

OBSCENITY, GENDER, AND SUBJECTIVITY

**OBSCENITY, GENDER, AND SUBJECTIVITY:
AN EXAMINATION OF GENDER AND OBSCENITY IN HUBERT SELBY JR.'S
LAST EXIT TO BROOKLYN, GLORIA NAYLOR'S *THE WOMEN OF BREWSTER
PLACE*, AND NTOZAKE SHANGE'S *FOR COLORED GIRLS WHO HAVE
CONSIDERED SUICIDE WHEN THE RAINBOW IS ENUF***

BY

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An Examination of Gender and Subjectivity in Hubert Selby Jr.'s *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*, and
Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide when
the rainbow is enuf*

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Abstract

This thesis examines how obscenity can be used either to maintain or to challenge gender stereotypes. Though this thesis focuses on only three texts, the questions raised concerning the relation between obscenity, gender, and subjectivity have wide applications. The primary theory applied here is a feminist poststructuralism which sees gender as socially constructed through language. According to poststructuralism, everything is formed socially or culturally through language. This includes the realities people experience of themselves and their surroundings; therefore, the language used to describe, and ultimately to construct, gender, is extremely important for a feminist critique of gender construction in our patriarchal society. Obscenity plays an often theoretically neglected role in the construction of gendered subjectivities. Drawing attention to the interconnection between obscenity and gender construction is important to feminists for several reasons. Understanding this interconnection may allow feminists not only to undermine stereotypical gender subjectivities, but to create entirely new subject positions.

To investigate the relationship between obscenity, gender, and subjectivity, this thesis examines the following texts: *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, *The Women of Brewster Place*, and *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf*. The Introduction provides a general survey of critical work concerning obscenity and gender construction as well as providing an introduction

to poststructural theory. Chapter I examines *Last Exit to Brooklyn* and raises questions about, among other things, the misappropriation of obscenity by Selby's female characters where women swear but do so in a patriarchal manner. Selby, in privileging violence over language, silences his female characters in his reinscription of the patriarchy. Chapter II examines *The Women of Brewster Place* and the context Naylor creates which clearly condemns male violence and gives power to female voices. Chapter III examines *for colored girls...* and finds several similarities between Naylor's and Shange's use of obscenity. The new subject positions that these two authors create will be investigated.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
I "She felt like standing up and yelling fuck you to everybody": Obscenity in <i>Last Exit to Brooklyn</i>	29
II " 'Merciful Father, no!' she bellowed. There was no prayer...but a blasphemous fireball ...demanding to be heard": Obscenity in <i>The Women of Brewster Place</i>	50
III "dont you touch my children / muthafucker / or i'll kill you": Obscenity in <i>for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf</i>	67
Conclusion	80
Works Cited and Consulted	84

Introduction

Obscenity, Gender, and Subjectivity

Graffiti in dark alleyways is not the exclusive habitat of obscenity; obscenity is used, seen, or heard in several daily discourses. From contemporary television, contemporary film, and contemporary literature, to the conversations we have entered into ourselves or overheard, we are surrounded by obscenity daily. Obscenity affects our concepts of what it means to be a woman or a man. Obscenity is often used by men to denigrate, intimidate, and violate women; but increasingly, women are appropriating obscenity for their own empowerment. Contemporary drama and film often portray women speaking obscenely to express anger or to emphasize their empowerment. The film *Thelma and Louise*, and the play *The Heidi Chronicles* come to mind. Likewise, obscenity plays a role in female empowerment in two contemporary written texts that have counterparts in the visual media: Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*, and Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf*. Naylor's written text has been made into a television mini-series; Shange's written text was derived from previously staged performances and is used to stage subsequent performances. Both Naylor and Shange present female characters who appropriate obscenity by using it in a context which is critical of male violence.

On the other hand, Hubert Selby Jr.'s *Last Exit to Brooklyn* provides an example of how obscenity can be used to prevent the empowerment of women by portraying women as using obscenity for patriarchal, misogynistic, and racist purposes in a setting which privileges violence over language as the primary force of change. Selby reinforces the obstacles which prevent the empowerment of his female characters. Selby's text was also transformed into a visual production: a 1989 film version. These three written texts are then important both as literature as well as being catalysts for productions in our modern visual culture. In a very real way these written texts do not just reflect reality, they help shape the realities of readers and viewers. However, before one can examine the relationship between gender and obscenity in these respective texts it is necessary to have a theoretical foundation of how language in general shapes gendered identities.

A feminist poststructural theory describes how gender is constructed socially through language. To comprehend fully how gender can be a social construct we must first realize that our perceptions of being individual, rational subjects, are also socially constructed. The two notions of "subjectivity" and "gender" are inexorably linked, which leads to the term "gendered subjectivities." "Gendered subjectivities" implies that our ideas concerning gender are a significant part of our beliefs involving self-identity: in other words, we do not come to think in terms of only "I am," but rather "I/she am/is" or "I/he am/is." Where humanist discourse and much "common sense" opinion would

insist that this is the "natural" expression of simply how the world *is*, a poststructuralist would disagree and insist that both our gender and our subjectivity are constructed through language; therefore, our particular "gendered subjectivity" at any moment is neither "natural" nor "permanent." Poststructuralism provides a means to critique gender differentiation by examining the language which creates these differences in the first place.

"Poststructuralism" is a plural term derived from several theories, but as Chris Weedon states, in *Feminist Practice & Poststructural Theory*: "While different forms of poststructuralism vary both in their practice and in their political implications, they share certain fundamental assumptions about language, meaning, and subjectivity" (20). Language becomes "the site of a struggle over meaning" (Weedon 9). Against "common sense" opinions which express the belief that language simply describes experience and reality, poststructuralists believe that language creates our reality and our experience:

Language is the place where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested. Yet it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is *constructed*. The assumption that subjectivity is constructed implies that it is not innate, not genetically determined, but socially produced.

(Weedon 21)

The "common sense" belief that rejects a socially constructed, constantly changing subjectivity "relies on a naive view of language as transparent and true, undistorted by things such as 'ideology' " (Weedon 77). Poststructuralism has shown this "naive view" itself to be a social construct:

"whereas subjectivity appears obvious to the individual, it is an effect of ideology" (Weedon 30). Louis Althusser discusses this in his 1971 text

"Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses":

Like all obviousnesses, including those that make a word "name a thing" or "have a meaning" (therefore including the obviousness of the transparency of language), the obviousness that you and I are subjects--and that that does not cause any problems--is an ideological effect, the elementary ideological effect.

(quoted in Weedon 30)

Therefore, according to Althusser, the "relationship between the individual and the subject position which she or he takes up in a specific ideology is *imaginary*" (Weedon 31). When we speak as unified subjects we fully believe that we are in control of meaning. We imagine that we are "rational, unified, [and] the source rather than the effect of language" (Weedon 31). The reason why it is difficult, if not perhaps impossible, for people to abandon this powerful "common sense" opinion about subjectivity is due to "the imaginary quality of the individual's identification with a subject position which gives it so much psychological and emotional force" (Weedon 31).

Though it may be difficult to abandon the humanist position due to the imaginary quality of subjectivity, poststructuralism shakes this position by exposing the imaginary nature of the humanist position:

[Poststructuralism] is a theory which decenters the rational, self-present subject of humanism, seeing subjectivity and consciousness, as socially produced in language, as a site of struggle and potential change. Language is not transparent as in humanist discourse, it is not expressive and does not label a "real" world.

Meanings do not exist prior to their articulation in language and language is not an abstract system, but is always socially and historically located in discourses.

(Weedon 41)

With this foundation, a feminist poststructuralism can critique "common sense" beliefs concerning gender. All "femininities" are constructed through language; therefore, more equitable female subject positions can be constructed by "decentering" the sexist stereotypical subject positions that have previously held privileged positions. Both female and male subject positions can be constructed differently since these "gendered subjectivities" depend on language and not on genetics for their structure. If the language informing gender discussions changes significantly from one generation to the next, the next generation will be comprised with different gendered subjectivities than the previous generation. To challenge prevailing ideas surrounding gender one must challenge the language itself that is used to create these ideas.

Children can not escape the dominant cultural opinions expressed in the language that surrounds them:

As we acquire language, we learn to give voice -- meaning -- to our experience and to understand it according to particular ways of thinking, particular discourses, which pre-date our entry into language. These ways of thinking constitute our consciousness, and the positions with which we identify structure our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity.

(Weedon 33)

At birth a child's biological sex is a given; however, her or his gender, her or his sense of what it means to be a girl or boy and how girls and boys should act, is

a social acquisition (Miller and Swift 51). This acquisition results not from biological sex-differences, but from the language used to describe biological differences:

Even before the child is born and certainly afterwards, parents, friends, and the social community are labelling and then responding to the child in a sex-differentiated fashion.

(Greenglass 37)

"It is in language that differences acquire meaning for the individual...it is in language that we learn how to differentiate pink and blue and to understand their social connotations" (Weedon 76). But the language which structures gendered subjectivities is not only contained in the labels parents give their children or the colour of pyjamas they are forced to wear.

Children begin to be affected by obscenity at an early age; from television and films rented from local video stores to the playground, children learn the social connotations attached to obscene words. As children learn certain gender associations with the terms "pink" and "blue," they also learn that there are gender specific obscene terms, such as "bitch" and "bastard." Children learn that in our culture the words used to describe the female anatomy are, for no obvious reason, more obscene than words used to describe the male anatomy. Children learn that obscenity plays a significant role in the social expectations of how they should act as children, as well as how they should behave when they become women and men.

Obscenity affects gender construction in two significant ways. Firstly, folklinguistic stereotypes concerning obscenity perpetuate an image of women as being overly polite and passive. "Folklinguistics," as Deborah Cameron explains, encompasses "as the term suggests, people's unscientific, common-sense knowledge about language" (*The Feminist Critique of Language* 20). Though these beliefs are not grounded in scientific fact, they are circulated in society as fact, and as such become an expected norm of behaviour. Studies suggest that folklinguistic stereotypes are learned by children resulting in the incorporation of these stereotypes into young women's social behaviour. Because the folklinguistic belief that women do not use obscene language is perpetuated, it appears that young women enter into the "linguistic world of obscenity" (Fine and Johnson 65) much later than young men. Secondly, research has shown that there are far more obscene words that can be directed towards women as insults by men than the other way around. These obscene insults have a significant effect on female gendered subjectivity by attacking a woman's sense of her sexuality and self-identity. Female sexuality is a vital component of gendered subjectivity and is often negatively constructed by language in general and obscenity in particular. Several feminists have described how obscenity in the hands of the patriarchy¹ maintains the

¹ *Patriarchy*. There are numerous understandings of this term, both inside and outside feminism. With Mary Daly (1978:1), I agree that "patriarchy appears to be everywhere." Veronica Beechey (1979:66):

The concept of patriarchy has been used within the women's movement to analyse the principles underlying women's

objectification and subjugation of women in our masculinist culture. Examining specific discourses (for example, pornography, legal disputes, or contemporary literature), gives insight into how stereotypes concerning obscenity are either affirmed or challenged and how this affects the construction of gender in our society.

Since gender is constructed through language, the stereotypes of any culture which are transmitted through various discourses will be an important part of gender construction. One prevalent folklinguistic stereotype concerning women and obscenity prescribes that women should avoid using obscenity at all times and that men should avoid using obscenity in the presence of women and children. This belief has a long history; as Jennifer

oppression...it has been used...in the search for an explanation of feelings of oppression and subordination, and in the desire to transform feelings of rebellion into political practice and theory.... Thus the theory of patriarchy attempts to penetrate beneath the particular experiences and manifestations of women's oppression and to formulate some coherent theory of the basis of subordination which underlies them.

But patriarchy is also a frame of reference, a particular way of classifying and organizing the objects and events of the world; it is a form of "order" which patterns our existence (Cora Kaplan, 1976, refers to it as "patriarchal order"). I am using patriarchy in all these senses; I am using it as an inclusive term to encompass a sex-class system, and a symbolic system which supports male supremacist social arrangements. That is why I see "patriarchy everywhere"; there is no aspect of our lives, that I know of, which is outside patriarchy...at the moment. But trying to 'pin down' the nature of this term from the beginning is self-defeating. Meanings are mapped out, layer on layer, and it is through the course of making many meanings, that specific meanings emerge.

(Spender 4)

Coates writes, "the strength of the folklinguistic belief in male/female differences in swearing is reflected in Elyot's strictures on the upbringing of noblemen's children in *The Governour* [published] 1531" (20):

Elyot advises that the child of a Gentleman should be brought up by women who will not permit "any wanton or unclene worde to be spoken" in the child's presence. To avoid the child's hearing such words, he urges that no men be allowed into the nursery.

(Coates 20)

The prescription that women should not speak obscenely is also expressed in an American proverb:

A whistling sailor, a crowing hen and a swearing woman ought all three to go to hell together.

(Coates 19)

The prescription against women speaking obscenely has been integrated into "scientific" studies which supposedly "describe" women's behaviour. The most infamous of these studies that perpetuate folklinguistic stereotypes is Otto Jespersen's "The Woman" published in 1922. Jespersen is resolute in his belief that:

women exercise a great and universal influence on linguistic development through their *instinctive* shrinking from coarse and gross expressions and their preference for refined, and, (in certain spheres) veiled and indirect expressions.

(Jespersen 210 my italics)

What was once an external prescription forbidding a woman to use obscenity becomes veiled under the guise of a supposed internal personal preference to avoid obscenity:

Among the things that women object to in language must be specially mentioned anything that smacks of swearing.... Such euphemistic substitutes for the simple word "hell" as "the other place," "a very hot," or "a very uncomfortable place" probably originated with women.

(Jespersen 211)

Jespersen gives no evidence of fact. That Jespersen was not consciously trying to hide his lack of evidence, but instead firmly believed in his "findings," can be seen by noting his conviction in the following statement:

There is no doubt, however, that women in all countries are shy of mentioning certain parts of the human body and certain natural functions by the direct and often rude denominations which men, and especially young men, prefer when among themselves. Women will therefore invent innocent and euphemistic words and paraphrases, which sometimes may in the long run come to be looked upon as the plain or blunt names, and therefore in their turn have to be avoided and replaced by more decent words.

(Jespersen 210)

Although Jespersen's "findings" are shown to be mere biased opinion rather than scientific evidence, once placed under the critical scrutiny of feminism, they should not be simply dismissed as insignificant sexist propaganda. As Deborah Cameron comments, Jespersen's presentation of folklinguistic beliefs as fact has serious ramifications:

The excessively ladylike style "described" by Jespersen is unlikely ever to have been used consistently by women: it is the usual idealisation based on the usual mixture of prejudice and wishful thinking. But folklinguistic beliefs are never without significance, and certainly this kind of belief, expressed in a score of passages masquerading as description in anti-feminist tracts, etiquette books, grammars and even feminist writings, have an effect on how women think they speak and how they think they

ought to speak. In formal situations where speech is monitored closely, women may indeed converge toward the norms of the mythology, obeying the traditional feminine commandments (silence, not interrupting, not swearing and not telling jokes).

(Cameron [1985] 155)

Jespersen is only one of several writers that pass on this folklinguistic belief in their writing. Coates points out that in 1960 "in his preface to the *Dictionary of American Slang*, Flexner claims that 'most American slang is created and used by males' " (Coates 108). Coates also accuses Robin Lakoff of perpetuating folklinguistic stereotypes: "[Lakoff] claims that men use stronger expletives (*damn, shit*) than women (*oh dear, goodness*), but her evidence is purely impressionistic" (108). Lakoff does compare two sentences and suggests that people would make gender distinctions depending on the presence or absence of obscenity; however, she does not reinforce folklinguistic stereotypes, but rather, she brings attention to how these stereotypes may affect social behaviour:

consider:(a) "Oh dear, you've put the peanut butter in the refrigerator again."

(b) "Shit, you've put the peanut butter in the refrigerator again."

It is safe to predict that people would classify the first sentence as part of "women's language," the second as "men's language."

(Lakoff 224)

More notably, unlike Jespersen, Lakoff sees a change in female attitudes towards the avoidance of obscenity. Because folklinguistic stereotypes, passed on by critics such as Jespersen, have played a role in gender construction,

Lakoff comments on how difficult it has been, and will be, for women to break the prescription of polite speech:

It is true that many self-respecting women are becoming able to use sentences like (*b*) publicly without flinching, but this is a relatively recent development, and while perhaps the majority of Middle America might condone the use of *b* for men, they would still disapprove of its use by women.

(Lakoff 224)

Lakoff does not suggest Jespersen's prescription should be followed; rather, she is noting that it *has* been followed. Because women are constructed by the dominant discourses of their time, it should not surprise Coates that Lakoff suggests the folklinguistic stereotypes of female politeness do affect female social behaviour.

A clearer transmission of folklinguistic stereotypes, however, can be found in "scientific" discourse as recently as 1984. In "Women, speech and presuppositions", Agnes Verbiest writes the following:

What is the self-image of women? They are sensitive and modest, never obtrusive, they don't like to come into prominence. That is in accordance with the observation that they don't swear or tell jokes as much as men do....

(Verbiest 144)

When these folklinguistic beliefs are passed on through "scientific" discourse they inform gender constructions since instead of actually describing "women's more polite use of language...they are actually attempting to prescribe how women *ought* to talk" (Coates 22). This prescription affects female subjectivity since the "avoidance of swearing and of "coarse" words is held up to female

speakers as the ideal to be aimed at" (Coates 22). As children acquire gender identities they assimilate this stereotypical ideal into their social behaviour:

The social order is reproduced through speech...it is reasonable to assume that when children learn to speak, one of the things they learn is the cultural role assigned to them on the basis of their sex. This is a two-way process: in becoming linguistically competent, the child learns to be a fully fledged male or female member of the speech community; conversely, when children adopt linguistic behaviour considered appropriate to their sex, they perpetuate the social order which creates gender distinctions.

(Coates 122)

A study confirming that part of gender construction includes learning these folklinguistic beliefs was completed by Chris Kramer in 1975. In her experiment men and women analyzed cartoon captions which used various degrees of obscenity. The study "confirm[ed] the existence of a cultural stereotype [where] among other things, women used fewer swear words" (Coates 108). Dale Spender is a critic who also feels that studies like these demonstrate:

...that the speakers are familiar with sexist stereotypes and given their pervasive nature it would be amazing if they did not know what vocabulary was "appropriate" for a woman and what was "appropriate" for a man.

(Spender 34)

Though these studies may only prove that children learn the "appropriate" stereotypes for their gender, there are other studies which show this knowledge is incorporated into social behaviour. One of the several studies which suggest that women and men incorporate these folklinguistic stereotypes

into their social behaviour was completed in 1981. This study revealed that although there was "no qualitative difference in the use of swear words, there was a difference in frequency between male and female usage" (Coates 109):

Clearly, the male speakers in Gomm's sample swear more often than the female speakers. Moreover, both women and men swear more in the company of their own sex; male usage of swear words in particular drops dramatically in mixed sex conversations.

(Coates 109)

Another study demonstrated that children acquire a knowledge of the folklinguistic beliefs of our society gradually. In 1976 Carole Edelsky tested to see when children acquire the belief that in our society swearing is masculine:

At 7 years, only two variables get a consistent response: *adorable* is judged to be female, and *Damn it!* is judged to be male. At 9 years, this has increased to eight variables: *adorable, oh dear, my goodness, won't you please,* are judged to be female, and *damn it!, damn + adjective, I'll be damned* are judged to be male. At 12 years, the child judges agree on assigning every one of the twelve variables to one sex or the other.

(Coates 131)

Not accidentally, children come to learn these stereotypes. The consequences of incorporating these stereotypes into social practice has been investigated extensively by Marlene G. Fine and Fern L. Johnson. They found that by the time women and men were in their twenties there was no discernable difference in the quality of obscenity used. By the time they reached their twenties both women and men generally agreed upon which were the most obscene words:

Females and males commonly noted nine words, although with a different frequency: *ass, bastard, bitch, cunt, damn, fuck, prick, shit,* and *suck*. The tenth most frequently listed word for females was *screw*, while for males it was *cock*.

(Fine and Johnson 62)

However, the study showed that there were noticeable differences in *when* men and women started using profanity and which obscene words were acquired

first:

For all eleven obscene words in the sample, males said they began using the word earlier than did females. Some males and females reported that they began using each word as early as grade school. The only exceptions were "suck" and "cunt": no females reported using either word in grade school. For all words, at least one-half of the males who said they used a particular word said they began using the word before they were in high school. In contrast, one-half of the women who said they used "shit," "damn," "ass," "bitch," and "bastard" said they began using those words before high school. Most women who said they used "cunt," "cock," "prick," "suck," "fuck," and "screw" did not begin using them before high school. The women in this sample clearly entered the linguistic world of obscenity after the men in the sample, and most of them entered by first using the less powerful forms of obscenity: profanity, scatological words, and words of ancestral origin. These less powerful forms reflect mild oaths and tend not to refer to the more socially taboo subjects of sexual anatomy and sexual acts.

(Fine and Johnson 65)

This study has direct relevance to the issue of gendered subjectivities. Why is it that the women "entered the linguistic world of obscenity" after the men?

One answer may be that the folklinguistic stereotypes which are perpetuated in several discourses affect female gender construction in such a manner that it makes it far more difficult for women to enter the "linguistic world of obscenity."

Women must overcome the social pressure to speak politely before they can use obscenity; as Jennifer Coates writes, "expressions such as "Little girls don't say that" mean that children are *taught* the sex-appropriateness of some linguistic items" (132). Since women incorporate the folklinguistic stereotypes of their culture, which includes the taboo against swearing, entering the "linguistic world of obscenity" is far more difficult for women than it is for men. While women must fight social stereotypes before they can use obscenity, men are actually encouraged by folklinguistic stereotypes to swear as a sign of their masculinity:

when small boys swear and use other rough forms of speech, their behaviour, for better or worse, is at least tolerated, if not condoned as appropriate. They are trying to be like men, people say. Similarly when men pepper their conversations with expletives, they are excused on the grounds that "boys will be boys.".... Little girls are not permitted such freedom. Verbally as well as in their physical actions they are expected to be more restrained and considerate than boys, and in time these expectations affect the speech patterns of both sexes.

(Miller and Swift 107-08)

The fight for women to enter the "linguistic world of obscenity" does not simply include breaking the folklinguistic stereotype of polite female speech. An equally important aspect of this fight deals with the vocabulary of obscenity itself. Men, in "proving" their masculinity, often use obscenity against women. The vast majority of obscene words are gender specific; that is, they are pejoratives directed against women. Julia Stanley pointed out that "there were 220 words for a sexually promiscuous female and only 20 for a sexually

promiscuous male" (quoted in Spender 15). As Spender notes, "this would seem to indicate that the language--as a system--embodies sexual inequality and that it is not women who enjoy the advantage" (Spender 15).

Since gendered subjectivity is constructed through language, as long as the dominant misogynistic meanings are contained in the obscenity, the sexual inequality of obscenity will have a negative impact on female sexuality. Thus, obscenity can be used to attack and distort a vital part of female gendered subjectivities. Ruth Todasco, author of *An Intelligent Woman's Guide to Dirty Words*, believes that "women's sexuality has been so tortured by patriarchy [sic] that the language does not exist to describe her sexual needs without prejudice to her person" (quoted in Miller and Swift 114). Instead, the language surrounding female sexuality defines sex "as naturally heterosexual and procreative and femininity is implicitly masochistic"² (Weedon 96).

Shelia Kitzinger insightfully discusses, in her book *Woman's Experience of Sex*, how obscenity is intricately connected to the construction of female sexuality. She states that "the words we use about sex, and those we avoid using, reveal our attitudes to it" (34). The "number of euphemisms and swearwords" (Kitzinger 35) are "expressions of social values" (Kitzinger 34), and these social values which are carried through obscenity prescribe a certain kind of sexuality for women. Women should be willing to gratify male sexual

² For a detailed discussion of how "female masochism" is socially constructed, see Paula J. Caplan, *The Myth of Women's Masochism* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1985).

desire; for example, there is no word to describe a man who 'does not want to go all the way,' yet, "a woman who does not want 'to go all the way' may be called a *cockteaser*" (Kitzinger 36). A woman has a difficult time expressing her sexuality since the language surrounding her sexuality condemns her for being either too active or too inactive:

There is a wide range of words for a sexually promiscuous woman: whore, slut, tart, tramp, harlot, floozie, and so on.... No word exists to describe a woman who functions in a sexually healthy and vigorous way. If a woman has more sex than is considered appropriate she is referred to as a "nymphomaniac." If she has less than is considered normal she is labelled "frigid." But there is no female term corresponding to "virile" or "potent" as applied to a man.

(Kitzinger 39)

Female sexuality is inscribed in our language from a male point of view; no other vocabulary more clearly demonstrates this than that which is used to discuss sexual intercourse:

What the dominant group has rated highly, almost to the exclusion of everything else, is its own role in sexual intercourse. The emphasis has been on the part which males have played so that once more the female contribution has been omitted and rendered invisible. Says Germaine Greer "All the vulgar linguistic emphasis is placed upon the *poking* element, *fucking*, *screwing*, *rooting*, *shagging* are all acts performed upon the passive female.

(Spender 177)³

³ Deborah Cameron similarly comments on the privileging of the male perspective in regards to the terms "penetration" and "foreplay." See, (*The Feminist Critique of Language*, 1990, 16) and (*Feminism & Linguistic Theory*, 1985, 81).

According to Kitzinger, these words, when used by the patriarchy to describe intercourse, are more than just "inappropriate descriptions of a warm, loving, tender, sexual relationship"(35):

These words also portray sex as an aggressive act performed by the male on a passive female. Since the words are often violent, they imply that the woman is harmed.... Not only are our bodies described as tidbits for men's delight...but sex is defined in terms of an aggressive act perpetrated upon a passive woman. The language insists that a woman wants and needs penetration in every sexual act. It is almost impossible to free ourselves from the preconceptions and prejudices with which language encumbers us. It can sometimes even be difficult to notice that these preconceptions are there because they are embedded in our culture and thinking.

(Kitzinger 35-39)

Kitzinger illustrates that "language is structured around the idea that every time a man and a woman have a full sexual relationship they must have intercourse" (36) by pointing out the privileging of penetration in the term "virgin":

A woman who may have had every other sort of sexual experience, including orgasm, with another person, is still a "virgin" until she has been penetrated.

(Kitzinger 36)

To construct a different gendered subjectivity we would need new words; no longer would we use the term "penetration":

The sex act...has as its "modus operandi" something men call *penetration*. Penetration however describes what the man does. The feminist Barbara Mehrhof has suggested that if women were in charge of sex and language, the same act could well be called *enclosure* -- a revolutionary concept.

(Spender 178)

Until there is a new vocabulary women will have to struggle against the dominant subject positions constructed for them with great difficulty; for as Kitzinger has described, the construction of gendered subjectivities in a language which implies that women are by nature masochistic makes it hard to imagine other possible subject positions let alone create them (Kitzinger 36). As will be seen, both Gloria Naylor and Ntozake Shange with their respective narrative voices forge a new vocabulary to create the new subject positions Kitzinger is calling for. By placing obscenity in a new context, both Naylor and Shange attack the myth of female masochism.

The notion of a masochistic female sexuality is supported in numerous discourses, from pornography to legal precedence, which portray rape as something provoked and desired by women. Muriel Schulz, has commented that though "rape is a four-letter word, it is not one which is taboo....it is ironic that the most viscous sexual act of all is not [a] 'dirty word' " (quoted in Spender 178). Miller and Swift demonstrate how women are invalidated by legal discourse both when they are raped, since the act is seen usually as a result of female provocation, and when they use obscenity to describe their rape in a court of law:

In the 1974 trial of Inez Garcia "much attention was given to the defendant's psychological transformation from a demure wife and mother who had never been known to use strong language -- a devout Catholic who had been too ashamed at first to tell anyone except her priest the reason why she had killed -- to a woman who could shout from the witness stand, pounding her fists on the judge's bench, "I killed the motherfucker because I was

raped!"....[after] the prosecutor made her draw a diagram of the rape scene and describe how she was forced to undress by her attackers he asked "Then what happened?" "You want me to tell you what happened after that?" "Yes." "He fucked me!" Garcia screamed.

(Miller and Swift 121)

Miller and Swift write that this "woman's use of the word fuck...was a factor in convicting her of murder in the killing of a 300-pound man who, she testified, had helped his companion rape her (Miller and Swift 121). After the trial, "a university lecturer wrote 'the defense of justifiable homicide in a state of shock and rage was undermined by Miss Garcia's *foul-mouthed performance* on the stand and her playing to a feminist gallery, as well as by the fact that the killing took place 17 minutes after the alleged rape occurred' " (Miller and Swift 121 my italics). Garcia Inez fell victim to two cultural stereotypes: 1) rape is not an obscene word or act, and 2) women should not use obscenity.

If legal discourse is noted for an absence of obscenity, then pornographic discourse is known for its abundance. In the same way that pornographic imagery reduces women to sexual objects for male consumption, obscenity objectifies women as solely existing for male sexual gratification.

Deborah Cameron sees a direct link between obscenity and pornography:

We can make an analogy here with pornography (since the word *pornography* means "pictures of prostitutes," perhaps *pornoglossia* would be a good name for the language that reduces all women to men's sexual servants).

(Cameron [1985] 77).

There are many critics now who realize that pornographic images have a negative impact on female sexuality; there are few, however, who realise that obscenity has similar effects. Deborah Cameron is one critic who makes this connection:

Andrea Dworkin's *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* stresses that [pornographic] images *are* violence against women, with effects similar to those of physical violence on women's self-image and attitude.... The same is true of sexual insults. They are verbal violence against women, expressing both our essential qualities in patriarchy (repositories of sexuality, prostitutes) and male woman-hatred, which makes women afraid. Since *cunt* and *slag* are bandied about even more often than the cock and the fist, this violence is no trivial matter, but a source of male power and a means whereby women are daily humiliated.

(Cameron [1985] 78)

Cameron discusses the problem with finding non-sexist terminology for female genitalia:

one woman said that for her, the word *cunt* and its synonyms conjured up pornographic stories, and therefore she had always used *vagina*. However, she had recently discovered that *vagina* came from Latin, where it meant "where you sheath your sword." She found this so offensive that she had abandoned *vagina* as well.

(Cameron [1985] 79)

Cameron does not say what word should replace "vagina" if some women feel the term is offensive. This may be due to a total absence of other non-offensive terms, or due to an absence of a context where "vagina" loses its patriarchal connotations. As will be discussed later, Naylor creates a context where "vagina" is clearly void of patriarchal connotations, and instead, is part of the new vocabulary that both Kitzinger and Ruth Todasco see as necessary

to "describe [a woman's] sexual needs without prejudice to her person" (quoted in Miller and Swift 114).

If there are no new terms quickly being created to replace offensive terms, if there are no new words to help create a more equitable gendered subjectivity, one option taken by several feminists has been to appropriate the very words that have been used offensively in male discourse. Mary Daly has tried to give voice to women previously silenced by redefining pejorative terms.

Daly writes:

We hear the call of our wild. We play games to end their games. Those who have been called bitches bark; pussies purr; cows moo; old bats squeal; squirrels chatter; nags whinny; chicks chirp; cats growl; old crows screech.

(quoted in Kramarae [1981] 28)

"Mary Daly (1978) calls herself a *hag*, which formerly meant 'an evil or frightening spirit', she asks, evil and frightening to whom?" (Jenkins and Kramarae 140). "Others make positive reference to themselves as witches and spinsters, to stress the importance of their having control over what they are called and how they are treated" (Jenkins and Kramarae 140). Debbie Weiler, a feminist recently working in women's self defense courses, appropriates obscenity to redefine herself: "Yes, I'm a Bitch, a Being In Total Control of Herself" (Debbie Weiler, 27 May 1991). Other feminists have tried to appropriate even the most insulting words by redefining them:

The word *dyke*, for instance, a disparaging term for Lesbian women, has been rehabilitated to some extent, and there have been suggestions that the same could be done for *cunt*. Women point out its connection with words

like *cunning* which carry the idea of power and magic, while others simply say they ascribe positive value to the word *cunt* because it denotes the most female and potent area of their bodies.

(Cameron [1985] 78)

However, there are serious problems with trying to appropriate the term "cunt."

Cameron believes that "reducing ourselves to body parts could never be a compliment to our feminist selves" (78). More problematically, the intention behind the words would remain the same when hurled as an insult: "we all recognise that what men mean by *cunt* and *dyke* is violent and contemptuous" (Cameron [1985] 78). Miller and Swift would agree that appropriating obscenity may not be entirely possible, for not only is "*cunt*, when used contemptuously...consummate abuse" (117), but certain obscene words related to male anatomy are culturally invested with positive connotation:

one such term is a common synonym for courage and toughness, as in the bumper sticker slogan, "It takes leather balls to play soccer."

(Miller and Swift 117)

Though "prick" is generally used as a forceful invective, according to Miller and Swift, there is no term for the male genitalia that "conveys the absolute scorn of slit, slot, snatch, gash, [or] cunt" (117). These words themselves are not inherently more obscene than *prick* or *cock*; it is through attaching certain connotations to the words and by using them in specific ways in various dominant discourses that they are perceived to be more obscene.

Even though it is problematic to appropriate obscenity, due to the dominant connotations associated with the words, some critics feel it is worth

the struggle. Fine and Johnson believe that "the increasing participation by women in the linguistic domain of obscenity has "diluted" the power of these once taboo and male controlled words" (73). Of course, the appropriation of obscenity, an attempt to overthrow dominant meanings in various discourses, will not go unchallenged, since "those meanings which do not support the patriarchal order are frequently seen as threatening, and, of course, they are often seen this way by women and men alike, for *both* sexes inhabit a male-decreed reality and make sense of the world in terms of male meanings" (Spender 57). Interestingly, studies have shown that the acceptability of women using profanity may be directly proportional to their feminist orientation:

Using a semantic differential technique to probe attitudes toward common obscenities ("fuck," "shit," and "bastard"), Rieber, Wiedemann & D'Amato (1979) found evaluational differences depending upon sex and feminist orientation of the rater; in particular, women, especially non-feminists, reacted more strongly to obscene language than did men.

(Fine and Johnson 73)

One possible reason for such a trend may be due to differing gendered subjectivities. The women who were feminists, as opposed to the women who were non-feminists, would have an easier time accepting obscenity being spoken by women because they were used to undermining stereotypes concerning gender, one of which maintained the politeness of women's speech. The non-feminist women, having a gendered subjectivity more tied to the folklinguistic stereotypes concerning women's avoidance of obscenity, would hence recreate those stereotypes in their social behaviour by reacting more

strongly to obscenity than either men in general or women who were feminists. Possibly, the non-feminist women, being surrounded by several discourses which perpetuated the folklinguistic belief that women avoid obscenity, had their gendered subjectivities constructed in a manner which inevitably would recreate such stereotypes in their social behaviour.

Appropriation of obscenity by feminists may provide a way to undermine gendered stereotypes, in the hope of eventually eliminating them, by exposing the folklinguistic stereotypes and by subverting them in various discourses. Gendered subjectivities will be affected negatively or positively only to the degree that these stereotypes are affirmed or challenged. One discourse where an investigation into how these stereotypes are perpetuated or challenged can be conducted is contemporary literature. Not only does the use of obscenity in contemporary literature reflect or reject present cultural beliefs, but depending on how obscenity is used, literature helps to maintain these beliefs or create new ones.

Although literature is not necessarily mimetic, in that it does not have to correspond to "reality" directly, the portrayal of women and the use of obscenity in these texts has a direct impact on maintaining or contesting gender stereotypes. Contemporary literature helps structure our cultural beliefs and our gendered subjectivities. As previously mentioned, contemporary texts can also be transformed into visual texts which become a part of popular culture. Hubert Selby's *Last Exit to Brooklyn* has been turned into a feature-length film, Gloria

Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* has been turned into a television mini-series, and the written text of Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* was derived from a staged choreopoem and is used to produce subsequent performances. These texts help structure our gendered subjectivities as readers or viewers by either maintaining gender stereotypes or by undermining them. In these texts women can be portrayed as characters that avoid obscenity, or as characters that try to appropriate obscenity; obscenity can be placed in a critical context, as in Naylor, or obscenity can exist in a misogynistic context, as in Selby. Naylor and Shange create clear narrative voices to stress the link between male violence and obscenity; Selby creates a vague and confusing narrative voice which portrays this link to be a natural occurrence. Female sexuality can be denigrated by both men and women by using obscenity in a misogynistic fashion (Selby), or women can appropriate obscenity to define their sexuality within a different context (Shange). Also, female sexuality can be defined positively with language void of obscenity, which occurs both in Shange's and Naylor's texts. By examining how obscenity is used in these three texts, one may see what stereotypes are perpetuated and what subject positions are presented as possible models for women and men to recreate.

Since, according to feminist poststructuralist principles, there is no essential female subjectivity, dominant portrayals of femininity can be challenged. The patriarchal construction of femininity no longer must be given

the privilege it has previously maintained in our society. Other, more equitable, "femininities" can replace the myth of female passivity and masochism.

According to Weedon, some of the concerns of the Women's Liberation

Movement include:

the very question of what it is to be a woman, how our femininity and our sexuality are defined for us and how we might begin to redefine them for ourselves.

(Weedon 1)

These concerns can only be fully explored if part of the investigation includes an examination of how obscenity is related to the construction of various gendered subjectivities. An investigation into how obscenity is used in contemporary literature by Selby, Naylor, and Shange provides an opportunity to begin an examination of this neglected issue.

Chapter I

"She felt like standing up and yelling fuck you to everybody": Obscenity in *Last Exit to Brooklyn*

The publication of Hubert Selby Jr.'s *Last Exit to Brooklyn* in 1957 was explosive; as Bill Langenheim writes, it was an Event: "It was the object of a well-publicized obscenity trial in London, and it was banned in Italy" (16). Selby's London publishers won their case which brought to Selby's text "a very dubious notoriety" (Binet 380). Several critics were not "charmed by the harsh reality of Selby's characters [but] he earned the praise of many of the non-establishment writers of the time" (Langenheim 16). Gilbert Sorrentino was one of the writers who praised Selby. In an article entitled "The Art of Hubert Selby," Sorrentino praises, among several things, "Strike," the longest story in Selby's text:

"Strike" is, for me, a masterpiece, possibly the finest short story written in this country in a decade. Every false ideal, every rotting set of values, every cliché we have ever heard about marriage, homosexuality, labor and management, the dignified poor--all are exposed by this merciless flat prose.

(Sorrentino 337)

Sorrentino is convinced that Selby is a moralist (342), and he places Selby's work along side of texts written by "Burroughs, Miller, Durrell, Mailer, Rechy, and Baldwin" (344). In fact, Sorrentino commends Selby for "not only [being]

not *erotic*, [but] more significantly, [for being] not *exotic*" (344), a charge Sorrentino levies against the work of Selby's contemporaries.

Several other critics place Selby in the company of socially critical writers. Peter Conn sees Selby's text as one of several which reject "America and its values" (517), and follow in the footsteps of Henry Miller. Conn writes:

Miller's postwar heirs included Kerouac and the prophets of the urban and sexual underground, among them John Rechy, in *City of Night* (1963); Hubert Selby, in *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (1964); Norman Mailer, in his more scabrous and self-parading moods; and William S. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* (1959).

(Conn 517)

These books "carried the Beat indictment of American mores to the avant-garde frontier" (Conn 518). Selby associated with several avant-garde artists and was first published by the avant-garde *Black Mountain Review*.

Michael Stephens recounts, in his article "Hubert Selby, Jr: The Poet of Prose Masters," how William Carlos Williams was "the first writer to champion" Selby (389). William Carlos Williams sent Selby's work, what would become "The Queen is Dead," to Robert Creeley who published the story. Though there were only seven issues of the *Black Mountain Review* published between 1954 and 1957, according to Peter Conn, "the magazine achieved a remarkable influence on literary opinion" (453).

As many critics demonstrate, Hubert Selby's text can be praised for its innovative formal technique and unrelenting force. From a Marxist perspective, Selby's text, especially "Strike," provides a scathing attack on big

business and self-interested unions. However, from a feminist perspective, Selby's text reinscribes the status quo of misogynistic male violence and domination. A feminist critique of *Last Exit to Brooklyn* will show that Selby does not in fact undermine patriarchal society as much as some critics may believe. The gendered subjectivities that Selby creates in *Last Exit...* reflect and help perpetuate the gendered inequalities that exist in our masculinist society. Hubert Selby has said in an interview that "to edit profanity and to utilize it properly in a book is very, very difficult" (*Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 1981 Summer; 1(2): 326). If "properly" means to create gendered positions of masculine violence, sadism, and authority juxtaposed to female passivity, masochism, and subservience, then Hubert Selby has done an excellent job in using profanity. Several female characters in *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, like Tralala, "[feel] like standing up and yelling fuck you to everybody" (93), and many do; however, these women are punished for their use of obscenity by a patriarchy that invalidates their voices by using verbal abuse and physical violence against them.

When women attempt to use obscenity to express anger and resentment, they are ignored, threatened, and/or violently silenced. Obscenity remains a privilege of men, a powerful tool of the patriarchy that is seen as a symbol of masculinity. Often, obscenity is used to express misogynistic hostility through male definitions of female sexuality which are constructed to denigrate women. More disturbingly, men use obscenity to dehumanize and objectify

women while simultaneously venting their aggression by physically assaulting and raping women. In the two most violent rape passages in *Last Exit...*, Hubert Selby Jr. perpetuates the myth of female masochism by creating female characters that take some kind of pleasure in their rape.

Many of the folklinguistic stereotypical beliefs regarding women and obscenity, which have previously been discussed, can be detected in *Last Exist to Brooklyn*; for example, women are told they should not use obscenity-- especially if it is directed at the patriarchy, and at times men are told they should not use obscenity in front of women. These prescriptive practices help invalidate the female voice when women try to appropriate obscenity to express their outrage. When the prescription against using profanity does not silence women, men threaten and/or use physical violence to enforce the prescription. The first and last sections of *Last Exit...* include scenes of prescription.

In the opening story, "Another Day Another Dollar," the prescription against men using obscenity in front of women is used by men to validate a brutal beating of a sailor. When the police arrive (the patriarchal symbol of authority, justice, and the public good), Freddy, a gang member, tells them the supposed reason for the attack:

We was standin on the corner talkin when these creeps started makin obscene remarks to my wife and when I toldem ta shutup they came after me. Aint that right?
Yeah.

His story is only partially true. The obscene remark, "dont chuall know youre not to fuck girls on the street" (8), was directed not at his "wife" but primarily at Freddy after the sailor saw Freddy assault his girlfriend. The resulting escalation does not arise out of defending Rosie, Freddy's girlfriend, but because Freddy hurls obscene insults back at the sailors:

Freddy let go of Rosie...then yelled at them to go fuck their mothers, ya cotton pickin bastards. I hear shes good hump.

(8)

This insult leads to the sailors' aggressive posturing in defending their honour. More gang members join Freddy and help him attack the sailors. The fight has little to do with insulting Rosie; the fight results from the male posturing of sailor and gang member. However, the police believe Freddy. Since Rosie is supposedly Freddy's "wife," her "honour" (read, male ownership) is seen to be something worth defending by violence. The sailors, angered by the injustice of Freddy's story, retort with obscenity when Rosie supports Freddy's lie:

They insulted me, the god--Yuh dirty hoarr. How could yawl be insulted???

(10)

For the police this outburst supports Freddy's story and is unacceptable: "you'd better watch your mouth soldier" (10). From this point forward in "Another Day Another Dollar," Rosie does not speak. Her voice and viewpoint becomes lost amongst the gang members' self-congratulatory outbursts: "Hey Freddy, hows ya gut. That was some rap that bastard giveya. Shit. I fuck cops where they eat..." (11). Here, Selby's "realism" does not include the female viewpoint;

instead, Selby privileges the male viewpoint. The sailors are forced to retreat to their barracks while the gang members go back to their favourite deli. The story ends with the gang members joking about how they got away with assaulting the sailors:

Yeah, they insulted Rosie. They roared, stamped, and banged their fists on the counter and tables.... Hey, watch ya language Alex. Yeah. No cursin in fronna married women. They laughed....

(12)

Selby continues to privilege the male perspective throughout his text. Though some aspects of his text may successfully critique elements of the patriarchy (ie. one can see big business ethics undermined in "Strike"), Selby, by both privileging the male view and by not creating a clear narrative voice to produce a critical context actually fails to critique gender issues.

The last section of *Last Exit...*, "Landsend," provides another example of how Selby privileges the male perspective by not creating a critical context. In this story, Selby recreates misogynistic practices without having these practices either commented on by a narrator or placed in a larger critical context. The husband, Mike, speaks obscenely and threatens violence to coerce his wife into giving up her demands that he assist her in caring for the children: "Get lost bitch before I break ya head" (211). Irene is infuriated with her husband and speaks obscenely to express her anger concerning his behaviour:

When she got back.... Arthur was still crying, Helen standing alongside the crib talking to him, and Mike yelled

out ta shut the kid up. Why dontya take care of the kid before yago to the store, truly and honestly indignant at the manner in which she neglected the children. If youre so concerned why dontya get up and take care of him, bastard?

(212)

But her use of obscenity is not welcomed by Mike:

He sat up in bed and turned toward the open door. Youd better watch your mouth or I/ll shove a fist init.

(212-13)

Irene is reduced to silence by Mike's prescription backed with a threat of violence: "Irene shook but all she could do was stamp a foot...." (213). As a tool of power, obscenity can be used in *Last Exit...* only by the powerful. This does not mean that women can not appropriate obscenity without employing violence, nor does it mean that obscenity can not be powerful without being accompanied by violence: both Naylor and Shange demonstrate this to be possible. Instead, the privileging of violence over language in Selby's text is one of several ways he creates a text which silences women and perpetuates the myths which allow the patriarchy to operate.

Occasionally, women try to silence other women by prescribing proper linguistic codes upon them, but because they can not enforce their prescriptions with violence in a way that men can, the prescriptions of women are not as effective. Selby creates a situation that is distressing to feminists because it not only perpetuates the myth of female politeness, but it shows women misappropriating obscenity in a patriarchal, racist manner, and it implicitly privileges violence over language. In "Landsend," a laundry operator

unwilling to allow access to a tenant from another building exploits the tenant's use of obscenity as a justification for expelling her from the laundromat: "We have ladies here who aren't used to that kind of language" (239)--thus the prescription of female politeness is reinscribed. Also, the operator thinks obscenely, an "interior monologue" in parenthesis, but she hesitates to curse out loud and only does so after being directly spoken to obscenely:

The woman wanted to tell her to get her black ass the hell outta her laundromat, but she didn't dare. She...told the intruder (the nigga bastard) that this laundromat was only for the people in this building, and anyway, the woman in the other laundromat never lets any of my people use her extractor. The other woman walked over to her and told her not to give her any of her shit, that if she wanted to use the mothafuckan extractor that she'd use it ghuddamn it. The operator stood straight, put her hands on her hips and beamed. You can just get the hell outta here sister. We have ladies here who aren't used to that kind of language (you filthy nigga whore).

(239)

More disturbing than the perpetuation of folklinguistic stereotypes is the operator's racism. Here, Selby presents a woman not appropriating obscenity, but misappropriating it. Obscenity can not be liberating for women if the dominant connotations of racism and violence are still attached to the obscenity. Shange and Naylor show that the patriarchal violence associated with obscenity can be left behind in a new liberating discourse; Selby, instead, chooses to present women who mimic the male use of obscenity in his text. Most disturbingly, the tenant's use of obscenity has no chance of being empowering, as opposed to the obscenity in Naylor's and Shange's texts, for

Selby creates a text in which male violence is privileged over language. Selby, by privileging male violence over the female use of obscenity, is in effect silencing women. Naylor and Shange create powerful female voices that employ obscenity effectively (Naylor -- Mattie's "blasphemous fireball" and Shange -- the lady in green's refrain of "my own shit"). Selby does not. For example, the tenant does not remain silent since she does not fear the laundromat operator: "Dont chuall tell me what to do mothafucka" (239); however, her voice has no power since in Selby's text violence reigns supreme. In *Last Exit...* women are less constrained in using obscenity against other females than against men since there is less likelihood that women will or can use physical strength to silence them; yet, since the women themselves can not back up their obscene threats with acts of violence in the manner that men can, their obscenity does not have the same force as when men use it. The tenant, though unafraid to use obscenity, is forced out of the laundromat nonetheless because she could not back up her obscene remarks herself with violence. Unlike Tralala's case, where initially the use of obscenity is backed up by male acts of violence, there are no men to enforce the tenant's words. Though disturbing, this should not be surprising once one understands that Selby is reinforcing, rather than undermining, our masculinist society.

Though men occasionally support women's use of obscenity when it is directed at someone or something other than themselves, the male characters in *Last Exit...* perpetuate folklinguistic beliefs that both prescribe that

women should not use profanity and that women do not use obscenity. The latter belief, one that portrays women as exercising an "instinctive shrinking from coarse and gross expressions and [having a] preference for refined...and indirect expressions" (Jespersen 210), is employed by Selby in an attempt to make male homosexual transvestites seem more feminine.

In the same way that Georgette, to be more "feminine," adopts to wear "womens panties, lipstick, eye make-up...manicured fingernails...womens clothes complete with padded bra, high heels and wig" (15), most of the transvestites in *Last Exit...* adopt more civil speech patterns than non-transvestites to be more "feminine." These speech patterns include avoiding obscenity. Since Selby uses the pronouns "her" and "she" to describe the transvestites, and since he gives them names such as Ginger, Regina, Alberta, and Georgette, the characters can be perceived as females by the reader for much of the text. These "feminine" characters help perpetuate the stereotype that "feminine" females should not use obscenity. Selby uses obscenity to indicate the "masculine" males, while the absence of obscenity indicates that a transvestite, a "feminine" male, is speaking. The dialogue between Ginger and some other men, in the section entitled "Strike," demonstrates how Selby uses this folklinguistic stereotype:

Hey Harry, this heres Ginger, a real sweet kid, chuckling, but dont fuck witer man. She use ta be a brick layer. Yeah, now shes a prick layer.... Hey, dont yaknow how ta tap a fuckin keg? the fuckin beers goin all over.... Harry said hello and Ginger curtsied...shoim ya muscle Ginger. She smiled and rolled up her sleeve and exhibited a large

appleshape muscle Aint that some shit?... Hey, watch yalanguage.... How inthefuck can yadrink warm beer. Wit my mouth, what thefuck yathink. You know, I'm hungry. Why dont one of you gentleman get me something to eat. Here, I got ya suppa, swingin, and they laughed. Im sorry honey, but I don't like moldy worm eaten meat. Save it for your mother...if you have one.

(161-62)

Ginger curtsies, speaks politely, and uses her(his) wit instead of obscenity to insult the non-transvestites. Although she(he) was a bricklayer and can use her(his) physical strength in retaliation, Ginger uses language void of obscenity and her(his) wit instead of violence to defend herself(himself). As long as Ginger dresses and speaks according to folklinguistic and stereotypical traditions, the other characters, especially Harry, see Ginger as being feminine and treat her like "a proper lady."

As Harry becomes more enamoured with the transvestites' use of polite language, among other things, he becomes less tolerant of his wife's use of obscenity which increases in direct proportion to his neglect. Harry's increased absence away from home without explanation leads to Mary's anger and use of obscenity:

Mary wanted to know where Harry went last night and where he was last Saturday night and if he was going to be home tonight and if he thought this was a flophouse and he could come home any fuckin time he felt like it and ever since the strike started he was goin around like he thought who he was and she wasnt gonna stand for any shit like this.

(172)

First Harry "ignored her" (172), then "he told her ta shutthefuckup or hed raper in the mouth" (172). The threats do not silence her so Harry resorts to violence:

She looked Harry in the eye, expecting, waiting, for him to lower his eyes or turn his head and told him she wasnt going to stand for any more of his shit.... She had just stopped talking and was still staring at him when he slapped her across the face. (172)

Even more disturbing than this assault on Mary is a description of intercourse and female sexuality that Selby creates at the beginning of "Strike." The gendered subjectivities Selby creates during this scene perpetuate the myth of female masochism and passivity. The resentment Harry displays concerning his wife's sexual needs, and his following aggression, both precursors to his entering the world of homosexuality, are severe and disturbing:

He squeezed his eyes shut so hard they pained then suddenly rolled over on Mary, hitting her on the head with his elbow, squeezing her hand between his legs as he turned, almost breaking her wrist -- Mary stunned for a moment, hearing more than feeling his elbow hit her; struggling to free her hand; seeing his body on hers; feeling his weight, his hand groping for her crotch...then she relaxed and put her arms around him. Harry fumbled at her crotch anxious and clumsy with anger; wanting to pile drive his cock into her, but when he tried he scratched and burned the head and he instinctively stopped for a second, but his anger and hatred started him lunging and lunging until he finally was all the way in--Mary wincing slightly then sighing--and Harry shoved and pounded as hard as he could, wanting to drive the fucking thing out the top of her head; wishing he could put on a rubber dipped in iron filings or ground glass and rip her guts out.

(107-08)

More disturbing than Harry's hostility, however, is the portrayal of his wife's acceptance of and pleasure derived from being raped: "Mary wrapping her legs around his and tightening her arms around his back, biting his neck, rolling from side to side as she felt all of his cock going in her again and again" (108).

Harry's sadism is given as the primary reason for Mary remaining married to him:

[he was] not even capable of trying to determine if he was hurting her, completely unaware of the pleasure he was giving his wife; his mind not allowing him to reach the quick climax he wanted so he could roll off and over; unaware that his brutality in bed was the one thing that kept his wife clinging to him and the harder he tried to drive her away, to split her guts with his cock, the closer and tighter she clung to him--and Mary rolled from side to side half faint with excitement, enjoying one orgasm, another, while Harry continued driving and pounding....

(108)

The rape ends, Harry rolls over nauseated, Mary with "her body still tingling" (109) quickly falls asleep.

As Harry enters into relationships with transvestites he stops "satisfying" his wife's sexual needs, but he still physically and verbally abuses her. His anger increases as he blames his wife for his homosexual desires. Since there is no longer anything satisfying about the relationship with her husband, Mary starts to express her hostility by speaking obscenely. At first, Harry ignores her language by leaving the apartment, but quickly he resorts to violence in order to silence her. Once again, female use of obscenity is portrayed as being futile, while the male use of obscenity is seen as a source of

male power intricately connected to the effective use of male physical violence. When the strike ends, Harry's relationship with Regina, a transvestite whose language is excessively civil and hence seen by Harry to be the embodiment of femininity, fails because Harry no longer controls union funds. Harry again vents his anger by assaulting his wife both verbally and physically. While she attempts to protect herself, Mary shouts obscenely as a result of his violence:

Youre a ballbreakin cunt ya no good sonofabitch--Mary stirred then rolled over on her back and opened her eyes-- Yeah, you bitch, grabbing an arm, twisting it and yanking her up to a sitting position, ya fuckin cunt. Whats the matta with you? ya gone crazy or somethin? trying to pull her arm loose. Yeah, I'm crazy...fa lettin ya break my fuckin balls....Ya aint pushin me around ya drunken slob. Drunken slob, eh? I/ll showya. I/ll showya, twisting harder and slapping her face....YA FILTHY BASTARD. I/LL KILLYA. YA CANT SLAP ME AROUND LIKE THAT, scratching his hand. YA LOUSY CUNT, IF IT WASN'T FOR YOU ITD BE DIFFERENT. ITS ALL YAFULT.

(204)

There is a distinct difference in how each character is using profanity. Harry uses obscenity to define his wife negatively by reducing her to her sexual organs. Mary uses obscenity to express her outrage at his attack, but her threat of violence, "I/LL KILL YA", may be a more powerful phrase than her attack on his parentage, "YA FILTHY BASTARD." Yet, one might argue that the power behind her threat to kill Harry derives its force by being juxtaposed to her use of obscenity. Still, her obscene remarks are not strong enough in themselves to end Harry's attack; Mary ends the attack by biting Harry's hand. In *Last Exit...*, female use of obscenity itself is not what counters male violence;

only physical violence counters physical violence. Though it may be argued that the female characters use obscenity to empower themselves to the point where they are able to use physical violence against their assailants, in *Last Exit...*, this use of violence only perpetuates patriarchal practices without creating a liberating environment. Female characters in *Last Exit...* are the characters that are left most damaged by violence, and are the characters who are without powerful voices.

The most disturbing example of male violence and use of obscenity to define women as sexual commodities, is contained in the story "Tralala." The story is disturbing because it involves a brutal rape, but also, because again Selby creates a character who in part enjoys her rape. Tralala is portrayed as complicit in provoking her rape; thus the blame that should be levied against the rapists may be deferred by a reader onto Tralala herself. Selby in part desensitizes the reader to Tralala's rape by creating previous scenes of violence in the story "The Queen is Dead" which precedes "Tralala"-- a transvestite is raped and enjoys the experience. The subject positions created by Selby, and the attack on Tralala's sexuality that runs throughout the story, employ obscenity in a disturbing manner: Tralala is portrayed as a masochistic sexual object responsible for provoking her own violation.

Tralala from the beginning to the end of the story defines herself in terms of her sexuality, or rather, in terms of her sexuality seen from a male character's perspective:

Tralala didn't fuckaround. Nobody likes a cockteaser.
Either you put out or you don't. Thats all. And she had
big tits. She was built like a woman.

(81)

Tralala, defined as a sexual commodity, is used by the gang to lure sailors on
leave into alleyways where they are robbed and beaten. Sometimes she would
knock them unconscious herself and take the money.

Since she is an asset to the men in the gang they support her use of
obscenity when Tralala speaks obscenely to a sailor:

He [the sailor] grabbed Tralala by the arm and pulled her
from the stool. Give me my wallet you goddamn whore.
She spit in his face and told him ta go fuckhimself. Al and
Tony pushed him against the wall and asked him who he
thought he was.

(84)

Al and Tony physically assault the sailor, as does Tralala, while Tralala hurls
insults at him (84). But this support quickly wanes once Tralala turns away
from the gang and begins to take control of her sexual affairs and the financial
gains she acquires. Tralala meets an officer who, since he is about to be
shipped out to the Korean War, spends money on her lavishly, treats her with
civility, and takes her to Manhattan--she has hardly ever been outside of
Brooklyn. But since she can only see herself as a sexual commodity, she
rejects his kindness and seeks only financial reward. Upon leaving she
receives a love letter instead of money and is disgusted. When she returns to
Brooklyn she is no longer seen as an asset or ally of the gang and they no
longer support her in her actions. She still uses obscenity but she no longer

has the protection of any men and people ignore her threats and obscene insults.

The rejection of the officer's love letter is given as the beginning of Tralala's downfall. This in itself is problematic, for it implies that Tralala would be safe and happy if only she could accept the love of a man and wait for his return. Her rejection of heterosexual fidelity problematically leads to her "inevitable" demise. Here, Selby's "harsh realism" is undermined by his own idealism which reproduces gendered stereotypes, rather than criticizing them.

While intoxicated Tralala tries to gain attention by proving she is a better sexual commodity than any other women in the bar:

Tralala pulled her sweater up and bounced her tits on the palms of her hands and grinned and grinned and grinned...Tralala slowly turned around...exhibiting her pride to the bar...the biggest most beautiful pair of tits in the world.

(98)

The men in the bar take advantage of her intoxication and use obscenity to objectify her: "someone yelled all tits and no cunt and Tralala told him to come on and find out" (99). Tralala is dragged out to a car and gang raped: "a few guys fought to see who would be first and finally a sort of line was formed everyone yelling and laughing" (99). While the rapes continued, "Tralala drank beer...and kept yelling she had the biggest goddamn pair of tits in the world" (100). "Everyone laughed and she laughed and she drank more" (100) as they raped her in turn, till "she passed out and they slapped her a few times and she mumbled and turned her head but they couldn't revive her so they continued to

fuck her as she lay unconscious" (100). From the time she is first dragged out Tralala is not once shown to resist or complain. She never once uses obscenity to express opposition to being raped. Her complicity in her rape is disturbing since it perpetuates the same myths which are found throughout pornography in our masculinist culture.

Obscenity is used by male characters and by Selby, or more precisely "the narrator," to describe a gang rape from the privileged perspective of the patriarchy. Unlike Naylor, where Naylor creates a distinctly critical narrative voice, Selby creates a narrative voice that is often indistinguishable from the rapists: "more came 40 maybe 50 and they screwed her and went back on line" (100). At moments Selby's narrative voice separates itself from the rapists by describing events harshly but without using obscenity: "she lay there naked on the seat and their shadows hid her pimples and scabs" (100). This voice could add to a partial condemnation of the rape, but it does not have the power or clarity of the condemnation Naylor's narrative voice creates:

Lorraine found herself, on her knees, surrounded by the most dangerous species in existence--human males with an erection to validate in a world that was only six feet wide.

(Naylor 170)

The violent ending of "Tralala" may, in Selby's novel, be excessive enough to partially condemn the patriarchy, although this is debatable; what is clear, however, is that Selby's narrative voice never fully condemns the actions of the rapists, nor does it denounce the myth of female masochism. In the

context of gendered subjectivities, Tralala's rape in Selby's novel, though disturbing, is not as upsetting as the ending of the rape scene in the 1989 film version of *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. In Selby's novel, after the men are finished brutally raping Tralala the kids in the neighbourhood assault her:

the kids who were watching and waiting to take a turn took out their disappointment on Tralala and tore her clothes to small scraps put out a few cigarettes on her nipples pissed on her jerkedoff on her jammed a broomstick up her snatch then bored left her....

(100)

The story ends with Tralala "lying naked covered with blood urine and semen and a small blot forming on the seat between her legs as blood seeped from her crotch" (100), while passing people laugh. The violence of the patriarchy is passed down from the older generation to the children, and Tralala is left dying.

As repulsive as this ending is, there is the possibility that the excessive violence of the children creates an historical context which may in part condemn the actions of the patriarchy and show the true horror involved in a gang rape. The 1989 film version of *Last Exit to Brooklyn* is more repulsive precisely because it fails to do just this; instead, it portrays Tralala as being a nurturing mother figure to a child after her brutal rape. In the film, Tralala's complicity in her rape is dramatized: the love letter she discarded is heard in a voice over as she is raped. The audience is shown, in obvious terms, that if only Tralala "had accepted the love of a good man" she would not have been raped. The filming of her rape is violent but not as graphic as described in the novel, which helps to make her rape less disturbing to film audiences.

Although the two texts are similar until the point where Tralala becomes unconscious, the two texts diverge significantly after this point. In the film, a boy who has a crush on Tralala--an event absent in Selby's novel-- discovers her being raped by the last men and he fights them off with a burning log (a young knight to the rescue). He covers her with his jacket and begins to weep. Tralala regains consciousness, sees the boy crying, and manages, after being gang raped by fifty or more men, to pull herself up to a sitting position and comfort the boy in his sorrow. She holds him gently to her breast and rocks him back and forth as she says "Don't cry, don't cry" (1989 *Last Exit to Brooklyn* Neue Constantin Film Production).

The gendered subjectivity portrayed in the film has Tralala exhibit a gentle, caring, maternal instinct, even after being violently and repeatedly raped. The stereotype of an essential maternal instinct is passed on in conjunction with her complicity in her rape for being a sexual object. From a feminist perspective the subject position created for Tralala in the film should be seen as problematic, and perhaps horrific. It certainly should not be seen as a positive testimony of human endurance.

Although Selby's novel perpetuates the myth of the sexual whore without adding an essential maternal instinct to the end of the story, it does not make Selby's portrayal of Tralala something to be held up as a model gender role for his readers. Selby's construction of Tralala's sexuality and complicity in her rape perpetuates stereotypes that support misogynistic conceptions found in

several discourses in our culture. Unlike other authors, such as Naylor and Shange, Selby has created neither female characters that retaliate for being raped nor female characters who clearly state that the responsibility for their rape belongs with the rapists and not the victims.

While *Last Exit...* may be a recreation of male violence more closely associated to pornography than literature, it should not be dismissed as unimportant. This text has been studied as literature in academia¹, but more importantly, this text has been a catalyst for a recent film that had a wide distribution and has itself been republished twice. As a part of popular culture, this novel has helped in perpetuating gendered stereotypes of masculine prowess, aggression, and authority. The lack of a definitive narrative voice delivering a clear condemnation may create ambiguity in the text allowing readers to see stereotypes reinforced rather than questioned. Women are portrayed as passive, masochistic, and the cause of their mistreatment. When women are shown using obscenity they often do so in vain, or they are shown using obscenity against other women in a misogynistic manner that supports the patriarchy. Both Naylor and Shange write texts that are vastly different from *Last Exit...*, in the way obscenity is used, and in the way the patriarchy is held accountable for the abuse women suffer. In using obscenity in a different manner than Selby, Naylor and Shange create gendered subject positions that undermine past stereotypical gendered constructs.

¹ *Last Exit to Brooklyn* was studied at The University of Western Ontario in 1988 as part of the curriculum for an undergraduate course on American Literature.

Chapter II

**" 'Merciful Father, no!' she bellowed. There was no prayer...
but a blasphemous fireball...demanding to be heard ":
Obscenity in *The Women of Brewster Place***

Gloria Naylor creates female characters in *The Women of Brewster Place* who rarely swear, so that when they do they foreground their discontent and outright anger. In response to an oppressive patriarchy which is self-interested and violent, the women of Brewster Place use obscenity to voice their distress. Like the male characters in *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, the men in Naylor's text often use profanity to denigrate, intimidate, and violate women. Several male characters swear both more frequently and more harshly than the female characters in the novel. Though Naylor may be charged with recreating "folklinguistic stereotypes" because the women noticeably speak obscenely less often than the men, she neither prescribes that women should necessarily use polite language, nor does she imply that women cannot become empowered through speaking obscenely. When women do use obscenity in Naylor's text, they employ it in moments of empowerment.

Though the frequency of using obscenity varies according to gender differences, this is not as important as the differing motives that characters have for using obscenity with respect to gender. Although readers do see the misogynistic male practice of using obscenity more frequently and the female

practice of swearing less frequently, they also see obscenity used by males as weapons and the female practice of using obscenity to express anger as a consequence of patriarchal oppression. Obscenity can be used against authority as well as against victims. Naylor places these practices in a context that clearly questions the validity of subjectivities which allow male violence and male use of obscenity to occur. Naylor indicts the patriarchy of Brewster Place as well as that of our own masculinist society.

Far from creating a text which reinforces the inequalities of traditional gendered subjectivities, Naylor creates a text which exposes the traditional concepts of "femininity," "masculinity," "lesbianism," and "heterosexuality." Opposed to the "femininity" portrayed in *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, that being passive and masochistic, Naylor portrays "femininities" to be nurturing but not passive, and persevering but not masochistic. Despite the patriarchal oppression they face, several of the diverse female characters that Naylor creates are assertive and compassionate. Naylor uses obscenity in part to emphasize the assertive capabilities of her female characters; she also chooses to use language void of obscenity to underscore the compassion of her female characters.

But Gloria Naylor uses obscenity and narrative prose void of obscenity for several other reasons as well; she uses prose void of obscenity to undermine the masculine use of obscenity by creating a greater historical context which forms an indictment of traditional masculinist society. When

readers engage this social criticism, they must scrutinize both the subject positions of Naylor's characters and the subject positions they take themselves in society. The combination of social criticism with misogynistic obscenity creates an unambiguous condemnation of male violence, whereas the excessive violence and obscenity Selby creates in *Last Exit...* is never fully condemned. For example, the prose passage commenting upon the violent rape of Lorraine differs from any narrative passage in *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, as has been discussed in Chapter I. Readers perceive obscenity used during the rape of Lorraine differently than the obscenity used during the rape of Tralala. The context in which obscenity is placed, the motives behind its use, and the effect created by its absence, are all aspects of a critical investigation concerning gendered subjectivities.

The contexts in which women swear in Naylor's novel are often those of responding to male violence or male self-interest. Both of these contexts can be found in the section entitled "Mattie Michael." Mattie does act according to folklinguistic beliefs early in the novel, though this is not to prescribe a behaviour as much as to show an obstacle that she later overcomes. For the young Mattie, Butch Fuller's profanity is offensive: "You ain't supposed to use the Lord's name in vain" (15). For an older Mattie using profanity becomes a means of expressing distress. She swears when her baby has grown into an irresponsible man who threatens to kill himself:

"I'll blow my brains out before I spend my life in jail"... "Basil, stop talkin' stupidity....I've been hearing

nothing but nonsense the last coupla days, and I'm sick of it..."Nonsense!" He swung his head around. "Yes damned nonsense!..."

(52)

Basil's self-indulgent complaints and preceding self-interested actions have led to Mattie's use of profanity, and though Mattie's outcry elsewhere of "Oh, God!" is not directly in response to male violence, her living in a rat-infested apartment is the direct result of her father's brutal beating.

During Mattie's beating, her mother uses profanity to express her abhorrence in a moment of empowerment. Not only does her mother use profanity, she also combines this use of obscenity with an intervening act of force; Mattie's mother implements obscenity during a protective act:

Her mother screamed, "For the love of Jesus, Sam!""Oh, God, oh, GodShe wrapped her finger around the trigger, aimed, and pulled. The force of the gun's blast almost knocked her off her feet. The edge of the fireplace exploded and sent flying bits of bricks into Mattie's back and cut up the right side of her father's face...."So help me Jesus, Sam!" she screamed. "Hit my child again, and I'll meet your soul in hell!"

(23-24)

Mattie's mother's profanity, if one may call it that, is not very harsh, and demonstrates a type of obscenity which is vastly different from the obscenity used by male characters in Naylor's text. Interestingly, though Mattie's beating is cruel, it is done with no accompanying obscenity--Sam does not use profanity during his attack. As will be seen later, when male use of obscenity is combined with male violence the brutality becomes devastating; the most

violent assault, the rape of Lorraine, is also the assault accompanied by the most obscenity.

The first character who uses obscenity not out of concern for someone else is Basil. His self-interested use of obscenity includes words more severe than those used by either his mother or grandmother. Basil does not take responsibility for his actions but can only protest when he is arrested: "the son-of-a-bitches beat me up!" (45). Unlike Mattie's distress, or her mother's distress, Basil's distress is a selfish one:

"...a man is dead, and there's gotta be some kind of proceeding about it."

"Well, he's better off than me. This place is a hellhole, and see what those bastards did to my face."

(48)

Juxtaposed to his language, Mattie's use of "damned" pales; however, this does not necessarily make Mattie a weak character. Instead, it heightens the reader's awareness of Basil's insensitivity and self-centredness. Mattie's unadvisedly paying his bail is unfortunate, and her loss resulting from his abandonment is only the first of several losses suffered by women due to the self-interested nature of many male characters in Naylor's text.

"Etta Mae Johnson," the second story in *The Women of Brewster Place*, is a story about the loss of a dream caused by the self-interest of a man. Yet, it is also a story about female compassion that helps to overcome the loss of a dream. Etta Mae is concerned about her financial future; she realizes that in a society which commodifies beauty she is becoming less "marketable" with

age. In an attempt to gain security she tries to attract Reverend Moreland Woods and hopefully his commitment. Her desire to gain security blinds her to Mattie's warning: "Can't you see what he's got in mind?" (69). In an attempt to protect her dream, Etta lashes out against Mattie:

I lay down with this body and get up with it every morning, and each morning it cries for just a little more rest than it did the day before. Well, I'm finally gonna get that rest, and it's going to be with a man like Reverend Woods. And you and the rest of those slack-mouthed gossips on Brewster be damned!

(69-70)

Not surprisingly, Moreland uses Etta for his self-interested sexual gratification. What is surprising and effective, however, is the context Naylor creates by using language void of obscenity. The narrator's voice creates a context which undermines the traditional notion of masculine prowess by employing the simile of a dying walrus:

All evening Etta had been in another world, weaving his tailored suit and the smell of his expensive cologne into a custom-made future for herself. It took his last floundering thrusts into her body to bring her back to reality. She arrived in enough time to feel him beating against her like a dying walrus, until he shuddered and was still.

(72)

Secondly, the narrator mentions "the rituals that would tie up the evening for them both" (72). This places Etta's encounter into a personal historical context which makes the Reverend's abandonment more devastating.

A cycle of male betrayal followed by female solace begins. Etta helps Mattie to survive the loss of her financial security and loss of her son;

Mattie helps Etta survive the loss of her dreams: "Etta laughed softly to herself as she climbed the steps toward the light and the love and the comfort that awaited her" (74). This is not the last time Mattie helps a woman overcome a loss, nor is it the last time male self-interest causes suffering. Lucielia Louise Turner, "Ciel" for short, suffers a far greater loss than either Mattie or Etta.

The story entitled "Lucielia Louise Turner" provides an example of how Naylor sets male use of obscenity into a context that attacks the violence of the patriarchy. Ciel loses her two children as a direct result of her husband's self-interested neglect and coercive use of obscenity. Eugene uses obscenity to express his misogynistic hostility, and to force Ciel into having an abortion. Like Basil, he can not take responsibility for his actions, but swears in indignation at his plight:

...damn, I took it bad. It was my kid, too, ya know.
But Mattie, that fat, black bitch, just standin' in the
hospital hall sayin' to me--to me, now, "Watcha
want?" Like I was a fuckin' germ or something.

(90)

Whereas most women swear in Naylor's text in response to patriarchal oppression or violence, Eugene uses obscenity to create patriarchal oppression and violence. When he loses his job he attacks his wife verbally:

"I lost my job today," he shot at her, as if she had
been the cause...."So now, how in the hell I'm gonna
make it with no money, huh? And another brat
comin' here, huh?"...."I'm fuckin' sick of never getting
ahead. Babies and bills, that's all you good for."

(94)

When Ciel tries to compromise by suggesting she'll have her "tubes tied" after the second baby had arrived, Eugene combines profanity with implicit threatened violence to undermine her compromise: " 'And what the hell we gonna feed it when it gets here, huh--air?'.... He came and grabbed her by the shoulders and was shouting into her face" (95). Eugene's obscenity is then followed by a description of the abortion procedure that is void of any obscenity. This description creates a context which is framed by Eugene's obscene coercion before and his obscene dissatisfaction after: "Eugene could be heard mumbling, 'Moody bitch'" (96). Although Ciel has the abortion, Eugene's self-interested irresponsibility makes him leave. He again uses obscenity in an attempt to manipulate Ciel, this time into her refraining from questioning his plans:

"...Who got you the job?"
 "A friend."
 "Who?"
 "None of your damned business!" His eyes were flashing with the anger of a caged animal. He slammed down the top of the suitcase and yanked it off the bed.
 "You're lying aren't you? You don't have a job, do you? Do you?"
 "Look, Ciel, believe whatever the fuck you want. I gotta go."

(99-100)

Eugene's impending abandonment distracts Ciel long enough for her remaining child to be electrocuted.

The loss of her two children, caused by Eugene's selfishness, severally damages Ciel's health. Mattie again helps a friend overcome a

terrible loss, and Gloria Naylor once again creates a narrative passage void of obscenity placing the suffering caused by the patriarchy into a larger historical context. Mattie, concerned over Ciel's condition and enraged at what the neglect of Ciel's husband has done, cries out in defiance. This is not the youthful timid Mattie who chastised Butch Fuller; this is a mature, nurturing, assertive, blaspheming Mattie:

"Merciful Father, no!" she bellowed. There was no prayer, no bended knee or sackcloth supplication in those words, but a blasphemous fireball that shot forth and went smashing against the gates of heaven, raging and kicking, demanding to be heard.

(102)

This profane shout of defiance is followed by the powerful repetition of " 'No! No! No!' Like a black Brahman cow, desperate to protect her young" (103).

What follows Mattie's "blasphemous fireball" is a compassionate rocking that becomes part of a powerful prose passage which forces the reader to see Ciel's suffering as another sacrifice in a chain of suffering hundreds of years long:

Ciel moaned. Mattie rocked. Propelled by the sound, Mattie rocked her out of that bed, out of that room, into a blue vastness just underneath the sun and above time. She rocked her over Aegean seas so clean they shone like crystal, so clear the fresh blood of sacrificed babies torn from their mother's arms and given to Neptune could be seen like pink froth on the water. She rocked her on and on, past Dachau, where the soul-gutted Jewish mothers swept their children's entrails off laboratory floors. They flew past the spilled brains of Senegalese infants whose mothers had dashed them on the wooden sides of slave ships. And she rocked on.

(103)

This passage is unlike any passage in *Last Exit...*, for this passage uses analogy, metaphor, and rhythm to condemn the violence of the patriarchies that have existed from ancient Greece to Nazi Germany, and which still exist today. When placed in this context, the male identities created by Naylor can not be held as identities to be emulated by her male readers. Unlike Selby, Naylor uses language to create a critical awareness in her audience. This critical narrative voice helps shape the relationship readers take to the subject positions presented in the text.

An equally important aspect of the context created during Mattie's restoring Ciel back to health which employs an absence of obscenity is contained in the description of Ciel's body during her bathing. The vocabulary Naylor uses is significantly different from the vocabulary she uses to depict male objectification during Lorraine's rape. By having C.C. Baker use obscenity to define Lorraine, Naylor makes the attack exceedingly disturbing. Opposed to this, the lack of obscenity in the description of Mattie's bathing heightens the compassion of her actions. More importantly, Naylor is creating a new awareness of a woman's body. She is creating the new subject positions that Ruth Todasco and Sheila Kitzinger demand are necessary to free women from patriarchal constructions of women's bodies and women's sexuality:

She took the soap, and, using only her hands, she washed Ciel's hair and the back of her neck. She raised her arms and cleaned the armpits, soaping well the downy brown hair there. She let the soap slip between the girl's breasts, and she washed each one separately, cupping it in her hands. She took each leg and even cleaned under

the toenails. Making Ciel rise and kneel in the tub, she cleaned the crack in her behind, soaped her pubic hair, and gently washed the creases in her vagina--slowly, reverently, as if handling a newborn.

(105)

Mattie bathes Ciel to create a wholeness, and this is expressed in language void of obscenity. On the other hand, C.C. Baker uses obscenity to dismember Lorraine by misogynistically reducing her to the term "cunt" (170). Naylor, by defining Ciel's body non-obscenely, has Mattie put her anatomical parts back together.

Naylor, in using obscenity, makes C.C. Baker's attack more revolting while simultaneously creating an opportunity to expose the violence of our masculinist culture. She places Baker's violence in a much larger context. The portrayal of Lorraine's violent rape is the closest match to the language of Selby's *Last Exit...*; however, there are several important differences. In Naylor's text, there is no ambiguity over Lorraine's complete lack of complicity in the rape. Lorraine's rape, however, is the second rape which occurs in a story entitled "The Two." Before her barbarous rape occurs, the reader is confronted with the rape of Ben's daughter.

During Ben's flashback the reader sees an anomalous female character who uses obscenity to defend the patriarchy in some manner--in many ways she resembles Selby's female characters. When Ben's daughter accuses her employer of raping her, Ben's wife Elvira refuses to believe the accusations:

She came to us with a bunch of lies 'bout Mr. Clyde 'cause she's too damn lazy to work....If she wasn't lame, she could walk it herself after she finish work. But the man nice enough to drop her home, and you want to bad-mouth him along with that lyin' hussy. (152)

Elvira attacks Ben's ability to earn money: "it ain't like this shit you got us living in" (153). As Elvira is the anomalous female in *The Women of Brewster Place*, her husband Ben is the anomalous male. Ben's guilt is the only instance of a male actually suffering from the loss of a child. His daughter flees to Memphis since "if she had to earn her keep that way, she might as well go to Memphis where the money was better" (154). Ben, the only male to suffer from the loss of a child, the only male to ever treat Lorraine with genuine kindness, ultimately becomes another victim of the patriarchy through Lorraine's attack after her rape.

The events surrounding Lorraine's rape illustrate the largest difference between male and female use of obscenity in Naylor's text. Before C.C. Baker's misogynistic obscene abuse occurs, Theresa, Lorraine's lesbian partner, uses obscenity, but for significantly different reasons. She is angered by the patriarchal, heterosexual prejudices she faces when a parent implies in her actions that Theresa is unfit to be around children:

The woman grabbed the child to her side. "What's going on here?" Her voice was just half an octave too high...."She scraped her knee." The words fell like dead weight. "What in the hell did you think I was doing?"

(157)

Upon returning to her apartment, Theresa expresses her anger: "Son-of-a-bitch, she thought, son-of-a-fucking bitch!" (157). She reacts to Sophie's spying from across the alleyway, the condemning patriarchal glare of heterosexual normalacy, by throwing food and hurling profanity towards the window. Here, Theresa lashes out against the oppressive forces surrounding her:

What the hell....Wait! I forgot the meat--can't have you think I would try to make meat loaf without meat....You might feel I'm a *pervert* or something--someone you can't trust your damn children around!

(158-59)

The implicit hostility of the mother's insinuation and the implicit hostility of Sophie's gaze become explicit in the obscenity used by the male youths.

Lesbianism, a threat to the youths' conception of masculine power, is denigrated by first verbal abuse and later assaulted by physical violence.

Anyone supporting lesbianism becomes a potential target: "Hey, Swana, better watch it talkin' to that dyke--she might try to grab a tit!....And I'm gonna tell Abshu you need a good spankin' for taking up with a lesbo" (162). When Kiswana attacks his masculinity by implying he has a small penis, "from what I heard about you I wouldn't even feel it" (162), C.C. Baker turns on Lorraine by using both threats of violence and the most insulting obscenity at his disposal:

Ya laughing at me, huh, freak? I oughta come over there and stick my fist in your cunt-eatin' mouth!

(162)

Kiswana's presence is enough to stop an attack from happening, though it is more her relationship to Abshu than anything else which protects her: "Hey

man, lay light....That's Abshu's woman, and that big dude don't mind kickin' ass" (163). Unfortunately for Lorraine, the implicit protection of Abshu is not extended to her when she is alone. When alone both the obscenity and violence increase to catastrophic levels.

The obscenity and violence used against Lorraine is placed in a critical context by being juxtaposed to another narrative passage that is void of obscenity. Readers are again forced to see the specific actions of the characters in the larger context of social criticism:

"Thought you was real funny laughing at me in the streets today? Let's see if you gonna laugh now, dyke!" C.C. forced her down on her knees while the other boys began to close in silently.

She had stepped into the thin strip of earth that they claimed as their own. Bound by the last building on Brewster and a brick wall, they reigned in that unlit alley like dwarfed warrior-kings. Born with the appendages of power, circumcised by a guillotine, and baptized with the steam from a million nonreflective mirrors, these young men wouldn't be called upon to thrust a bayonet into an Asian farmer, target a torpedo, scatter their iron seed from a B-52 into the wound of the earth, point a finger to move a nation, or stick a pole into the moon--and they knew it. They only had that three-hundred-foot alley to serve them as stateroom, armored tank, and executioner's chamber. So Lorraine found herself, on her knees, surrounded by the most dangerous species in existence--human males with an erection to validate in a world that was only six feet wide.

(169-70)

This scathing criticism of phallic power forces the reader to question her or his relationship to traditional notions of masculinity. This context implicates the larger power structures of the patriarchy in the actions of C.C. Baker and his gang. This passage is placed amidst the growing obscenity and violence of the

male youths, and both passages are made more disturbing by each other's presence. No such narrative passage accompanies Selby's rape scenes involving Mary, or Tralala.

The description of Lorraine's rape is perhaps as graphic as the description of Tralala's rape, but unlike Tralala, Lorraine is neither presented as being inherently masochistic nor complicit in her rape. Lorraine's repeated cry for mercy, "Please" (170), clearly indicates her wish for the attack to cease; Tralala never indicates she wants her attack to stop. What is similar in the two rape scenes is how male characters use obscenity to dehumanize women. Men use profanity as an extension of their penis, that is, as a weapon¹. Before C.C. Baker sexually abuses Lorraine physically, he verbally violates her with obscenity: "Better lay the fuck still, cunt, or I'll rip open your guts" (170). Gloria Naylor once again juxtaposes male violence to a passage void of obscenity in which the narrative voice creates a context condemning the patriarchy. Unlike Mary and Tralala in *Last Exit...*, Lorraine feels no pleasure from being assaulted:

When they had finished and stopped holding her up, her body fell over like an unstringed puppet. She didn't feel her split rectum or the patches in her skull where her hair had been torn off by grating against the bricks. Lorraine lay in that alley only screaming at the moving pain inside her that refused to come to rest.

(171)

¹ I am deeply grateful to my colleague, Mark Canny, for illuminating this idea with his insightful commentary.

As disturbing as the description of Lorraine's rape is, the description is far more capable of creating a subject position more tolerable from a feminist standpoint than the subject positions of Tralala and Mary because a reader will not see the traditional myths of female masochism and passivity being reinscribed by Naylor's text.

Naylor's depiction of rape may in some way help dispel the masochistic myths concerning female sexuality that are perpetuated in several discourses in our culture including *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. Naylor's description is not more tolerable because it is necessarily more mimetic than Selby's depiction of rape; it is more tolerable because the gendered subject positions created for readers by Naylor may force readers to be more critical of traditional female stereotypes. The pain suffered by Lorraine creates a more tolerable subject position than either the orgasmic pleasure Mary derives from being raped or Tralala's laughter during her rape. Even less tolerable is the subject position created in the film version of *Last Exit...* where Tralala's subjectivity includes the stereotypical nurturing instinct portrayed in her holding a weeping boy to her "comforting bosom" even after being gang-raped by more than fifty men. Unlike the depiction of rape in either versions of *Last Exit...*, Naylor's depiction of rape forces her audience to question the myth of female masochism. Selby's depiction of rape only reinforces the myth of female masochism.

The myth of female passivity is also challenged by Naylor. In either text of *Last Exit... Tralala* complacently accepts her victimization, whereas Lorraine does not. In her attack on Ben, tragic as the attack is, we are shown a woman lashing out against being victimized. Though she has been reduced to a level of insane rage, "[creeping] on her knees, making small grunting sounds like a wounded animal" (172), Lorraine still manages to strike back at the patriarchy. The tragedy does not lie in her striking back, but in her striking the wrong male character.

Though C.C. Baker escapes punishment, Lorraine's assault does not go unnoticed by the women of Brewster Place: "every woman on Brewster Place had dreamed...of the tall yellow woman in the bloody green and black dress" (175). Though it is only in Mattie's dream that explicitly the community comes together to tear down the wall splattered with Lorraine's blood, the reader is left with the impression that Lorraine's rape will potentially bring togetherness to "the block party." Her rape may in the end be a catalyst of empowerment for not only the women of Brewster Place, but for the women who read Naylor's text. Lorraine's brutal rape, and the context in which her rape is placed, may force male readers to redefine their conceptions of masculinity and femininity. Women and men, after reading *The Women of Brewster Place*, may find their gendered subjectivities to be significantly altered. Most likely, women and men will be unaware of how they have been affected, but some may consciously choose to privilege a redefinition of what it means for them to be a woman or a man in their ever changing attempt to secure a gendered identity.

Chapter III

**"dont you touch my children/ muthafucker/ or i'll kill you":
Obscenity in *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the
rainbow is enuf***

i'm not goin to be nice
i will raise my voice
& scream & holler

(Shange 57)

Shange's *for colored girls...* is the collective raised voice of seven women of colour; together they form their own rainbow. They do not reach the end of their rainbow easily. Constantly, they struggle against oppression and violence; constantly, they struggle to be heard. Sometimes they scream in the attempt of protecting their children, and sometimes they scream out against a sense of futility; often they scream at the effects of male self-interest and male violence. The forcefulness of their screaming does not come from sheer volume but from what they say and the context in which it is said. Ntozake Shange has weaved obscenity into her text in a manner that empowers women while exposing the misogynistic underpinnings of the patriarchy. When male speech is portrayed it is shown as using obscenity in an attempt to silence and denigrate women, but all portrayals of male speech in Shange's text are delivered through female voices so there is in fact no silencing achieved. The power of obscenity in male speech becomes undermined precisely because

women are speaking obscenely. The women in Shange's text are aware of male verbal abuse and by drawing attention to this male use of obscenity they diminish its power. The patriarchy is shown to be oppressive and violent but also something that women can struggle against successfully. The appropriation of obscenity plays an important role in their struggle by creating gendered subject positions which are contrary to stereotypical gender constructs.

Unlike Naylor's or Selby's texts, Shange's *for colored girls... was a performance piece before it was a published written text. First presented in December 1974 in Berkeley, California, and later in September 1976 on Broadway, Shange's "choreopoem" was a piece that incorporated dance, music, and poetry (Shange xii-xx). All the poetry, and thus all the obscenity, was seen and heard coming from women on stage. When performed, the impact of their speech is more immediate and more powerful than the written text. The choreopoem breaks folklinguistic stereotypes of female politeness in an effort to create assertive female subject positions. Though reductive, studying the written version of Shange's text, first published in May 1977, does provide one the opportunity to examine how obscenity is used as a tool of female empowerment and how obscenity is used to expose male abusive practices.*

Similar to Naylor, Shange has several female characters swear in anger as a direct result of patriarchal abuse. While women are shown speaking obscenely to assert their demands for better treatment, men are shown

speaking obscenely to be coercive or abusive. The first time obscenity is used in the text is in a comment on male behaviour:

& harly jumped all in tico's face
 cuz he was leavin for the navy in the mornin
 hadda kick ass so we'd all remember how bad he
 waz

(7)

Here the phrase "kick ass" is tied to male posturing and violence. Male speech is presented as employing obscenity early in Shange's text. During a fight, though "ulinda...[was] cursin & carryin on" (8), the obscenity is heard coming from a male: "lissin bitch sammy went on" (9). Unlike these events, the first time obscenity is explicitly used in female dialogue it is used to express anger. At the end of "no assistance" the lady in red uses obscenity as the exclamation point of her empowerment. She explains that she is no longer "capable of debasin [her]self for the love of another" (14), and she gives notice that she is "endin this affair"(14). Following this comes the first of several instances which attack the stereotype of polite female speech:

this note is attached to a plant
 i've been waterin since the day i met you
 you may water it
 yr damn self

(14)

Obscenity is again used effectively as a declaration of female anger over male practices in a discussion concerning rape. Unlike Selby or Naylor, Shange does not choose to depict an actual rape but instead shows women discussing how the patriarchy fallaciously constructs female complicity in the act

of rape. By having women discuss the social consensus that "a rapist is always to be a stranger/ to be legitimate" (17) Shange forces her audience to scrutinize this maxim. The context Shange creates both declares the injustice of events and affirms that responsibility should be placed with the rapist instead of the victim. Though society places responsibility with women if they are acquainted with their rapist, clearly, Shange does not:

lady in red

but if you've been seen in public wit him
danced one dance
kissed him good-bye lightly

lady in purple

wit closed mouth

lady in blue

pressin charges will be as hard
as keepin yr legs closed
while five fools try to run a train on you

lady in red

these men friends of ours
who smile nice
stay employed
and take us out to dinner

lady in purple

lock the door behind you

lady in blue

wit fist in face
to fuck

lady in red

.....
 are sufferin from latent rapist bravado
 & we are left wit the scars

(18-19)

The assault against female sexuality is contained in the harshness of juxtaposing "fist in face" with "to fuck." This is totally antithetical to the description of intercourse in "graduation nite" where Shange avoids using obscenity: "WOW / by daybreak / i just cdnt stop grinnin" (9). The lady in blue exposes the violence of rape by speaking violently. Obscenity is again used by the lady in blue to express her anger resulting from a patriarchy which minimizes date rape. For these women there should be no distinction between strangers or acquaintances who commit rape:

lady in red

women relinquish all personal rights
 in the presence of a man
 who apparently cd be considered a rapist

lady in purple

especially if he has been considered a friend

lady in blue

& is no less worthy of bein beat witin an inch of
 his life
 bein publicly ridiculed
 havin two fists shoved up his ass

lady in red

than the stranger
 we always thot it wd be

lady in blue

who never showed up

(20)

By having several women come together in a discussion of rape, Shange presents a picture of women rejecting isolation, silence, and consent. A sense of community is created. And as the community of women questions the myths of female complicity so must Shange's audience question their own opinions concerning rape. Male violence is condemned by holding males responsible for their actions.

The discussion regarding rape begins a denunciation of male misogynistic practices which is furthered in "i used to live in the world." In this section, Shange describes how women are encircled by male verbal and physical violence resulting in a form of imprisonment:

wdnt be good
 not good at all
 to meet a short black brown young man fulla
 his power
 in the dark
 in my universe of six blocks
 straight up brick walls

(39)

This "universe of six blocks" is very similar to Lorraine's final "world that was only six feet wide" (Naylor 170). Both territories are arenas of male physical and verbal violence. Shange, similar to Naylor, shows how males use obscenity to denigrate and violate women. In an effective use of stage direction and capitalization, Shange stresses the vehemence of "men cursing" (40):

*The lady in orange enters,
she is being followed by
a man, the lady in blue
becomes that man.*

"I SPENT MORE MONEY YESTERDAY
THAN THE DAY BEFORE & ALL THAT'S
MORE N YOU NIGGAH EVER GOTTA
HOLD TO COME OVER HERE BITCH
CANT YA SEE THIS IS \$ 5"

(40)

This practice of using obscenity to denigrate women is also commented on in "no more love poems #1." In this section a woman who refuses to be controlled by male obscenity any longer confronts us:

ever since i realized there waz someone callt
a colored girl an evil women a bitch or a nag
i been trying not to be that & leave bitterness
in somebody else's cup/ come to somebody to love
me
without deep & nasty smellin scald from lye or
bein
left screamin in a street fulla lunatics/
whisperin
slut bitch bitch niggah...

(44)

The woman speaking this dialogue enacts another woman's previous declaration that she could no longer be "sweet talkin / good mornin & thank-you & nice day" (40), since according to her "nice is such a rip-off" (40). In the way an illusionist destroys the power of magic by drawing your attention to how a trick is done, the lady in orange destroys the power of male speech by drawing attention to how men attempt to manipulate one woman by defining another obscenely.

Several women in *for colored girls...* refuse to be "sweet talkin" by incorporating obscenity into their own speech. One manner in which this occurs is through the direct appropriation of obscenity. Women take the obscene words used by men to define women and impose their own connotations by placing the obscene terms into a much larger definition. The lady in purple does this by defining herself as more than any single anatomical part. As has been seen in Naylor's text, the possibility exists for women to oppose the dismembering ability of the patriarchy:

here is what i have/ poems/ big thighs/ lil tits/ &
 so much
 love/ will you take it from me this one time/
 please

 ... lemme love you just like i am/ a colored
 girl/ i'm finally bein real/ no longer
 symmetrical
 & impervious to pain

(46-7)

The lady in green appropriates obscenity in her assertive speech "somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff." In this speech she defines herself in ways that break the stereotypical myth of polite female language and the stereotype of "ladylike" decorum. "My shit" becomes a powerful refrain in her speech which places "quik language back in [her] mouth" (53). She deliberately takes control over defining her body and her actions:

...i see
 ya hidin my laugh/ & how i sit wif my legs open
 sometimes/ to give my crotch some sunlight/ &
 there
 goes my love my toes my chewed up finger nails/

.....
 who is this you left me wit/
 some simple bitch widda bad attitude/ i wants my
 things/ i want my arm wit the hot iron scar...

 & no i didnt get
 a chance to douche/ hey man/ this is not your
 perogative....

(54-55)

Her anger, expressed in the refrain "my shit," is carried into the next section dealing with male neglect and abuse. At the same time as being comic, for the women try to top one another's male excuses for infidelity, the scene does expose the self-interest and misogyny of the patriarchy. The first couple of excuses portray men as being foolish, but soon men are portrayed as being capable of violence:

lady in yellow

get this, last week my ol man cam in sayin, "i
 don't
 know how she got yr number baby, i'm sorry"

lady in brown

no this one is it, "o baby, ya know i waz high,
 i'm sorry"

lady in green

"shut up bitch, i told you i waz sorry"

(55)

Implicit in the lady in green's portrayal of male speech is a threat of impending male violence if the women refuses to "shut up." Again, the woman by talking

to other women breaks her bonds of silence as the coercive use of obscenity by men is exposed for Shange's audience.

The best demonstration of male violence combined with the male employment of obscenity can be seen in the actions of beau willie brown. This section also provides an example of how women in *for colored girls... use* obscenity in moments of intense anger. When reading Shange's written text one might accidentally imagine that all of beau willie's dialogue is being said by a man; however, it must be remembered that all of beau willie's dialogue is delivered by a female voice. When performed on stage, this aspect of Shange's text forcefully highlights the savagery of beau willie's misogyny. Shange focuses her audiences' attention towards his abuse by having crystal use his obscenity against him:

crystal just got inta sayin whatta fool niggah
 beau waz
 & always had been/ didn't he go all over uptown
 sayin
 the child waznt his/ waz some no counts
 bastard/
 & any ol city police cd come & get him if they
 wanted/
 cuz as soon as the blood type & shit waz
 together/
 everybody wd know that crystal waz a no good
 lyin
 whore...

(59)

Shange directly connects his previous physical abuse with profanity in noting "she still gotta scar / under her right tit where he cut her up" (59). When the

narrative begins to take beau willie's perspective it increasingly includes obscenity:

...if he showed his face he waz subject to
 arrest/ shit/ she'd been in his ass to marry her
 since she waz 14 years old & here when she 22/
 she wanna
 throw him out cuz he say he'll marry her

(60)

Crystal uses his own obscenity against him: "she burst out laughin/ hollerin whatchu wanna marry me for now/ so i can support yr ass" (60). Her defiant shout, "i wdnt marry yr pitiful black ass for nothin" (60), is met with violence. After the assault, beau willie, in a manner reminiscent of how Eugene's expressed his indignation before his child's funeral, expresses his own indignation at being held accountable for his actions: "he wanted to marry her/ & have a family/ but the bitch waz crazy" (61).

As beau willie's violence and use of obscenity increases the audience is confronted with perhaps the most forceful use of obscenity in Shange's text. His attempt to manipulate crystal by using obscenity fails and leads to beau using physical force: "beau gotta shoutin...waz she always gonna be a whore/ or did she wanna husband/ & crystal just kept screamin for him to leave us alone...so beau broke the door down" (61). The threat of imminent violence angers crystal, and she screams obscenity at beau willie:

niggah/ get outta here/ get out & dont show yr
 ass again or i'll kill ya/ i swear i'll kill ya/
 he reached
 for naomi/ crystal grabbed the lil girl & stared
 at beau

willie like he waz a leper or somethin/ dont you
 touch
 my children/ muthafucker/ or i'll kill you

(62)

Though her obscenity ultimately fails in protecting her children, it does leave a lasting impression on Shange's audience--in a stage performance this is one of the most memorable moments where a female uses obscenity in the choreopoem. Her outrage which employs obscenity is juxtaposed with beau willie's misogyny and attempted coercion: "awright bitch/ awright bitch/ you gonna marry me" (63). When he has the children beau tries to use them as bargaining chips by threatening their lives. He succeeds by holding his children out a fifth story window; crystal will marry him: "i'll marry ya/ anything/ but bring the children in the house" (63).

Although beau willie's violent actions win crystal's compliance for the moment, he nevertheless, drops crystal's two children. His actions go unexplained. Like Ciel, crystal suffers the terrible loss of having her children destroyed by the actions of misogynistic men. And also like Ciel, crystal survives her loss by the comfort and support of women around her. The women in *for colored girls...* come together at the end of the choreopoem into "a closed tight circle" (67) and sing the lines "i found god in myself & i loved her" (67). These women do not keep their compassion to themselves but offer it to the audience as well:

*The ladies
 sing first to each other,
 then gradually to the*

*audience. After the song
peaks the ladies enter into
a closed tight circle.*

lady in brown

& this is for colored girls who have considered
suicide/ but are movin to the ends of their own
rainbows

(67)

Ntozake Shange creates these women to voice "in the words of a young black girl's growing up...our struggle to become all that is forbidden by our environment, all that is forfeited by our gender...." (Shange xxi). Audiences must engage gendered subjectivities that refuse to participate in stereotypical models of behaviour. These women, in breaking folklinguistic beliefs concerning "polite speech," are breaking the myths of female passivity and female masochism. Though people who see Shange's text staged may be affected more forcibly, readers also will have to at some level re-evaluate their opinions concerning gender. The patriarchy is condemned by Shange convincingly. Her condemnation has several similarities with Naylor's condemnation. Men are portrayed as using obscenity as verbal abuse in conjunction with physical violence; women are shown using obscenity to express outrage at this violence. Women also appropriate obscenity in a redefinition of what it means to be female. Readers, upon reading *for colored girls...*, as with reading *The Women of Brewster Place*, may have their gendered subjectivities undermined and significantly altered through unconscious processes or through their own conscious responses to the text.

Conclusion

Helen: Dammit, Daddy--co-operate for a change!

Daddy: Got the wrong shoe on the wrong foot!

Helen: Got the right goddam shoe on the right
goddam foot!

Daddy: Your language! Goddam disgustin'!

Helen: Learnt it from you!

Daddy: Lord intended for only men to swear.

Helen: Hell He did!....

(W.O. Mitchell, *The Kite* 208)

Hubert Selby Jr. employs obscenity in a manner which perpetuates gender stereotypes and silences women, while Gloria Naylor and Ntozake Shange employ obscenity in a different manner which contests gender stereotypes and gives power to female voices. Amongst these three authors there is a distinct difference in the subject positions created for their respective audiences. Though Selby does not portray women as being capable of appropriating obscenity to gain power, this does not mean that all male authors do so. W.O. Mitchell is an author who creates in *The Kite* a strong female character who speaks obscenely to gain power--and who gains power without using patriarchal violence to do so. The subject positions Mitchell creates are much closer to the subject positions created by Naylor and Shange than the ones created by Selby.

Both male and female authors are capable of creating more equitable female subject positions by consciously undermining the sexist stereotypical subject positions which abound in our culture. Part of this endeavour to create new female subject positions includes breaking the myth of female politeness. Naylor and Shange are successful in doing this by having female characters speak obscenely to assert their demands without having to rely on physical violence for results. Selby's privileging of violence only reinforces the silencing force of the patriarchy. The women who do speak obscenely in Selby's text do not appropriate obscenity, but rather, they misappropriate obscenity and reinforce patriarchal attitudes. An equally important part of the endeavour to create new female subject positions includes creating a new language to construct female sexuality and an awareness of a woman's body as something other than the dismembered parts seen through the patriarchal gaze. Naylor and Shange forge a new language which does create new female subject positions.

Obscenity, used by feminists to form a new vocabulary and new subject positions, may not be an end in itself; possibly, obscenity may only be a means to reach a new language void of obscenity that has not yet been fully established. Naylor's narrative voice at times may be a foretelling of this language yet to exist. Whether obscenity will be necessary in the future is a question for speculation; however, what has been clearly demonstrated by Naylor and Shange, is that obscenity as a means to undermine the

stereotypical beliefs of the patriarchy now, is an effective option. Women can use obscenity not only to shatter the myth of female politeness, but to eradicate the myth of female masochism which has been a part of patriarchal gender construction.

In several discourses, from drama and film to literature and magazine articles, women are using obscenity to create new female subjectivities. As recently as August 1991, obscenity can be found playing an important role in a forceful condemnation of male violence. Simultaneously, female empowerment and female compassion for the victim of male violence are juxtaposed. In an article entitled "A Day in the Life," found in August 1991 issue of *Ms.*, Rebecca Walker writes the following:

Two men pass by and ignore me, and I am crying now, with this woman whose skull is scraping the pavement.... More cars more people going by not stopping to help and the clerk from the store comes outside and I scream to him that he is a bastard and a coward and he comes at me as if to hit me and I look at him, daring him, and he retreats back into his store.... I want to run after him with his own broken bottle and crack open his skull but I want more to hug this woman and tell her that it's all right and he's a bastard and that I love her and that I'm sorry and that I'll take her home....

(Walker 106)

Rebecca Walker's powerful refrain "he's a bastard" does not demonstrate Jespersen's belief that women show an "instinctive shrinking from coarse" language (210). Quite the contrary, Walker exposes this belief, just as she exposes the brutality of male violence and the myth of female masochism.

Both women and men can create written or visual texts which will expose the myths which the patriarchy has been founded upon. Both women and men can, if they desire, create texts which decenters and topples previously privileged sexist subject positions. Audiences, once surrounded by texts which present new gendered subject positions will be forced both unconsciously and consciously to re-evaluate their own gendered subjectivities. Questions concerning the relation between obscenity, gender, and subjectivity, do not just apply to this thesis concerning three texts. These questions apply to several areas of cultural concern: films, television, magazines, dramas, literature, to name just a few. Though obscenity is not the only aspect of language which constructs gendered subjectivities, it is an important part. Future critics desiring to produce thorough studies concerning language and gender construction will have to include the role obscenity has played, and continues to play, in either supporting stereotypical subject positions or creating new ones.

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