(1000)

In *Keywords*, Raymond Williams attempts to understand the complex dynamics of and in culture and society by focusing on the unit of the keyword as both a representative and an active entity of conflict and motion. I interpret ('define') a keyword in brief form as follows: a reference to a contested syntactics which itself is a weapon of the contestation. Syntactics not only references but shapes semantics; the regulation of syntactics, explicit and implicit, necessarily molds a particular way of expressing and reasoning about meaning. In this sense, the contest of meaning manifests as – or perhaps more precisely, *is* – a contest of syntactics. A keyword is a reference which does not quite point towards any particular set of well-agreed meanings, as most 'common words' do, but rather to the contested syntactics (ergo, contested meanings) of that keyword. In this sense, a keyword is reflexive or 'self-aware' - not merely a unidirectional relation between syntactics and semantics nor a bidirectional one, but something entirely different: a reference to a very complex portrait (or anti-portrait) of itself, and therefore a recursive intermeshing and anti-meshing that gives us a critical vantage point to begin mapping an ideological and cultural physics.

I am primarily interested in the concept of vulgarity, which I feel Williams may be neglecting in his particular exploration of the keyword-form. Williams seems to investigate keywords which are mutually acknowledged sites of syntactic conflict. For instance, individuals from different economic and social strata may contest the syntactics of the word 'class', but it is nevertheless in use by both in conversation and literature – thus mutually recognized. Vulgarity, on the other hand, plays into a much more subversive sort of conflict. It is not just a conflict between competing meanings and usages of a word, but also a conflict between repression and expression. Which words are silenced speaks volumes – so goes the adage – but such words are

likely to be excluded in a keyword analysis that prioritizes mutually acknowledged sites of conflict. As a result, such an analysis may perpetuate the dominant neglect of keywords repressed in the name of vulgarity, itself contributing to the 'dictionarizing' the keyword mode of analysis seeks to move away from.

One word I find particularly interesting to understand as a keyword is 'faggot'. The canonical source for thinking about the word 'faggot', it seems, is C. J. Pascoe's *Dude, You're a Fag.* My intention in this response is to draw sparingly from Pascoe's ethnological research and personal experience to understand 'faggot' as a keyword ultimately to contribute a possible new dimension of vulgarity to Williams' framework.

'Faggot' is an incredibly complex keyword. Anyone who has come across it understands that, even in its surface-form, it presents itself multiply. 'Faggot' is 'officially' defined as a derogatory reference to gay men. When it is employed, however, it is rarely intentionally to attack someone for being gay. Pascoe found that high school boys in her study, for instance, seldom used 'faggot' if they know that the recipient was gay. Rather, the Faggot is a conceptual embodiment of an anti-masculinity which must be denigrated and attributed to others to continually reaffirm one's own masculinity. The Faggot is accessed and manipulated through the reference 'faggot'. As Pascoe articulates in her book, this usage manifests and is regulated differently across racial and socioeconomic divides. Moreover, 'faggot' is a member of a large corpus of vulgarities used as generic attacks (in the same family as 'bitch', 'motherfucker', and 'asshole'). This sort of usage is featured prominently in anti-establishment and non-conformist cultural literature, particularly in music. Similarly to other slurs, 'faggot' and its variations have also been somewhat reclaimed by gay men. On an anecdotal scope, my gay friends and I will use the modified 'faggy' as a term of affection. It is common for poets in gay and queer poetry to use

‘faggot’, ‘fag’, and ‘faggy’ in both normative and provocative ways. When the word ‘faggot’ is expressed in common discourse, therefore, it itself is already a reference to a multiply contested syntactics which allow us to begin understanding the relations and anti-relations between masculinity, sexuality, race, socioeconomics, and culture.

The reciprocal dimension of the expression of ‘faggot’ realized by its vulgarity is its repression. Vulgarity, by constitution, is excluded from the vocabulary of the ‘cultured’ and the ‘proper’. The dominant usage of ‘faggot’ is not to use it at all, thereby introducing a self-destructive interpretation in the keyword’s contested syntactics. The proper man or woman, upon encountering the word ‘faggot’, seeks to neutralize the term. This can be done through explicit censorship – schoolboys are reprimanded for expressing vulgarities, offensive terms are excised from popular song lyrics, and so forth. Another powerful mode of repression, however, is an ‘expressive’ or ‘acknowledging’ repression, in which a word’s vulgarity is neutralized by abstracting the reference from the contested syntactics (‘academicizing’ may be one way to understand it). I have been unwittingly committing this throughout the response by taking care to enclose ‘faggot’ in quotes each time it is referenced. ‘Academicizing’ allows one to cursorily acknowledge the reference while removing or masking one’s involvement in the contested syntactics, when we know that such removal is never possible and that we always participate in the contestation. One thinks: what happens in academic and popular culture when one rejects this repression via acknowledgement, to just say faggot without the reference-contestation severance?

Moreover, we can understand the separation of the expressive and repressive forces in the syntactic contestation of faggot as itself artificial. A close analysis demonstrates that expressive usages are engaged in close reciprocity and dialogue with repressive practices. Its usage as a

generic attack mechanism used widely in anti-establishment music is in deliberate opposition to establishment repression of vulgarity. Its usage in gay and queer literature and conversation is anti-repressive, expressive in a range of gentle to provocative manners, deliberately working to illuminate the connectivity between the reference and contestation. A vulgar keyword points to an incredibly complex syntactic contestation in which its own life and death each simultaneously generate and deteriorate the other.