

# Fighting Words!

A Critical Approach to Linguistic Transgression

ERIC LOUIS RUSSELL



# FIGHTING WORDS!

*Fighting Words!* is a critical exploration of all kinds of “bad language” and how that language shapes, reinforces, or subverts identity, ideology, and power. Eric Louis Russell expertly investigates facets of taboo language, drawing on diverse interdisciplinary material to define key concepts and using them to examine the complex dynamics behind a wide range of examples from popular culture, from Donald Trump’s controversies to Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion’s WAP.

What emerges from this analysis is the intersectionality of how language is performed and how it contributes to the shaping of identity and simultaneously shapes and is shaped by social attitudes, cultural assumptions, and systems of power with regard to race, sexuality, and gender.

With fascinating “A Closer Look” boxes and a rich array of pedagogical features, this is the perfect text for advanced students and researchers in sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, and related fields.

**Eric Louis Russell** is Professor of French & Italian at the University of California at Davis, with affiliations in the Linguistics Department and the Program in Gender, Sexualities & Women’s Studies. He is the author of *Alpha Masculinity: Hegemony in Language and Discourse* and *The Discursive Ecology of Homophobia: Unraveling Anti-LGBTQ Speech on the European Far Right*.

In a single accessible, readable, and relevant volume infused with wry humor and keen insights, *Fighting Words!* offers readers an indispensable primer on topics ranging from linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics to political correctness and cancel culture. Beginning with a focus on “bad” language, the volume invites the reader to question, reexamine, and reimagine the very construct of what language is, imploring us to consider language as a verb: to language. To help his readers question the language that permeates the contemporary sociopolitical space, Russell skillfully embeds his analysis of transgressive languaging acts in engaging, relevant contexts: the Trump years, overheard conversations, rap music, and the ubiquitous “Karens” who dominate social media. Via these rich and provocative examples, Russell encourages the reader to examine these linguistic transgressions more thoughtfully and critically. Discussion questions and suggestions for further reading are provided at the end of each chapter, providing not simply “food for thought” but rather provocative and insightful stimuli for difficult conversations. *Fighting Words!* is essential reading for a divided nation of people struggling, but often failing, to understand each other.

—**Thomas Jesús Garza**, *The University of Texas at Austin, USA*

# FIGHTING WORDS!

A Critical Approach to  
Linguistic Transgression

*Eric Louis Russell*

Cover image: © Getty Images | drante

First published 2024

by Routledge

605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

and by Routledge

4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

© 2024 Eric Louis Russell

The right of Eric Louis Russell to be identified as author of this work has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

*Trademark notice:* Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

ISBN: 978-1-032-13054-5 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-13053-8 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-22742-7 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003227427

Typeset in Galliard

by Apex CoVantage, LLC

# CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	viii
<i>Prologue – On Never Looking Away</i>	ix
1 Rethinking Language: Foundations for Critique	1
<i>If Not Existence, Then What?</i>	4
<i>Implications of Language-as-Verb</i>	6
<i>Tying It Together</i>	7
<i>Discussion Questions</i>	9
<i>Further Reading</i>	9
2 Linguaging Transgression: “Grabbing Pussy” and “Locker Room Talk”	11
<i>Describing Transgressive Linguaging</i>	13
<i>Linguistic Signs</i>	16
<i>Beyond Words</i>	21
<i>X-Phemism</i>	23
<i>Structured Linguaging</i>	25
<i>Tying It Together</i>	28
<i>Discussion Questions</i>	30
<i>Further Reading</i>	31
3 Linguaging Meaning: “Rolling Coal” and “Having Balls”	33
<i>Unintended Transgression</i>	34
<i>Linguaging Meaning</i>	35

	<i>Meaning and Languages</i>	40
	<i>Languaging Culture</i>	42
	<i>Languaging Communities and Communities of Languaging</i>	47
	<i>Languaging Context</i>	50
	<i>Indexing and Enregisterment</i>	53
	<i>Tying It Together</i>	55
	<i>Discussion Questions</i>	57
	<i>Further Reading</i>	58
4	Languaging Worldview: Ideology and Mythology	60
	<i>Beliefs and Languaging</i>	61
	<i>Languaging Rules</i>	63
	<i>Mythology and Ideology</i>	65
	<i>Languaging and Race</i>	70
	<i>Tying It Together</i>	73
	<i>Discussion Questions</i>	77
	<i>Further Reading</i>	78
5	Languaging Authority and Power: Karens in the Wild	80
	<i>Karens (as well as Darrens, Beckys and Warrens)</i>	81
	<i>Authority and Power</i>	83
	<i>Doing Language and Doing Power</i>	86
	<i>Censorship and Self-Censorship</i>	89
	<i>Facework and Verbal Hygiene</i>	92
	<i>Tying It Together</i>	95
	<i>Discussion Questions</i>	99
	<i>Further Reading</i>	100
6	Languaging Consequence: Linguistic Performativity and Hate Speech	101
	<i>Insults and Hate Speech</i>	102
	<i>Languaging in Real Time</i>	106
	<i>Speech Act Theory</i>	109
	<i>Interpolation and Hailing</i>	114
	<i>Tying It Together</i>	117
	<i>Discussion Questions</i>	120
	<i>Further Reading</i>	121

7	Languageing Cancellation: The Ecology of Discourse and Hegemony	122
	<i>Cancel Culture</i>	123
	<i>Discourse Two Ways</i>	127
	<i>Discursive Power and Hegemony</i>	131
	<i>Critical Discourse Studies</i>	134
	<i>Tying It Together</i>	136
	<i>Discussion Questions</i>	140
	<i>Further Reading</i>	140
8	Languageing Rebellion: When Pussy Grabs Back	142
	<i>Transgression at the Top of the Charts</i>	143
	<i>Linguistic Rebellion</i>	144
	<i>Transgression as Liberation</i>	150
	<i>Tying It Together</i>	152
	<i>Discussion Questions</i>	157
	<i>Further Reading</i>	157
	<i>Works Cited</i>	159
	<i>Index</i>	175



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work would not have seen the light of day were it not for several people who deserve a heartfelt shout-out. Foremost are my editor at Routledge, Amy Laurens, and assistant Bex Hume, as well as Ze'ev Sudry, who first approached me with a (what appeared at the time) crazy invitation to take up this project. I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge colleagues at the University of California, Davis (Departments of French & Italian and Linguistics), and at the Università degli Studi di Trieste (Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici): thank you *e grazie mille* for listening to my ideas, for providing your own thoughts and for your support. Students in two decades of HUM 15 have been a source of inspiration and much needed challenges, keeping me on my toes and making me question my own preconceived notions. A huge thanks to my wonderful teaching assistants over the years, especially Chloe Brotherton and Mirna Reyna. Finally, I am eternally grateful to my friends, family and, especially, husband Sam: there are no fucking words to express my gratitude.

# PROLOGUE – ON NEVER LOOKING AWAY

A decade and a half ago, the University of California, like other public institutions of higher learning, found itself in the grip of an existential crisis, one that reshaped the humanities and human sciences and indirectly led to the writing of these pages. An overheated housing market had crashed, sending government finances into a tailspin and provoking a sharp economic decline, all of which squeezed campus budgets to an extent not seen in decades. This was a watershed moment for many disciplines and fields, especially those like languages, whose position has long been precarious in the neoliberalized, ever more STEM-centred world of US higher education.<sup>1</sup> With the goal of, in the words of an erstwhile dean, “paying our way” (see Chapter 2 for more on euphemisms), I and my colleagues were encouraged to develop large-enrolment classes, conduits for putting butts in seats and placating administrative bean counters, even if student learning was to suffer.

“Fuck me,” I recall thinking, almost certainly using this or a similar expression, “there’s no fucking way that many students could ever give even half a fuck about what I do.” My area of scholarly expertise being largely theoretical, I was at a loss to respond to the dean’s imperative. *Bitching* about this mandate with friends and colleagues – and again undoubtedly using a fair dash of profanity while also raising a few eyebrows (I was younger and very much too sure of myself in those years) – it occurred to me that the very form of my reaction, in all its blundering, non-academic vulgarity, might make for a compelling undergraduate course. At least, I found the prospect inspiring. Call it swearing, cursing or cussing, I *really fucking* love doing language in this way. I always have relished the shape and weight of so-called bad language, from my co-primary English and German, to French

and Dutch (languages of my academic formation), to Italian (encompassing much of my present scholarly and personal life) and even to Spanish and Slovenian (in which I continually struggle to gain a toehold). In all spaces I have inhabited, at times for years, at times for brief sojourns, I have relished deploying different mechanisms of being vulgar or crass, observing how people insult each other and how these insults are received, and attending to expressions injected into moments of humour, frustration or pain. (My go-to in English is an off-the-cuff *fuckballs*, in French *puuuutain*, drawing out the first syllable, in Dutch a stern but dull *verdomme*, and in Italian the omnipresent *cazzo*.<sup>2</sup>) What is not to love about the richness that raw communicative moments demonstrate about linguistic and cultural settings, let alone the people who inhabit them? And what is not fascinating about the aperture that these acts give into the inner working of different communities, our own included?

As the preceding should make clear, this is not just the stuff of distant, removed-from-daily life academia. I am a participant in these moments, spaces and contexts; I am a member of these communities; and I am affected by what happens in these semiotic spaces, as much as I affect them in turn. I confess to using so-called bad language on a daily basis, often as I wake up (who among us hasn't faced the first moments of a Monday with the thought, articulated or not, "*goddamnit*, here the fuck we go again!"). I continue these practices throughout the day, responding to the little things (dense traffic or forgotten items on a grocery list, which merit at minimum an "oh for *fuckssake*") and to far more important ones (abrasive colleagues or the state of current politics, often worthy of something much stronger, such as "*fuckmenightly*"). My languaging isn't limited to so-called swears, either: I am fascinated by offensive humour, even as I am frequently repelled by it; I am riveted by profanity and blasphemy, even if I confess to having little of the faith requisite to truly experience these concepts; and I cannot help but perk up when I hear insults being thrown about, even when I, a friend or members of my communities are the object of hate and animus (being an openly gay, unabashedly progressive, European-American academic in the early twenty-first century means such moments are far from exceptional). It is not necessarily the shock or provocation of such ways of interacting that appeal to me – although I would be dishonest in saying that isn't part of it – it is the efficiency, power and impact of such naked practices, the richness and variability of their form and structure, and the embodied results that they produce. Languaging in such a high-impact manner – and few semiotic modalities are more impactful than those that are "not supposed to be done" – is akin to swinging a communicative hammer: it might not always be pretty and make a bit of a mess, but it works and leaves little room for confusion. In other words, *it gets shit done*.

Thus, it was perhaps inevitable that I began to seriously consider the question, “Why the *fuck* should I *not* construct class around this *fucking shit*?” Why not approach so-called bad language with the same methods and stances that I and other linguists use in our more traditional teaching assignments? Why not use this practice to guide students toward better questions concerning that which they are told shouldn’t be done in the first place, spurring critical thinking habits and intellectual postures?

It seemed like a fucking great idea then, and it sure as fuck still does now.

### Studying *This Shit*

*This shit* – swearing, cursing, insults, offensive jokes, crass speech and all else that we are told time and again is somehow decadent, defective, unworthy or insidious – is not a trivial or marginal matter. *This shit* is, in fact, everywhere: it is part and parcel of our human experience, love or loathe it, run from or toward it, embrace or ignore it. Hardly a day goes by that most of us don’t utter something that we have been told we ought not to, and we regularly do language in a manner we have learned is best avoided, even if such communication is directed only to ourselves (after all, we also think through language). And it’s hardly just ourselves or our close contacts who do this – we constantly hear of one or another famous person uttering words not meant for public consumption, provoking forced apologies and even prompt resignations. With the omnipresence of social media and new means of instantaneous communication, it doesn’t take an astute observer to see that so-called bad language and the people who do it are never far to hand, nor are the consequences for such linguistic action lacking.

And yet, we spend very little time and energy attending to any of these actions and the contexts in which they occur, save perhaps to offer admonition and pretend that this is marginal or can be marginalized. This is a true shame, as such *shit* is as much the stuff of our human existence as is the economics of wealth and poverty or the biology of cancer and sexually transmitted disease, subjects of serious and dedicated study at any university worthy of such a moniker. “Why the fuck shouldn’t this shit be studied,” I reasoned, as the shape and form of a dedicated course began to evolve, “especially since it’s fucking everywhere and everyone is so fucking up in arms about it all.” I reasoned that, if my colleagues in other departments can offer classes on a wide variety of topics deemed sensitive or controversial, ranging from the history of genocide to the mechanisms of environmental poisoning, I could offer a course that looks at communicative moments that engender shock, offense and anger.

So began my adventure as a scholar-teacher of bad language. I first waded into these pedagogical waters timidly, confining discussion to a handful of

lectures in a course entitled Language and Identity. (Fun fact: the course is still offered under this title, as our campus registrar has understandably balked at the unofficial course title “Fuck This Shit,” although I do include it prominently on syllabi and in the curricular portal). Over the next several years, it evolved into a dedicated course that looks solidly and squarely at *this shit*, tackling new and newly controversial *shit* far beyond swearing or expletives. Year after year, students have responded positively to the offering – a fact that has, no doubt, pleased various administrators (the same ones who have also either not cared to look more deeply at the class and its content or who have simply turned their heads, satisfied with enrolments and a lack of scandal . . . fingers crossed!). And this is not just an administrative success but also a pedagogical one – at least, I hope – mostly thanks to the undergraduates who make up the course community. Students may be young and are often inexperienced, but they are hardly stupid. When it comes to linguistic life, they are quite far from naïve. In fact, they are curious and even eager to examine experiences that have long been relegated to the shadows, especially when this is something about which they have been made ashamed or embarrassed.

My own trajectory has been exciting, humbling, frustrating and instructive. The class participants – students who are typically in the early years of undergraduate study, very often in their first term – are ever changing, which has meant that the object of our work together has evolved continuously, even surprisingly. Although I provide structure and scaffolding, they teach me as much, if not more than I am able to teach them as it concerns contemporary languaging practices and perspectives. This has not always been smooth sailing, by any means: there have been many moments that challenged me – as an intellectual, as an instructor and as a human being. Discussions of forms referring to genitalia and masturbation have made me turn crimson with embarrassment; a unit examining offensive humour left me with a profound sense of discomfort, especially when it became clear that so-called rape jokes had supplanted antecedent forms of sexist humour (this was in the early 2010s, before the #MeToo movement come into its current salience); and issues of racism and xenophobia, particularly in the Trumpist era, have required a great deal of empathy and patience, not to mention pulse-checking from all sides. Time and again, year after year, class after class, I return to the fundamental ethical consideration of this work; I have attempted to do the same in the pages that follow. As I try to make it clear to students, I do not believe that it is intellectually honest or ethical to ignore uncomfortable realities, particularly those that are part and parcel of our daily lives, and especially when this material is highly impactful. We may wish that no one were insulted because of race, gender, sexuality or another identity characteristic; we may hope for a world in which humour is not a weapon wielded by the powerful

to further ensmall the powerless; and we may try to avoid speaking, writing or tweeting in ways that are considered crass and uncivilized in order to present a positive social persona. These aspirations are normal and may even reflect many of our better selves. However, any attempt to control languaging and languagers ultimately amounts to a Sisyphean enterprise: no matter how hard we toil, pushing the boulder of “bad language” up a hill, we will inevitably find that gravity has pushed it back down upon us time and again. (I would suggest that our efforts are doomed to failure because, in this analogy, we are both the mountain and the rock, both Sisyphus and Zeus, both creator and created – more on this in the chapters that follow.)

Which leads me to ask again, perhaps to the point of pedantry, why the *fuck* shouldn't we study this *shit*?

I believe that we should and that we must. We must do this systematically, calling upon theoretical and applied work in various fields – linguistics and sociolinguistics, of course, but also discourse analysis, philosophy, history, sociology, anthropology and much more. We must do this bravely, refusing to shy away from uncomfortable truths or indelicate realities. And we must do this from a critical perspective, maintaining a careful balance between interrogation and open-mindedness, scepticism and wonder. We must do this because those who do language also cause injury and harm through their actions, just as they shock and offend with their actions, and because we judge such people, just as we are judged ourselves. Perhaps more than all else, we should do this because we are capable of this type of inquiry – and capable of carrying it out thoughtfully and openly.

This is, in effect, my invitation: to step into the careful, critical and uncomfortable studying of *the shit*. And, for *fuckssake*, to do it well.

### **What This Book Is (and What It Is Not)**

Before reviewing the different components of this book and what it is intended to be, it is important to clarify what it is not. First and foremost, this is not another book about swearing, vulgarity or even more generally about so-called bad words, regardless of how they might be labelled. Of course, profanity and vulgarity are a part of what is examined in the following pages, if only because it would be impossible to attend to such a topic otherwise (although the astute reader should already be prepared to call the very notion of word into question, a topic taken up more in Chapter 2). It is not that such matters are uninteresting or trivial but that there have already been many insightful and interesting works looking at bad words, many of which are listed at the close of this prologue.

Rather than the nebulous concept of bad language, this book examines transgressive languaging and transgressive languagers, moments of

boundary crossing and the human actors who author them (see Chapter 1 for clarity on these unconventional terms). These are actions that shape not only what we think of others but how we understand ourselves and our place in communities both narrow and broad. Transgression involves who said or wrote or tweeted or posted what; it also involves the people hearing or reading or retweeting or reposting in response. And the nature of transgression arises not merely or even primarily from isolated individuals, emerging instead from a sociolinguistic and discursive ecosystem (Russell, 2019). These considerations and their inclusion in the description, interpretation and analysis of transgressive linguistic events visibilize that which is often invisible: concepts such as authority and who grants, accepts and/or contests it; ideas such as power and who holds it, how they attain and deploy it, as well as those who dispute it; and theories concerning the systems of structured relation, notably those emerging from or cogent to the Frankfurt School and its primary catalysts, such as Benjamin, Horkheimer, Marcuse and Adorno, all of whom sought to peel back the layers of social reality and apprehend the structures and dynamics underlying them, this with (admittedly fraught) emancipatory goals. In effect, the concept of transgressive languaging is always about more than what it appears on the surface and studying it carefully offers a means to better understand the hidden forces operating across communities and cultures.

To return to the example that frames this prologue, swearing is certainly one type of transgressive linguistic activity. When I write sentences such as “Why the fuck shouldn’t we study this shit?” I am crossing a border that separates two arenas of action: one that might allow me to language in ways considered fit for private consumption, for instance among close friends at a bar, and one that requires me to adhere to strict norms of collective linguistic behaviour, in this instance cogent to academic writing and publishing. People like me, guardians of all that is erudite and sacred about academia and its trappings, are not supposed to publicly language in this way. The transgression inherent to such an act is not simply a matter of the words I choose. It also arises from a host of other factors that are not readily apparent but whose import is far deeper. These include questions of authority and hygiene, power and hegemony, ideology and mythology: all are bound up in this example. Crossing the boundary separating “acceptable in private” from “unacceptable in public” testifies to my own attempt to claim power, notably the power to challenge and provoke the readership of these pages, as well as the power of my editors and publishers (who will no doubt have had much to say about this prologue!) to control how far across such a boundary I may wander with impunity.

These and many other transgressions are the focus of this book. The foundational interrogation of the following pages is thus not only one of

taboo or of labelling, not simply one of defining boundaries and describing how these are crossed, but one that interrogates the very notion of boundary and of crossing, one that calls into question the forces that establish and enforce boundaries and the inheritances that lead us to understand one or another act and actor as transgressive, not to mention the extent of any transgression. This concerns all that makes up a linguistic community, from its members to the powers that unite and divide them, from the knowledge that allows them to perform and accomplish things with languaging to the ways in which others interpret and react to such moments. In short, it is about humanity in a fundamentally human way, as all humans are languagers and the vast majority of human interaction involves some sort of languaging. And these languagings are also very, very frequently transgressive.

This book is intended to serve as both a reference and a guide for students and scholars at various levels of study, ranging from advanced undergraduates to professional researchers, and is hopefully of interest to a wider, curious audience beyond academia. It brings together antecedent scholarship, some of which is not usually applied to linguistic transgression, and is divided into eight chapters, each of which centres on a specific theme, illustrated by a real-life example. Chapter 1 serves as the foundation of the book, advancing several concepts and terminological conventions that frame discussion throughout, most notably the refutation of language-as-thing and the assertion of language-as-verb. Chapter 2 introduces key ideas and vocabulary involved in transgressive languaging and enlanguagement, using former president Trump’s assertions (namely, that he could “grab women by the pussy”) as descriptive and interpretive examples. Chapter 3 moves to the question of meaning and its social construction, examining a hot mic moment and asking how languagers make and remake different aspects of their reality. Chapter 4 takes on questions of linguistic mythology and ideology, considering how languagers contend with, promote and rebel against Academic English. Chapter 5 tackles issues of authority and power, offering a closer look at so-called Karens and their linguistic activity, as well as community reaction to this. Chapter 6 turns to performativity and speech act theory, building on the ways in which languaging and enlanguagement are framed in Chapter 1 by re-examining several instances in which the *n-word* was deployed and issues relevant to hate speech or linguistically manifested animus. Chapter 7 turns to the notion of discourse and hegemony as realized through languaging, interrogating examples of so-called cancel culture. In closing, Chapter 8 takes up acts of linguistic rebellion, including rehabilitation and resignification, reverting to many of the formal foci of Chapter 2 through an examination of Cardi B’s hit song “Wet Ass Pussy.”

Each chapter begins with a story taken from recent years, real-life moments used to focus readers while serving as a basis for the application



of pertinent concepts and terms. Of course, these are not the only examples that might be evoked in reference to the themes and ideas under discussion, and each chapter includes several additional illustrative points that are intended to frame debate, whether in a formal classroom or in other, less traditional settings, as well as a series of questions for subsequent discussion. Also included are suggestions for further reading. As will be obvious from the very beginning, the division between different chapters and their ordering are, for the most part, a matter of authorial choice. With the exception of Chapter 1, which challenges many of the ingrained ways of talking about language and linguistic activity, and Chapter 2, which should prove useful to readers who are less familiar with linguistics, all others are relatively interchangeable and can be read in any order.

### **Author Positionality**

It will be obvious to any reader that this book does not pretend to be comprehensive in its scope or treatment of linguistic transgression, a task that would prove impossible for even the most talented author. Much of this limitation is self-imposed, deriving from the choice to focus on English linguistic and North American cultural themes and data. Other notable biases include the selection of thematic foci and the real-life examples used to illustrate them. In other words, there is already a tremendous amount of interpretation that precedes all description and analysis in these pages, if only through the narrowing of intellectual lenses. For this reason, I feel it is best to depart from the seemingly objective rhetoric and posturing and openly acknowledge who I am, my own experience, and how these facts have shaped this book.

Nearly all examples and source material in this book emerge from Anglophone, US cultural contexts, to the exclusion of others. This highly narrowed focus should not be understood to imply that there is something unique or magnanimous about this backdrop – or that other linguacultures have nothing to offer by way of compelling examples – but arises from two practical motivations. Firstly, this book is being written by a scholar who has spent the vast majority of his professional life in the above-mentioned settings, although I must also confess that many of the examples are not part of my repertoire. I do, however, believe that it is important to use for illustrations examples for which I have intuitions and lived experience, as well as ones that are accessible and legible to the greatest number of readers. As I have argued in Russell (2019, 2021, 2024) and in Knisely and Russell (2024), the type of careful, critical scholarship that is exemplified and modelled in the following pages can only be done from an emic perspective, implicating a view from within and denying any mythological objectivity.

Secondly, and acknowledging that this is the result of myriad forces that are hardly equanimous – and might even be qualified as oppressively neo-colonial – US cultural and linguistic practices are one of, if not *the* point of reference in an ever more interconnected world (see critique in Ives, 2009). For good or for bad (and let me be clear: I believe the scales tilt undeniably in the latter direction), the United States is the source of much globalized and globalizing discourse, including that pertinent to transgression. To see examples of this powerful force one need only look at the ways in which popular acts of disruption, such as the #MeToo movement and *wokeness*, have spread from this sociolinguistic and sociocultural base to nearly all corners of the globe. Thus, while the example descriptions, interpretations and analyses might come from this backdrop, they stand to be at least somewhat legible to others – and hopefully the intellectual, critical work applied here can serve as a template for the study of transgressions in many more linguacultural contexts.

Finally, a brief mention truly must be made of the examples that were selected themselves. They are all cases of transgression that are disconcerting, sometimes to me personally. I have wrestled a great deal with questions about which of the many – far too many – examples of linguistic transgressions in the news might best serve the objectives of this work, without being overly difficult for readers to contend with or inadvertently propagating the types of animus, privilege and violence that are critically examined. I hope that these illustrations and the discussions that flow from them, shocking or banal as they might appear to different readers, will inspire more questions than answers, and that any conclusions offered will be understood as both unstable and destabilizing, especially for those (like me and, I suspect, most readers) who enjoy the privileges of academic life.

### **A Final Word of (and Before) Beginning**

“Never look away,” beckons the English title of *Werk ohne Autor*,<sup>3</sup> a loosely historic film recounting the trajectory of post-war German artist Gerhard Richter (2018, directed by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck and produced by Buena Vista International). Through a shifting, challenging opus, Richter dared look solidly at the some of the most uncomfortable civic and cultural realities of the twentieth century, including many that affected him personally. The film, loosely based on his life, beckons its audience toward the recognition of discomfort and unease in the face of that which, despite all attempts at denial or dissimulation, transpired and transpires among humans. Viewers of both Richter’s art and von Donnersmarck’s film are put in a position where they cannot fully look away, if only because they are henceforth participants in the very object that they might have otherwise

abjected. In a similar vein, when it comes to language and to that which transpires in and through linguistic activity, I assert that we should never look away, even and especially in moments of extreme discomfort, but strive to look ever deeper and closer.

With that in mind, I invite readers of these pages to adopt a similar posture, one that never looks away, but always stands in critical examination. This is a posture of curiosity and empathy, courage and concern, criticism and introspection in the face of languaging facts and facets that are usually not part of polite society and civil exchange. It is all the more important to maintain this in the face of linguistic moments that provoke anger, resentment, fear and any number of additional unpleasant feelings. I invite you all to reconsider linguistic transgressions and transgressive languaging acts, questioning them more and more deeply, with greater care and insight. To build a wall around the uncomfortable moments of our linguistic existences only gives rise to more entrenched power dynamics and imbalances, as it nourishes those who would rather not have their actions or reactions called into question, instead allowing them to persist in the unexamined belief that this is the only or best or inevitable way of being and doing.

To develop a critical posture vis-à-vis languaging and languagers is nothing short of – to put it in a register that leaves little doubt as to how this book will proceed – *fucking with* that which the privileged (call it *patriarchy*, *hegemony*, *the man* or something else) would rather leave *un-fucked-with*. This *fucking with* is not just a question of academic flair or an intellectual exercise but a liberating act, one that is designed to break down boundaries and augur participation (see Halberstam, 2021, 2022; Knisely & Russell, 2024; Russell, 2021). And it is done not simply because it is enjoyable or amusing but because, to quote one of the lectures I regularly give to undergraduate students, “we fuck with the patriarchy, because the patriarchy isn’t going to fuck itself.”

### Further Reading

There are dozens of works available focusing on taboo or bad language, most often focusing on words. One of the most accessible of these is Ruth Wajnryb’s *Expletive Deleted*, which does a tremendous job of describing such language and does so in a way that avoids superfluous academic posturing. Similarly, John McWhorter’s *Nine Nasty Words* provides a comprehensible foundation for any who are interested in taboo language. Tony McEnery’s *Swearing in English* offers compelling examples from the past and attends to their resonance in the present, and Benjamin Bergen’s inciteful primer *What the F: What Swearing Reveals About Our Language, Our Brains and Ourselves* is a brilliant book that makes neuro- and psycholinguistic

fundamentals legible to readers at nearly any level of experience. For those who require an introduction to the fields of linguistics and sociolinguistics, Randall Eggert’s *This Book is Taboo* will prove useful and enlightening. At the same time, for those curious about swearing in languages other than English, additional sources are not hard to find, although these are often (and quite rightly) published in their respective languages, rendering them less accessible to many. An excellent point of departure for Anglophone readers is Magnus Ljung’s *Swearing: A Cross-Cultural Linguistic Study*; for those simply curious about how to get by in other contexts, Jay Sacher’s highly approachable *How to Swear Around the World* is a terrific introduction to many linguacultural contexts, also including helpful phonetic hints and even a few illustrations. For a more academically grounded view of humour, taboo and otherwise, Attardo’s *The Linguistics of Humor* offers a solid foundation.

## Notes

- 1 STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) is frequently evoked as a catch-all for those disciplines that are understood to truly matter in public discourse, putatively because they “produce” (note the agentive denotative content of this verb) future neoliberal citizens who are employable, having demonstrable “skills,” thus reifying the vocational turn of higher education in the United States (and not only). STEM coexists in a difficult tension with the humanities, which are often considered luxuries as they put forth less-quantifiable “products” of knowledge (see McComas & Burgin, 2020).
- 2 This already suggests a great deal about linguacultural differences, especially if each form’s literal meaning is considered: French (translatable as “whore”), Dutch (“goddam”) and Italian (“dick”). I suspect it also says something about me that I don’t really default to taboo language in German.
- 3 The original title, directly translatable as “Work without an Author,” does not quite capture the spirit of its English title.