

Teaching Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* in a Feminist Classroom: An Intersectional, Transnational Perspective

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*Using an intersectional and transnational feminist lens, this article examines the theoretical and pedagogical challenges of teaching *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf in today's feminist classroom. Rather than relegating this classic feminist text to the pedagogical margins owing to its sometimes-problematic treatment of race, class, and dated understanding of imperialism, the piece argues for an approach that acknowledges *A Room of One's Own*'s deployment of uncertainty as a productive feminist category. Ultimately, it demonstrates how the pedagogical use of textual pairings or clusters within an intersectional and postcolonial framework can make the teaching of Woolf's text relevant in contemporary feminist undergraduate courses.*

Keywords: feminist pedagogy / intersectionality / post colonialism / Woolf, Virginia

In *A Room of One's Own* ([1929] 2000), an essay based on two 1928 papers delivered at the Arts Society at Newnham and Girton College in Cambridge, Virginia Woolf declared that a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction. Earlier, sitting on the riverbank, her tumultuous thoughts in this direction—thoughts she described as insignificant little fish—had made it so impossible for her to sit still that she started walking rapidly across a grass plot, only to be intercepted by an indignant, gesticulating man's figure. The cause of the indignation: Woolf was a woman walking on the turf, and only Oxbridge Fellows and Scholars were allowed on the turf, the graveled

path being the place for women. Yet Oxbridge, to Woolf, was just an invention; and as she wryly noted, this male protection of a turf, rolled for 300 years in succession, had sent “her little fish into hiding” (8).

Not for long, though. Soon to be hailed as a classic feminist text, *A Room of One's Own* presented a trenchant critique of gender inequalities, from the poverty of women writ large in discriminatory laws of inheritance and gendered barriers to formal education, to women's social regulation as only wives and daughters of men. How could the impact of such inequalities be anything other than debilitating for women's creativity, Woolf argued, thus locating the problem not in some inherent deficiency of the female mind but in a patriarchal society that had systematically diminished women's worth, while simultaneously using them as looking-glasses to lionize men. Woolf poignantly sketches how “[w]omen have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size. . . . Whatever may be their use in civilized societies, mirrors are essential to all violent and heroic action. That is why Napoleon and Mussolini insist so emphatically on the inferiority of women, for if they were not inferior, they would cease to enlarge. That serves to explain the necessity that women often are to men . . . if she begins to tell the truth, the figure in the looking-glass shrinks. How is he to go on giving judgement, civilizing natives, making laws, writing books, dressing up and speechifying at banquets, unless he can see himself at breakfast and at dinner at least twice the size he really is?” (37–38). Given that this critique is almost as relevant now, despite obvious strides in polity and society, it is hardly surprising that Virginia Woolf acquired the status of a touchstone author for generations of feminists.

Interestingly, Woolf speaks to us as much about what she knows as about what she purports not to know. Rebecca Solnit (2014, 79–82) reminds us of how often Woolf says “I think” and “I don't know,” reading these reiterations as a celebration of the unknown, the unseeable, the obscure. “It's an extraordinary declaration,” says Solnit of Woolf's 1915 diary entry proclaiming that the future was dark, the best thing Woolf thought a future could be, “asserting that the unknown need not be turned into the known through false divination or the projection of grim political or ideological narratives; it's a celebration of darkness, willing to be uncertain about its own assertion. . . . It is the job of writers and explorers to see more, to go into the dark with their eyes open” (80–81). In *A Room of One's Own*, too, Woolf's embrace of the unknown is apparent; Solnit sees in Woolf's texts an agency refusing to be contained by the proprieties of gender, class, and time—Woolf's marrying a Jew in the England of her times, for instance—and ultimately freedom, even wildness, an embracing of voyages deep into the darkness, an eschewing of any pretense at authoritative knowledge and oversimplification in favor of an interpretive ambiguity, speculation, and nuance.

And yet, as Solnit (2014, 83) acknowledges, albeit briefly: there are many Woolfs. Teaching *A Room of One's Own* in my “Feminist Thought”

undergraduate seminars in the women's studies program at the University of Michigan, I therefore find myself entrusted with the pedagogical task not just of upholding the genius of this classic feminist text, but also of working through multiple layers of text and context to draw out the many Woolfs. In Dhar (2014), my earlier work on feminist pedagogy, I traced its developmental trajectories alongside that of feminist theory; arguing that feminist pedagogy's key features today include intersectionality along with experiential, participative, and transformative learning, the chapter sketched a roadmap for the inclusion of a diversity of voices, histories, and perspectives outside of the normative white middle class in course content and teaching practices across disciplines. Given this importance of intersectionality—the ways in which gender intersects with social class, race, caste, age, ethnicity, sexuality, and other registers of identity to produce complex structures of power and privilege in different locations and under differing historical conditions—it becomes imperative that my class ask a more varied set of questions about this text and its author, and that I teach *A Room of One's Own* not as a standalone classic but in conversation with other critical feminist works.

Alice Walker's "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" (1987) is one such example. Rather than enquiring what it meant historically for "a woman" to be a writer and artist, she asks what it meant for a *Black* woman. "Did you have a genius of a great, great grandmother who died under some ignorant and depraved white overseer's leash? . . . Or was her body broken and forced to bear children (who were more often than not sold away from her)—eight, ten, fifteen, twenty children? How was the creativity of the black woman kept alive, year after year and century after century, when it was a punishable crime for a black person to read or write?" (31–32) Quoting Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*, that a woman must own money and space in order to write, Walker wonders what this meant for Black female slaves who owned not even themselves. Walker speaks of Phillis Wheatley, a "sickly frail black girl who, had she been white, would have been considered the intellectual superior of all the women and most of the men," but who, in being "captured at seven, a slave of wealthy whites who instilled in her a 'savagery' of the Africa they 'rescued' her from," was condemned to a life of a colonized mind, divided loyalties, and contrary instincts (32–33). Suffering from malnutrition and dying young, but not before poetically invoking the fair, golden-haired godliness of the white mistress whose hair she combed every morning, Wheatley was seen as a traitor if not an idiot, until a later generation of Black women writers such as Walker attempted to recuperate her place in history by reminding us of the importance not just of what Wheatley wrote or sang, but of how she kept alive some notion of song.

That this song was sung often, but not heard as much in the white halls of history—of that there remains little doubt today. Despite the continuous existence of Black women's rich intellectual traditions—including the times when Black women's voices were strong and other times when, as Patricia Hill Collins

(1990, 5) puts it, “assuming a more muted tone was essential”—this tradition was obscured by shadows that were “neither incidental nor benign”; instead, the invisibility of this intellectual tradition has been critical to maintaining the structural inequalities of gender, race, and social class.

Virginia Woolf’s plea to be considered equal to men was made when all men were not equal; when the racial and class inequities between men themselves, let alone women, could not have been more pronounced; when elite white males at Oxbridge were the only subcategory of men who enjoyed more sociopolitical rights than the elite white Woolf herself. While Woolf asked to inherit/inhabit a room of her own, shoulder to shoulder with the most privileged men of her milieu, there was no inheritance to even lay claim to for a majority of poor people of color across genders. It thus seems impossible even to read, let alone teach, *A Room of One’s Own* today without a critical engagement with the discourses of elite white privilege that so shaped Virginia Woolf’s life and times.

In fact, in a trenchant response to Woolf’s contention that the white woman has not been complicit in the oppression of the Black, Mary Eagleton (1987, 52) wonders how we are supposed to interpret Woolf’s problematic phrase “even a very fine negress” in *A Room of One’s Own*. Asks Eagleton, “What are the attributes of a ‘very fine negress;’ are we supposed to recognize her difference from a ‘less fine negress;’ does the word ‘even’ suggest that the white woman would be tempted to co-opt certain ‘superior black’ women, but not others? . . . Woolf, who is so acute on issues of gender, so sophisticated in her awareness, exhibits here an unconscious racism in what can be described as hardly more than a liberal gesture against the era of high imperialism” (42).

Eagleton notes that, for Woolf, the Black woman enters the argument not as a potential writer who is assumed to be white, but as a victim of imperialism. But I would argue that here, too, Woolf seems to complicate if not refuse some of her responsibility through her famous poetic declaration in *The Three Guineas* that as a woman, she had no country (1938). Formally, does her declaration not resemble the gender-blindness of men, the class-blindness of the rich, the ableist assertions of the able-bodied? Susan Sontag (2003, 84–85) also disagrees with Woolf’s declaration, especially given the change in the social status of women; and Rebecca Solnit (2014), in turn, argues with Sontag, noting in particular that Sontag does not “address our inability to respond to entirely unseen suffering” (84–85). While this discussion/dispute between the three remarkable essayists Woolf, Sontag, and Solnit presents, above all, a rousing testimony to the female intellect, it is impossible to overlook that Woolf was asking for her body/mind to be allowed on Oxbridge turf at a time when the British empire had been engaged in conflating the bodies of women of color with the body politics as a justification for the brutal imposition of colonial regimes across Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Further, this emblematic centrality of Brown women’s bodies to the imperial enterprise—supposedly saving the women from their “backward” cultures

as a reason for justifying colonialism—involved a systematic misreading of entire cultures and an imperialist writing of world history that was, to repeat Alice Walker's earlier words, neither incidental nor benign. Instead, it entailed what progressive feminist pedagogy today sees as suspect, and what postcolonial feminist Uma Narayan (1998) interrogated as “cultural essentialism”: the practice of ahistoric generalizing of entire cultures, and of viewing culture as a monolith rather than as a hotly contested category that changes within/across time and place—which played insidiously into the white savior complex and its colonial agendas.

Given its violently racial and colonial history, it does seem ironic that feminist thought should have needed what postcolonial feminist Chandra Mohanty (1984) called out as the authorizing signature of Western humanist discourse in terms not just of the theoretical concerns of feminism but also in reading texts in the feminist classroom. For how could we forget that the colonization of minds, divided loyalties, and contrary instincts Walker points to, in the context of early Black women writers, have forever haunted postcolonial writers and subjects too, caught between the dilemma of what Frantz Fanon ([1952]; 1967) described as Black skins and white masks. Sadly, in having to navigate these complex histories, spaces, and borders both conceptual and lived, it is not uncommon for some students of color in my classes to monolithically frame “their own” cultures as disparagingly as they would have been framed by white colonizers centuries ago (2019). This, then, emphasizes for me the pedagogical and political importance of addressing our split subjectivities, as does Chicana queer feminist Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) in speaking of the borderlands as a place of past pain as well as future possibility.

Since writers like Virginia Woolf have now become a part of the canon, their texts being seen as the new classics and not just in the feminist classroom, revisiting them through an intersectional, postcolonial, and transnational lens even while acknowledging their contribution to feminist thought thus becomes necessary. As this reflection piece indicates, the pedagogical use of textual pairings or clusters within an intersectional framework can make the teaching of *A Room of One's Own* relevant in contemporary feminist undergraduate courses. Since feminist theory and praxis must go hand in hand, this also allows for a classroom discussion of current challenges faced by writers without rooms of their own, without access to economic or cultural capital, making possible the envisioning of newer possibilities, new feminist futures.

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