

***Seven Stories of Threatening Speech:  
Women's Suffrage Meets Machine Code***

**Ruth A. Miller (2012)**

**Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 289pp.**

*Reviewed by Perry Sherouse*

Historian Ruth Miller offers an ambitious critique of agency-focused accounts of women's suffrage movements in the United States and England in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Miller draws upon women's suffrage to contribute to critical theory, by describing the 'operation and execution of nonhuman, computational speech, and the threat that this speech poses to physical or environmental systems' (p. 5). Indeed, Miller explains that her book is 'not about women's suffrage or women's movements in and of themselves ... instead, speech is the central concern' (p. 51). One of Miller's goals, then, is to explain, 'how a particular mode of speech ... came to be associated with the suffragists' (p. 58). The question of how such associations were formed, in addition to the significance of their effects, is outside of the scope of her text. I quote Miller at length in order to do justice to her argument, and also to indicate how ambiguities arise from using terms like 'linguistic activity', 'language', and 'speech' without explicit definition. Engaging with the scholarly literature in the social sciences that has dealt with these challenging rubrics would strengthen her argument.

Miller comments that anti-suffragists gave 'no mention of the speakers' [suffragists'] words or their ideas' (p. 60). Ironically, she does the same, focusing exclusively on anti-suffragists' descriptions of suffragists to assemble evidence for her argument. To be fair, this is a function of Miller's focus: she is not describing suffragists or their speech, but rather,

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is interested in how their speech was construed as ‘threatening’ by anti-suffragists. The object of analysis is *not* suffragists’ speech itself, but rather characterisations of that speech. Miller claims at several moments in the text that suffragists and anti-suffragists use similar discursive structures, though her examples (with one exception; see p. 105) are exclusively from anti-suffragists. The seven chapters in the body of the text take thematics (‘Antisecular speech’, ‘Monsters’, ‘Repetitive speech’, ‘Witches’, ‘Insane speech and its remedies’, ‘Rampant theory’ and ‘Dream speech’) that Miller finds in characterisations of suffragists’ speech, culled mostly from newspaper editorials stretching over roughly half a century. It is disappointing that Miller does not provide analysis of the speech genres (newspaper editorials, opinion essays, senate and house of representative arguments) from which she draws her materials, as their participants, rhetorical conventions, spheres of circulation, and publics deserve more detailed attention. Leaving aside agency as a dominant rubric need not mean ignoring the contexts and cotexts in which the debates about suffrage took place. In particular, attending to what the debate form itself contributes to these discursive forms would be valuable.

Miller strives towards the evocative rather than the descriptive. As a result, the key terms of her argument (‘threatening’, ‘machine code’, ‘computational speech’, ‘environment’ and even ‘speech’) remain unelaborated and ambiguous. Miller’s care with certain terminology, such as ‘consent’ in legal discourse, is not carried over to the terminology more central to her argument. For the term ‘threatening’, for example, Miller toggles among at least four understandings: threat as a metaphor for the disruption of norms, threat as hate speech, threat as the promise of physical force, and threat as physical force. Speech-as-physical is in her main purview, but contains multiple possible interpretations. When Miller refers in shorthand to ‘threatening speech’, it is unclear what the ramifications of this formulation are.

Miller’s main interlocutors in the text are Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Katherine Hayles and Bruno Latour. Miller casts her primary theoretical move as a ‘methodological’ one: viewing evaluations of suffragists’ speech without the lens of agency. Miller informs us that starting with human agency is constraining and shuts down conversations about ‘what speech might do’ (p. 38). It remains unclear what, substantively, these possibilities about speech are. What does Miller have in mind when she gestures towards a broader understanding of speech? Miller does not engage with the extensive literature in linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics that deals with theoretical as well as empirically-grounded understandings of speech and language. The brief discussion of J. L. Austin’s performative

speech acts (in chapter 3) serves as a means to discuss Judith Butler's and Katherine Hayles's readings of J. L. Austin, rather than to engage with a longer genealogy that treats language in social practice. As Miller's account links 'narrative' about suffragists to the social world, directly addressing this dimension would enrich her argument. A more basic concern is that Miller's analysis seems to afford no space for social aggregates (such as 'communities' or 'groups,' however they are defined), though there is an implicit claim that suffragists comprise a pre-existing, well-delineated group to which features of talk were assigned or imputed.

Miller's secondary claim is that 'suffragists' speech is one example of machine code executing before machines existed to execute it' (p. 5). Rather than being a mere provocation, Miller picks up this anachronistic claim later in the text, arguing in the section on 'dream speech' that continuities between suffragists' speech and machine code must be taken seriously by means of 'nonlinear interpretations of time' that reveal the multidimensional qualities of suffragists' so-called 'dream speech' (p. 191). Miller's discussion of dream interpretation, hazardously balancing Freud against Foucault, does not suggest the mechanisms of continuity between suffragists and machine code. More to the point, it is unclear what Miller means by 'machine', a term that she uses interchangeably with 'computational'.

Miller seems to view 'machine' as a contemporary object. Although she does not say so outright, the prototype of 'machine' in Miller's argument is the computer. Miller treats 'machine' as an analytical category rather than a historically grounded one. Its function in her account is to describe a certain mode of linguistic activity imputed to (female) suffragists. Pieced together from disparate locations in the text, the 'machine' mode is 'non-human,' concerned with 'sorting, storing, and proliferating information' (p. 2), unembodied, effective, operational, and non-communicative. This suite of characteristics is in opposition to those associated with man's speech (as 'human,' embodied, central to subject formation, concerned with transmitting messages and producing knowledge). Miller detects this opposition in the ways that suffragists' speech was maligned by antisuffragists, and suggests that such a narrative is pervasive and relevant to understanding contemporary electoral politics. Though the anachronistic move is deliberate, it is problematic that the term 'machine' is not among those used by antisuffragists to describe suffragists' speech. For example, suffragists are likened by critics of the time to small drums and noisemakers (p. 104). It is hard to judge if these count as 'machines' in Miller's account, but one has the sense that they do not. The physical, historical and social dimensions of 'machine' must be made explicit if it is to serve as the primary rubric

for understanding evaluations of suffragists' speech, even if 'machine' is intended as a metaphor, or an anachronistic theoretical category.

Built out of the term 'machine' is the more complex issue of how Miller, as analyst, construes 'language', 'speech' and 'linguistic activity' as objects of study. Miller announces that she intends to '[take] machine code as a linguistic model, and [write] a computational rather than human history of speech' (p. 53). What would a computational history look like? This remains an evocative but unfulfilled move. What components of 'machine' or 'computation' does Miller intend to use as the foundation of a linguistic model, and how are those components missing from existing models? Miller's own concept of the 'linguistic' focuses primarily on the referential function of language, to the disadvantage of the other functions, to say nothing of the paralinguistic, extralinguistic, and cross-modal dimensions of communication. Conceptualising message transmission as the primary linguistic mode is a move that requires justification. Absent is a more general discussion of linguistic models and how Miller's research contributes to them. The closest she comes is the statement that 'a linguistic system no longer need be defined narrowly as an abstract system of rules and principles ... [it] must instead be a physical, mechanical, electronic, environmental, ecological, and yes, natural *thing*' (pp. 54–5). Miller is right to broaden 'linguistic system' beyond an abstract set of rules. It is puzzling that she does not acknowledge the scholarly traditions in linguistic anthropology, sociolinguistics, and semiotics that have already done so extensively.