

The Will To Poetry and The Will Of Poetry:
Intersubjectivity and Transcorporeality in Virginia Woolf's and Rita
Wong's Texts

by

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Abstract

The will *to* poetry is a raw, creative drive to word new wor(l)ds as it imagines a future-in-becoming. The will *of* poetry, also a creative linguistic drive, is the particular lexicon and episteme a writer is born into; it is temporally situated in the past and present. Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* tells us the writer must become incandescent and speak truthfully in order to channel poetic will ethically. My thesis is motivated by the question: what kind of aesthetic of being can the queer woman writer imagine in a world threatened by heteropatriarchy, neocolonialism, neoliberalism and mass-consumption? Virginia Woolf's and Rita Wong's texts gesture toward an ethic of care grounded in an awareness of our intersubjectivity and transcorporeality. Intersubjectivity suggests a collective consciousness in which we either co-create or destroy each other. By transcorporeality, I mean that our bodies are porous and open-ended systems made up of other bodies, other living organisms.

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1. Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Virginia Woolf's prose adapts elements of verse to such an extent that it reads like poetry. I hesitate to say Virginia Woolf considered herself a prose poet. She praised, and employed, poetic qualities in her novels including rhythm and beats, and imagery filled with lucid shocks, what she calls 'moments of being' delivered in a fluid and impassioned style ("A Letter to a Young Poet"; "A Sketch of the Past"). Critics have remarked that her prose verges on poetry in much the same way Shakespeare's verse verges on prose (Copley 946). While planning the writing of *The Waves*, her most experimental text, she calls it "an abstract mystical eyeless book: a playpoem" (*Diary 3* 203). *A Room of One's Own* and *The Waves* demonstrate how what I'm calling "the will *to* poetry" and "the will *of* poetry" ("poetic will" when referring to both) manifest in texts: in moments of ambiguity, gestures toward intangible and mystical domains, encounters with power and knowledge structures, and in elements of formal experimentation including hybridity and transgressions. While these rifts may apply to any poetry coming out of the Western Romantic tradition, the goal of my project is to see how the will *to* poetry articulates a future-in-becoming through these openings, and how the will *of* poetry makes sense of the past and present through them. My thesis considers how poetic will manifests in the work of two modern poet-thinkers, Virginia Woolf and Rita Wong. As a Canadian scholar, activist and writer, Rita Wong's poetry collections, *forage* and *undercurrent*, were published over seventy years after Woolf's death. Wong is, I argue, the future poet Woolf imagines in *A Room of One's Own* (*AROO*)—the woman poet whom Woolf says will emerge 100 years from when she penned the text. Reading the two authors together reveals parallel lines of thought across different traditions, traditions that allow us to see how poetic will is deployed in its intuition of a porous collective selfhood that includes the organic and non-organic world, as well as astute critiques of

heteropatriarchy and empire, and most prominent in Wong's work, neoliberalism, neocolonialism, mass-consumerism and environmental devastation. Wong's and Woolf's texts share the strategy of couching their critique in a queer and feminist aesthetics of being and ethic of care. Their texts show us how the poetic self may cultivate a collective ethical self *as a process in which the self is always in a relation to itself*. In other words, *the subject is a process whereby she reflexively—and in my reading, poetically—relates to herself*. Neither writer is invested in the language of legal rights and reforms in their struggles for social or environmental justice. Instead, Woolf and Wong attempt to *imagine* what kinds of lives are possible for queer women outside dominant paradigms.

As the poetic self cultivates an ethical self through the act of writing, this process of self-reflexivity is also a way of caring for her community of readers, society and the planet. Thus, in addition to showing how poetic will manifests in Woolf's and Wong's texts, I am motivated by questions centred around the role of the queer woman writer, her aesthetic of being and how it is limited or liberated by a violent world order. How, also, the queer woman writer, from her outsider perspective, can trouble the status quo by re-writing what she desires in texts. To be clear, I read Woolf's and Wong's philosophico-poetic texts on the same plane as the writers' aesthetic of being and living. My thesis is divided into six parts: this introduction, which includes a theoretical framework, followed by Chapter 1, "The Writer as a Channel and the Will To Poetry." It opens with a critical analysis of Virginia Woolf's *AROO*, the text I focus on most heavily in this thesis. The will *to* poetry emerges as a creative drive to word new wor(l)ds; it is essentially activist and future oriented as it wills writers to imagine new ways of being in a heteropatriarchic world that subjugates women. Chapter 2, "The Will Of Poetry," demonstrates how the writer is born into a pre-established dictionary of available wor(l)ds. As Michel Foucault

explains, “the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us” (“What Is Enlightenment” 32). If the will *of* poetry delineates linguistic limits and mirrors back to us reality-in-the-present, the will *to* poetry is an “experiment with the possibility of going beyond them” (Foucault 32). In Chapter 3, “Poetic Will in Woolf’s *The Waves*: Intersubjectivity in Heteropatriarchy” and Chapter 4, “Poetic Will in Wong’s Poetry: Transcorporeality as an Aesthetic of Being,” I read Woolf’s *The Waves* as well as Wong’s *forage* and *undercurrent* and consider how poetic will is enacted in each. What emerges is a posthumanist paradigm that hints at new materialisms: we are intersubjective and transcorporeal with each other and the living world around us. *The Waves* shows us that we are interconnected by a central consciousness and that we co-create each other. Meanwhile, Wong’s poetry demonstrates that we are transcorporeal, that is, our bodies are made up of other bodies, including that of other species and the living, breathing world around us. Both texts raise ethical questions: who are we and how do we relate to one another if we are made up of a multitude of others? In part 6, the conclusion of my thesis, “Writing as an Aesthetic of Being and Ethic of Care,” I suggest the writer must give her focused attention on poetic will and humbly recognize that she is co-creating texts with a linguistic drive independent of her. In this ontological movement from “I” to “we,” the writing self must also recognize that the artwork is an expression of the multitudes that make up a shared reality as it gestures toward new possibilities. However, before I begin my reading of Woolf’s and Wong’s texts, I wish to contextualize the theoretical framework from which my concepts of the will *to* poetry and the will *of* poetry emerge.

The will *to/of* poetry builds on Arthur Schopenhauer’s metaphysical explanation of the world, namely that of the Will to live. In his magnum opus, *The World of Will and*

Representation, Schopenhauer gives us a unifying philosophy of the existence of the universe by claiming that the expression of the universe's existence is situated in the Will to live. The universe's aspiration to exist is manifest in the organization of life. In animals and humans, he claims, the will to live is a "fundamental principle of being" ("Viața, amorul, moartea" 3). It is immutable and unique. The Will to live drives us to work, marry and reproduce, thus ensuring the survival of our species. Much of this activity was considered futile and absurd by Schopenhauer. His secular understanding of Will is characterized as raw, creative and/or destructive energy whose source is the timeless Universe as articulated by Plato and Kant (more on this later). The Will to live is neither good nor bad; the morality of this Will, if there is one, depends on what the subject does with it. This phallogocentric male perspective is decentred by Woolf's and Wong's texts which embody communal will rather than individual will. My concept of the will *of* poetry may at first glance appear antithetical to Schopenhauer's definition of Will. I build on the work of post-structuralist philosophers Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Judith Butler who replace, decentralize and even 'kill' the figure of the author as the primary subject of inquiry when reading texts and instead focus on other sources of meaning. Deconstructionists consider the institutions of power and fields of discourses that shape and underpin the formation of meaning. Technologies of control (policing meaning and therefore controlling 'truth') exist at the intersection of time and space, that is, in a particular historical moment and social context. Cultural norms, other literature, readers, institutions of power such as patriarchy, neoliberalism and colonialism, for example, become sources of meaning because they maintain the power and knowledge structures of a particular historical moment. According to French theory since the late 1960s, the humanist author is therefore never authoritative

because the reader's culture and society are just as responsible for the interpretation of a text as the author's personal context.

The will *of* poetry shares some of the assumptions made by these post-structuralist philosophers, including disrupting the notion of a single and autonomous self thus decentralizing the idea that there is a single writing subject who decides what to do with Will. Moreover, authorial intent, namely the author's intended meaning of a text, must be understood in relation to readers' interpretations of the text itself. As such, words perceived by a subject have no single or stable meaning; it is possible (perhaps even inevitable) to hold conflicting interpretations of a single text because a plurality of meanings results in a nuanced interpretation that may expose the power and knowledge structures that underpin discourse and interpretation. The will *of* poetry, then, is grounded in the post-structuralist claim that an individual is a site of conflicting tensions and knowledge claims (including class and gender, to name but two that are of particular interest to my thesis). In one respect, this line of thinking holds that language is performative, that is, words bring into being the reality that they purport to describe; in constituting the very reality that they purport to describe, words have the power to act on and alter the terms of that reality. To be clear, the will *of* poetry's agential power emerges out of the post-structuralist notion of performativity, a model in which words have agency, that is, the power to do things, either because they exist within a judicial system that upholds their power through Law (see Austin's marriage example in *How To Do Things With Words*) or through a more informal, social system of norms that sustain their agency (see Butler's *Gender Trouble*). However, the agential power of the will *to* poetry which desires to wor(l)d a future-in-becoming comes out of the intangible domain of reality, a transcendental space of potentiality; I return to Schopenhauer's model of Will in an attempt to understand where the will *to* poetry's raw energy

comes from. For Schopenhauer, the source of Will comes from (Plato's and to a certain extent, Kant's notion of) the timeless conceptual Forms, the very metaphysical stuff the intangible universe is made of before it manifests into physical reality. Reality manifest in our three-dimensional world, then, is a pale copy of the Forms.

For Plato, everything is rationally founded upon a set of timeless conceptual Forms, including the concept of "Goodness" or the "Good." I am particularly interested in this concept because of Aristotle's interventions around it. The latter argued that a lack of Goodness in the physical world was evidence enough of its lack of relevance in studies of ethics (*Eudemian Ethics*; *Nicomachean Ethics*). Nonetheless, Aristotle closely related it to the idea of "Oneness," that is, that we are all interconnected, all One, which is a key to reading Woolf's *The Waves* and Wong's poetry. I read Oneness in terms of Goethe's notion of the self as a "Gesamtkunstwerk," translated as "total work of art" or "synthesis of arts" (Millington 232), and claim that the poetic self's relation to poetic will and writing becomes coextensive with life itself. The whole world is a work of art, according to Woolf, and thus Woolf's most important thing to do, even in times of war, is to write. She writes not merely for art's sake, but because art opens up possibilities for imagining new wor(l)ds. Her will to poetry is activist because of its relentless desire for change. Writing for Woolf is the means of accessing and contributing to that world-as-work-of-art and politics. The marginalized writer—especially the queer non-white middle-class woman that Rita Wong embodies and advocates for—creates art as a way of inventing a liveable aesthetic of being outside of the boundaries of heteropatriarchal, neoliberal and neocolonial State power.

Thus, whereas for Plato Oneness and other Forms make up the patterns that support the very foundation of our material reality, for Woolf everything is a work of art held on the same plane. For Woolf, material reality itself is a work of art, whose patterns are to be discerned

within its physical manifestations. However, Woolf also senses a mystical and timeless plane, intangible aspects of our lived experience that she gestures toward but never names. In *The Waves*, it manifests as intersubjectivity, a shared consciousness, “Oneness.” The intangible and tangible planes of reality are but One for Woolf. There are no hierarchies: the artwork does not merely represent intangible reality; material reality *is*; intangible reality *is*; art *is*. Thus, the will to poetry in Woolf’s text builds upon but ultimately departs from Schopenhauer’s, Plato’s and Kant’s understandings of intangible reality. Plato postulates that these timeless concepts are the foundation upon which the ever changing (time-bound) world exists. They can only be known to the mind, the intellect, and not the senses: they are not aesthetically available. Kant has a comparable worldview to Plato in his distinction between the phenomenon and the noumenon—the time-bound world perceived by the human mind is founded upon a positive and benevolent timeless intelligence. Kant introduces a “moral certainty” to his framework: for him, the timeless, good, supreme intelligence (the seemingly unknowable “thing-in-itself”) behind the natural time-bound scenes of the world is also moral. Schopenhauer heavily criticizes and rejects Kant and other German Idealist philosophers such as Fichte, Shelling and Hegel. The latter understood the universe as a thought-process becoming increasingly conscious (self-aware) and rational. In this movement of ever expanding self-consciousness, the world has yet to fully self-materialize—but when that day comes, it will be heaven on earth. Dismissing the “all is God” theory, Schopenhauer asserts that the logic of Hegelian dialectics (that is, the logic of thesis, antithesis and synthesis) as fundamentally flawed and, in fact, based on false assumptions. Throughout *The World of Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer rejects and ridicules humanism and expresses a deeply atheist philosophy marinated with Eastern belief systems. Therefore, coupling post-structuralist philosophy with Schopenhauer’s concept of Will, or if you

prefer, reviving Schopenhauer in a post-structuralist period, may not be as anachronistic as it might seem since Schopenhauer's theoretical framework was also opposed to humanism. Even Nietzsche, the grandfather of genealogy and a great influence on Foucault's thinking, built on Schopenhauer with his theory of the Will to Power ("der Wille zur Macht"). Whereas Schopenhauer sees a Will to life whose main drive is to procreate, Nietzsche postulates that humans' main drive—the will *to* power—is for ambition, position and achievement, in short, the striving to attain the highest position possible in life and society. Why do I not put the emphasis, then, on a will *to* poetry like Schopenhauer and Nietzsche might have done? I could have written a thesis concerned only with the will *to* poetry and suggested that a writer's main drive is for the creative use of language, for creating and changing the world *through* poetry, characterized by qualities such as intersubjectivity, transcorporeality and care, in short, a will working against Nietzsche's will to power.

By speaking of a will *of* poetry, I am working within and against Schopenhauer's concept of Will. The will *of* poetry does not come from a timeless, intangible dimension that precedes physical reality. On the contrary, it emerges out of time-bound and place-specific cultural norms, social structures and discourses. The will of poetry is bound to a specific historical context. It emerges out of what Foucault calls the "dispositif" (apparatus) of a particular moment, including the many institutional and physical mechanisms, and all the knowledge structures that maintain and build upon the exercise of power within a social body. The will of poetry is therefore not a universal will. It does not manifest in the same way in the texts of a queer woman writer from 1930s England as it does, for example, in the texts of a culturally hybrid queer woman from 2017 Canada. However, paradoxically, as I listen to their words, a will *to* poetry also emerges in

Woolf's and Wong's texts, particularly in Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, which I will consider in the next chapter.

I wish to add that the will *of* poetry is mutually implicated with the will *to* poetry. By mutually implicated, I mean to say that they are entangled. There is an undeniable contiguity between the two; to attempt to distinguish the one from the other would not only be difficult—and seem arbitrary, for where do you draw the line?—it would be to misunderstand their intersubjectivity. By speaking of a will to/of poetry, I suggest that the writer channels two drives, related but distinct. The writing self is decentralized because poetry has its own will. In this model, the author is plural: the creative urge to word wor(l)ds comes in some sense from an imagined future and from the community of living beings, including the land, the water and so on. In short, I am attempting to articulate in this thesis a relational model for writing texts. Poetic will emerges as playful, wild and undomesticated in the texts I analyze. There is a spectrum of possibilities and many grey zones between ethical texts and unethical ones and where one draws the line depends on endless variables, many of them produced by context. The text's uptake across its communities of reception contributes to the proliferation of possibilities. A text long considered unethical might be mobilized and interpreted subversively and read against its original intent or reception. Judith Butler explains this as the perlocutionary power of the performative: the ways in which the word “queer,” for example, has been taken up as affirmative rather than hateful (*Excitable Speech* 26). Thus, the way I read and listen to Woolf's and Wong's texts co-creates meaning. Hermione Lee, one of Woolf's biographers, writes, “Virginia Woolf doesn't have a life, she has lives. She gets rewritten by each generation, and appropriated by different and competing readings” (“Encountering Woolf” 15). By the same token, Woolf's texts have many lives and many meanings, and the way I engage with her texts is, for me, an ethical

encounter. In this regard, Jill Stauffer's work on *ethical hearing* in, "A Hearing: Forgiveness, Resentment and Recovery in Law," has influenced the way I think of hearing as an ethical command: "If we were willing to hear . . . we might find ourselves face to face with our own responsibility—as listeners who have the power to hear or to fail to hear" (519). Hearing ethically is a responsibility we owe to the text and the world, society and our understanding of ourselves. This kind of hearing decentralizes the Cartesian optics of certainty; the all-knowing "I" moves to a fluid "we." Hearing ethically is more than just a cultural act between critics/readers and texts; it is a deeply relational act: to hear ethically is to dwell in *ethical and caring relation* to each other, words, texts and our planet.

Finally, I wish to note other influential texts that have opened with a direct address to the mystical power of words: "In the beginning was the Word" (*The Geneva Bible* John 1:1), a phrase that places the word before the individual, before any other physical manifestation. I am also conscious of the resonances between poetic will and the evocations to the ancient Muses or Goddesses of Poetry, whose energy is said to animate epic texts like Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*:

Sing, goddess, the anger of Peleus' son Achilleus
and its devastation, which put pains thousandfold upon the Achaians (1-7 *The Iliad*).

And:

Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story
of that man skilled in all ways of contending,
the wanderer, harried for years on end,
after he plundered the stronghold
on the proud height of Troy (1-5 *The Odyssey*).

My secular concept of poetic will, I argue, comes out of the creative drive of language itself, existing "in" and "out of" and "through" Woolf's and Wong's texts, to borrow the language of *The Odyssey*. We come into contact and apprehend poetic will in the creative use of language,

the way it pulses in texts, like a heart beats in a human body, giving it life. But we cannot, so to speak, open the body of a text in order to find evidence of the will of poetry's beating heart. We dissect and autopsy that which is already dead and poetic will is a life-giving force. We cannot touch poetic will just as we cannot touch the Wi-Fi, a wireless network that animates our computers' connection to the internet, but it's no less there. We find poetic will in its trace, *in the way it opens us to hearing*; it is a rupture with the status-quo and a gesture toward a future-in-becoming. In short, we apprehend poetic will by being in relation to it, by recognizing what it does to us and the space between us. The will *of* poetry not only produces (and exposes) meaning through language, which is obvious, but the will *to* poetry inspires us to change the self's relation to itself and others.

As Heidegger explains, poetry, language and thought make up the neighbourhoods of the same country (*On the Way to Language*). Thinking about language means entering a region where method (specifically, scientific method) is not master. Instead, we recognize that we need language in order to think and are therefore entangled in a lagging-behind our initial topic of inquiry. If we don't worry about this entanglement and explore the neighbourhood of what Heidegger calls the "country of thinking," we notice the road always leads to the neighbourhood of poetry (*On the Way to Language* 75). In a modern context in which scientific method and political economy rules thinking, Heidegger makes the case for a thinking through reading and *listening* to the will to/of poetry. Encountering a poem, then, may bring about a thinking *experience* with language in an area we may not have cared about before. This kind of methodology, through an encounter, a listening and an experience with language makes us sensitive and open to the will to/of poetry. Methodologically, I listen, encounter, experience and open up to the will to/of poetry in Woolf's and Wong's texts. This illuminates my thinking about

a) linguistic drive to word new wor(l)ds, imagining a future-in-becoming through text (my definition of the will *to* poetry); and b) language that fits ‘normal’ phenomenological experience emerging out of a particular historical moment, concerned with the past and present (the will *of* poetry). The key purpose of my thesis is to define a model for understanding poetic will in order to articulate a new theory for the influence of language.

Chapter 1: The Writer as a Channel and the Will To Poetry

In 1928, Virginia Woolf gave two talks at two Cambridge women's colleges, which inspired the writing of *A Room of One's Own* a year later (Rosenbaum xii-xxi). These talks, most probably rewritten in a 1929 article titled, "Women and Fiction," were delivered "to encourage the young women—[who seemed] to get fearfully depressed" (*AROO* xiv). Out of this context, *A Room of One's Own* was written with the intention to spur educated women into action, and into thinking and writing truthfully and poetically about their experiences. Deeply political, the essay is grounded in the material reality of women in the first half of the twentieth century. It also opens into larger metaphysical issues that preoccupy Woolf throughout her literary career.

Writing retrospectively about her life in *A Sketch of the Past*, Woolf posits her philosophy by claiming that "Behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. *Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself" (72). This "we" the text is speaking of represents all humans. It also re-signifies what "human" means since what is essential about humanity is figured as and through a work of art. Words, that is, language, and human beings, are not merely interconnected, they are intersubjective: "we *are* the words." The words are us.

Woolf posits this mysterious pattern *as* a work of art. Making (and experiencing) art, then, is a way of accessing something of this metaphysical reality in ways that are different from Schopenhauer's and Plato's concept of non-physical Forms or Ideas, or even Kant's *noumenon* (the thing-in-itself), as that which underpins reality. For Schopenhauer, art is representation or imitation of the Forms. If music comes closest to representing the true essence of the Forms,

literature, and tragedy in particular, is second best—but it never reaches the perfection of the Forms. Woolf’s model, on the other hand, postulates that the realm of the metaphysical *is* a work of art, that we and our words are part and parcel of this mysterious fabric, and that making (and experiencing) art is a way of accessing this reality. Art, then, is not merely representation. Art *is*. Thus, humanity and works of art are part of a larger, metaphysical and material aesthetic of being. The will *of* poetry and the writer’s will *to* poetry emerge in Woolf’s texts as the connecting wires that carry the creative current between humans, works of art, material reality and a greater metaphysical being (Woolf’s texts show us that there are no hierarchies between intangible and material planes; they *are*—everything *is*—entangled in much the same way as radio waves, the electromagnetic field, our cell phones and our bodies co-exist in a system of communication that seems very normal to us even though we cannot see or touch the radio waves of the electromagnetic field).

I focus my attention in this chapter on *A Room of One’s Own* and listen for the will to poetry in the text. An essay lit up by the affective powers of literary devices, it centres on the “psycho-social and cultural and historical structures of the sex-gender system” (Gayle Rubin qtd. in DuPlessis 12) as it tries to answer questions about women and fiction. Though circular and fluid, the text is written in a clear, logical, lucid and accessible manner, suggesting that if given the freedom to think, every woman might be able to theorize, challenge and imagine a new way of being in the world. The democratization of thinking and writing is a reflection of Woolf’s ethical commitment to the future female poet: the one that she imagined would emerge 100 years after she wrote *A Room of One’s Own* and one of the reasons, I argue, for the continued relevance of her thesis that women need space and an independent income in order to write. *A Room of One’s Own* has traditionally been read by literary critics as claiming spatial privacy and

an income for modern women writers but also as making room for the “hitherto ungranted space within the canon for women artists” (Cornut-Gentille D’arcy 855). Others have looked at the images and symbols in *A Room of One’s Own* and analyzed them in psychoanalytical terms. From the fish that represents a “metaphor of a thought process . . . indicative of a larger socio-political repression of women” (Yang 29), to the Manx cat, whose missing tail symbolizes “a ‘writing tradition’ of which women writers have been deprived and disposed in the culture of phallogentrism” (Childs 64), scholars continue to locate new meanings in the places, people and objects of the text. Still more scholars have provided historical, literary and social context for *A Room of One’s Own*, including but not limited to Emily Kopley’s study of the impact of George Rylands’s letter exchanges on Woolf’s thinking and writing, providing context for her 1937 BBC Talk “Craftsmanship” (946), which I will analyze later on. Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s critical response to Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* is one of the many personal accounts of its formative power on feminist women writers and thinkers. “It continues to model ethical theorising practices,” writes DuPlessis, adding that Woolf’s essay also “continues to be a vital source of insight and pleasure” (10). The connection between the text’s ability to offer “analytic and aesthetic pleasure” has encouraged what DuPlessis calls an “arousal and engagement” that has opened up a “speculative and politically urgent space between desire and knowledge” (10). DuPlessis’s repeated use of the verb “continues” emphasizes *AROO*’s continued relevance. Indeed, what is striking about Woolf’s essay is its persistent influence, the way it does not cease to captivate our attention, imagination and the production of more writing, whether academic or creative.

Is DuPlessis’s point that *A Room of One’s Own* continues to be relevant true? Indeed, it seems the text now functions as a trope, almost an archetype. In 2014, Chinese short story writer,

Zhang Yueran, penned a story by the same title. Translated by Jeremy Tiang, Yueran's "A Room of One's Own," follows a number of interrelated female characters, starting with Qui Lao, who struggles to find the time to write and finish her novel in a satisfying manner. We follow the main character for a day, as she goes grocery shopping, to the dry cleaner and has a coffee-date with a friend whose kid interrupts their thoughts. Qui Lao represents the female writer caught in the grips of domesticity, dependent on her husband for money. At a party thrown by her husband's boss, Qui Lao is envious at the same time as she is appalled by the superficial lifestyle of the wealthy. This kind of social event is evocative of many scenes in Woolf's novels which are full of parties, picnics and gatherings. Just before Qui Lao drives her drunk husband home, she has a suggestive moment with the boss's daughter, Miss Huo: "I feel cold just looking at you," Qui Luo replied, still smiling, gesturing at the mink stole draped around Mrs. Huo's shoulder" (Yueran 165).

Yueran's short story, its title and emphasis on Woolf's main themes, including women writers, domesticity and lesbian desire, suggests that Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* has influenced feminist cultural imagination and signification across the globe. It has become a seemingly universal symbol translatable to new contexts. It represents the struggle women writers go through in order to have the time, space and privacy to write in a patriarchal context. It exposes the problem of female poverty and financial dependency on men. It also represents queer desire, or rather, the difficulties, sometimes even impossibility, for lesbian desire to manifest freely. Just as Chloe—and probably Olivia—must go home to their husbands, so too Qui Lui drives her man home to a shared bed. Yueran's "A Room of One's Own" signals that even though themes of writing, domesticity and queer desire are expressed in many of Woolf's texts, including her novels, essays, diaries and letters, *A Room of One's Own* is positioned as the

internationally-recognized literary symbol with enough cultural capital to become a synecdoche of Woolf's entire body of work. There are dozens of short stories, essays and experimental texts by the same title, either written in English or translated into English. Canada's award-winning feminist and queer literary magazine, *The Room*, is inspired by and committed to the themes of Woolf's essay. Even scholars writing about farming, interdisciplinary studies, migration and countless other disciplines use *A Room of One's Own* as shorthand for women's struggle for freedom of expression, space and desire (D'arcy; Persson; Suda). That is the reason I have chosen to open my thesis with an analysis and close-reading of *A Room of One's Own*. Emerging out of the large body of scholarly work on Virginia Woolf and *A Room of One's Own*, my thesis offers a new theoretical framework for reading Woolf in general and *A Room of One's Own* and *The Waves* in particular through the lens of my related but distinct concepts of the will of poetry and the will to poetry, couching Woolf's body of work in the context of a wilfully queer and feminist aesthetic of being.

1.2 The Writer as a Channel for Poetic Will

A writer must become a clear channel for poetic will in order to truthfully represent reality. This, I suggest, is one of the core arguments of *A Room of One's Own*. According to Woolf, the writer must become "incandescent," spiritual, and kill the Angel in the House (more on this later) in order to properly channel poetic will. Furthermore, Woolf's *AROO* shows us the writer must transcend her ego-self in order to channel the intangible essence of the will to poetry. Woolf criticizes Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* because it succumbs to the writer's personal grievances. Brontë, according to Woolf, failed to express her literary genius because of her anger toward men. Brontë's genius was, in other words, stunted by her personal desires, her ego-self

reacting to the injustices of patriarchy. Woolf frames Brontë's *Jane Eyre* as a case study against temperamental writing; her case represents a warning to emerging female writers:

Her books will be deformed and twisted. She will write in a rage where she should write calmly. She will write foolishly where she should write wisely. She will write of herself where she should write of her characters. (70)

In Woolf's language, rage brings about foolishness, and deforms and twists texts. An angry woman, then, lacks self-control and wisdom. Woolf's critique of texts clouded by the ego's limited perspective was not solely directed to Brontë—she directs it to men and women writers alike. Nonetheless, the trope of the “out of control woman” is very old, and Woolf's focus on Brontë's anger dangerously feeds into its narrative. In Antiquity, women were caricatured as lacking “*sophrosyne*,” the self-knowledge that leads to a measured self-control or temperance—a virtue Greek men could cultivate but that women and barbarians could not (Stewart 584). A woman's *sophrosyne* consisted in “knowing that she must submit herself to male governance” (Stewart 584). To be clear, Woolf is arguing that *all* writers, irrelevant of their sex, should call on the virtue of *sophrosyne*. Under no circumstance does she suggest women should submit to male governance; on the contrary, she is advocating for women's liberation from patriarchy. However, because of the intensity of the critical gaze she places on Brontë, critics have noted that Woolf's apparent de-legitimization of women's anger has generated its own field of discourse by feminist scholars (Helal; Silver).

Brenda Silver, who has noted that scholarly discourse around women's anger is a battle over truth, writes, “[t]o the extent that the reigning discourses in our century, whether political, critical, or psychological, have constructed truths that condemn anger, at least women's anger, and with it feminist critique as destructive of truth, feminist criticism has struggled to find a voice with which to speak in the public” (341). Silver's observation that anger is a culturally

produced truth aimed to make women's anger socially deviant is one way of reading Woolf's harsh criticism of Brontë's text. However, as Silver explains, Woolf is not politically opposed to women expressing their outrage at injustice. Woolf, too, experiences anger while reading what men have written about women in *A Room of One's Own*; Woolf does not categorically reject women's anger. Rather, she is concerned with *the way* the heat of anger is channelled by writers: "as a tool of gender ideology, anger yields great power, and [...] the only way to use anger effectively is to analyze its source and *channel* it properly" (Helal 80, italics mine). In the context of Kathleen Helal's larger argument, the verb "channel" is of particular interest to me:

I outline one of Woolf's methods of using anger: analytic objectification. She creates both Professor Von X and the Angel as malevolent personifications of her fury, only to distance herself from her emotion. Both Woolf's expressions of anger and her analyses of it enhance our understanding of the way women writers negotiate between their desire to express anger and their frustration with a society that disciplines women to be docile. (81)

This reading suggests Woolf self-censored her anger in order to negotiate the tension between her desire to express her emotions frankly and the problem of women needing to be docile, that is, of performing the "Angel in the House" figure Woolf says she killed in order to become a writer ("Professions for Women"). If Professor Von X and the Angel are "malevolent personifications of her fury," then Woolf is guilty of doing exactly what she accuses Charlotte Brontë of having done: she is writing of herself instead of her characters. While I agree with Helal and Silver that Woolf's treatment of female anger is culturally produced and emerges out of a context where women's emotions were heavily policed, I focus on Helal's notion of 'proper *channelling*' as a model for the work of writing. What if the tensions Woolf mediated are the conflict between a poetic will that represents reality in the present and a poetic will that desires to word new wor(l)ds? If the writer needs to channel emotions properly, can the same thing be

said of words? What would it mean to claim “words yield great power and one must analyze their source in order to channel them properly”?

In her introduction to *A Room of One's Own*, Mary Gordon notes, “The androgynous mind must be a *pure vessel*—we are back, once more, to the important idea of purity—for the transmission of reality” (xii, italics mine). The idea of being a “pure vessel” resonates at the level of language with the notion of “channel[ing] properly.” While Gordon sees the pure vessel as an argument for Woolf’s thesis that women need money and privacy in order to write, and the notion of proper channelling is Helal’s way of arriving at a model in which anger allows women “to perform power, to become visible, to define an identity, and to redraw boundaries” (93), I argue that the image of the pure vessel is a metaphor for the writer’s channelling of the will of poetry and the will to poetry. As Woolf writes, “For masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice” (*AROO* 65). In this passage, Woolf laments the lack of a feminine literary tradition, and the “mass behind the single voice,” is referring the work of thinking done by past authors (and the body of the people, which I read as the general discourse and belief systems held by one’s society). However, I would like to suggest another way of reading this passage by re-considering it in light of Woolf’s theories on words. I propose the mass behind the single voice refers not only to the body of the people but also to the body of words in the English language.

As Woolf says in a 1937 broadcast, which became the essay “Craftmanship,” “words live in the mind.” Playful and irreverent in tone, this broadcast claims that words are “highly sensitive,” “worse than useless,” “irreclaimable vagabonds,” “highly democratic,” and, importantly, “they have a need for change.” Words, it appears, have a final goal that is related to

the central thesis of *A Room of One's Own*: “Finally, and most emphatically, words, like ourselves, in order to live at their ease, need privacy.” Words, like humans, have needs that must be met in order to live. Words *live*. Words *are*. They have memories and association and histories, that is, they are grounded in material reality, bound by what is utterable in a given historic-social moment; they channel the will *of* poetry. However, new words also “spring to the lips whenever we see a new sight or feel a new sensation.” The writer channels a will *to* poetry, a desire and creative drive for new wor(l)ds. If new experiences and feelings want to spring forth, Woolf struggles to find a linguistic context in which they might make sense, so that her new wor(l)ds may be readable by her audience. I suggest this BBC talk is one of those ambiguous moments in which Woolf is gesturing toward the will *to* poetry, the creative agency of language to word new wor(l)ds which are sometimes “unusable” because “the language is old. You cannot use a brand new word in an old language because of the very obvious yet mysterious fact that a word is not a single and separate entity, but part of other words.” Woolf is expressing here the tension between the will *to* poetry and the will *of* poetry. Two writerly qualities emerge distinct yet entangled in *A Room of One's Own*; in Woolf's terms, the writer must become “incandescent” (as a way to access the will *to* poetry) while she also practises truth-telling (to ethically channel the will *of* poetry). Building on Woolf, I claim these qualities are prerequisites for the writer to channel poetic will ethically.

There is also a spiritual component associated to channelling poetic will. In “‘Carrying Consciousness like a Feather on the Top, Marking the Direction, Not Controlling It’: Virginia Woolf and Buddhist Consciousness,” Verita Sriratana writes that “not many readers of literary critics use the term ‘spiritual’ to describe [Woolf]” (88). However, Sriratana's paper does exactly that by reading Woolf's text in light of the Theravada Buddhist concept of consciousness through

an analysis of ‘vipassanā’—meaning to “see things as they really are” (88). There are three components of vipassanā: “‘anicca’ (inconstancy or impermanence), ‘dukkha’ (suffering or unsatisfactoriness), and ‘anatta’ (non-self)” (88). It is the “non-self” aspect, the transcendence of the ego-self, that I am most interested in exploring. In her essay, “Modern Fiction,” Woolf explains that the modern writer needs to represent “life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing” (160), which she characterizes as the need to become “spiritual” (161). Spiritual here signifies “internal” reality, character’s consciousness, as opposed to outer material reality (such as houses, clothing etc.). Woolf wants to show “the pattern” (161), “consciousness” (161) and “life” (159) through fiction. Life, for Woolf, “is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end” (160). She is not only expressing her stream of consciousness writing style here, she is also invoking the image of incandescence, which I will dwell on in the next section. Although she couches spirituality in consciousness, which for her exists “inside” characters’ minds, scholars have noted and documented Woolf’s attraction toward the intangible: “Despite her resistance to the very idea of ‘mysticism,’ Virginia Woolf’s writings were displaying consistent mystical themes. The root ‘mystical experience’—loss of self; merger with a greater unity; the apprehension of numinousness, timelessness, transcendence, and intensified meaning—is recognizable in many of her novels and in her personal writing” (Kane 332). Merging with a greater unity, timelessness and mysticism are all related, I argue, to Woolf’s channelling (and cultivating) of a will *to* poetry that connects the writing self to intangible reality in and through her texts. This mystical inclination is expressed in her philosophy in “A Sketch of the Past,” when she speaks of the pattern hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life. Notably, she describes this philosophy as an “intuition of mine,” that “is so instinctive that it seems given

to me, not made by me” (72). Again, she criticizes the ego-self, the sovereign and masculine subject and the idea that the artist is the sole creator of texts. If this philosophy is *given* to her and not made by her, then that means two important things. First, it means that it does not come solely from *within* her mind. To be “given” something implies receiving it, or at the very least, a channelling of something *outside* of the self. Second, it also implies that the giving is coming from a source other than the self. The will *to* poetry moves her to write. There is a sense of both urgency and necessity in the work of writing, which, and I stress this point, is an effect of the hidden pattern that calls her. To intuit and co-create this hidden pattern, Woolf tells us the writing self must become incandescent.

1.3 Becoming Incandescent: The Will To Poetry in *A Room of One's Own*

Throughout *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf speaks of the writer as needing to become “incandescent” in order to express her genius and pen works of art, a quality she repeatedly praises in Shakespeare: “returning again to my original enquiry into what state of mind is most propitious for creative work, because the mind of an artist, in order to achieve the prodigious effort of freeing whole and entire the work that is in him, must be incandescent, like Shakespeare’s mind” (*AROO* 47). Woolf’s preoccupation with the writer’s proper “state of mind” in relation to creative work is overtly stated here. The writer “must” be incandescent, a quality related to the ability to free the work “whole and entire.” It is as if the work already exists whole and entire in an intangible form *before* the writer facilitates its manifestation in material reality. This work is *in* the writer, yes, but not in any material sense; rather, it exists in a state of potentiality. The work of facilitating or channelling becomes increasingly specified. The language in this passage assumes the final work always already exists, an argument for the will *to* poetry, a linguistic creative drive that connects the artist to intangible form. Leaving aside the

assumption that the intangible form of the work exists *within* the artist unexamined, Woolf is concerned primarily with the problem of *how* to release the work so it comes out whole and entire, not twisted and deformed, like it does in *Jane Eyre*, for example. *The Waves*, however, complicates the assumption that the creative work exists *in* the mind of a sovereign writer by suggesting it comes from collective consciousness not specific to a single mind (more on this in Chapter 3). The writer's labour, then, which requires "prodigious effort," is an exercise of freeing, of allowing, of facilitating the work to come out of the mind unobstructed. While the act of writing the text is unquestionably physical, the words that exist "whole and entire" before the writer free them transcends embodiment, echoing Woolf's concept of idealized androgyny. The need to cultivate this somewhat nebulous concept of "incandescence" is related to the need to become detached from one's ego-self as discussed in the previous section. Expressing emotion without impediment is an aspect of Woolf's concept of the androgynous mind.

Incandescence is not merely related to the concept of the androgynous mind—it is an essential aspect of, and the necessary condition for, the androgynous mind: "[Coleridge] meant, perhaps, that the androgynous mind is resonant and porous; that it transmits emotion without impediment; that it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided" (82). Writers, then, must rise beyond the limited vision of their gendered ego-selves in order to entirely and wholly express the work that already exists in an intangible form—they are not, importantly, supposed to express *themselves*. They must reach beyond the sovereign, authoritative and phallogocentric "I" to qualify as androgynous and incandescent. Indeed one of the principal functions of the androgynous mind, in its incandescence, is to resist masculine authority and to cultivate a will *to* poetry (this cultivation, furthermore, makes possible the will *of* poetry, which allows the artist to

speak truthfully about reality-in-the-present). As Woolf reads the novel of a fictional Mr. A, she notes the emergence of the letter “I” with controlled irony:

it was a straight dark bar, a shadow shaped something like the letter ‘I’. One began dodging this way and that to catch a glimpse of the landscape behind it. Whether that was indeed a tree or a woman walking I was not quite sure. Back one was always hailed to the letter ‘I’. One began to be tired of ‘I’. Not but what this ‘I’ was a most respectable ‘I’; honest and logical; as hard as a nut, and polished for centuries by good teaching and good feeding. I respect and admire that ‘I’ from the bottom of my heart. But—here I turned a page or two, looking for something or other—the worst of it is that in the shadow of the letter ‘I’ all is shapeless as mist. Is that a tree? No, it is a woman. (83)

The “I” in this passage, which is rigid like a phallus, represents the subjectivity of a man. Instead of praising him, he is repeatedly mocked. Though he is respectable on the surface, logical and honest, he is reduced to a “hard nut” in the next phrase. The humour in her choice of words and imagery, the phallic “I” and the “nut,” is representative of Woolf’s style, her ability to deliver a serious critique of patriarchy while also making fun of it. Mr. A fails to earn the respect and admiration he desires because “in the shadow of the letter ‘I’ all is shapeless as mist.” The “I,” is distorted by the dominance of its phallogocentric perspective to such an extent that it blurs artistic vision. The artist’s *eye/gaze/vision* demands a loss of ego, an “I”-lessness, so that writer and in turn his reader can discern between a woman and a tree. Mr. A has not succeeded in freeing the work whole and entire; it is flawed and twisted by his masculine, privileged, and possibly even myopic point of view.

Shakespeare, on the other hand, who had an androgynous and incandescent mind, could write a woman, a fact Woolf takes the trouble to research: “Trevelyan is speaking no more than the truth when he remarks that Shakespeare’s women do not seem wanting in personality and character” (36). Woolf’s androgynous mind is figured through the image of a man and woman entering a carriage together on the street and represents a united perspective of reality, both feminine and masculine in its expression. Some feminist readers have criticized this image for its

heterosexual presentation and problems with how to read balance and/or fusion between the sexes (Farwell; Lund). It is a disappointment for feminist thinkers who consider Woolf's "synthesis of opposites" as leaving political and power relations "essentially unchanged" (Lokke 235). This critique, although valid, misses the point Woolf is trying to make about the incandescent essence of the androgynous mind. The androgynous mind is "undivided" and "porous." In its unity, the androgynous mind remains open and curious.

This open and curious quality is also conveyed through the idea of illumination, a word used by Mary Gordon in her discussion of androgyny: "[writers] must illuminate their own souls but not allow their souls to get in the way of Reality" (xiii). Indeed, the very definition of incandescence involves the act of shedding light, or illumination: "[e]mitting light on account of being at a high temperature; glowing with heat" (*OED* 1a) and "[b]ecoming or being warm or intense in feeling, expression, etc.; ardent, fiery; 'flaming up'" (*OED* 2). This association between incandescence and "emitting light" has been picked up by other scholars interested in Woolf's concept of incandescence. Madelyn Detloff suggests that we should not only think of the Edison light bulb as producing light but consider the whole structure that makes light possible, including the building's walls and the electrical apparatus running through the whole structure. This architecture is a metaphor for the whole body of words (language) and the historical-social-political-cultural contexts that sustain its syntax and deployment. The Edison light which produces hot and glowing incandescence does so through current passed in a filament, in much the same way, for example, that poetic will is a current (creative drive, raw linguistic energy) that passes through the writer as she pens her texts. In the case of the Edison bulb, the filament resists the current; it is precisely this resistance which creates incandescent light. This could be read as a metaphor for the writer's resistance, or rather, *her sensing* of poetic

will, which produces incandescence. Following the logic of this metaphor, she “becomes warm” with “intense . . . feeling [and] expression” to such an extent that writing becomes the most necessary action to take, even at times of war. As when she turns on the light in a dark room and its contents take on colour and shape, so the incandescent mind sheds light on things unseen. For Woolf, what must be illuminated is that “hidden [...] pattern” behind the “cotton wool.” In *AROO*, Woolf also calls this hidden pattern “reality”:

What is meant by ‘reality’? *It* would seem to be something very erratic, very undependable—now to be found in a dusty road, now in a scrap of newspaper in the street, now a daffodil in the sun. *It* lights up a group in a room and stamps some casual saying. . . . Sometimes, too, *it* seems to dwell in shapes too far away for us to discern what their nature is. But whatever *it* touches, *it* fixes and makes permanent Now the writer, as I think, has the chance to live more than other people in the presence of this reality. It is his business to find *it* and collect *it* and communicate *it* to the rest of us. (*AROO* 91-92, italics mine)

The writer “collects” the very erratic and very undependable scenes of reality, ambiguously and repeatedly referred to as “it” in this passage. The repetition of the adverb “very,” which signals emphasis, doubly stresses the importance of reality’s ever-changing nature. Importantly, reality also “seems to dwell in shapes too far away for us to discern what their nature is.” Woolf could be referring to shapes that are geographically far away, but she could also be alluding to intangible or metaphysical shapes. This moment of ambiguity around what “it” represents gestures to reality’s amorphous quality. The writer words “it,” gives form to “it” in texts, as she finds the right “shape” to her sentences (*AROO* 65). These shapes are not in proximity, yet they are named and nameable as “it.” The shifting referent for “it” opens up possibilities for new wor(l)ds. The will to poetry, through the writer, is doing the work of “fixing” and “making permanent” in texts what reality fixes and makes permanent in the material world, including those shapes too far away to grasp. However, “it” also represents material reality, those shapes, institutions, and things that are physically present in the world. In the next chapter, I listen for the

will of poetry in *A Room of One's Own* in order to understand how power structures circumscribe what the queer woman writer can imagine as she creates new wor(l)ds.

Chapter 2: The Will Of Poetry

Women's relationship to art, the lack of a feminine literary tradition and women's wounded subjectivities haunt Woolf's texts. In the previous chapter, I discussed incandescence as *illumination of the truth*. Incandescence intuits the spiritual truth that everything is One: words, us, art and reality. Incandescence is also the illumination of truth as it emerges from embodied and lived experience, arising from a specific cultural context, a particular episteme. In short, incandescence arises in response to the conditions of a particular material reality: "What one means by integrity, in the case of the novelist, is the conviction that he gives one that this is the truth. . . . One holds every phrase, every scene to the light as one reads—for Nature seems, very oddly, to have provided us with an inner light by which to judge of the novelist's integrity or disintegrity" (72 *AROO*). The "inner light" given to readers by "Nature" to judge the integrity of the writer's disintegrity shines also in the writer who is the conveyer of that truth. This type of incandescence, concerned with the truth of the material world, has been coined "situated incandescence" by Madelyn Detloff (31). It is cultivated by what she calls epistemic humility, and just and loving attention. Remaining curious and open, withholding the desire to authoritarian thinking, that is, resisting a will to power is balanced with Iris Murdoch's concept of cultivating the "just and loving gaze" (Murdoch qtd. in Detloff 33). The just and loving gaze is also lucid and frank. The practice of truth-telling allows contemporary writers to channel the will of poetry in such a way as to break the looking-glass of illusion that maintains men's superiority over women. It also destabilizes the writerly "I" Woolf decries.

2.1 Poetic Truth-Telling and The Will of Poetry in *A Room of One's Own*

The word "truth" is repeated 34 times in *A Room of One's Own*, a quantitative indication of Woolf's concern with truth-telling in the context of women and fiction. In "Reason and Truth

in *A Room of One's Own: A Master in Lunacy*," Michèle Barrett writes that there are two types of truths in *AROO*, "[Truth] is the distillation of disinterested scholarship . . . This kind of truth is the traditional academic one" (120). As Barrett points out, "the academic route towards 'the truth' (even Truth perhaps), is treated by Woolf with heavy irony" (120). The second type of truth, the one favoured by Woolf and Barrett, is defined as an "internal truth as opposed to externally validated truth, and it is most definitely not treated with irony . . . Writerly truth is about enabling a vision to be seen, 'whole and entire' by the reader" (121). Thus, the truest truth is held in the writer's ability to speak frankly through fiction. To be clear, in this chapter, I explore *the problem of the truth-teller*—who can speak truth back to power and under what conditions—rather than the problem of truth as such. In *Virginia Woolf as Feminist*, Naomi Black writes, "Woolf presents a deeply radical sort of feminism. Her feminism was original, yet firmly rooted in the women's movement of her time . . . Woolf's feminism is indeed drastic, basic, transformational. *Political* is another adjective I would apply to Woolf's feminism" (9-10). Building on Black's reading of Woolf's feminism, *AROO* seems to frame the writing self's drastic, basic, transformational and political feminism in a command to speak truthfully.

Woolf opens her essay with a paradox concerning truth:

At any rate, when a subject is highly controversial—and any question about sex is that—one cannot hope to tell the truth. One can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold. One can only give one's audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions as they observe the limitations, the prejudices, the idiosyncrasies of the speaker. Fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact. (4)

This passage manages reader expectations, on the one hand, by holding truth up as an ultimately unattainable ideal, and on the other, by suggesting fiction is better situated than fact in terms of its capacity to "contain" truth. This definition of truth comes close to Heidegger's notion of "unconcealedness," which he finds by going back to the Greek concept of *aletheia*, a type of

truth that is closely related to unveiling, revealing and uncovering as opposed to correspondence theories of truth in which the true statement or concept is the one that matches objective reality. At the level of language, unconcealedness resonates with Woolf's "unveiling" of the pattern hidden behind the cotton wool. It appears, then, that Woolf's philosophy is concerned with unveiling truth and *the practice of truth-telling*, which I would like to consider from the point of view of the Greek concept of *parrhesia* or "speaking frankly." If *aletheia* is a truth uncovered, *parrhesia* is a truth enacted. This is precisely what Woolf wishes emerging women writers would do—to speak truth back to power without censorship. Indeed, one of Woolf's strongest interventions into representations of truth in *AROO* is to empower the woman writer by urging her to write the truth of her subjective experience and her frank view of men, thus shifting the terms by which reality is perceived and represented. Woolf tells us that if the woman writer begins to speak truth back to men, his fitness for life will be diminished: "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?" (31). Woolf's imperative is for a type of truth-telling that speaks back to power as a way of unveiling reality-in-the-present, exposing instead of supporting the myth that men are twice their actual size.

In ancient Greek texts, only a simple, frank style of speaking revealed the soul. *Parrhesia*, translated from the Greek into English, simply means "free speech" (*Fearless Speech* 11). Michel Foucault reminds us that specific criteria must be fulfilled for a subject to engage in *parrhesia*. First, truth-tellers must speak back to power (therefore, anyone who is in a position of power relative to the audience is automatically disqualified from being a *parrhesiastes*); second, it follows that the truth-telling activity must involve a certain level of risk-taking; it therefore

demands courage; and, finally, truth-tellers must be motivated by a moral obligation. Indeed, as Foucault writes, “the *parrhesiastes* primarily chooses a specific relationship to himself: he prefers himself as a truth-teller rather than as a living being who is false to himself” (*Fearless Speech* 17). What underlines *parrhesiastic* activity is the subject’s frankness, which, for Foucault as for the Greeks, is opposed to rhetoric. Etymologically, *parrhesia* means “to say everything” (*Fearless Speech* 12), without censorship. Woolf embodies what I call *poetic parrhesia*. Her relationship to herself is mediated by language; by writing fiction truthfully, she engages in *poetic parrhesia*.

Woolf not only dismantles the conventional notions of truth and where it is supposed to dwell—in lectures, in the British Museum, in books by male “experts”—she also positions women’s subjectivities as a privileged locus of truth-telling. Truth deployed through women’s texts is suggestive of *l’écriture féminine* because of its maternal, rhythm-based, fluid and flowing language as opposed to the phallogocentric language of the father. Woolf writes, “it is in our idleness, in our dreams, that the submerged truth sometimes comes to the top” (*AROO* 27). The submerged truth, it seems, comes to us in ways that are not always logical or linear. It is not a perfectly constructed argument meant to convince the listener. Rather, it is a “submerged” truth that “comes to the top,” and the writer’s work is to dis-close it. Woolf also says, “One must strain off what was personal and accidental in all these impressions and so reach the pure fluid, the essential oil of truth” (22 *AROO*). This image of “the essential oil of truth,” implies a squeezing out of everything that is peripheral in order to attain pure truth, to find its essential quality. It is an impersonal truth, meaning an unbiased truth. Truth cannot be found in books that have merely a pretence to objectivity: “If truth is not to be found on the shelves of the British Museum, where, I asked myself, picking up a notebook and a pencil, is truth?” (22). After a day

of taking notes, she concludes that “[t]ruth had run through my fingers. Every drop had escaped” (26). Indeed, truth is not found in institutions that produce knowledge and make truth-claims, such as universities. And books, written by men, burn with the heat of arguments that hide the ugly face of misogyny. The figure of Professor X, then, represents all the scholarly men who have written books, in the tradition of their predecessors, with colourful titles such as, “The Mental, Moral and Physical Inferiority of the Female Sex” (27). It is not only the scholarly texts that make objective truth claims that lie, it is all the novels—written by men or women—that don’t attain Woolf’s idea of “the essential oil of truth” that end up partaking in the big lies: “[a]nd the novels, without meaning to, inevitably lie” (89).

Woolf’s commitment to truth-telling is made clear in her essay “Professions for Women,” in which she explains a woman writer must kill the figure of the Angel in the House in order to speak frankly:

And while I was writing this [book] review, I discovered that if I were going to review books I should need to do battle with a certain phantom. And the phantom was a woman. . . The Angel in the House. It was she who used to come between and my paper when I was writing reviews.” (278)

Woolf describes this woman as “intensely sympathetic,” “intensely charming,” “utterly unselfish,” “she excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily,” “she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others”—in short, she is the good wife and mother, nurturing others and flattering their egos (278). Above all, “she was pure,” as an “Angel” (278). She is that voice inside Woolf who encouraged her to be sympathetic and “tender” (279) when reviewing novels written by men. In *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf describes the function of the Angel in the House: “Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice his natural size” (35). By being tender, flattering and

sympathetic, the woman has reflected back the figure of the man “twice his natural size.” She has partaken in the big lie that he is superior to her. A few lines later, she adds: “The looking-glass vision is of supreme importance because it charges the vitality; it stimulates the nervous system. Take it away and man may die, like the drug fiend deprived of his cocaine” (*AROO* 36).

Therefore, if and when the woman writer kills the Angel in the House, she begins to shatter this looking glass. *A Room of One’s Own*, then, argues for women to cultivate a mind of their own by speaking truth back to power, by becoming *parrhesiastes*: “Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer” (“Professions for Women” 279). The verb “kill” emphasises the harrowing importance of this rite of passage. Indeed, “Had I not killed her,” writes Woolf, “she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing. For, as I found, directly I put pen to paper, you cannot review even a novel without having a mind of your own, without expressing what you think to be the truth about human relations, morality, sex” (“Professions for Women” 279). This passage shows us what’s at stake: women’s writing in relation to speaking “the truth about human relations, morality, sex.”

This life-and-death struggle with speaking truthfully arises out of the constraints of Woolf’s historical moment. A scholar of creativity, Patricia Stokes presents a useful model of creative output in which creativity is a result of constraints, whereby constraints *liberate* creativity (*Creativity from Constraints: A Psychology of Breakthroughs* 113). Problems structure the space of creativity and lead to “a solution path that simultaneously defines and satisfies a novel goal criterion” (Stokes 130). Killing the Angel represents the woman writer’s hard-won and painful process required to speak frankly; the risks are real and the very violence of the process suggests courage is involved, as well as a greater sense of ethical purpose and duty. *A Room of One’s Own* names four overarching constraints facing women writers: heteropatriarchy,

poverty, lack of privacy and lack of women's literary tradition. These are the material conditions that limit women's freedom and, by the same token, the constraints by virtue of which the writer becomes incandescent. Material constraints, then, can be thought of in positive terms because they are the limitations women creatively resist, and this resistance produces incandescence in the same way an Edison light bulb creates light as a result of resistance.

Woolf conveys the extent of these constraints and the field of resistance within which she operates in a vivid scene in which, as narrator, she seems to be casually reading the daily newspaper when she becomes suddenly aware of patriarchy's reach:

The most transient visitor to this planet, I thought, who picked up this paper could not fail to be aware, even from this scattered testimony, that England is under the rule of a patriarchy. Nobody in their senses could fail to detect the dominance of the professor. His was the power and the money and the influence. He was the proprietor of the paper and its editor and sub-editor. He was the Foreign Secretary and the judge. He was the cricketer; he owned the racehorses and the yachts. He was the director of the company that pays two hundred per cent to its shareholders. He left millions to charities and colleges that were ruled by himself. He suspended the film actress in mid-air. He will decide if the hair on the meat axe is human; he it is who will acquit or convict the murderer, and hang him, or let him go free. With the exception of the fog he seemed to control everything. (29)

Thus, reading the daily newspaper provides Woolf with enough evidence to say, "England is under the rule of patriarchy." This fact is so obvious that even an alien would notice it. The figure of "the transient visitor" is telling: those who are entangled in the system may not be able to see it for what it is; the outside perspective, then, becomes a point of view capable of speaking the truth about oppressive institutions of power. Furthermore, newspaper articles are not merely neutral pieces of information delivered by objective journalists. They function as a "scattered testimony" of men's rule over every single aspect of society's organization, from the act of making laws, to the capitalist organization of business in which "the company . . . pays two hundred per cent to its shareholders." He makes the rules and manages "the millions to charities

and colleges that were ruled by himself”; society, therefore, is ruled by the figure of the patriarch for the purpose of maintaining his position of power. His power extends so far that it reaches the actress in mid-air. He is the one, therefore, who handles the body of the only woman in this passage. He alone decides, murders, hands down sentences and sets free. He controls not only the institutions of power, such as the legal system, but also institutions of knowledge, such as universities. The only thing he cannot control, it seems, is the weather. Notice Woolf’s use of style as a way to engage in *poetic parrhesia*. This passage is deeply characteristic of a typically Kafkaesque nightmarish and oppressive power system in which the individual is imprisoned in a given bureaucracy, its social and linguistic codes, and its laws (*The Trial*; *The Castle*; “In the Penal Colony”). The sense of alienation idiosyncratic to Kafka’s texts is figured here as well: the repetition of the oblique, anonymous yet all-powerful “He” who speaks in the voice of “I,” is alienating to women or anyone outside of patriarchy; the control system in this passage seems to have a hold of every aspect of life, including the small-scale decision as to whether “the hair on the meat axe is human” or not. Importantly, the most Kafkaesque element in this passage may be Woolf’s suggestion that the power system is located in the apparatus of language. She finds evidence of patriarchy in the daily newspaper, a form of mass communication available to everyone. Newspapers shape social norms and discourses and as such delineate what is knowable and true. In Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony,” a torture and execution device carves the sentence of the condemned prisoner’s death on his skin before letting him die, suggesting that “sentencing”—that is, the performative power language—has the power to kill bodies. We see the resonances of the relation between language, power and death in Woolf’s passage: “He was the proprietor of the paper and its editor and sub-editor” and a few lines later, “he it is who will acquit or convict the murderer, and hang him, or let him go free.”

As *AROO* continually demonstrates, patriarchy's reach is such that it penetrates every aspect of one's life. Woolf perpetually presents women's constrained and impoverished material conditions as directly influencing their abilities to think and create. Consider these two passages:

[O]ne cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well. (18)

And:

I pondered why it was that Mrs. Seton had no money to leave us; and what effect poverty has on the mind; and what effect wealth has on the mind . . . and, thinking of the safety and prosperity of the one sex and of the poverty and insecurity of the other and of the effect of tradition and of the lack of tradition upon the mind of a writer. (20)

Notice the choice of verbs listed in the first passage. If one has not dined well, that is, if one is too poor to be able to afford a dinner as lavish as the men's university dinner, then one cannot "think," "love" and "sleep" well. Thinking is required for writing, as is a rested mind and a loving heart. If the next passage is concerned with a lack of women's literary tradition, the question of *everywoman's* place within a system of dominance and cultural imperialism surfaces automatically. For why have so few women written in the past, asks the text? What effect does wealth have on the mind? The answers pour out, splashing against each other in a fast current across the pages of the essay. Women were busy making babies and raising children (*AROO* 19; 21; 34; 38; 71). They were brutally and systematically kept in states of forced poverty; historically, their money was the property of their husbands, making it literally impossible for them to have financial independence and thus build their own universities and provide legacies for future women (*AROO* 18-21).

If she had to write in poverty and without a sense of privacy because she did not have a room of her own, the woman writer also wrote out of the context of another lack: that of a women's literary tradition. Woolf is concerned about "the effect of tradition and of the lack of tradition upon the mind of a writer" because, she claims, "we think back through our mothers if

we are women” (64). The shape of men’s sentences do not fit women’s experiences (64), how could they, since they are written from the perspective of the authority figure, the “He” that represents patriarchy and the “I” who has the authority to speak. The lack of tradition left women with “a scarcity and inadequacy of tools,” and “must have told enormously upon the writing of women” (64). Other than Jane Austen—whom Woolf sees as having found authentic shapes to her sentences—the contemporary female writer, presented as the fictional novelist, Mary Carmichael, who “will be a poet” but not for “another hundred years’ time” (95), fails to satisfy Woolf even if her text does something novel: “Chloe liked Olivia perhaps for the first time in literature” (69).

Woolf wants the novelist to give her a real situation whose truth is told without internal censoring by the chorus of society or the figure of the Angel in the House. However, Mary Carmichael fails because her style lacks in tradition, it is messy and lacking in what I interpret to be literary mastery. Carmichael’s situation, the fact that Chloe liked Olivia, never takes off. It is as if the will *to* poetry is stunted, not just because of Carmichael’s style, but because of a socially hostile context. There are some things the will *of* poetry cannot truthfully reflect because the risk to the writer is too great. In 1928, Radclyffe Hall’s novel, *The Well of Loneliness*, asks its readers to “Give us [homosexuals] also the right to our existence” (Hall 437). It went on trial in Britain and was judged as obscene the same year Woolf delivered the talk to women’s colleges that would become *A Room of One’s Own*. Woolf, and other Bloomsbury members were supposed to testify at Hall’s trial, but were never called to do so. Thus, although Woolf was aware of the trial, and nervously supported Hall, *The Well of Loneliness* was nevertheless ruled indecent due to its homosexual content and censored. Therefore, Woolf’s conscious choice, that is, her decision to include lesbian undertones in many of her novels, including in *A Room of One’s Own*, gives us a

sense of the risk and courage a writer had to cultivate in order to reflect reality truthfully. Yet, if Hall's trial proves anything, it's that some risks are too great and not worth it if the writer wants her text to be read. Nonetheless, Woolf flirts with us. She is playful and cheeky in tone: "The truth is, I often like women. I like their unconventionality. I like their completeness. I like their anonymity. I like—but I must not run on in this way. That cupboard there, —you say it holds clean table-napkins only; but what if Sir Archibald Bodkin were concealed among them?" (93). As she lists the things she "often" likes about women, using sensual and tender words like "completeness," she stops herself to evoke the figure out Sir Archibald Bodkin, the Director of Public Prosecutions who successfully opposed Hall's novel. Thus, although Woolf was worried about testifying in court, she seemed unafraid to speak her mind in *AROO*, at least to a certain extent. Evoking Bodkin's name was a way of speaking back to censorship at the same time as she was working through it. In the next chapter, I read *The Waves* in order to listen for the will to/of poetry through the character of Rhoda, whose lesbian desire also never fully manifests. Her inability to form a liveable aesthetic of being and her eventual suicide, I argue, is an expression the group's mind. The characters are bound by a collective consciousness, co-creating each other. This reading suggests that Rhoda's suicide was, in fact, a collective act.

Chapter 3: Poetic Will in Woolf's *The Waves*: Intersubjectivity in Heteropatriarchy

It is commonplace to read *The Waves* as Woolf's most experimental, mystical and abstract text. As Carl Wooding writes, "Virginia Woolf can delight those who delight in language or metaphors" (3); Woolf's literary vision was different than that of her predecessors: the consciousness of her characters was more real to her than their houses and incomes ("Modern Fiction"). It is not that Woolf denies facts or events: birth, marriage, death, comedy and tragedy are for her but the surface of things. Woolf troubles conventions of the traditional pillars of fiction and undermines their phallogocentrism. By focusing on the consciousness of characters, she exposes power dynamics between genders and the invisible glass globe of patriarchy that oppresses women and men alike, but queer women in particular. All this, according to Bryony Randall, makes *The Waves* an "everyday novel" (173), one that Woolf says in her diaries will "give the moment whole whatever it includes" (*Diary 3*: 209 qtd. in Randall 174). It is precisely because *The Waves* holds the tension between the mystical and the everyday that I read for the will to poetry and the will of poetry in it. Feminist and queer politics are at the core of this modernist, if not proto-post-modernist, masterpiece: Neville's homosexual desire for Percival is out in the open while Rhoda's identity and sexuality remain in a constant state of flux and fluidity. In *Virginia Woolf and the Politics of Style*, Pamela Transue argues that this is precisely why Rhoda commits suicide. Reading *The Waves* as "developing a form in which [Woolf's] own vision of reality could prevail, [which] was, for Woolf, a feminist act" (135), Transue argues that in the patriarchal system in which the characters exist, a queer woman simply could not form and ground an identity. Esther Sánchez-Pardo González suggests that together with androgyny, same sex-love, and the troubling of gender binaries, Woolf's gender-bending characters function as a locus of subversion for deconstructing heterosexuality. I expand on this to argue that Rhoda, and

in particular her suicide, represent the text's attempt at *becoming* (note that I do not say at representing) intersubjective, at performing what Ida Klitgård calls a central consciousness: "Woolf stresses the individual's capacity for transgressing identity boundaries, which leads to a dissolution into multiple beings. The reverse would lay stress on the formation of multiple beings into one single, organic identity, one individual" (77). Many scholars have focused on Rhoda because of her unique position as an outsider in *The Waves*. She is "elusive and conflicted" (Myk 106) and a victim of "cultural trauma" (Jamili and Roshanzamir 114). Her inability to form a stable identity represents a "transgressive figure of uncertainty" that challenges the notion of the sovereign subject (Myk 106). Małgorzata Myk reads this uncertainty as a way for Rhoda to gain "authority and agency" in which suicide becomes a "metaphorical act of distancing" (10). My reading of *The Waves*, however, suggests that Rhoda's suicide is not her sovereign doing. This reading does not give back authority or agency to Rhoda. What it suggests is a radical rethinking of our aesthetics of being and ethical obligation toward one another in a world that is intersubjective, that is, in a world in which we co-create and/or destroy each other. By intersubjectivity, I mean collective selfhood existing between conscious minds.

The will of poetry in *The Waves* seems to mourn queer female experiences, suffocated and stillborn, made to die, in heteropatriarchal societies. If Chloe liked Olivia in a *Room of One's Own*, Rhoda liked Louis and dated him but could not form a distinct identity outside heteronormative scripts and subsequently committed suicide. Her desire for women—obvious, if you listen to the will of poetry's language of desire—never manifests. Published in 1931, a mere two years after *A Room of One's Own*, *The Waves* is composed of six characters' soliloquies (a seventh character, Percival, is present but never speaks), which are interrupted by nine interludes, stunning prose poems that describe a coastal scene from sunrise to sunset. As the day

moves onward, a chapter of the characters' lives passes: childhood, university years, early adulthood, et cetera. *The Waves* is an extended metaphor for a unified consciousness made up of multitudes. In "Beyond Doer and Done To: An Intersubjective View of Thirdness," Jessica Benjamin defines intersubjectivity as "a relationship of mutual recognition—a relation in which each person experiences the other as a 'like subject,' another mind who can be 'felt with,' yet has a distinct, separate center of feeling and perception" (5). Indeed, the image of the waves suggests unity in separation and distinction in Oneness. In "Ecofeminism, Holism, and the Search of Natural Order in Woolf," Bonnie Kime Scott writes that contemporary physics, quantum mechanics and in particular wave-particle theory "was useful in exploring an alternate concept of reality, and served [Woolf's] stylistic move away from realism" (4). Intersubjectivity *is*, the text suggests, that "alternate concept of reality."

Intersubjectivity in *The Waves* is shown as fluid, porous and amorphous. The movement between prose poetry and dialogue suggests a rift, an opening, but also a continuity of Being between the coastal scene and humans. I almost wrote the "inner" lives of humans because all we hear are the characters' private thoughts. They never speak to each other directly; the action in the book is conveyed to the reader through the characters' minds, that is, through consciousness. I do not speak of an "inner" substance because this consciousness is not individual, but rather part of a collective subjectivity. The will to poetry gestures toward it in the opening scene of the book:

Gradually, the dark bar on the horizon became clear as if the sediment in an old wine-bottle had sunk and left the glass green. Behind it, too, the sky cleared *as if* the white sediment there had sunk, *or as if* the arm of a woman couched beneath the horizon had raised a lamp and flat bars of white, green and yellow spread across the sky like the blades of a fan. (5, italics mine)

And:

Gradually the fibres of the burning bonfire were fused into one haze, one *incandescence* which lifted the weight of the woollen grey sky on top of it and turned it to a million atoms of soft blue. (5, italics mine)

It is the “arm of a woman” that moves night into day. At a minimum, we can say the image of the woman functions as a simile, since her action is indirect and in the realm of the figurative: “*or as if* the arm of a woman.” We could also read this scene as being choreographed by a woman’s arm, giving her agency by suggesting she illuminates the whole scene with her gesture. I suggest the woman is part and parcel of the coastal scene. She co-creates what is seen with the sky. Thus, the question that arises is, “can there be a coastal scene without a human observer, a perceiver or reality-in-the-present?” After all, the woman and the sky appear to be entangled in this scene.

Written in images that mix the natural world with domesticity, as when the rising of the sun is compared to the rising of a lamp, the text’s focus on the sky echoes *A Room of One’s Own*’s epiphanic and emancipating moment when Woolf no longer thinks of God as Milton’s gentleman, but rather, and in her own terms, as a secular and open sky: “Indeed my aunt’s legacy unveiled the sky to me, and substituted for the large and imposing figure of a gentleman, which Milton recommended for my perpetual adoration, a view of the open sky” (33). Money, that is, financial independence from men, has allowed Woolf to imagine her own definition of God, in this case, the image of the open sky. The opening of *The Waves*, represented by the image of a horizon, an open sky, is no coincidence. I do not suggest that the arm of the woman represents the arm of her dead aunt that gave her financial freedom, although it’s a possible reading. This woman is a mystery, just like the “woman writing” throughout the text. *The Waves*, then, is populated, if not haunted, by missing and mysterious women, whose presence we sense but never see. This is a world, then, in which more than one woman “is missing” or, if you prefer,

never fully manifests. In reading Rhoda's suicide as a co-creative act, I hope an answer emerges. In the second passage above, the language around the sun resonates with the descriptions of an androgynous mind in *A Room of One's Own*. We return to *incandescence*, that heated passion so necessary for writers to channel poetic will. When the passage above says *incandescence* "lifted the weight of the woollen grey sky on top of it and turned it to a million atoms of soft blue," it resonates at the level of language with "Behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern" (*A Sketch of the Past* 72). We must see in the "woollen grey sky," that is, in the interconnected "cotton wool," a hidden pattern: we are the words, the words are us. Thus, the coastal scene, the woman and the words are One; we are intersubjective at all levels. In her *Letters*, Woolf writes about her intentions for *The Waves*:

I wanted to eliminate all detail; all fact; and analysis; and my self . . . and keep the elements of character; and yet that there should be many characters, and only one; and also an infinity, a background behind—well, I admit I was biting off too much. (381)

This passage is a key to reading the text, particularly the paradox that there are "many characters" and yet "only one," which can only be understood if we consider consciousness in terms of a continuity connected to a "background" of "infinity," an intangible plane or reality existing outside of linear time. Reading Rhoda's character in these terms, I argue, is productive because it allows us to consider her existence as always already in relation to others.

Women's experiences and water are central motifs in *The Waves*. They are powerful, creative forces. But where water is amorphous, undomesticated and fluid, women are, except for Rhoda, on the opposite end that spectrum, domesticated and stuck performing gendered identities. Jenny is an upper-class socialite, deeply physical and sexual, and perhaps the flattest character in the novel, changing very little throughout its narrative arc. By the end of the book, she realizes her beauty will not last forever and is forced to come to terms with ageing. Yet, she

is not offered any prospect for growth outside of gendered heterosexual relations. Readers assume she will continue taking lovers until she is too old and unattractive to go on with her lifestyle, a relatively tragic and superficial ending. Susan, who has a visceral relationship to the land and nature, cannot stand the city. She seems satisfied by domestic life, raising children and caring for the home, the land, the family. She sacrifices whatever genius she may have, whatever passion may be left in her, even her love for Bernard, for the commonplace cycle of rural life that her father cultivated before her.

Rhoda, however, is socially awkward, isolated and unable to form a stable and liveable aesthetic of being. Why does she commit suicide, a fatal act we hear of retrospectively, in Bernard's final soliloquy? When Percival is killed on a mission in India, his death is mourned by the whole group, changing their dynamic. He is remembered as a hero, whereas Rhoda's death is not presented as an event in the same way. It is told in passing. Why is that? Percival's death is grievable, I believe, because his life made sense to the others; he brought coherence to the group through his conventional, hegemonic, unconscious masculinity. In "Britannia Rules *The Waves*," Jane Marcus reads the text as "anti-imperialist and anticanonical" (137). For Marcus, Bernard and Percival have traditionally been represented as the Hero and Poet, "without recognizing Woolf's fictional prophecy of fascist characters" (137). These male figures deny women a culture of their own, in the same way that British colonialism denies "barbarian" countries cultures of their own. On parallel lines, in *Virginia Woolf Against Empire*, Kathy J. Phillips claims that Woolf "shrewd[ly]" satirizes and critiques "Empire making, war making, and gender relations" (vii). Woolf, like her husband speaking of British and French imperialism of Africa, considered western forms of imperialism "almost wholly evil" (Leonard Woolf qtd. in Phillips

viii). If we accept that Percival and Bernard represent the archetypal Hero and Poet and that the British Empire made their lives possible as such, where does that leave Rhoda?

Rhoda's life barely gathered enough strength and momentum to distinguish itself. She represents the countless lives lived on the margins, misunderstood, whose suffering isn't articulable enough to be cared about. At the same time, Rhoda's status as an outsider allows us to see how the process of exclusion is necessarily co-creative. Here I wish to pause and consider the implications of labelling Rhoda as an outsider. A more nuanced reading is necessary. Rhoda is interesting as a character function because she occupies a hybrid space of tension, or what J. H. Stape calls an "outsider-insider" or "insider-outsider" position. J. H. Stape's critical review of Natania Rosenfeld's *Outsiders Together: Virginia and Leonard Woolf*, makes a similar point: the Woolfs were a socially fluid couple, both insiders and outsiders in English society. Like the rest of her group, Rhoda is a white upper-middle class English woman. If Virginia Woolf occupied a fluid insider-outsider space within society and the Bloomsbury group, Rhoda's position was much more precarious in her circle of friends.

Indeed, Rhoda, who fails to finish her thoughts (13), also fails to successfully imitate and thus become like other women: "so I put off my hopeless desire to be Susan, to be Jinny" (19). She describes her experience at school as depersonalizing: "But here I am nobody. I have no face. This great company, all dressed in brown serge, has robbed me of my identity" (24). A serge is a woollen fabric like the cotton wool that veils reality. It has robbed Rhoda of her unique subjectivity. "This great company" is a metonym for the whole social structure that maintains the heteronormative social order. A few sentences before Rhoda speaks of being nobody, she notices the "black stain on the white page of the Prayer Book" (24) that Miss Lambert holds. The black stain is a hint at Rhoda's sexual attraction for Miss Lambert, her latent and unconscious lesbian

desire that cannot manifest. Unable to word and express her desire, Rhoda “has no face,” a sentence repeated throughout the text. Yet notice the sexual intensity in the passage below, spoken by Rhoda:

I choose out across the hall some unknown face and can hardly drink my tea when she whose name I do not know sits opposite. I choke. I am rocked from side to side by the violence of my emotion. I imagine these nameless, these immaculate people, watching me from behind bushes. I leap high to excite their admiration. At night, in bed, I excite their complete wonder. I often die pierced with arrows to win their tears. . . . Therefore I *hate looking-glasses which show my real face.* (31, my italics)

Rhoda speaks of having a “real” face, a metaphor for identity. The language of the “looking glass,” also used in *AROO*, gestures toward women’s truth-telling as a way to deconstruct heterosexual scripts. Rhoda’s “hate” for her “real” face may be an unconscious expression of her emotionally complex relation to the truth of lesbian desire. Whatever the case, Rhoda is undoubtedly rocked by the violence of her emotions. Indeed, the verb “excite,” repeated twice for emphasis, suggests it. At night, she dies pierced with arrows, an allusion to Saint Sebastian, an enduring homoerotic icon since Renaissance according to Donald Boisvert (*Sanctity and Male Desire: A Gay Reading of Saints*).

When Rhoda comes to orgasm a few sentences after Miss Lambert vanishes down the corridor, she seems unaware of her own desire:

I will pick flowers; I will bind flowers in one garland and clasp them and present them—Oh! To whom? There is some check in the flow of my being; a deep stream presses on some obstacle; it jerks; it tugs; some knot in the centre resists; Oh, this pain, this anguish! I faint, I fail. Now my body thaws; I am unsealed, *I am incandescent*. Now the stream pours in a deep tide fertilising, opening the shut, forcing the tight-folded, flooding free. To whom shall I give all that now flows through me, from my warm, porous body? I will gather my flowers and present them—Oh! To whom? (41 italics mine)

The pain and anguish is replaced by a thawing, an incandescence. A stream pours out just before the words “deep tide fertilising” are spoken. Rhoda is opening, flooding. And she wants to give herself, but to whom? The metaphor of the sea in female desire and orgasm is grounded in the

imagery of waves. Waves of desire represent an uncontrollable force, a movement that men and the patriarchy cannot domesticate. The repetition of this question, “To whom?” preceded by the exclamation “*Oh!*,” suggests more than mere impatience. It speaks of an ecstatic release, a jerking toward an answer that never arrives just as Miss Lambert passes out of her sight. If Rhoda dates Louis later in the text, should we assume that her lesbian desire dies with her school years? On the contrary, I suggest it’s because of her confused wanderings with Louis that she still cannot form a stable self and finally commits suicide. Therein lies the tragedy of Rhoda’s life and fate: try as she might, she fails to imitate the other women because she cannot make herself fit the heteronormative mould. Like Judith Shakespeare in *AROO*, Rhoda ends her suffering by taking her own life, her potential genius forever stunted and unexpressed. However, stating that Rhoda (or Judith) “took her own life” or “committed suicide” is misleading because it suggests that these women are sovereign subjects, that they are the sole doers behind the deed, to paraphrase Nietzsche. *The Waves* presents characters as co-creations of each other, united yet distinct. Speaking of intersubjectivity, Kim L. Worthington writes, “one’s conception of self is never fixed simply in one permanent structure of representation, but is a plurality of shifting affiliations” (qtd. in Myk 108). Presenting identity as a co-creative process over time and between individuals which Myk calls “interliving” (108) in one of her footnotes, I suggest that the group is an ecosystem in which intersubjectivity comes into our awareness osmotically. Osmosis describes the tendency of a fluid, usually water, to pass through a semipermeable membrane, in much the same way collective consciousness connects the web of individual consciousness, allowing linguistic drive to pass through us.

Woolf’s letters written when she was composing *The Waves* suggest that she was trying to communicate a sense of Oneness: “I did mean that in some vague way we are the same

person, and not separate people” (397). She writes that because of her “lack of reasoning power,” all she can do is make an “artistic whole” of it:

The six characters were supposed to be one. I’m getting old myself—I shall be fifty next year; and I come to feel more and more how difficult it is to collect oneself into one Virginia. (397)

Bernard, too, is preoccupied with the paradox of multiplicity within unity: “I do not altogether know who I am—Jinny, Susan, Neville, Rhoda, or Louis; or how to distinguish my life from theirs” (165). This passage suggests that their lives are intimately and ontologically entangled. Notice Bernard’s troubling of the individual as separate and whole: “For this is not one life; nor do I always know if I am man or woman, Bernard or Neville, Louis, Susan, Jinny, or Rhoda—so strange is the contact of one with another” (168). This passage gestures toward the kind of ontological porousness and permeability suggested by McLaurin in his concept of unanimism or “group mind” (30). To define unanimism, we need but look at the metaphor of the many-petalled flower: “‘The flower,’ said Bernard [...] is become a six-sided flower; made of six lives” (136). Therefore, intersubjectivity troubles and decentralizes individual sovereignty. In the intersubjective model, consciousness is made of multiplicities: “it becomes clear that I am not one and simple, but complex and many” (44). Through language, awareness of our intersubjectivity (our ability to co-create and/or destroy each other) becomes knowable.

Bernard and Neville are both aware of how they co-create one another, as is made clear by Bernard when he says, “Let me then create you. (You have done as much for me.)” (49). We do the work of co-creating each other through language, by naming our intention to do so. We do the work of destroying each other in the same way, including in our neglect to care for each other. If the self is partly created by others, then who killed Rhoda? “Oh, life, how I have dreaded you,” she says, “oh, human beings, how I have hated you. How you have nudged, how

you have interrupted, how hideous you have looked in Oxford street” (145). She copied Jinny and Susan, “What you did, I did” (145); however, the imitation ultimately made it impossible for her to create an aesthetic of being outside heteronormative frameworks. As she says, “I left Louis; I feared embraces” (146). She feared being touched by him, whether in terms of physical closeness or emotional affection. Notice the contrast between the few lines she gives Louis and the extraordinary language, filled with excitement, fertility and desire, when speaking of Miss Lambert. Not only is Rhoda’s lesbian desire thwarted, but her drive to create is also stunted. Perhaps Rhoda represents the figure of the artist-manqué and in this way acts as Lily Briscoe’s foil (Lily is the amateur woman artist who has a vision in the last moment of *To the Lighthouse*).

Bernard, Neville and Louis are all three writers yet none of the women have creative drives outside of dominant gender scripts. The relationship between women’s homosexual desire and a drive to write is explored in Karyn Z. Sproles’s *Desiring Women: The Partnership of Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West*. The Bloomsbury group (comprised of female and male artists, critics, thinkers and others) transgressed and troubled heteronormative scripts according to Sproles, but did not tolerate lesbian desire. Desire and sexuality between two men, however, was accepted and even celebrated. Sproles suggests that Sackville-West was not only Woolf’s lesbian lover but also someone who, outside the Bloomsbury group, heavily influenced Woolf’s relation to herself, others and her writing (131). The letters they exchanged document a shift in Woolf, which was later articulated in *Orlando* and *A Room of One’s Own*: the fact that a woman can desire someone of her own sex. Although Woolf’s texts were never overt about women’s lesbian desires, they became more sensual and daring after she met Sackville-West. Indeed, this biographical reading of Woolf suggests that she too was engaged in a co-creative processes with her friends and lovers. I build on this to suggest that the group mind, at whatever level, be it

familial, social or cultural, co-creates us because it delineates what is possible and imaginable. By the same token, the group mind can destroy us, as in Rhoda's case.

In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Judith Butler asks the question "whose lives are grieveable?" only to conclude that our lives are always already entangled:

It is not as if an "I" exists independently over here and then simply loses a "you" over there, especially if the attachment to "you" is part of what composes who "I" am. If I lose you, under these conditions, then I not only mourn the loss, but I become inscrutable to myself. Who "am" I, without you? When we lose some of these ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or what to do. On one level, I think I have lost "you" only to discover that "I" have gone missing as well. (22)

This extraordinary question, "Who 'am' I, without you?" leads Butler to conclude that in losing "you," "I" have gone missing as well. Thus, in losing Rhoda, the group has lost a part of each "I" that makes up their unit, for Rhoda's being was entangled with theirs. If they do not grieve her in the way they grieve Percival that does not mean her life was meaningless. Rather, it suggests that they did not have a language by which to understand her aesthetic of being. By maintaining a heteropatriarchal episteme, the group also killed Rhoda's *potential* as a queer woman artist, giving rise to an ethical dilemma. If Bernard and Neville are aware of their intersubjectivity, and consciously care for the way they co-create each other, what does it mean to suggest they neglected caring for Rhoda? Everyone in the group knew that Rhoda was excluded, awkward and suffering, yet no one cared enough create openings for Rhoda to emerge "whole and entire" outside heteropatriarchy. Even Louis, who dated her, stood idly by as Rhoda's sense of self further deteriorated. In the next chapter, I consider Wong's poetic interventions in a context where the queer woman writer no longer needs to fight for lesbian expression. In *Reading Virginia Woolf*, Julie Briggs writes that "[i]n the sixty years since her death, Virginia Woolf's

England has vanished” (190). However, almost eighty years later, the world women are born into continues to be violent according to Rita Wong’s poetry.

Chapter 4: Poetic Will in Wong's *undercurrent* and *forage*: Transcorporeality as an Aesthetic of Being

Moving from Virginia Woolf to Rita Wong is like watching a river fork in two. Emerging out of the same struggle, the new stream follows its own path. Consider Woolf's 1938 book-length essay, *Three Guineas*, which most explicitly denounces patriarchy and colonialism by claiming men are the roots of war. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag opens with a critical review of *Three Guineas*, writing, "Men (most men) like war, since for men there is 'some glory, some necessity, some satisfaction in fighting' that women (most women) do not feel or enjoy" (3). Wong, building on Woolf's tradition, explicitly deconstructs the biopolitical, neoliberal and colonial violence of Corporate America and the State of Canada, challenging readers to acknowledge their complicity in the destruction of the planet and the ongoing violence toward Aboriginal people and, in particular, Aboriginal women. Her work has been read as eco-political, deconstructing biopolitical power structures with avant-garde writing techniques (L'Abbé; Shepherd). Indeed, the will to poetry in her texts is wild, undomesticated and playful as it gestures toward what material feminist and environmentalist Stacy Alaimo calls transcorporeality. Transcorporeality considers the material and ontological fluidity, transmutability and polymorphous relation between human bodies, cultures, cities and nature: "the substance of what was once called 'nature,' acts, interacts, and even intra-acts within, through, and around human bodies and practices" (*Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times* 1). Alaimo claims that we are multiples of multiples, bodies made up of other bodies, minds made up of other minds. In this context, she considers the ethical subject as rooted in the private practices of everyday life and in extraordinary and public performances. Wong's poetry enacts transcorporeality on the domestic, quotidian plane, as well as the energy of a rally-going, peace-walking, social justice activist and in so doing resonates

with Alaimo's claim that "if there is a revolution happening, it is a modest one, often composed, as Braidotti puts it, of 'the ordinary micro-practices of everyday life'" (3). I build on this understanding transcorporeality to suggest that the poetic self cultivates a *communal*, ethical self that cares for all the beings on Earth. Indeed, every word in Wong's poetry is a declaration of love, care and defence of water, land and sentient beings on the planet.

Rita Wong's poetry is characterized by formal experimentation and transgressions that combine poetry, photographs, artwork, passages of non-fictional texts in the margins of its pages, Chinese characters and Aboriginal languages, creating poetic and rhetorical openings and possibilities through hybridity while performing the multiple within the unified whole. The poems adamantly resist constraints, and authoritative and totalizing systems. A Chinese-Canadian writer, Wong is deeply aware of the way language reflects colonialism and how it continues to colonize: "I have a certain distrust of English, A certain resentment that it has been forced onto so many people. At the same time, I do love words . . . Entering a language is like learning a new way to perceive the world" (qtd in Lai 72). Wong's *undercurrent* and *forage* seek the new within the old as the will to poetry words new wor(1)ds and the will of poetry speaks truthfully about "the scar sands" ("Fresh Ancient Ground" 19). Substituting "scar" for "tar" as a way to demonstrate how the extraction of oil hurts the plant is idiosyncratic of Wong's haunting playfulness. The poem "Fresh Ancient Ground" asks readers "*can the water trust us?*" In wong's text, water has its own consciousness; it is a sentient being we can enter into relation with through language, by learning to speak its syntax. When she asks if the water can trust us, it is in the context of environmental destruction, pollution and lack of respect for this life-giving element. Wong wants us to engage with water in new ways, by creating a relationship based on respect and trust. The tension between truthfully speaking about reality-in-the-present while

attempting to word a future-in-becoming is palpable, urgent and necessary: it invites the active participation of readers by challenging them to question definitions of selfhood and their relations to other life forms. Wong is the poet Woolf imagines will emerge 100 years from when she penned *A Room of One's Own*. She has not only killed the Angel in the House, she has subverted the language of domesticity and turned it into a powerful creative force. At the level of form, *undercurrent* is made up of verse and poetic prose passages, not unlike the poetic prose interludes in *The Waves*. Both texts are deeply invested in water's symbolic power. We are water. We are individual waves in a united ocean. However, Wong's *undercurrent* pushes the symbolic toward the stubbornly material and concrete. The poem, "The Sea Around Us, The Sea Within Us," wants us to "call the ocean our ancestor" (2), the "liquid matrix" (11) we are. Then, it wants us to take responsibility for polluting its body by "kick[ing] the oil addiction for love of water" (untitled 48). Wong's poetry deconstructs oil-culture and provides us with a compelling genealogy of colonialism in order to illuminate the violence of our present biopolitical and neoliberal context.



Caption: Worker Agnes Wong of Whitecourt, Alberta, assembles a sten gun produced for China by the Small Arms Ltd. Plant, Long Branch, ON, April 1944. Source: Library and Archives Canada. Credit: Ronny Jacques, National Film Board of Canada. Still Photograph Division. PA-108043. From Rita Wong's *forage*, p. 24.

The everyday, the domestic, speaks back to America's military-industrial complex in *forage's* "domestic operations 2.0." The writer becomes a warrior: "sure could use an estrogen bomb / aimed at the pentagon right about now. a betty crocker takeover / even. housewives of suburbia unite, you have nothing to lose / except your lives if you wait any longer. an apron of discontent. / a whole refrigerator full" (11-15). Delivered with humour, the poem is spiked with biting anger aimed at the military-industrial complex, for which the Pentagon is a synecdoche. The poetry subverts militaristic language through its use of domestic imagery and in doing so decolonizes and demilitarizes language in a culture deeply rooted in war, profit and trade. When juxtaposed with the image of worker Agnes Wong assembling a sten gun for China by the Small Arms Plant in Ontario in 1944 (which appears a few pages before the poem), the poetry brings together Asian bodies and guns in a way that is discomforting. The irony of an Asian worker

assembling a gun for China is a visual representation of the modern idiom that “the world is a village.” Who will be killed by Agnes’s gun? Although she smiles innocently, making these phallic weapons of destruction, we know she has been hired by agents of patriarchal and colonial powers who kill innocent lives in China. Agnes, who shares the same last name as Rita, provides us with an uncanny dramatization of our connections to one another at the level of language.

In the poem “reverb,” the connection between wealth and war is associated with guilt and theft: “the amount of weaponry correlates to the level of guilt / obscene wealth is not earned but stolen” (7-8). Lines such as “poverty rampage in corporate attire” (2), “the rate of interest is ejaculatory” (3) and “the trend to credit facilitates / fascism” (6-7), lead to the central metaphor of the poem in which the speaker is David taking on corporate America, a proxy for Goliath. The irony in “waiting for / goliath, the slingshot has become a teddybear catapult” (8-9) is clear and made even more poignant when read alongside, “would / kafka wear nikes?” (11-12). Behind this rhetorical question is an urgent demand: what tools does a modern David have at his or her disposal in the battle against the machine? Would Kafka, who is notorious for his nightmarish depictions of control societies, walk among us wearing the brand of ‘the enemy’? The poem concludes with the poignant question, “where’s my slingshot?” (19). Goliath’s slingshot is the power of words, the power to cultivate ethical selves in the direction of health and healing, not wealth and stealing. But how do we make ethical, healthy choices when everything has been polluted, even our language: “as pollution erodes these lines / no sense in food or rhyme / resistant as in herbicide” (“chaos feary” 16-18). The prose poem, “canola queasy,” at once attacks and exposes the violence of biopolitics and neoliberalism, which has infiltrated our food and our bodies: “vulture capital hovers over dinner tables . . . how to converse with the wilfully profitable stuck in their monetary monologue? . . . the time for business-as-usual died with the

first colonial causality. reclaim the long now.” Wong is looking for a way to “converse” with the “wilfully profitable,” those bound by the will to power. She speaks back in their language, that is, in corporate vernacular with words like “capital,” “business” and “monetary.” Indeed, she wants us to end the status quo by reclaiming the “long now,” or reality-in-the-present. That last line is a call to action. But what, exactly, does she want from us?

As one of the poetic prose interludes in *undercurrent* declares, “We are undercurrent. . . . the healers who want to live well on this revolving planet. . . . We see that obscene wealth for a few is not merely a sign of merit or talent or ability, but also a spiritual sickness. . . . We want to restore balance, right relations, ethical being” (1, 2, 7-8, 12-13). I stress the deliberate use of the pronoun *we*, a pattern in the collection. The intersubjective *we* includes readers, Wong’s ancestral lineage, comprised of women who worked hard and sacrificed their lives under patriarchal systems, trapped by domestic, social and economic power structures. The water is also alive in the *we*. In fact, for a full list of the *we*, I suggest readers consult the four page long acknowledgement section which begins with the words: “It is an enormous gift and a humbling responsibility to live on the beautiful, unceded Coast Salish homelands of the Tsleil-Waututh (Burrard), XwMuthkwium (Musqueam), Skwxuwu-7mesh (Squamish) and Stó:lō Nations” (89). *undercurrent* is also dedicated to the Keepers of the Water and the restitution for Indigenous people. The *we*, then, undeniably includes Aboriginal communities whom Wong positions as protectors of the land and water, those who actively oppose Corporate America and the State of Canada. A group of activists, the Keepers of the Water’s mission brings communities together to protect “all living things” in the Arctic Drainage Basin, a vulnerable area in Canada:

The Keepers of the Water is comprised of First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples; environmental groups; concerned citizens; and communities working together for the protection of air, water, and land - and thus, for all living things today and tomorrow in the Arctic Drainage Basin. (*keepersofthewater.ca*)

The repetition of “we” throughout *undercurrent* includes all of those healers who “want to live well on this revolving planet.” The poet speaks as an inclusive “we” using language as the weapon against ecological destruction. Notice that there is no collateral damage here, no bloodshed, since the language does not aim to destroy but rather to create: to “restore balance, right relations, ethical being.” The verb restore suggests these states exist a priori but are threatened by systemic and structural violence. This deeply non-violent model is based on the notion that to transform the modern apparatus of power, a new model must be created that makes the old one obsolete.

Notice that balance is kindred to right relation and ethical *being*, an ontological statement. This trilogy is an articulation of a new aesthetic of being and ethic of care that animates Wong’s texts. Thus, she gives us a model of change founded on the need to cultivate communal and ethical selves. But what do ethical being, right relation and balance mean and how can this new model make the old one obsolete? Are they related, by contrast, to “obscene wealth” and “spiritual sickness”? Absolutely. Sickness is used in two ways in *undercurrent*: first, to describe the planet’s poisoned and polluted state, “the great pacific garbage patch” (“Borrowed Waters:” 2) and “everything leaking everywhere it wasn’t mean to go / rainbow in the sky or on slick oil” (“Fresh Ancient Ground” 10-11); second, it is used to describe humans’ spiritual sickness: “a spiritual sickness, a boated ego, a reduced capacity to respond to the suffering of one’s kin” (*undercurrent* 47: 8-9). The word “kin” does not simply mean human-to-human familiar relationships. The next line reads, “We want everyone to understand that the tumours in the moose and whitefish and our neighbours are a sign of our failures, not our successes” (*undercurrent* 47: 9-10). Indeed, to see that we are kin to all life is the overarching project of *undercurrent*: “committing to the union of the living” (*undercurrent* 27: 71) The art of

living well requires that we cultivate right relation and ethical being with the whole planet, an argument for transcorporeality.

The plural *we* throughout *undercurrent* also refers to the poet herself, her intersubjective voice, and her care for other women. What I find striking about Wong's collection is its deep respect for Aboriginal wisdom. Indeed, in trying to articulate right relation, we hear the voice of a Dene elder:

an elder said, when i speak of water, i don't mean
the rivers and lakes, i mean the women

women are water, yes. ("Dispatches From Water's Journey" 67-69)

In this poem, Wong is travelling with the Keepers of the Athabasca for the 2011 Keepers of the Water gathering hosted by the Northlands Dene First Nation. It is safe to assume the Elder in these lines is a Dene Elder, of the "less than a thousand Dene people" (59) referred to in the poem. The mission of the keepers of the water is to protect, honour and care for the water, but when the Elder says, "when i speak of water, i don't mean / the rivers and lakes, i mean the women," both water and women are re-signified. These lines in *undercurrent* echo Woolf's philosophy that we are the words, the words are us. The verb "to be" makes an ontological claim in both writers' texts: if we are water and if also we are words, then Wong's innovation to Woolf's philosophy is that artworks and humans are also One with the whole planet.

This changes the way we read the whole collection, whose main theme is water, now also signifying women. It creates an opening for an ontological movement from the separate and singular "I" to an intersubjective "we." The third canto of "dispatches from water's journey," which ends in prose poetry, suggests that to be aware of our transcorporeality may be a "gentle reminder" of our responsibilities to one another:

...

Water is

our living connector, a gentle yet powerful way to be in relation to one another. (86-87)

Most striking is where the line is cut off, at the verb to be: “Water is.” This is not the only poem where the line deliberately ends with the verb to be: “Maybe we are” (8) and “Maybe we are” (12) in a prose interlude on page 16; “We are” (“fresh ancient ground” 48); “We are” (11), in a prose interlude on page 53. This ontological unity demands that we enter in right relation with each other and live in balance with nature. In “The Wonder of Being Several,” the category of human starts to collapse when we realize that we come from, return to and are water but also because “symbiotic bacteria outnumber our juicy cells ten to one” (2). This transcorporeality makes an ethical demand on us and charges the poetry with will. The will to poetry in Wong’s texts will not be satisfied with an apathetic response from us, its readers. Indeed, in one of its prose interludes, the will to poetry speaks to us directly: *“Maybe you are part of ‘us’ without even knowing / that you are . . . Maybe we are remembering what it means to respect / water, because doing so is to respect ourselves, our shared, fluid vulnerability”* (*undercurrent* 16: 2-3, 5-6). Notice the repetition of the adverb “maybe,” suggesting a hesitance but also hope that we remember the ancient wisdom of “Oneness.”

In “declaration of intent,” ethical being demands we reconsider our need for new language to express our transcorporeal, fluid vulnerability: “water is a sacred bond, embedded in our plump, moist cells / ... in the oceans that our foremothers came from / ... the language we need ...” (5; 9; 11). What does it mean to evoke “the language we need”? These words reverberate and echo throughout *undercurrent*, including in the first line of the first poem which claims water speaks:

water has a syntax	i am still learning
a middle voice	pivots where it is porous. (“pacific flow” 1-2)

Water, then, is the language we *need*; water has syntax; a watery language suggests dense fluidity. To say we need to “learn” this “porous” “middle voice,” implies we need to learn how to listen to its ebbs and flows in order understand its teaching. Like the will to poetry, watery language suggests and gestures toward new wor(l)ds—a shared, fluid and vulnerable aesthetics of being. With this in mind, I return to the poem, “declaration of intent,” in which the dilemma between desiring right relations, balance and ethical being is complicated by the ongoing violence of colonialism:

let the colonial borders be seen for the pretensions that they are
 i hereby honour what the flow of water teaches us
 the beauty of enough, the path of peace to be savoured
 before the extremes of drought and flood overwhelm the careless
 . . .
 a watershed teaches not only humbleness but climate fluency
 the language we need to interpret the sea’s rising voice
 . . .
 i hereby invoke fluid wisdom to guide us through the toxic muck (3; 10-11; 15)

The opening line teaches us how to read the rest of the poem: “let the colonial borders be seen for the pretensions that they are.” *The* colonial borders—not specifically Canada’s but perhaps *all* colonial borders—will be shown as pretentions. The past principle of see, *seen*, is phonetically resonant with *scene*, suggesting colonial borders are historical events. Perhaps the event spans across time and space, implying, then, that the pretention of colonial borders is a historical burden. In any case, the burden of this event (string of events) must be witnessed since the verb *seen* implies it. If it must be seen, then the will of poetry is asking us to act as witnesses to the scene.

There are two distinct thoughts occurring in the opening line of the poem. First, colonial borders are pretensions. The second, related to the first, tells us that the truth of the first thought shall be made visible. It is not clear *who* shall take the veil off our eyes, to dis-close reality, in

order to show us the truth of colonial borders. The verb “let” has no subject. It does not say “I will let,” nor “we will let,” but rather, and simply, the command let. Let x be seen as y , a formula reflecting divine command, such as “Fiat Lux!” or let there be light. We are being asked to surrender to this ‘truth,’ and it shall become visible to us. I put truth in scare quotes because of its tendency to slip through our fingers the moment we want to grasp it and because of modern suspicion of truth-claims. For this reason, when I say we must surrender to this truth, what I mean is we must allow ourselves to listen to its syntax. It is the reader’s responsibility to see whether the poem’s truth falls within an aesthetic of being based on right relations, ethical being and balance. We can read “declaration of intent” by considering the poem, “dispatches from water’s journey,” whose opening line is revealing: “i live at the west entrance of a haunted house called Canada” (1). The opening lines of these two poems speak back to each other. It borders on the cliché to read house as both internal and external geography, yet that seems to be the overarching theme in the collection. *undercurrent* is haunted by colonial borders, this ‘truth’ becomes evident as we navigate through its poems. Returning to “declaration of intent,” I wish to consider the poem’s title before what needs to be seen emerges for us, if we allow it.

A declaration of intent is a document giving details of what a person, group, business or other organization hopes to achieve in the future, but which is not a legal contract. The declaration of intent is also a performative action in a wedding ceremony, sometimes called the charge to the couple. This movement between the present and the future binds the newlyweds into a common declaration of intent, a common goal and shared focus of attention. Saying is doing, since a declaration is also a performative self-referential speech act; it declares that it is making a declaration. In this respect, we may sense the ‘presence’ of the will to poetry in the negative space, in the shadows of the title, “declaration of intent.” The poem lists its desires, its

future objectives, the direction of its gaze. The title implicitly involves us in its gaze and focuses our attention on its goals. The first objective, then, if we read this poem as a list, is to surrender to witnessing the colonial borders. Why this above all other objectives? In other words, why is it necessary for us to let, to allow this ‘truth’ to be seen before any other? I suggest it’s because the will of poetry will not speak to us in the language of science with its pretence to objectivity. It places us in the position of witness, so that we may see and know reality-as-it-is by ourselves. It will not prove to us, empirically or otherwise, that colonial borders are pretentions.

As we experience poetry in the process of decolonization, we become aware of its being, its will. We begin to listen to how the creative use of language suggests a *poetic voice* or *poetic creative agency* that is a particular modulation of will that cannot be said to arise on the basis of knowledge or power but rather in the gaps and openings created by it. The will of poetry declares, performs and *suggests* rather than empirically proves or rhetorically convinces. As Luce Irigaray noted about scientific discourse in *Parler n’est jamais neutre*, science’s pretence to objectivity and neutrality doesn’t admit its own subjectivity, its bias, its desire. Scientific discourse doesn’t admit its affects. In other words, in postulating a neutral discourse, science effaces its own body, its politics and gender identity. In “declaration of intent,” as elsewhere in Wong’s texts, the will of poetry never claims to be neutral: it has no pretence of universality, impersonality and indifference. It speaks of events, of bodies, of gender. It speaks of its personal desires, its subjective will. It does so in the second line of the poem: “i hereby honour what the flow of water teaches us.” We know from earlier experiences with the will of poetry that water in *undercurrent* is women. We learn from women’s subjective experiences, then. Lowercasing the pronoun “i” is a symbolic and political choice, suggesting a departure from performing authority. Visually and symbolically, the phallic upper case “I” has been castrated. Linguistic status-quo is

being destabilized when i refuses to rise and become capital. In a subtle way, our attention is then brought to the very word capital, which signifies wealth in the form of money or other assets owned, contributed or invested by an individual or an organization (corporation) for the purposes of starting a company or investing. And, as the poem will show us: for the purposes of accumulating more wealth at the expense of balance, ethical being and right relation.

Colonialism and capitalism emerge in *undercurrent* as the opposite of an ethic of care that honours women and the environment; they are embedded in power structures that destroy and pollute life on earth. But how do we resist these power structures?

The will to poetry gestures toward “the beauty of enough, the path of peace to be savoured / before the extremes of drought and flood overwhelm the careless” (3-4). These lines, I suggest, connect us back to remembering that “i” am part of “us,” remembering that i am water and that i must change my relation to myself and others by engaging in ethical being and striving for balance. Balance is “the beauty of enough,” a counter-current philosophy in a global economy of mass consumption, of never enough. The warning is clear: “before the extremes of drought and flood overwhelm the careless.” This line reminds us of Noah’s Ark and the Book of Genesis’s flood narrative. The careless are the ones to be held responsible, the ones that will be overwhelmed. I stress the word care-less, as it implies that a lack of care will lead us to apocalyptic disaster. The ethic of care expressed by *undercurrent* is simple: care-more, not less. To ignore this calling may be deadly. “declaration of intent” also asks us to listen to water’s ancient wisdom: “i hereby invoke fluid wisdom to guide us through the toxic muck.” A few lines earlier, we hear echoes of this wisdom: “a watershed teaches not only humbleness but climate fluency / the language we need to interpret the sea’s rising voice.” This is the water’s syntax we must learn to listen to, just as we learn to listen to the will of poetry. Its voice promises to guide

us, like a benevolent elder, through the deluge, through the toxic muck. The suggestion we're slowly attuning to is that water/women's poetry are guides for those of us willing to surrender to its voice. We will be rewarded with the "beauty of enough" (balance) and "the path of peace" (right relation and ethical being).

But listening is not a passive act. It demands action. It demands—before we consider any solution to the toxic muck—that we take responsibility. Indeed, this becomes clear in the tonal shift as of line twenty-seven in the poem, when the listing starts to use repetition with variation as an expression of intensity and incandescence:

because i am part of the problem i can also become part of
the solution
although i am part of the problem i can also become part of
the solution. (27-30)

The change in conjunction, from *because* to *although* is striking. *Because* implies that we are the reason behind the problem. It is a way of saying: since we created *x*, we can solve it by becoming *y*. The shift to *although* marks a movement away from blaming, from pointing the finger and looking at who created the problem, to what I consider a more optimistic attitude in line with the poetry's ethic of care. *Although* is saying "in spite of"; it is forward looking: *even though*, it tells us, we partly created *x*, we can solve it by becoming *y*. Put another way, *for all that*, which is in the past and for which I do not seek to blame, I can also become part of the solution. Notice that the verbs *can* and *become* do not change from one line to the next. *Can* implies ability, from the verb to be able to. It also invokes permission, since the secondary meaning of the verb *to be able* implies it: "you can use the phone, no problem." I am able to, then, *and* I give myself permission to become *y*. The verb *become* is essential to our understanding of these lines. Indeed, I would like to suggest that an ethic of care implies an ethic of becoming. It implies an ontological movement, a process from one way of being to another. It is a movement from the singular and

phallic, neoliberal subject represented by the capital letter “I” to the intersubjective and transcorporeal “we.”

In a prose interlude, caring is a communal process, represented by the pronoun “we”:

. . . *We can look frankly at what is not going well—the destruction of natural habitat, the dangers posed by global warming, the inequities and violence in our own cultures—and do better. We are capable of it, if we care to try.* (19)

The nightmare ends “if we care to try.” Attempting to care can only happen if we first bear witness to “the destruction” of our planet and “the dangers” and “inequities and violence” in our culture. We “can look,” implies we have the ability and the permission. Indeed, the poem states it didactically: “We are capable of it,” there are no excuses. However, there is a conditional clause. Yes, we can “do better,” but only “*if we care to try.*”

Caring, for Wong, implies loving. Loving ourselves and our fellow (m)others, including all of the planet’s precious life forms, that is deep ‘truth’ the will *to* poetry wants us to surrender to, as the will *of* poetry asks us to witness the horrors and pretensions of modern power structures. As we experience its will, perhaps we too enter into an ethic of becoming in which new ontological possibilities emerge. In which new ways of caring also emerge: ethical being, balance and right relations. If we care enough—if we see that we are transcorporeal and intersubjective, that we are united to (at the same time as we are distinct from) all other life forms on earth, including other human beings, water, land and sentient beings—then perhaps we will strive to be and to do better than the violent mess we were born into. What can we do for the water, the poems ask us? It is another way of asking us what we can do for women. What can we do *as* women, also, since we are the spiritual warriors that must unite and answer poetry’s call. Will we awaken to *becoming worthy* of living on our planet? In an interview Wong gives us her personal declaration of intent: “My work comes out of those larger forces—anger at injustice;

desire for peace which we as a global community should be capable of; love; the excitement of learning as different cultures come into contact” and “At its root, [my poetry] is about love in its widest sense” (“Interview with Rita Wong” 2000). The will to poetry in Wong’s texts gestures toward love. Love is water is women. Love.

Conclusion: Writing as an Aesthetic of Being and Ethic of Care

The will to poetry is a linguistic creative drive that desires to word new wor(l)ds. According to Woolf, the writer must become a clear channel for the will to poetry by cultivating what she calls an incandescent mind. Incandescence is more than mere illumination. The writer “must” be incandescent in order to free the work “whole and entire,” suggesting the final text exists somewhere in a state of potentiality even before the writer puts pen to paper. Indeed, in this secular model of existence, words, art, writers, the very fabric of tangible and intangible reality, are One. The will *of* poetry, also a creative linguistic drive, emerges out of a particular socio-historical context. It is the lexicon the writer inherits and is born into. *A Room of One's One* suggests that speaking truthfully allows writers to channel the will of poetry in such a way as to reflect reality ethically, without sustaining old or creating new illusions. The will of poetry exposes the truth of heteropatriarchy and colonialism, for example. Thus, whereas the will *of* poetry is historical and socio-symbolic, the will *to* poetry is future oriented. Working outside closed epistemologies, *The Waves* shows us how “unsensed physical causes” (Banfield qtd. in Scott 4) entangle us ontologically by enacting intersubjectivity and demonstrating how we co-create each other. How, also, if we are careless, we destroy each other.

Writing of ontological entanglement is also part of Rita Wong's project in *forage* and *underground*. As she says,

It's important for me to find out more about where my food comes from. As corporations patent more and more life forms, what we eat is increasingly becoming genetically engineered . . . I might not know what kind of misery produced the fruit that I eat, but on some level, I believe that many of us are literally eating unhappiness and suffering although we may not be conscious of it. This has many implications personally and socially. (qtd. in Lay 73)

Notice that she intuits what she does “not know,” perhaps that which is not knowable to us through our five senses or through scientific perception. Although there are material conditions to be discovered here, Wong’s texts are deeply spiritual, calling on Aboriginal wisdom to enact ethical being, right relations and balance between all life forms on earth. In the passage above, the fruit which is altered by a process of genetic modification has been produced by “misery,” which we in turn consume. These feelings are not mere affect, they are tangible things. We do not only eat the apple, we eat its suffering, “literally.” We also intuit from her image the chain of suffering of the countless workers who pick, package, ship, store and sell the fruits to us. As when Eve ate the forbidden fruit, do we gain knowledge of good and evil by eating modern apples? Wong’s *forage* points to the poisonous effects of mass farming and genetically modified food. The passage above, like the rest of her poetry, suggests bodily porousness, a non-boundary between humans and fruit, and other living beings. Also hinted at is the possibility that *feelings are matter*. We do not simply consume the apple. We become it. The apple’s imposed misery by corporations such as Monsanto (which Wong calls out numerous times in *forage*) lives on in us as we become its unhappiness. This ontological entanglement recalls Karen Barad’s theory of agential realism, a type of material agency that does not privilege the human (813). Barad takes from physicist Niels Bohr the notion that all phenomena are ontological entanglements.

But what and who are we entangled with, exactly? Beyond being entangled with each other and the living world, Woolf’s and Wong’s texts demonstrate that we are also enmeshed with systems of knowledge and power, including patriarchy and colonialism, liberalism and biopolitics. Stacy Alaimo, who makes the claim that “thinking is the stuff of the word,” writes, “[t]o analyze, theorize, critique, create, revolt, and transform as someone whose corporeality cannot be distinct from biopolitical systems and biochemical processes is to think as the stuff of

the world” (185). We are entangled with language, including, I suggest, with the will to poetry and the will of poetry. What does it mean to be ontologically entangled with the raw, creative drive of language and what are the ethical implications of such a claim? If the writer cultivates *poetic parrhesia* (truth-telling) and incandescence, if she is spiritual and frank in the way Woolf and Wong are, then the writer has changed her very aesthetic of being in the world—the way she thinks, writes, relates, experiences, the way she *is*—has trans-formed, is trans-corporeal, is intersubjective; entangled with poetic will, she “knows” the text “whole and entire” before she writes it; she lives in the trans-actions and tensions between the will *of* poetry and the will *to* poetry, between reality-in-the-present and a future-in-becoming; her mind is porous and intersubjective because she dwells in and out of, works through, and exists in flashes of incandescence with poetic will.

Throughout this thesis, I have suggested that Woolf’s and Wong’s aesthetic of being enacts an ethic of care in which the writing self cultivates an ethical self within a community of others, including her readers, her poetic will and the whole planet. Eco-feminists Josephine Donovan and Carol Adams, who argue that the continued subjugation of women is akin to, and entangled with, human dominance over nature, articulate an ethic of care couched in a language of “ethical attentiveness” (*The Feminist Care Tradition in Animal Ethics* 174; 198). I rethink the work of the writer as the need to cultivate an “ethical attentiveness” of poetic will. The writing self must also place her ethical gaze on her intersubjectivity and transcorporeality with other humans and the rest of the planet. This claim decentres and resignifies the role of the writer since it implies she must humbly accept to co-create texts with poetic will and a community of others. This co-creativity opens up possibilities for linguistic encounters with the “thinking with a multitude of living creatures” (Alaimo 186) and echoes the call to action issued in Wong’s

undercurrent, notably the need to “becom[e] worthy” enough “to live as a guest on these sacred lands” (untitled 22).



Caption: *Becoming Worthy* by Marika Swan, gracing the cover of Rita Wong’s *undercurrent*.

A copy of *Becoming Worthy* by Marika Swan graces the cover of Rita Wong’s *undercurrent*. In the artist statement at the back of the book, Swan explains how her Tla-o-qui-aht heritage influences her work as an artist. She points out that when her people were whaling, “they prepared their whole lives spiritually *to be worthy of a gift* as generous as a whale” (95 *italics mine*). The above copy of her woodblock print depicts a woman swimming in front of a blue whale. Below her is the image of Pook-mis, a drowned whaler, symbol of the dangers that faces those who are not spiritually prepared for the hunt. Indeed, this notion of becoming worthy enough to live on our planet, to be allowed to receive its medicines and gifts, whether it be in the

form of water, land, fauna and/or flora, is, I suggest, an intersubjective and transcorporeal language of care. Notice the woman swimming in front of the whale, how her left foot is connected by a cord to its mouth. The cord represents physical connection and interdependence between human and animal, not unlike an umbilical cord. It also gestures toward spiritual and ethical connections as the woman leads the whale away from the place where the hunter is buried. Presumably, if this is where the hunter fell, the area represents whale hunting grounds and the woman is therefore leading the animal away from danger. Certainly, at the level of colour, the whale and the woman share the same tones, orange and red, amid a background of blues, whites and yellows. The visual resonance between whale and woman doesn't stop there, however. The woman's body is curved with her leg up in the same upward arch as the whale's tail. Thus, they move as One, in the same direction. The woman leads the way while the male hunter is left behind, sunk and buried underground, his eyes wide open on the pale face of death. Recalling Woolf's words: "it is in our idleness, in our dreams, that the submerged truth sometimes comes to the top," (*AROO* 27), I conclude this thesis by suggesting that the most urgent political action of our times may be our need to awaken to the possibility that we are intersubjective and transcorporeal or risk destroying each other and the beautiful, lively and sacred world around us.

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