

# 行政院國家科學委員會專題研究計畫 成果報告

## 那特琪《親密內衣》中的性、空間、和再現 研究成果報告(精簡版)

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中文摘要：非裔美國女劇作家琳·那特琪在她的《親密內衣》中描述 1905 年住在曼哈頓下城一位三十五歲相貌平凡的黑人女裁縫艾絲特如何力爭上游學會為自己獨立生活。艾絲特專門為像是范布仁太太的上流名媛或是像是她的好友梅蜜這樣的黑人妓女縫製束腹、馬甲、和貼身內衣。她在自己宿舍臥室中縫製親密內衣，到她顧客們臥室或香閨去見她的客戶，也會去一位傳統猶太教布商的臥室兼布店買布料。在她非裔加勒比海籍帥哥丈夫喬治·阿姆斯壯背叛她後，艾絲特覺醒了，她搬回宿舍重操舊業，但是她心中有強烈的自我認同意識，對未來也充滿希望。本篇論文試圖釐清《親密內衣》中馬甲、身體、空間、性別角色、婚姻之間的複雜關係並探究劇中女性的自主能力。

中文關鍵詞：那特琪，《親密內衣》，馬甲，身體，婚姻，空間

英文摘要：African American playwright Lynn Nottage in her *Intimate Apparel* (2003-) describes how Esther, a plain-looking 35-year-old black seamstress living in Lower Manhattan in 1905, learns to weave an independent life for her own. Esther makes a living for herself by making corsets, camisoles, and bodices for upper class white ladies like Mrs. Van Buren and black prostitutes like her best friend Mayme. She makes the intimate apparel in her boarding house bedroom, meets her clients in their bedrooms, or boudoirs, and purchases the fabric from an orthodox Jew in his bedroom-store. After the betrayal of her African Caribbean husband named George Armstrong, Esther is disillusioned and resumes her old role and place at the boarding house but with strong recognition of her self and hope for future. This paper intends to scrutinize the intricate relationship between the corset, body, space, gender role, marriage and women's agency in *Intimate Apparel*.

英文關鍵詞：Lynn Nottage, *Intimate Apparel*, the corset, body, marriage, space

## The Corset, Body, and Marriage in Lynn Nottage's *Intimate Apparel*

African American playwright Lynn Nottage in her *Intimate Apparel* (2003- ) describes how Esther, a plain-looking 35-year-old black seamstress living in Lower Manhattan in 1905, learns to weave an independent life for her own. Esther makes a living for herself by making corsets, camisoles, and bodices for upper class white ladies like Mrs. Van Buren and black prostitutes like her best friend Mayme. She makes the intimate apparel in her boarding house bedroom, meets her clients in their bedrooms, or boudoirs, and purchases the fabric from an orthodox Jew in his bedroom-store. After the betrayal of her African Caribbean husband named George Armstrong, Esther is disillusioned and resumes her old role and place at the boarding house but with strong recognition of her self and hope for future. This paper intends to scrutinize the intricate relationship between the corset, body, space, gender role, marriage and women's agency in *Intimate Apparel*.

Key words: Lynn Nottage, *Intimate Apparel*, the corset, body, marriage, space

## 那特琪《親密內衣》中的馬甲、身體、婚姻

非裔美國女劇作家琳·那特琪在她的《親密內衣》中描述 1905 年住在曼哈頓下城一位三十五歲相貌平凡的黑人女裁縫艾絲特如何力爭上游學會為自己獨立生活。艾絲特專門為像是范布仁太太的上流名媛或是像是她的好友梅蜜這樣的黑人妓女縫製束腹、馬甲、和貼身內衣。她在自己宿舍臥室中縫製親密內衣，到她顧客們臥室或香閨去見她的客戶，也會去一位傳統猶太教布商的臥室兼布店買布料。在她非裔加勒比海籍帥哥丈夫喬治·阿姆斯特壯背叛她後，艾絲特覺醒了，她搬回宿舍重操舊業，但是她心中有強烈的自我認同意識，對未來也充滿希望。本篇論文試圖釐清《親密內衣》中馬甲、身體、空間、性別角色、婚姻之間的複雜關係並探究劇中女性的自主能力。

關鍵字：那特琪，《親密內衣》，馬甲，身體，婚姻，空間

## The Corset, Body, and Marriage in Lynn Nottage's *Intimate Apparel*

### I. Introduction

Like her predecessor Lorraine Hansberry, female African American playwright Lynn Nottage excels in depicting black's striving and tenacious spirit. In the legacy of African American drama, she follows her male predecessors like August Wilson to articulate the silenced life of African Americans. Esther makes a living for herself by making wedding corsets, camisoles, and bodices for upper class white ladies like Mrs. Van Buren and black prostitutes like her best friend Mayme. She makes the intimate apparel in her boarding house bedroom, meets her clients in their bedroom, or boudoirs, and purchases the fabric from an orthodox Jew in his bedroom-store. After the betrayal of her African Caribbean husband named George Armstrong, Esther is disillusioned and resumes her old role and place at the boarding house but with strong recognition of her self and hope for future. This paper intends to scrutinize the intricate relationship between the corset, body, space, gender role, marriage and women's agency in *Intimate Apparel*.

### II. The Corset and Body in Private and in Public

Lynn Nottage manifests in her play the repressive social stricture for women of the 1900s in America and the symbol she uses to connect us to that human bondage is intimate apparel. When the play begins, Esther is in her bedroom "diligently trimming a camisole with lace." The title for the first scene—"Wedding Corset: White Satin with Pink Roses," clearly indicates that Esther is a professional seamstress making intimate apparel like corsets, bodices, camisoles for a living.

The exquisitely shaped corset soon captures our attention. First, the corset belongs to a category of clothes—underclothes; like clothes, we wear underclothes for several reasons. Joanne Entwistle in *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory* lists four explanations for the question "why do we wear clothes?" The first theory is protection, the second modesty, the third decoration and display, and the fourth communication (57-58). The fourth explanation of fashion/dress as communication has become widely accepted by anthropologists on dress and fashion theorists.

C. Willett and Phillis Cunnington in *The History of Underclothes* also list several functions of underclothes: 1. to protect the body from cold; 2. to support the shape of the costume; 3. for cleanliness; 4. erotic use of underclothes; 5. as a method of class distinction (14-18).

People wear underclothes mainly because of protection as underclothes can protect them from cold weather and crude outer clothes. Furthermore, in most cultures,

underclothes are worn in order to cover the sexual organs. In private, underclothes can exhibit, and communicate.

Corsets, however, have an interesting ambivalence of private and public manifestation. During the Victorian Age in England or the late 19th and early 20th century, corsets were worn beneath dresses as decorum (Steel 35). One could not see corsets directly in public but one could certainly perceive corsets worn beneath the dress due to the distinguished hourglass figure.

It is this ambivalence of the private and public and the absent and present that Lynn Nottage discerns in the corset discourse and would like to scrutinize in *Intimate Apparel*. On the one hand, she foregrounds the rigidity of social stricture on women and the disciplining power of femininity in patriarchal society through the representation of the corset; on the other hand, she also perceives the subversive and recalcitrant spirit in women's autonomy and empowerment in using corsets even under the domination of patriarchy.

Corsets were said to be invented in the middle of the 14th century (Waugh 17), but they did not obtain the stereotypical impression we have until the 19th century. "In contrast to cone-shaped stays of the 18th century, 19th-century corsets molded the body into an hour glass shape" (Baumgarten 26). From then on, corsets have shaped, conditioned, and dominated women's body physically and ideologically. Women who wear corsets are regarded decorous and feminine; meanwhile, constraining corsets render women incapacitated.

In *Intimate Apparel*, many women wear corsets because they have to conform to the gender codes in the 1905 Manhattan. The bride in Act One Scene I Corinna Mae will wear the white-satin-with-pink-roses wedding corset on her wedding night. The white socialite belle Mrs. Van Buren spends extravagantly on her pink-silk-and-crepe-de-Chine-gardenia ball corset to top other ladies in fashion and to win her husband's heart back, even though she thinks it "hardly seems decent."<sup>1</sup> Black prostitute Mayme also wears a pale blue corset like Mrs. Van Buren's, feeling herself "like Fifth Avenue" (22). Esther wears a stunning white-satin-embroidered-with-orange-blossoms wedding corset on her wedding night and later an elaborate satin corset in the hope of saving George's heart from Mayme's side.

The tight-lacing corsets, like straitjackets for psycho inmates, restrict women's natural body growth, render women incapacitated, and discipline them to embrace such aesthetics of beauty. Even though women might find wearing corsets uncomfortable, hampering their mobility, and even indecent, they succumb to the patriarchal fashion, aesthetics, and social mores. The first time when Mrs. Van Buren

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<sup>1</sup> Lynn Nottage, *Intimate Apparel* in *Intimate Apparel / Fabulation* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006), p. 12. All subsequent references to this play will be noted parenthetically in the text..

tries on the latest fashion from Paris, her sentiments orchestrate the self-imposed inculcation.

*(Ms. Van Buren examines herself in the mirror, with an initial disgust that gradually gives way to curiosity.)*

Mrs. Van Buren: And you say the French women are wearing these?

Esther: So I'm told.

Mrs. Van Buren: I don't believe it. It hardly seems decent. But I suppose the French aren't known for their modesty. *(Strikes a provocative, though slightly self-conscious pose)*

Esther: Well, it the rage. Some ladies ain't even wearing the corsets in private.

Mrs. Van Buren: Is that true?

Esther: Most gals don't like 'em, even fine ladies like yourself. Truth is, I ain't know a man to court pain for a woman's glance.

(12-13)

To begin with, Mrs. Van Buren dislikes this “very low” corset; she thinks herself “ridiculous” and she also thinks that she is behaving “absolutely foolishly” (12). But her displeasure gradually gives in to her strong desire to look like the singer from the Tenderloin—the high class prostitute (“Program” 4). It is understandable for her psychological state to change quickly because she is keen on recapturing her husband's heart and retaining the image of the fashionable belle. However, Mrs. Van Buren's change from disgust to curiosity also reveals how fashion operates to change people's taste of things. Even if she is first abhorred with the low corset's indecent outright sexy provocation, she is soon determined to pick up the latest Parisian fashion.

However, implied in Esther's comments is the ordinary girls' displeasure with the constraining corsets. In public, girls are required to wear corsets beneath their dress, but, in private, according to Esther, they prefer not to wear the tight underclothes and even noble ladies do not much like them. If one has to wear the tight-lacing the whole day both in public and in private, one certainly gets physically tired and feeble easily. Imagine wearing the corset in a hot summer day! Even with all the physical discomforts, however, most women still put up with the corsets and they maintained such dress code generation after generation for quite a long time.

### III. The Corset and Marriage

The restraining power of the corset is employed in *Intimate Apparel* to pinpoint

the restraining power of patriarchal ideology on female gender roles and women's obligations. Among the many patriarchal institutions that confine women, marriage is now dissected in this play for its repressive power over women. For women who cannot get married, life without marriage fills them with pressure and discrimination. For women who are married but to "bad" husbands, marriage becomes a shackle. In this play, while 35-year-old plain-looking Esther suffers from the social pressure for her unmarried status, the married women whose husbands neither love nor respect them, including Mrs. Dickson, Mrs. Van Buren, and later even Esther, experience a strong lack and heartbroken loss.

*Intimate Apparel* begins with an old maid Esther alone in her room adding lace to a camisole while people downstairs are celebrating Corrina Mae's wedding. Esther has resided in this boarding house for over 18 years since she was 17 years old and she is now the only spinster among the 23 women who have lived in the house during that time. She feels dejected because even though she knows she is a good girl with intelligence and diligence, men ignore her as "wall flower" (8). She knows clearly the major reason is that she is not pretty. She receives pressure and discrimination from society simply because she is hardly sought after by men. This social pressure is embodied in the urge and care of her landlady Mrs. Dickson.

Mrs. Dickson's mentality is that every girl has to get married because "It tough... for a colored woman in this city [New York]" (10). She keeps pushing Esther to consider Mr. Charles because, to her, this recently promoted head bellman seems good enough for (old and plain) Esther. She intentionally overlooks how gluttonous and fat this frequent visitor is because she believes that "sometimes we get to a point where we can't be so particular" (10). In fact, the notion of taking marriage as an investment for a woman's life, though not blatantly condemned in the play is definitely challenged and criticized by the playwright. 37-year-old Mrs. Dickson marries near-60-year-old opium-addicted Mr. Dickson, not because of love, but because of the rooming house he owns. Mrs. Dickson's mother, totally disillusioned by her poor marriage, teaches her daughter to reject love and to "marry up" (39), which the obedient daughter willingly does later. A critic states that she sells herself to "acquire capital" (Larhs par. 3).

Another lady who makes a fortune on marriage at the expense of true love and her life is Mrs. Van Buren. Even if she is the leading socialite belle whose dresses are always the focus of the fashion columns and whose life courts admiration and envy, she and her husband are like strangers or even enemy. She feels relief when he is away and he too will "find ways of prolonging his stay" in Europe (57). When Esther asks if she loves her husband, Mrs. Van Buren answers, "I am a married woman, such a question is romantic" (59). Her outright dry reply implies there is neither romance



nor love after one is married. Often drowning herself in alcohol and cherishing Esther's accompaniment with her clearly show how lonely she is and how empty her marriage is. But she chooses to maintain the nominal marriage because, like Mrs. Dickson, she also sells herself in exchange of a financially stable and glamorous life.

Both Mrs. Dickson and Mrs. Van Buren take marriage as their career. Even when the men they invest in do not bring them true happiness, they still cannot do away without marriage. Like the tight-lacing corsets, they are fettered by marriage.

#### IV. The Corset and Empowerment

Since corsets confine women physically and mentally, women who wear corsets in a sense ironically become accomplice perpetuating the patriarchal repression on women themselves. Situated in a patriarchal society with a slow progress of changes and liberation for women at the turn-of-the-century Manhattan, women involuntarily succumbed themselves to patriarchal domination. However, paradoxically some women use such patriarchal subjugation well that they subvert such repression into empowerment and actualize themselves. Esther Mills, the talented seamstress, transforms her ingenuity into the elaborate corsets she makes, and hence makes a livelihood that makes her independent and autonomous.

Such a paradox discerned in the characterization of Esther as making corsets to perpetuate patriarchal repression on women and to liberate herself from patriarchal repression finds a parallel in the power of this intimate apparel—corsets. The corset is notorious for its “physical oppression and sexual objectification; however, as a garment, it is also “acknowledged as a stimulant to sexual pleasure for its ‘enthusiasts’” (Entwistle 195). Sociologists such as D. Kunzle and V. Steel discern that “the ambivalence of the corset and indeed, all clothing, which expresses two opposing desires: garments cover the body and also enhance and display it” (Entwistle 196). To be more specific, the corset has “[an] ambivalent purpose to enforce the sexual taboo by objectively oppressing the body, and simultaneously to break that taboo by subjectively enhancing the body” (Kunzle 2-3). As the aforementioned ambivalent feature of the corset—being “absent” in public but present in private, corset wearing also demonstrates ambivalent power politics of repression and expression. While patriarchy oppresses women through the dress code of the corset, women with the corsets on exercise and use their sexuality to “rise out of a socio-sexual subject position” (Kunzle 2).

Michel Foucault in his *History of Sexuality* states, “Where there is power, there is resistance” (95). While patriarchal society imposes the corset aesthetics and decorum upon women thus rendering women objectified and physically feeble, women find a counter force in such corset culture. As mentioned previously, “Power,

after investing itself in the body, finds itself exposed to a counterattack in that same body” (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 56). Foucault emphasizes that “there are no relations of power without resistance” (*Power/Knowledge* 142). Women, who are disciplined to wear corsets, utilize such performed femininity to achieve their goal. Esther, who makes fantastic corsets for women to wear and for men to see and sport, gains independence and therefore is allowed a chance to pursue her dream.

Esther is a woman of individuality; having a skill to support herself financially makes her even more a woman of agency. Like many gifted women in patriarchal society in the past, smart and capable Esther is suppressed; however, as she says, she is very fortunate because she has acquired a very good skill—she can make the lingerie. With this skill she can support her life and she also has the mobile freedom to move around. One step elevated higher than the servant class, she enjoys more financial power and social mobility.

Sandra G. Shannon who, because of the biblical allusion of the Hebrew name Esther, thinks Esther “epitomizes the dutiful, docile and obedient servant” (188). I believe that Esther is more than that submissive woman; she is a woman of her own belief and integrity. Therefore, even though she has great anxiety over her spinsterhood, when Mrs. Dickson forces her to accept the awful candidate left available for her, Esther protests by saying, “I ain’t giving up so easy” (9). She is a woman of her own principle. Because of her talent and diligence, she has saved a lot of money on the way to realize her dream—to buy a beauty parlor (35). As a critic puts it, “That money and that dream fuel her independence” (Blaney 15). She must be a woman of self-assertion. At the inception of the play, she depreciates herself because in terms of marriage marketability, her capital is scarce.

Esther first still allows herself to be dominated by patriarchal ideology of marriage, so she tries to get married and then when she is married to George Armstrong she struggles to make that marriage work. However, she “holds her emotional destiny in her own hands; she is free to make a choice, even a bad one” (Lahr). When Mrs. Dickson, who can be viewed as a motherly figure to her in this patriarchal society, vehemently objects to her epistolary romance and her decision to marry George Armstrong, Esther is determined to venture into her own marriage “out of love.”

Unfortunately, she is disillusioned when George first betrays her by having an affair with her best friend Mayme and then when he greedily “snatches” away all her savings in the crazy quilt. She realizes that if this man is not worthy of her love, this institution of marriage is impractical and useless to her.

From this point on after the epiphany Esther becomes more confident and more self-assured. She denounces marriage and George Armstrong, she expresses her true

love to Mr. Marks courageously but understatedly, and she also resumes the role of solitary seamstress but with conviction and hope. Different from the first self-effacing her, Esther in the end of the play bursts with aggressive vitality though the representation of her actualization still retains some warm and peaceful overtone. Firstly, when George leaves her with the money, Esther goes to tell Mayme what kind of person George is in the hope of enlightening Mayme up. When George comes knocking on Mayme's door to elope with her, Esther begs Mayme not to open the door and not to follow him. "Let him go," implores Esther, "He ain't real, he a duppy, a spirit. We be chasing him forever" (71). Esther clearly knows George can only breed troubles for her (and Mayme as well) and marriage now can only give her discontent.

Perhaps with George and their marriage gone, Esther has nothing to lose and more courage. Therefore, the second thing she does is to express her love to the man she truly cares about. She no longer hides her true affection, so she visits Mr. Marks again to give him the Japanese silk smoking jacket—the wedding gift she made for her husband. As a critic states, "there is an unstated but real affection between the two" (Lahr). When she offers to smooth the shoulders of the garment for him, the stage direction writes, "Mr. Marks does not move. Silence. Their eyes fix upon each other" (72). Although Esther "reluctantly" leaves without a word, although we are not told what will happen between them in future, we can tell that Esther has boldly expressed where her mind belongs through her body language. In contrast to her reserved and self-sanctioned attitude before her marriage, Esther definitely has grown into a more expressive and aggressive woman.

In the finale, Esther moves back to her old room in Mrs. Dickson's boarding house making corsets for a living again. It seems that Esther has searched her love and dream in vain and has finally returned to where she started; however, she definitely is a woman who feels content with her spinsterhood, and also a woman who will work hard making intimate apparel all over again to fulfill her dream. This time her dream is different because she is pregnant. Esther is now a woman who not only has a affirmative philosophy of life to pass on, but also a woman of total autonomy. I hate to suggest that at the end of the play it looks like George seems to be a sperm donor, but Esther here turns a new leaf of her life. The stage direction writes,

Esther lightly touches her belly. A moment. She walks over to the sewing machine and begins to sew together pieces of fabric, the beginnings of new quilt. (74)

The fabrication of a new patchwork quilt symbolizes the new life—colorful and practical; therefore, Esther, the corset seamstress, has accomplished her rite of

passage into the marriage world and has now acquired total independence with new power.

## V. Conclusion

Lynn Nottage is a playwright whose work is intended to lend a voice to the experience of the African-American women. At an interview, Nottage once explained where she got her inspiration and source for her writings—"the kitchen table of [her] house". She recalled her childhood and said that after school when she went home, she would be hearing at the kitchen table stories told by her grandmother, her mother, and even the woman from across the street. This gather place and the stories they told is the thing that gives the genuine touch to her story in *Intimate Apparel*.

Indeed, according to Sandra G. Shannon, *Intimate Apparel* is loosely based upon "[Nottage's] Barbadian great grandmother, who, in 1904, immigrated alone to New York and found work as a seamstress, with particular skill in making frilly, sensual undergarments for the city's elite" (186). This is to say Esther is a possible historical figure who once tried to make sense of her life as a seamstress of intimate apparel in the 1905 Manhattan. As Sandra G. Shannon has pointed out, Nottage in *Intimate Apparel* "[rescues] voices from history" and presents "black women defining themselves" (187). Despite the subjugating power of the patriarchal norms, and despite the fettering shackle of the patriarchal marriage corset, Esther learns to live for herself and finally can weave a colorful life like her patchwork quilt with a new recognition of life. Her story posits a highly positive image of African American woman, and she deserves our respect and appreciation.

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# 國科會補助專題研究計畫項下出席國際學術會議心得報告

日期：101年6月17日

計畫編號	NSC 99-2410-H-004-038-		
計畫名稱	那特琪《親密內衣》中的性、空間、和再現		
出國人員姓名	姜翠芬	服務機構及職稱	政大英文系
會議時間	101年5月16日 至 101年5月18日	會議地點	Universidad Complutense de Madrid (University of Complutense of Madrid)
會議名稱	(中文) 第十屆國際女性研究研討會：穿越性別空間 (英文) X International Conference on Women's Studies: Negotiating Gendered Spaces		
發表論文題目	(中文) 那特琪《親密內衣》中的馬甲、身體、和婚姻 (英文) The Corset, Body, and Marriage in Lynn Nottage's <i>Intimate Apparel</i>		

## 一、參加會議經過

本人及我的學生政大英文所碩士班一年級學生施舜翔的論文都被此次會議主辦單位西班牙國立馬德里大學英文系接受，因此於五月十四日星期一一起搭飛機前往西班牙馬德里參加會議，抵達馬德里時間是五月十五日星期二約下午三點。五月十六日早晨前往馬德里大學英文系報到，馬德里大學非常大，走很久才順利找到會場。我的論文發表場次是本日 5:30-6:30，整個發表很順利，除了主持人 Professor Claudia Alonso Recarte 問我問題之外，觀眾中也有人問我問題，討論熱烈。會議於五月十八日星期五下午結束，我們則在五月十九日參觀馬德里的博物館，於五月二十日星期日搭機回台灣，在五月二十一日星期

一下午回到台北。

## 二、與會心得

本次會議名稱是 X International Conference on Women's Studies: Negotiating Gendered Spaces 與我所作的研究方向契合，因此很高興能有機會參加此研討會並與西班牙及其他國家學者切磋空間和女性方面的議題。雖然問我問問題的學者英文不是很流利，但是我非常高興西班牙的女性學者也做 Lynn Nottage 的戲劇研究。我們彼此交換心得，也都是非常欣賞 Lynn Nottage 的寫作和戲劇哲理。

五月十八日星期五的一場專題演講是由馬德里大學英文系的 Professor Noelia Hernando Real 講 “Dramatic Geopathology: Self and Space in Plays by Contemporary North-American Women Playwrights” 與我所作的研究有直接關係讓我獲益良多。

## 三、考察參觀活動(無是項活動者略)

無是項活動，略

## 四、建議

此次參加會議的台灣學者只有我和我的學生二人，有點可惜。馬德里大學是西班牙排名第一的學校，很值得交流，語言是有點不通，但是英文系的老師的英文都很流利，而且那幾位主辦的女教授們個個看來都非常 tough! 希望將來能跟她們多交流，多學習。

## 五、攜回資料名稱及內容

論文發表證明和會議議程

## 六、其他

論文被大會接受 email 文件及出席本次學術會議論文請見下頁



Dear conference participant,

We are pleased to inform you that your proposal has been selected for presentation at the **X Conference on Women´s Studies** at the Complutense University.

The acceptance of your paper for a presentation does not imply that it will necessarily be accepted for publication.

If your paper is written in English and you are not a native speaker, we suggest that you have your paper revised by an expert writer.

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Sincerely,

The Organizing Committee

=====

Estimado participante,

Nos complace anunciarle que se ha aceptado su propuesta para la participación en las **X Jornadas Internacionales de Estudios de la Mujer**.

La aceptación de su propuesta no implica que ésta sea aceptada para la posterior publicación. Si la propuesta está escrita en inglés, se recomienda que alguien revise el correcto uso del idioma.

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Reciba un muy cordial saludo,

El comité organizador

## The Corset, Body, and Marriage in Lynn Nottage's *Intimate Apparel*

African American playwright Lynn Nottage in her *Intimate Apparel* (2003- ) describes how Esther, a plain-looking 35-year-old black seamstress living in Lower Manhattan in 1905, learns to weave an independent life for her own. Esther makes a living for herself by making corsets, camisoles, and bodices for upper class white ladies like Mrs. Van Buren and black prostitutes like her best friend Mayme. She makes the intimate apparel in her boarding house bedroom, meets her clients in their bedrooms, or boudoirs, and purchases the fabric from an orthodox Jew in his bedroom-store. After the betrayal of her African Caribbean husband named George Armstrong, Esther is disillusioned and resumes her old role and place at the boarding house but with strong recognition of her self and hope for future. This paper intends to scrutinize the intricate relationship between the corset, body, space, gender role, marriage and women's agency in *Intimate Apparel*.

Key words: the corset, body, marriage, *Intimate Apparel*.

## I. Introduction

Like her predecessors Lorraine Hansberry, female African American playwright Lynn Nottage excels in depicting black's striving and tenacious spirit. In the legacy of African American drama, she follows her male predecessors like August Wilson to articulate the silenced life of African Americans. Esther makes a living for herself by making wedding corsets, camisoles, and bodices for upper class white ladies like Mrs. Van Buren and black prostitutes like her best friend Mayme. She makes the intimate apparel in her boarding house bedroom, meets her clients in their bedroom, or boudoirs, and purchases the fabric from an orthodox Jew in his bedroom-store. After the betrayal of her African Caribbean husband named George Armstrong, Esther is disillusioned and resumes her old role and place at the boarding house but with strong recognition of her self and hope for future. This paper intends to scrutinize the intricate relationship between the corset, body, space, gender role, marriage and women's agency in *Intimate Apparel*.

## II. The Corset and Body in Private and in Public

Lynn Nottage manifests in her play the repressive social stricture for women of the 1900s in America and the symbol she uses to connect us to that human bondage is intimate apparel. When the play begins, Esther is in her bedroom "diligently trimming a camisole with lace." The title for the first scene—"Wedding Corset: White Satin with Pink Roses," clearly indicates that Esther is a professional seamstress making intimate apparel like corsets, bodices, camisoles for a living.

The exquisitely shaped corset soon captures our attention. First, the corset belongs to a category of clothes—underclothes; like clothes, we wear underclothes for several reasons. Joanne Entwistle in *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory* lists four explanations for the question "why do we wear clothes?" The first theory is protection, the second modesty, the third decoration and display, and the fourth communication. The fourth explanation of fashion/dress as communication has become widely accepted by anthropologists on dress and fashion theorists.

C. Willett and Phillis Cunnington in *The History of Underclothes* clearly list several functions of underclothes: 1. to protect the body from cold; 2. to support the shape of the costume; 3. for cleanliness; 4. erotic use of underclothes; 5. as a method of class distinction (14-18).

However, when it comes to underclothes, I believe people wear underclothes mainly because of protection as underclothes can protect them from crude outer clothes. Furthermore, in most cultures, underclothes are worn in order to cover the sexual organs. In private, underclothes can exhibit, and communicate.

Corsets, however, have an interesting ambivalence of private and public manifestation. During the Victorian Age in England or the late 19th and early 20th century, corsets were worn beneath dresses as decorum. One could not see corsets directly in public but one could certainly perceive corsets worn beneath the dress due to the distinguished hourglass figure.

It is this ambivalence of the private and public and the absent and present that Lynn Nottage discerns in the corset discourse and would like to scrutinize in *Intimate Apparel*. On the one hand, she foregrounds the rigidity of social stricture on women and the disciplining power of femininity in patriarchal society through the representation of the corset; on the other hand, she also perceives the subversive and recalcitrant spirit in

women's autonomy and empowerment in using corsets even under the domination of patriarchy.

Corsets were said to be invented in the middle of the 14th century (Waugh 17), but they did not obtain the stereotypical impression we have until the 19th century. "In contrast to cone-shaped stays of the 18th century, 19th-century corsets molded the body into an hour glass shape" (Baumgarten 26). From then on, corsets have shaped, conditioned, and dominated women's body physically and ideologically. Women who wear corsets are regarded decorous and feminine; meanwhile, constraining corsets render women incapacitated.

In *Intimate Apparel*, many women wear corsets because they have to conform to the gender codes in the 1905 Manhattan. The bride in Act One Scene I Corinna Mae will wear the white-satin-with-pink-roses wedding corset on her wedding night. The white socialite belle Mrs. Van Buren spends extravagantly on her pink-silk-and-crepe-de-Chine-gardenia ball corset to top other ladies in fashion and to win her husband's heart back, even though she thinks it "hardly seems decent" (12). Black prostitute Mayme also wears a pale blue corset like Mrs. Van Buren's, feeling herself "like Fifth Avenue" (22). Esther wears a stunning white-satin-embroidered-with-orange-blossoms wedding corset on her wedding night and later an elaborate satin corset in the hope of saving George's heart from Mayme's side.

The tight-lacing corsets, like straitjacket for psycho inmates, restrict women's natural body growth, render women incapacitated, and discipline them to embrace such aesthetics of beauty. Even though women might find wearing corsets uncomfortable, hampering their mobility, and even indecent, they succumb to the patriarchal fashion, aesthetics, and social mores. The first time when Mrs. Van Buren tries on the latest fashion from Paris, her sentiments orchestrate the self-imposed inculcation.

*(Ms. Van Buren examines herself in the mirror, with an initial disgust that gradually gives way to curiosity.)*

Mrs. Van Buren: And you say the French women are wearing these?

Esther: So I'm told.

Mrs. Van Buren: I don't believe it. It hardly seems decent. But I suppose the French aren't known for their modesty. *(Strikes a provocative, though slightly self-conscious pose)*

Esther: Well, it the rage. Some ladies ain't even wearing the corsets in private.

Mrs. Van Buren: Is that true?

Esther: Most gals don't like 'em, even fine ladies like yourself. Truth is, I ain't know a man to court pain for a woman's glance.

(12-13)

To begin with, Mrs. Van Buren dislikes this "very low" corset; she thinks herself "ridiculous" and she also thinks that she is behaving "absolutely foolishly" (12). But her displeasure gradually gives in to her strong desire to look like the signer from the Tenderloin—the high class prostitute (Check Program for "Tenderloin"). It is understandable for her psychological state to change quickly because she is keen on recapturing her husband's heart and retaining the image of the fashionable belle. However, Mrs. Van Buren's change from disgust to curiosity also reveals how fashion operates to change people's taste of things. Even if she is first abhorred with the low corset's indecent outright sexy provocation, she soon determines to pick up the latest

Parisian fashion.

However, implied in Esther's comments is the ordinary girls' displeasure with the constraining corsets. In public, girls are required to wear corsets beneath their dress, but, in private, according to Esther, they prefer not to wear the tight underclothes and even noble ladies do not much like them. If one has to wear the tight-lacing the whole day both in public and in private, one certainly gets physically tired and feeble easily. Imagine wearing the corset in a hot summer day! Even with all the physical discomforts, however, most women still put up with the corsets and they maintained such dress code generation after generation for quite a long time.

### III. The Corset and Marriage

The restraining power of the corset is employed in *Intimate Apparel* to pinpoint the restraining power of patriarchal ideology on female gender roles and women's obligations. Among the many patriarchal institutions that confine women, marriage is now scrutinized in this play for its repressive power over women. For women who cannot get married, life without marriage fills them with pressure and discrimination. For women who are married but to "bad" husbands, marriage becomes a shackle. In this play, while 35-year-old plain-looking Esther suffers from the societal pressure for her unmarried status, the married women whose husbands neither love nor respect them, including Mrs. Dickson, Mrs. Van Buren, and later even Esther, experience a strong lack and heartbroken loss.

*Intimate Apparel* begins with an old maid Esther alone in her room adding lace to a camisole while people downstairs are celebrating Corrina Mae's wedding. Esther has resided in this boarding house for over 18 years since she was 17 years old and she is now the only spinster among the 23 women who have lived in the house during that time. She feels dejected because even though she knows she is a good girl with intelligence and diligence, men ignore her as "wall flower" (8). She knows clearly the major reason is that she is not pretty. She receives pressure and discrimination from society simply because she is hardly sought after by men. This social pressure is embodied in the urge and care of her landlady Mrs. Dickson.

Mrs. Dickson's mentality is that every girl has to get married because "It tough... for a colored woman in this city [New York]" (10). She keeps pushing Esther to consider Mr. Charles because, to her, this recently promoted head bellman seems good enough for (old and plain) Esther. She intentionally overlooks how gluttonous and fat this frequent visitor is because she believes that "sometimes we get to a point where we can't be so particular" (10). In fact, the notion of taking marriage as an investment for a woman's life, though not blatantly condemned in the play is definitely challenged and criticized by the playwright. 37-year-old Mrs. Dickson marries near-60-year-old opium-addicted Mr. Dickson, not because of love, but because of the rooming house he owns. Mrs. Dickson's mother, totally disillusioned by her poor marriage, teaches her daughter to spoof off love and to "marry up" (39), which the obedient daughter willingly does later. A critic states that she sells herself to "acquire capital" (Larhs).

Another lady who makes a fortune on marriage at the expense of true love and her life is Mrs. Van Buren. Even if she is the leading socialite belle whose dresses are always the focus of the fashion columns and whose life courts admiration and envy, she and her husband are like strangers or even enemy. She feels relief when he is away and he too will "find ways of prolonging his stay" in Europe (57). When Esther asks if she loves her husband, Mrs. Van Buren answers, "I am a married woman, such a question is romantic" (59). Her outright dry reply implies there is neither romance nor love after one is married. Often drowning herself in

alcohol and cherishing Esther's accompaniment with her clearly show how lonely she is and how empty her marriage is. But she chooses to maintain the nominal marriage because, like Mrs. Dickson, she also sells herself in exchange of a financially stable and glamorous life.

Both Mrs. Dickson and Mrs. Van Buren take marriage as their career. Even when the men they invest in cannot bring them true happiness, they still cannot do away without marriage. Like the tight-lacing corsets, they are fettered by marriage.

#### IV. The Corset and Empowerment

Since corsets confine women physically and mentally, women who wear corsets in a sense ironically become accomplices perpetuating the patriarchal repression on women themselves. Situated in a patriarchal society with a slow progress of changes and liberation for women at the turn-of-the-century Manhattan, women involuntarily succumbed themselves to patriarchal domination. However, paradoxically some women use such patriarchal subjugation well that they subvert such repression into empowerment and actualize themselves. Esther Mills, the talented seamstress, transforms her ingenuity into the elaborate corsets she makes, and hence makes a livelihood that makes her independent and autonomous.

Such a paradox discerned in the characterization of Esther as making corsets to perpetuate patriarchal repression on women and to liberate herself from patriarchal repression finds a parallel in the power of this intimate apparel—corsets. The corset is notorious for its “physical oppression and sexual objectification; however, as a garment, it is also “acknowledged as a stimulant to sexual pleasure for its ‘enthusiasts’” (Entwistle 195). Sociologists such as D. Kunzle and V. Steel point out that “the ambivalence of the corset and indeed, all clothing, which expresses two opposing desires: garments cover the body and also enhance and display it” (Entwistle 196). To be more specific, the corset has “[an] ambivalent purpose to enforce the sexual taboo by objectively oppressing the body, and simultaneously to break that taboo by subjectively enhancing the body” (Kunzle 2-3). As the aforementioned ambivalent feature of the corset—being “absent” in public but present in private, corset wearing also demonstrates ambivalent power politics of repression and expression. While patriarchy oppresses women through the dress code of the corset, women with the corsets on exercise and use their sexuality to “rise out of a socio-sexual subject position” (Kunzle 2).

Michel Foucault in his book (?) states, “Where there is power, there is counter power.” Women, who are disciplined to wear corsets, utilize such performed femininity to achieve their goal. In a similar vein, Esther, who makes fantastic corsets for women to wear and for men to see and sport, gains independence and therefore is allowed a chance to pursue her dream.

Esther is a woman of individuality; having a skill to support herself financially makes her even more a woman of agency. Like many gifted women in patriarchal society in the past, smart and capable Esther is suppressed; however, as she says, she is very fortunate because she has acquired a very good skill—she can make the lingerie. With this skill she can support her life and she also has the mobile freedom to move around. One step elevated higher than the servant class, she enjoys more economical power and social mobility.

I disagree with Sandra G. Shannon who, because of the biblical allusion of the Hebrew name Esther, thinks Esther “epitomizes the dutiful, docile and obedient servant” (188). In fact, I believe that Esther must be a woman of her own belief and integrity. Therefore, even though she has great anxiety over her spinsterhood, when Mrs. Dickson forces her to accept the awful candidate left available for her, Esther protests by saying, “I ain't giving up so easy” (9). She is a woman of her own principle. Because of her talent and diligence, she has

saved a lot of money on the way to realize her dream—to buy a beauty parlor (35). As a critic puts it, “That money and that dream fuel her independence” (Blaney). She must be a woman of self-assertion. At the inception of the play, she depreciates herself because in terms of marriage marketability, her capital is scarce.

Esther first still allows herself to be dominated by patriarchal ideology of marriage, so she tries to get married and then when she is married to George Armstrong she struggles to make that marriage work. However, she “holds her emotional destiny in her own hands; she is free to make a choice, even a bad one” (Lahr). When Mrs. Dickson, who can be viewed as a motherly figure to her in this patriarchal society, vehemently objects to her epistolary romance and her decision to marry George Armstrong, Esther is determined to venture into her own marriage “out of love.”

Unfortunately, she is disillusioned when George first betrays her by having an affair with her best friend Mayme and then when he greedily “snatches” away all her savings in the crazy quilt. She realizes that if this man is not worthy of her love, this institution of marriage is impractical and useless to her.

From this point on after the epiphany Esther becomes more confident and more self-assured. She denounces marriage and George Armstrong, she expresses her true love to Mr. Marks courageously but understatedly, and she also resumes the role of solitary seamstress but with conviction and hope. Different from the first self-effacing her, Esther in the end of the play bursts with aggressive vitality though the representation of her actualization still retains some warm and peaceful overtone. When George leaves her with the money, Esther goes to tell Mayme what kind of person George is in the hope of enlightening Mayme up. When George comes knocking on Mayme’s door to elope with her, Esther begs Mayme not to open the door and not to follow him. “Let him go,” implores Esther, “He ain’t real, he a duppy, a spirit. We be chasing him forever” (71). Esther clearly knows George can only breed troubles for her (and Mayme as well) and marriage now can only give her discontent.

Perhaps with George and their marriage gone, Esther has nothing to lose and more courage. She no longer hides her true affection, so she visits Mr. Marks again to give him the Japanese silk smoking jacket—the wedding gift she made for her husband. As a critic states, “there is an unstated but real affection between the two” (Lahr). When she offers to smooth the shoulders of the garment for him, the stage direction writes, “Mr. Marks does not move. Silence. Their eyes fix upon each other” (72). Although Esther “reluctantly” leaves without a word, although we are not told what will happen between them in future, we can tell that Esther has boldly expressed where her mind belongs through her body language. In contrast to her reserved and self-sanctioned attitude before her marriage, Esther definitely has grown into a more expressive and aggressive woman.

In the finale, Esther moves back to her old room in Mrs. Dickson’s boarding house making corsets for a living again. It seems that Esther has searched her love and dream in vain and has finally returned to where she started; however, she definitely is a woman who feels content with her spinsterhood, and also a woman who will work hard making intimate apparel all over again to fulfill her dream. This time her dream is different because she is pregnant. Esther is now a woman who not only has a conviction of life to pass on, but also a woman of total autonomy. I hate to suggest that at the end of the play it looks like George seems to be a sperm donor, but Esther here turns a new leaf of her life. The stage direction writes,

Esther lightly touches her belly. A moment. She walks over to the sewing machine and begins to sew together pieces of fabric, the beginning s of new quilt. (74)

The fabrication of a new patchwork quilt symbolizes the new life—colorful and practical; therefore, Esther, the corset seamstress, has accomplished her late rite of passage into the marriage world and has now acquired total independence with new power.

## V. Conclusion

“Lynn Nottage is a playwright whose work is intended to lend a voice to the experience of the African-American women” (Gale para. 1). At an interview, Nottage once explained where she got her inspiration and source for her writings—“the kitchen table of [her] house” (Interview 09-02-2005). She recalled her childhood and said that after school when she went home, she would be hearing at the kitchen table stories told by her grandmother, her mother, and even the woman from across the street. This gathering place and the stories they told is the thing that gives the genuine touch to her story in *Intimate Apparel*.

Indeed, according to Sandra G. Shannon, *Intimate Apparel* is loosely based upon “[Nottage’s] Barbadian great grandmother, who, in 1904, immigrated alone to New York and found work as a seamstress, with particular skill in making frilly, sensual undergarments for the city’s elite” (186). This is to say Esther is a possible historical figure who once tried to make sense of her life as a seamstress of intimate apparel in the 1905 Manhattan. As Sandra G. Shannon has pointed out, Nottage in *Intimate Apparel* “[rescues] voices from history” and presents “black women defining themselves” (187). Despite the subjugating power of the patriarchal norms, and despite the fettering shackle of the patriarchal marriage corset, Esther learns to live for herself and finally can weave a colorful life like her patchwork quilt with a new recognition of life. Her story posits a highly positive image of African American woman, and she deserves our respect and appreciation.

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# 國科會補助計畫衍生研發成果推廣資料表

日期:2012/09/10

國科會補助計畫	計畫名稱: 那特琪《親密內衣》中的性、空間、和再現
	計畫主持人: 姜翠芬
	計畫編號: 99-2410-H-004-038- 學門領域: 美國文學
無研發成果推廣資料	

99 年度專題研究計畫研究成果彙整表

計畫主持人：姜翠芬		計畫編號：99-2410-H-004-038-					
計畫名稱：那特琪《親密內衣》中的性、空間、和再現							
成果項目		量化			單位	備註（質化說明：如數個計畫共同成果、成果列為該期刊之封面故事...等）	
		實際已達成數（被接受或已發表）	預期總達成數（含實際已達成數）	本計畫實際貢獻百分比			
國內	論文著作	期刊論文	0	0	100%	篇	' The Corset, Body, and Marriage in Lynn Nottage's Intimate Apparel.' The Fourth Biennial International Conference of the Contemporary Women's Writing Association. Contemporary Women's Writing: (Wo)Man and the Body. Taipei: National Chiao Tung University, July 11-13, 2012.
		研究報告/技術報告	0	0	100%		
		研討會論文	1	1	100%		
		專書	0	0	100%		
	專利	申請中件數	0	0	100%	件	
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國外	論文著作	期刊論文	0	0	100%	篇	' Space, Gender, and Body in Lynn
		研究報告/技術報告	0	0	100%		
		研討會論文	1	1	100%		

							Nottage' s Intimate Apparel.' X International Conference on Women' s Studies: Negotiating Gendered Spaces. Madrid: University of Complutense of Madrid, May 16-18, 2012.
		專書	0	0	100%	章/本	
專利		申請中件數	0	0	100%	件	
		已獲得件數	0	0	100%		
技術移轉		件數	0	0	100%	件	
		權利金	0	0	100%	千元	
參與計畫人力 (外國籍)		碩士生	0	0	100%	人次	
		博士生	0	0	100%		
		博士後研究員	0	0	100%		
		專任助理	0	0	100%		

其他成果  
(無法以量化表達之成果如辦理學術活動、獲得獎項、重要國際合作、研究成果國際影響力及其他協助產業技術發展之具體效益事項等，請以文字敘述填列。)

無

	成果項目	量化	名稱或內容性質簡述
科 教 處 計 畫 加 填 項 目	測驗工具(含質性與量性)	0	
	課程/模組	0	
	電腦及網路系統或工具	0	
	教材	0	
	舉辦之活動/競賽	0	
	研討會/工作坊	0	
	電子報、網站	0	
	計畫成果推廣之參與(閱聽)人數	0	

## 國科會補助專題研究計畫成果報告自評表

請就研究內容與原計畫相符程度、達成預期目標情況、研究成果之學術或應用價值（簡要敘述成果所代表之意義、價值、影響或進一步發展之可能性）、是否適合在學術期刊發表或申請專利、主要發現或其他有關價值等，作一綜合評估。

1. 請就研究內容與原計畫相符程度、達成預期目標情況作一綜合評估

達成目標

未達成目標（請說明，以 100 字為限）

實驗失敗

因故實驗中斷

其他原因

說明：

2. 研究成果在學術期刊發表或申請專利等情形：

論文： 已發表  未發表之文稿  撰寫中  無

專利： 已獲得  申請中  無

技轉： 已技轉  洽談中  無

其他：（以 100 字為限）

3. 請依學術成就、技術創新、社會影響等方面，評估研究成果之學術或應用價值（簡要敘述成果所代表之意義、價值、影響或進一步發展之可能性）（以 500 字為限）

本研究探討那特琪《親密內衣》中的性、空間、再現、身體、馬甲等親密內衣、婚姻等議題。從女主角及其他角色的工作、婚姻、和感情生活看到女性對自己身體和情慾在不同空間時的表現。雖然本戲場景是一百年前非裔美國女性的故事，但是本研究亦鼓勵台灣女性，乃至世界女性了解自己身體及慾望，即使婚姻不如意或是無法掌控，也要積極自主，活出自我。