

**‘Every Groove, Stain, Fork, Knife’: Subject, Object,  
and the Nature of Domestic Labour in the Works of  
Virginia Woolf (1882- 1941)**

Synopsis of Thesis Submitted for the Award of the Degree of Doctor of  
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### Research question:

This thesis will address the hitherto unstudied question of how domestic labour informs those aspects of Woolf's writing which question the supremacy of the masculine subject as the interpreter of objects in the domestic interior, and posit other, alternative ways of understanding the dynamics of a domestic space. In doing so, it will contribute to the study of Woolf's uniquely modernist and feminist aesthetics, as it locates the ways in which Woolf establishes the agency of non-human objects and gendered subjects, given that the question of an autonomous domestic space for the woman writer is at the heart of Woolf's feminism (i.e. a room of one's own).

### Methodology and Chapters:

This thesis will adopt a two-pronged approach. On the one hand, it traces the way in which, in Woolf's oeuvre, a subject is defined by the objects with which she attempts to '*furnish* the self' to use Maurizia Boscagli's term, while orienting herself towards a space which ought to be 'home.' On the other hand, it is crucial to take note of Woolf's narrative strategies which foreground the subject's own ability to use these 'things' creatively, rather than passively exist within a pre-given economy of domestic labour and domestic consumption. These processes take place in a socio-economic context where systems of signification that treat non-human objects - and frequently the housewife as well - as fungible are at play.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, Karen Barad's method of reading factors *through* each other, rather than establishing agency or causality as the attribute of a singular entity, is an instrumental part of the

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<sup>1</sup>Maurizia Boscagli, *Stuff Theory: Everyday Objects, Radical Materialism* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2014) 5; italics mine.

methodology followed throughout this thesis.<sup>2</sup> It is only through the careful study of the dynamic agentic/auratic/ ontological qualities of subjects and/or objects that we are able to understand the hidden mechanisms of reproductive labour. It is through the study of domestic labour that we are able to grapple with the manner in which subjects and objects exist and interact with each other in their mutually entangled state. Correspondingly, the thesis attempts to read the private sphere through public discourses (which are correspondingly read through the private testimonies that shape them) and to read the sphere of literary work, conventionally read as a public, imagined realm of letters, through private spaces. Woolf repeatedly conjures up such spaces for us- where writing, reproductive labour, and politics are inextricably mixed up together.

As the thesis answers a *how* question, rather than a *why* or *what* question, it does not move linearly towards a singular answer. Instead, it creates a branching effect. It branches out into comprehensive explorations of the myriad factors at play when we consider ontological relations in the domestic interior with respect to the writings of Virginia Woolf. It studies the varied ways in which Woolf makes these relations an intrinsic part of her modernist narratives, highlighting the role of domestic labour in the gendered modernist subject's understanding of autonomy and creativity.

It depends on reading minute details in the text, in a sense, replicating the methodology of domestic labour- which depends on carefully noticing exactly what seems out of place to us, and putting it where it 'belongs,' only to be struck by the ever-changing, elusive objects which constantly evade our attempts to reduce to them to order, tempting us to appreciate the mutating aesthetics of this material world we can never become 'masters' of. The starting point of the

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<sup>2</sup> Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009) 30.

thesis is an impulse to see reproductive labour as more than a self-evident category of gendered oppression. It follows that it is only through a committed study of specific aspects of domestic labour, and the organization of the domestic interior, that we can understand how this gendered labour is exploited.

Along with Woolf's novels, feminist and modernist tracts, the thesis takes into consideration texts which are pushed to the margins of Woolf studies including the vast body of Woolf's literary journalism, and her extensive engagement with life-writing. By reading these against the grain of what is still a prevalent literary practice- i.e. that of reading Virginia Woolf as a writer entirely concerned with the abstruse workings of 'the mind,' in conjunction with a range of other texts, it becomes possible to create and read through a feminist palimpsest. It sees Woolf's project of building a personal space in conjunction with many other rooms imagined/ inhabited by dissidents from the spatial regimes of heteropatriarchy.

The thesis begins with an introduction which provides a detailed overview of the many historical, philosophical and literary contexts which inform Woolf's contribution as a feminist modernist. Accordingly, the thesis does not treat modernism as a monolithic construct, given that Woolf weaves interactions between domestic interiors and gendered subjects into work in which she also engages with other contemporary contexts. The six chapters of the thesis dwell upon different aesthetic traditions that Virginia Woolf was witness to, focusing especially on the inter-war years. It focuses on various modernisms, i.e. modernist life-writing (with its roots in Victorian life-writing,) the High Modernist novels of Dorothy Richardson, Modernist country house writing (with their roots in a long tradition of country house writing,) Post-Impressionist art, and art criticism. It also works through an in-depth focus on other cultural formations which

characterize the inter-war years, i.e. patterns of resource distribution in inter-war Britain, and the museumification of the British country-house.

The first chapter starts by considering an important legacy of representing the woman writer's relation to her home which Woolf inherited, i.e. a tradition of literary biography following Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857). It explores Woolf's methods of excavating a history of subject and object relations in the domestic interior which can be reformulated beyond patriarchy.

The second chapter studies Woolf's relationship to the domestic arrangements of her contemporaries (specifically the masculine home-making of Roger Fry) and contemporary aesthetics of the domestic space. This chapter unpacks a crucial aspect of Woolf's oeuvre, that of her participation in the invisibilization of subaltern figures from representations of the modernist domestic interior on the grounds of race and class, by studying her biography of Roger Fry alongside her review of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*.

The third chapter dwells on a cultural phenomenon specific to Woolf's Britain, a discourse about the British country-house as a beloved and endangered piece of Britain's 'domestic' and/or imperial legacy. The country-house thus becomes site where 'luxurious' and 'historic' domesticity was produced as an artifact. This domesticity implies the presence of a 'sovereign' subject. In *Orlando*, Woolf emerges as a participant in a gendered literary tradition of upstaging masculine prerogatives to sovereignty and property in the country house novel, a genre which found a new lease of life between the wars. Additionally, she also comes up with a method of re-narrativizing history by aligning reproductive labour to memorialization. Thus Woolf ultimately turns her back on methods that use objects as signifiers of historic processes, and turns to a

formulation of history which refuses to turn away from the realms of national history into the material realm.

The fourth chapter dwells on the specific way in which Woolf, writing in the scarcity-driven inter-war years, studies how domestic labour functions as a praxis which is expected to subsidize 'domestic' scarcity, i.e. the material conditions of the household which is in continuum with the material-economic networks of the British Isles. It finally argues that *To the Lighthouse* contains a utopian longing for a society in which the well-being of families will be shaped by methods which ensure a better distribution of resources in the community, so that home-makers cease to be punished for conditions of household-scarcity created by economic forces.

The fifth chapter studies rented accommodation in London for 'bachelors' in the first half of the twentieth century, studying Woolf alongside the work of the pioneering modernist Dorothy Richardson, whose narrative methods are tantalizingly close to Woolf's own. It studies how Woolf and Richardson explore new forms of dwelling with furniture in rooms located away from the patriarchal 'family-home.' It explores the new aesthetic that the writers create through their modernist prose, and argues that this aesthetic of a sensuous apprehension of form, matter, and colour, rejects the signifying systems of commodity capitalism and normative domesticity. Instead it creates a new form of joyous sharing of domestic space between objects and subjects, which respects the autonomy of both non-human objects and human subjects.

The last chapter, however, points out the limitations of this vision, when we return to the regimes of cleanliness that characterize these unorthodox 'lodgings' in the work of both writers. Initially, these domestic spaces might appear to champion unorthodox and messy living, on the one hand, and modern, efficient systems of sanitation on the other hand. However, the chapter goes on to

show that both these aspects are shaped by the pervasive need to exclude material traces that remind the white feminine subject that she is now excluded from the node of power that was the prosperous bourgeois household.

It returns to Crosby in order to point out the cruel ironies of the ‘modernizing’ inter-war years, in which the myth of ‘labour-saving’ or ‘efficient’ home-making, is actually used to mask the fact that domestic labour has not in fact been reduced or made easier, it has simply morphed into other forms of policing boundaries of class, race, and gender through the surfaces of the home. In a sense, Crosby’s life trajectory provides a glimpse of what it might mean to be able to achieve a utopic autonomous space where women can interact with domestic objects on their own terms. However, she ultimately misses the utopic vision at the end of ‘Professions for Women,’ of women servants, refusing to wait on the patriarch and occupying his house. Given that Crosby does not just feature in *The Years*, but also appears in *Three Guineas*, Woolf thus leaves us with a figure who is a reminder of the fact that there are no easy, harmonious resolutions to relations in the domestic interior, Nor are their easy solutions or to the problem of domestic labour under an imperial patriarchy and a military industrial complex.

### Conclusion:

The thesis thus reaches a descriptive understanding of Woolf’s methods of understanding the domestic interior through its subject-object relations and the praxes of domestic labour, instead of boiling itself down to ‘a ‘a nugget of pure truth to wrap up between the pages of your notebooks and keep on the mantelpiece for ever.’<sup>3</sup> (sic) Woolf’s methods of working with historical traditions, her blindnesses, her utopian visions, her conversations with the polyphonic

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<sup>3</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1935) 2<sup>nd</sup>ed, first published in 1929, 6, archive.org, [https://archive.org/details/woolf\\_room/page/n3/mode/1up](https://archive.org/details/woolf_room/page/n3/mode/1up).

modernisms around her are traced to follow the various, often contradictory, aspects of her responses. If Woolf can be read as the bearer of the tidings of an eventual dismantling of the patriarchal house, she can also be blinded by the promises of inter-war bourgeois modernity. She is also a writer who stays with the trouble instead of siding with the piece-meal domestic reforms that characterized the Western hemisphere of her times. The thesis thus attempts to provide a comprehensive context to Woolf's quest for a feminist 'room,' and/ or household, and the ways in which various entities might exist in these spaces