassioned and raving about how amazing this movie was before deeming it "cunt," the older male patrons sitting near me looked uneasy. But for myself, in that moment and many others, cunt succeeds in achieving an auxiliary goal of empowering the person saying it. As a woman, I felt proud to say the word. Evidently, there will be mixed success until the word gains more popularity, which will help with accomplishment. We are getting there, though.

In Barbara Kingsolver's novel *Animal Dreams*, the protagonist reads a meaningful letter from her sister that revolution is not "a great all-or-nothing," success like life is not white or black. Before she reaches that elusive "all," the protagonist reads: "the very least you can do in your life is figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope. Not admire it from a distance but live right in it, under its roof" (Kingsolver 299). Of course, in analyzing reclamation projects, we have to be realistic and grounded in how people feel, talk, and act. Many

times, in these reclamation projects for slurs, there are moments or stages that can be considered failures. Looking at the reclamation of cunt with popularity, felicity, and accomplishment in mind, there's much to be desired, more of the in-group to join the people in the know. But it is worth remembering that at the heart of reclamation projects is hope — hope for a better world where people are respected, dignified, and equal. When people try to reclaim words, they are not at a distance; they are living right in it, under hope's roof, trying to reflect the beauty and strength of a group with language. While we have looked at reclamation in this thesis with a critical eye, it was not to discount burgeoning efforts.

Moving forward, if you feel called (and it's felicitous!), don't be afraid to say cunt. If you see cunt, applaud it. And if you don't see it, serve it. In the words of Kevin Jz Prodigy, "If you do not feel, breath, and ooze cunt, do not come to this floor!"

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