Ghosts, Bodies, and Memory in Mrs. Dalloway: Clarissa Dalloway’s Performance of Invisible Femininity

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What does women’s writing require for it to be realized, or more importantly, what should it seek to do? Écriture féminine, an expression coined by Hélène Cixous, promotes the idea that women must write through the body; that it is possible for the female body itself to be posited as a necessity to what feminist writing seeks, or should seek, to embody. Accordingly, Woolf, and critics such as Cixous, urge women to write “writing that inscribes femininity” (Cixous 417) to overcome a heterosexual, typically masculine language, and heterosexual norms embedded in traditions and societies. In doing so, women’s writing will emerge from a history of unspoken frustration and pain, and women will escape a deathly silence to tap into possibilities of change. But such an idea of women’s writing necessitates a dichotomy between women and men, and implies that writings that emerge from these respective bodies
will always differ as a direct result of their physical differences. In effect, the mechanism to provoke and give birth to feminine writing relies on a woman’s ability (or need) to write like a woman, which, accordingly, limits capacities and boundaries of women’s writings.

By “woman,” Cixous speaks of the woman “in her inevitable struggle against conventional man,” and laments the lack of “a universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history” (Cixous 414). Her descriptions of these two women subjects, one of whom she recognizes as a figure common in society and the other as a prototype for women, are problematic on several grounds, for defining woman as one who struggles against the opposite sex only emphasizes again the stereotypical “repressed woman” placed in a “libidinal and cultural — hence political, typically masculine — economy” (Cixous 417). Cixous accentuates characteristics of a woman’s body in a manner that differs somewhat from Woolf’s; she does not underscore a need for the body’s independence, but depicts womanly strength via a metaphoric mother image who gives the “best” of herself to another woman (her daughter) — a writer, then, who “writes in white ink,” producing writing that nourishes like a “good mother’s milk” (Cixous 419). While Cixous gestures toward and brings attention to women writers and mothers, her very invitation demonstrates that the inclusion of some bodies will always entail the exclusion of others. What of those who have no wish to experience motherhood? Should this necessarily exclude them from “the equivoce that affects you, fills your breast with an urge to come to language . . . that part of you that leaves a space between yourself and urges you to inscribe
in language your woman’s style” (Cixous 419)? Why the distinction, and what dangers might lie in such invisible, precarious classifications?

Both Cixous and Woolf focus on the female body and the writing that emerges from that body. Applied to the actual text, the body may parallel language (the tool) while the product (the writing produced) aligns with textual structure. In this paper, the term “language” is aligned with linguistic attributes and structure rather than actual textual content, as Cixous and Woolf place more importance on the possibilities stemming from a feminine language that embodies a “femaleness” by its very grammatical and structural usage. Repeatedly, in A Room of One’s Own, Woolf speaks of agency and requirements of the body as essential to the production of feminine writing. Thus, Woolf appears to reciprocate the claim put forth by French feminists that the female body is vital to creating women’s writing. However, Woolf’s fictional writing contests what she appears to claim in her non-fictional writing — this is where she departs from Cixous’ investment in the female body and a feminine language. In this context, her work may speak more to Kristeva, who rejects the idea of a uniquely feminine language. But Kristeva, while arguing for a space through which multiple sexual identities may emerge, also limits its bounds in her theory, which connects the female body with maternity, while claiming female homosexuality to be an unintelligible practice.

Woolf, in Mrs. Dalloway, distinguishes between what is unintelligible and what remains unspoken. Clarissa remains silent when she is expected to speak. Moreover, she performs identities that appear to reinforce stereotypical female roles, such as motherhood,
yet occupies none of them with conviction. She does not bemoan this instability. Her silent refusal and ensuing failure to occupy all, or even one of the roles placed onto her, are precisely what speak so powerfully in Woolf’s text. But her failure is by choice, and does not indicate disastrous consequences. In fact, Clarissa’s precarious identity becomes a textual site of agency in itself. Thus, Woolf’s fiction delineates that the skeletal frame of a text, language, and the tool at work — the woman’s body — are not what feminist scholars should focus on; rather, it is the fictional content itself, and silences within, that offer possibilities for new meanings to emerge, and guide women readers and writers to piece together and revisit fragmented (and perhaps necessarily so) identities. Indeed, it is her creation of characters, who in turn create worlds rife with ambiguous sexualities and contradictory impulses (impulses that are again reflected in the discrepancy between Woolf’s own fictional and nonfictional writings), that leave feminist marks on her texts. In Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* and in her collection of essays *The London Scene*, the emergence of plural identities for women does not stem from a lack of typically “female” frustration and anger or a paucity of Jane Austen-like, impeccably crafted sentences dancing with humor and detached irony, for there are plenty of both.

It is thus not the body, language, or form, but what she speaks of, and whom she speaks for, that instill her writings with provocative, silent gaps, and bodies that refuse to be labeled. This contradiction between Woolf’s fiction and her nonfiction, rather than blurring, illuminates future possibilities for feminine writing, and what bodies and women’s voices in future feminist texts should seek to encompass. “Oddly enough she had quite forgotten what she
looked like . . . . Every time she gave a party she had this feeling of being something not herself, and that every one was unreal in one way; much more real in another” (Woolf 171). Woolf’s protagonist, throughout *Mrs. Dalloway*, disrupts notions of the real and unreal in the span of a day, a deceivingly ordinary day that encompasses both her youth and present setting through the vehicle of memory. Subsequently, Clarissa’s female body, its physicality, relations to the Other within itself, surrounding environment, and “ghost” bodies interlace with feminine sexuality and self-identity. Such deconstruction and reinterpretation of “real” and ghost bodies probe deeply in responding to the question: Does a feminine sexual identity, or perhaps universal woman figure, exist at all, and if so, how does this idea transfigure through Clarissa Dalloway? Clarissa’s identity, or identities, to be more exact, trouble notions of the feminine body and identity. Because of her versatility in her alternations from one identity to another — and performance of a multitude of identities at once — it gradually underscores the fact that none of her identities “stick” to her body.

Hence, for the purposes of this paper, I refer to identity as something performative: Clarissa’s performance of each of her identities signifying a plurality of identities. From her performances of mother, daughter, sister, wife, and hostess emerge her embodiment of this plurality of identities, but within each category are gaps that allude to the possibility of nonidentity. However, it is precisely these unresolved spaces that manifest what supposedly should not, and cannot, exist in the forms of ghosts, and real and unreal bodies, framing possibilities for a universal femininity. Clarissa blurs notions of identity in both private and public spheres.
On her way to Bond Street, the narrator questions: “What was she dreaming . . . . What was she trying to recover?” (Woolf 9), implying the acts of sleeping and dreaming, which should occur in the privacy of her bedroom, rather than an open, masculine space. On the other hand, once she returns home, she is enveloped in the feeling that she is “like a nun who has left the world and feels fold around her the familiar veils and the response to old devotions” (29), paradoxically “veiling” herself in this private space. It is evident that Clarissa not only recreates a feminine space in present time, in a traditionally masculine realm, but purposely strips herself of her own female sexuality to desexualize the space she occupies with her husband. In addition to an inversion of space, the “double time” (Bowlby 91) that Bowlby finds in the novel allows the past and present to coexist, Clarissa’s memory, her “insistently present rememberings bringing forth the presence of ghost bodies and female desire” (88).

For Cixous, feminine writing meshes with the invention of an “impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes” (Cixous 423), freed from masculine limitations. Her own writing is interlaced with these attempts, as is visible in her poetic language such as, “the rhythm that laughs you” (419) — “le rythme qui te rit” (Cixous and Clément 172-73). In Woolf’s text, it is not so much the creation of a new language that is given weight, but the deconstruction of a masculine linear time through the installment of this double time. Wedged in a precarious balance between these two temporalities, Clarissa finds herself “very young; at the same time unspeakably aged” (Woolf 8). Accordingly, in this double time, the memories of ghostly bodies and desires that she invokes lodge in the present, queering private and public spheres. In
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these queered spaces, Woolf opens up new possibilities of gender and female sexual identity. Similarly, in *The London Scene*, Woolf, while crafting the illusion that she is narrating from real time and real events, creates fiction that takes on fascinating dimensions, as is exemplified in her recreation of histories. When Woolf visits the residences of Carlyle and Keats, she enters into a historical location where fictional doors are opened, just as “we shut the gate upon the grass and the tree where the nightingale sang” (Woolf 38). “We reflect, as we cross the worn threshold” (35), Woolf tells her reader.

While she muses, it is evident that she not only infuses fiction into its spaces, but induces the reader to join her through her invocations of “us” and “we.” In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa exists in a double time, and in *The London Scene*, Woolf creates a double past for the places in which she is physically present, while narrating in present time. Thus, Woolf queers time and space, as her character Clarissa does, recreating histories in her exploration of the metropolis. Every step of the way, her reader performs the role of witness. The act of reading transcends its bounds in both texts; the reader crosses more than a physical threshold while reading. It is not just Clarissa and Woolf who wander in and out of time frames that interlace past, present, and ghost bodies (and events); it is always the spectator-turned reader who does so simultaneously. And perhaps justly so, since, according to Weed, “feminism is implicated with reading” (Weed 263). By the fiction she creates and employs, Woolf reclaims London, a male-dominated metropolis, for her own body and for her women readers. Sarker states that: “We walk with Woolf through the usual tourist spots which selectively monumentalize national memory in great men’s houses, or their works of art (the abbeys and
cathedrals), or their places of work (Oxford Street and the Houses of Parliament)” (Sarker 10), and notes that the city embodies a masculinized history dominating geography. But Woolf does not “selectively monumentalize,” proclaiming that “London has lain there time out of mind scarring that stretch of earth deeper and deeper, making it more uneasy, lumped and tumultuous, branding it for ever with an indelible scar” (Woolf 39).

Woolf places London in a time that is not recordable or containable, but “out of mind.” The metropolis is no longer the space for privileged male writers and scholars, for that city has been killed off and resurrected anew, alive, and personified. When she surveys the city “as a whole — London crowded and ribbed and compact, with its dominant domes, its guardian cathedrals; its chimneys and spires; its cranes and gasometers; and the perpetual smoke which no spring or autumn ever blows away” (39), she does not view a city of great men. She has probed its teeming people and maze-like streets with the purpose of recreating it; when she places the role of witness on her reader, she writes and speaks for not her body alone, but all of her readers. What’s more, she invites and includes even readers who may be resistant to her texts. When her collection of essays conclude that “though London still exists, London will never be the same city again” (77), it is clear that this applies not just to the writer, nor her character, but the reader as well; it is the reader who, along with the Londoner Mrs. Crowe, creates her own little niche and world in a city of organisms, who probes, re-envisions, and recreates the city that the woman writer embraces and gazes on anew. This act of re-envisioning and creation of spaces for a plurality of identities emerges through Clarissa in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Clarissa does not write,
but her stories are narrated through not one, but all of her identities (or nonidentities) in the text; hence, in accordance with Cixous' emphasis on the need for feminine writing produced by the female body, the narration is generated through her body, or bodies.

But Cixous’s definition of woman also includes the image of the “repressed woman” placed in a “political, typically masculine” (Cixous 417) economy. Clarissa is anything but repressed hostess and wife, for she, despite the limitations that are undoubtedly part of her reality, shows a lackluster willingness to suppress her desires that borders on an incapability to do so. While Clarissa takes part in a heterosexual, normative marriage with Richard, her noncommittal response after an encounter with her husband is that “even between husband and wife there is a gulf” (120), a gulf of which no more is explained. Despite Clarissa and Richard’s physical proximity, the gulf is clearly unbridgeable, or there is no wish on her part to bridge the gap. Then, should Sally’s initial physical non-presence indicate an even wider gap in their relationship? Significantly, it is Clarissa’s memory that always invokes the ghost of Sally’s kiss, and that in itself is more than sufficient to stir intense longing and acknowledgment of the strength of her desire. “Had not that, after all, been love?” (32), she muses, deciding that “the purity, the integrity, of her feeling for Sally . . . . had a quality which could only exist between women, . . . . [springing] from a sense of being in league together, a presentiment of something that was bound to part them (they spoke of marriage always as a catastrophe)” (34). Even during denials of her attraction to Sally, insisting that “she could not even get an echo of her old emotion,” Clarissa is unable to refrain from remembering “going cold with excitement” (34).
In addition, Clarissa’s perpetually repeated “rememberings” suggest that little guilt is involved, particularly made palpable when she is horrified at Peter’s intrusion when she is with Sally; instead, there is a vague comprehension that she should suppress what she feels. Since it is a love that supposedly should not and cannot be seen, or verbally invoked, Sally’s body is present in the form of a ghostly desire in Clarissa’s memories that filter into the present. Castle finds lesbianism itself “something ghostly” (Castle 757), as it featured in past Western literature as “a kind of love that, by definition, cannot exist” (759). This is why, she explains, in previous lesbian love stories, amorous female contact was limited or prohibited (“the kiss that can’t happen”), as in Defoe’s text, by apparitions and ghosts. But the ghost figure, incorporeal and nonexistent, “nonetheless appears” (Woolf 763) at the party, exposing that Clarissa’s desire continues to exist in real time. This indicates, then, that the ghost Sally’s existence within Clarissa’s memory is not limiting in any way; rather, it is precisely this aspect that allows Clarissa to freely invoke Sally’s ghost body into even the private, domestic, heteropatriarchal sphere of her home. Bell claims that Clarissa’s “upbringing at Bourton had been Victorian and sheltered in the extreme . . . . Even Sally Seton’s kiss and the lovely infatuation that follows seem to have participated in this prelapsarian Bourton aura” (Bell 98), but does not take into account that it is, in fact, not just in Bourton that Sally’s body exists for Clarissa.

When Clarissa is finally reunited at her party with Sally, though briefly, her former object of desire has become embedded in the heteropatriarchal structure, as the presence of her “five enormous boys” (Woolf 171) indicates. “That voice! It was Sally Seton! Sally
an excited, overjoyed Clarissa realizes, until she discovers that the Sally in real time is a far cry from the ghost Sally, for her “warmth” and “vitality” (181) have dissipated. “She hadn’t looked like that, Sally Seton, when Clarissa grasped the hot water-can . . . . Not like that!” (171), Clarissa recalls, the temperature of sinking, cold disappointment starkly contrasting with connotations of the hot water can. But there are two Salls in Mrs. Dalloway; when she appears in the present, the ghost is invoked too at once, looming through the “mist” (171). Clarissa invokes not only Sally’s ghost but also that of Peter, but for all her longing for Peter and what might have been, “always when she thought of him she thought of their quarrels” (36), and views him as an intruder upon her relationship with Sally, instinctively recognizing “his hostility; his jealousy; his determination to break into their companionship” (36). Besides which, in contrast to Sally’s gift of a kiss, Peter selfishly attempts to break Clarissa down into fragments and pieces that he can understand and take in through his scrutinizing male gaze, “criticizing her” (167). “Why did he come, then, merely to criticize? Why always take, never give?” (168), Clarissa silently retorts.

The contrast in her respective emotions for Sally and Peter is illustrated in sharp contours in the figurative Shakespearean performance that she enacts with each character. Whereas she accounts her feeling for Sally to be vivid and sharp, like “Othello’s feeling, and she felt it” (35), she concludes that with Peter, “it was as if the five acts of a play that had been very exciting and moving were now over and she had lived a lifetime in them . . . with Peter, and it was now over” (47), and even as she rises from the sofa to go to Peter’s side, it is “as a woman . . . gets up to go out of the theatre”
(47). In consideration of Clarissa’s attachment to Sally, one would assume that this text, if “feminist,” would accentuate strong female bonds between mother and daughter as well. However, bonds between Clarissa and Elizabeth are strangely fragile. This lack of mother-daughter closeness is reinforced through the silence, or absence rather, of Clarissa’s own mother. When her mother is mentioned, “Clarissa’s eyes filled with tears. Her mother, walking in a garden!” (176), indicative of a pain long since buried with her death. Even her sister’s death is laced with an unnamed horror, for it is implied that Clarissa has seen her own sister killed by a falling tree before her eyes at a young age. But both female figures pass by as momentary ghosts; their stories remain untold. While silence is maintained by choice, the fact that homosexual desire and female presences appear as “ghosts” also indicates the possibility of repression. In this context, Irigaray’s argument that “maternity supplants the deficiencies of repressed female sexuality” (439) certainly must be reconsidered, for what do we make of Clarissa, who is alienated from her own daughter, excluded from the closeness Elizabeth shares with Richard?

The mother-daughter relationship is interrupted physically as well, by Miss Kilman whom Clarissa believes has “taken her daughter away from her!” (125). Their different natures are accentuated: Clarissa has “a passion for gloves; . . . her Elizabeth . . . cared not a straw for . . . them” (11), and whereas Clarissa is preoccupied with fashion details, such as whether her hat is proper attire for the morning, Elizabeth does not care “how she dressed, how she treated people who came to lunch” (11), with apparently “nothing of her mother in her” (78). Clarissa displays more “feminine”
traits, while her daughter appears “masculine” in comparison. Is this discrepancy in nature, lack of bonds, and Elizabeth’s impulsive trip through the streets of London, suggestive of an independence, then, that Elizabeth is “the bearer of new opportunities . . ., a woman who will be able to go further than her mother, still bound to the conventional femininity of the Victorian . . . women” (Bowlby 82)? Elizabeth’s bold entrance into the public, masculine sphere “in front of everybody” (Woolf 135) and her ambitions to enter into a paternal profession do certainly imply positive progress for women. But her ambitions relate to only the traditionally masculine professions outside the domestic sphere, as if independence necessitates a relinquishment of her femininity; they cannot exist simultaneously. Eventually, she voluntarily reoccupies her place in the domestic realm, for she takes heed of her mother, who “would not like her to be wandering off alone like this” (138).

More ominously, even though it is “frightfully clever” (131) intelligence that Elizabeth values in Miss Kilman, plainly, Elizabeth is confined in the bounds and limitations of the female body, her own flesh, more so than her mother. Even the morally righteous Miss Kilman admires and prizes the young girl for her physical beauty. “Miss Kilman could not let her go!” (131) as her “large hand opened and shut on the table” (131), as if grasping for something she sees slipping out of her hands. But because Miss Kilman is a woman, she threatens a transgression of propriety. Instinctively, Elizabeth recognizes this, right after Miss Kilman implores her, “Don’t quite forget me” (132), her hand blindly stretching and clenching. This moment of pleading briefly suggests a parallel with the relationship between Clarissa and Sally. However, Elizabeth’s lack of sympathy
borders on a harsh coldness. Unhesitatingly, she rejects the possibility of occupying a plurality of sexual identities like her mother. “Elizabeth turned her head” (132), refusing to acknowledge her friend’s admiration of her body. Elizabeth’s rejection of Miss Kilman thus disavows any ambiguity in their relationship. Evidently, then, it is only since Clarissa encounters ambiguity in her sexual identities, namely due to her own relations with Richard, Peter, and Sally, that she mistakenly reads a similar ambiguity in her daughter’s relationship with Miss Kilman.

While conscious to some degree that she is on the precarious edge of early womanhood, Elizabeth does not realize the dangers latent in the praise she receives. “People were beginning to compare her to poplar trees, early dawn, hyacinths, fawns, running water, and garden lilies” (134), which suggests that to make sense of and understand Elizabeth’s “oriental,” mysterious beauty, her body will eventually be taken apart, unraveled, and categorized by the gaze of others. “Beauty had gone, youth had gone” (133), Miss Kilman bemoans. These are precisely the traits that Richard sees in the girl. Unable to recognize her at first, Richard is “proud of his daughter” (194), proud of her loveliness and its ephemerality, an entrancing prison. But clearly, Elizabeth herself does not reject his gaze as her mother does. She is complicit to some degree, as is implied by her wearing the necklace she receives from her father, while Clarissa does not wear the gift of his bracelets. In doing so, in the end, it is Elizabeth, and not Clarissa, who places herself in the male-dominated economy with ease. Since Clarissa does not properly belong to this sphere, she cannot make sense of her own daughter, or why Elizabeth had become “very serious” (123). Nonetheless, “here
is my Elizabeth” (48), Clarissa announces, possessive of her daughter. Richard, in a similar vein, “adored his Elizabeth” (114), and it is clear that his verbal claim over “his” Elizabeth is stronger, for by the novel’s ending, she approaches him, not her mother.

The ending of the novel remains troubling, which places her not by the side of her mother but her father, who sees her through a masculine gaze, finding appealing her beauty and youth, “feminine” traits that will likely render her appealing on the marriage market. Hence, the lack of mother-daughter bonds not only illustrates Clarissa’s uneasy grasp over maternal feelings, and the contrasting identities occupied by mother and daughter respectively; it also manifests the idea that maternity is not a “natural” phenomenon experienced by the female body unto itself. Even performing the role of hostess, which is her forte, Clarissa cannot understand why she feels “for no reason that she could discover, desperately unhappy” (121). When she looks into the mirror she sees “the delicate pink face of the woman who was that very night to give a party; of Clarissa Dalloway; of herself” (37), an interesting ordering of words — it is the hostess who comes first, then the name, then last of all, herself. Is Clarissa able to make sense of any of her fractured identities? Just why is it that Peter and Richard’s mocking criticism of her party should account for such misery? Here, it becomes clear that her role as hostess for this particular party is not simply a “feminine” one; the event’s purpose is not to boast of her abilities and possessions in the physical, corporeal world. Invitations are given in the stead of a plea to be seen and understood: “My party tonight! Remember my party tonight!” (48), Clarissa exclaims almost desperately.
But invariably she is misinterpreted. It is not her essence but the idea of Clarissa that others visually see. Peter reads Clarissa as “purely feminine . . . with that woman’s gift, of making a world of her own wherever she happened to be” (76), but his masculine notions of what femininity constitutes certainly would not account for her desire for Sally. Her conflicted identities, he obliterates entirely, finding “no bitterness in her; none of that sense of moral virtue” (78). Her husband’s gaze, on the other hand, is not more accurate. Richard cherishes tender emotions for his wife, but he is unable to perform the simplest deed as to picking out a gift for her that would suit her taste, and what is more, he is unable to verbally articulate his feelings, relying instead on the materiality of a visible thing, a gift. For Clarissa, however, reading the body is of less concern since she invokes both the material and ghost body and is able to distinguish between the two. With Miss Kilman, Clarissa declares that “it was not her one hated but the idea of her” (12), which is why, even after her presence is removed, it nevertheless “overwhelmed her — the idea” (126). Miss Kilman discerns that “it was the flesh that she must control” (128) but echoes Elizabeth’s plight in that she is caught within the layers of her own skin. In light of Miss Kilman’s “marked” flesh — inscribed with conditions like poverty that may have physical manifestations — her latching onto Elizabeth’s more malleable, privileged body is understandable. Pitying her situation, Clarissa makes a gift of flowers to Miss Kilman, but fails here as well in her performance of charitable, middle upper-class woman, as is explicit in her sufferings from her inability to love “this brutal monster” (12).
Such flowers, strewn all over the novel, illuminate Clarissa’s multitude of identities; in addition to their reinforcing her status as a member of respectable, fashionable society, they are evocative of Sally’s ghost body, Clarissa’s participation in the masculine economic sphere, her idyllic girlhood, and her status as a wife. And Clarissa’s ultimate failure to either collapse her plurality of sexualities and identities, or enfold herself within one of these categories, appears to speak to Cixous’ lamentation for the lack of “a universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history” (Cixous 414). However, indeed, it is possible to posit Clarissa Dalloway as a universal woman figure, or feminine sexual identity, in light of the precarious, queer spaces she occupies in a double time. As a married woman, she is a wife but knows the burning desire for a female body. Nevertheless, she is not purely lesbian because this desire is directed towards a ghost body that is not there. She is a mother, but estranged from her daughter. And finally, her female family members are absent, with only the pained loss of a mother and sister lingering in the backdrop. Everything about her is elusive; even as a hostess, she disappears momentarily, leading Peter to inquire “Where’s Clarissa?” (186). This verbal invocation of Clarissa is suggestive of more than her physical whereabouts. Just as Clarissa’s husband assures himself of his wife’s identity by attempting to cement it by physical gifts, Peter desires to “fix” Clarissa in place via his male gaze. Clarissa, by refusing to possess a decipherable sexual identity, posits a threat to male characters in proximity by her very existence.

But Clarissa’s plurality of identities is impenetrable by the male gaze and physical or verbal signifiers of containment. Significantly,
Clarissa does not “name” what she is; she does not even recognize her own self during her performance of hostess. Perhaps Clarissa, somewhat consciously, rejects all limitations and imprisoning labels; she is not one or the other. Bell surmises: “There is so much reported thinking going on in the heads of so many characters with virtually no guidance from the impartial narrator as to what we should be thinking that Clarissa Dalloway hardly seems to be a protagonist but instead is a unifying device around which other characters’ thoughts cohere” (Bell 94). Thus, the barely perceptible gray line that delineates a distinction between Clarissa as all-identities and nonidentity is what opens up spaces and possibilities for the female body, sexuality, and feminine identity. Middleton finds that:

If the nature of the artist is to transmute personal experience and feeling into a public act, Clarissa Dalloway is certainly an artist, and Virginia Woolf’s novel a portrait of the artist as a woman in middle age. The fundamental action of Mrs. Dalloway is to elucidate the mechanisms of Clarissa’s thoughts and actions and to chart the ways in which her existence profoundly controverts the ideology and power relations of her cultural sphere (Middleton 36).

Woolf, despite her claim in A Room of One’s Own that feminine writing requires a certain bodily mechanism freed of economic limitations and masculine language, contradicts herself in her portrayal of Clarissa, as well as herself as narrator in The London Scene. For, through Clarissa and Woolf, the reader comes to view the private spheres of women who, “according to the patriarchal ideology of the day as well as her own figure[s] in the world, was not imagined to have any artistic feeling at all” (Middleton 36), figures who flit in and out of the past and present, queering layers of time
and spaces. Implicitly (and contradicting her own claims), Woolf’s fictional text and text that employs fiction criticize women who are bound to a patriarchal structure where facets including one’s profession, finances, and heterosexuality supposedly limit one’s identity.

In fact, Woolf revolts against this system, implanting in Clarissa’s world a feminine sphere imbued with suggestions and meanings that are irreducible by external influences. Clarissa, whose plurality of identities includes that of artist, destabilizes not only a heterosexual, patriarchal structure, but the very form of art itself. She does not create art in the traditional sense, nor is she aware of her art; hence, the product exists intact, outside of the society in which she is placed. Woolf’s heroine lives in the house of her husband. Presumably, she does not have an income. Yet, she creates; it is not fictional writing, but nonetheless, her memories are a form of art that refuses the limitations of masculine structure and language, and are expressive of “life as viewed by a unique individual, and impress that view of life on the art’s observers. Clarissa Dalloway, as a woman, is an outsider to the male-dominated realm of official art; therefore the art she does create, which she is compelled to create by her Self, cannot but be revolutionary in form” (Middleton 45). However, Middleton also claims that as “Clarissa’s intuitive completion of Septimus’ suicide rescues that act from the oblivion to which it might otherwise have been consigned, so Woolf’s creation rescues Clarissa, or someone like her, from the same oblivion, at the same time serving to erase the isolation felt by women artists excluded from the male intellectual tradition” (Middleton 53). It is not so much that Clarissa rescues a character from oblivion, and is
consequently saved from that same fate; this seems to indicate that women artists feel the need to be included in a male intellectual tradition, and it reinforces a heteronormative patriarchal structure.

Rather, what is truly revolutionary of Woolf’s text is that a female artist, one far from traditional, utilizes tools previously consigned only to male writers. Woolf, in *A Room of One’s Own*, speaks of the need for freedom from an external, male world to create feminine writing, to create works that brim of poetry. However, Woolf’s fiction in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The London Scene* make palpable that it is not only financial independence, language, and the way in which it is employed that contribute to the creation of feminine writing. French feminist thought vividly outlines the potential and limitations of the most essential tool to *écriture féminine*, the woman’s body. While the impact and influences of historical, societal, and cultural contexts on the body that produces the flesh, the work, is undeniable, feminist scholars must not overly lay emphasis on the body, or linguistic structure and form that may give rise to more exclusion and limitations. It is the content of contradictions, and silences within Woolf’s texts through which one glimpses possibilities for change, and a space for readers and writers to embody a plurality of identities; a space budding with blossoms that manifests what feminine writing is, and offers hope for bodies and voices in future feminist texts.

In the queered space of double time, Clarissa Dalloway exists in the past and present simultaneously, breaking traditional structures of masculine time and linear narrative by invoking ghost bodies. Stories untold and bodies in memories are ghosts brimming, wandering on the peripheries of these two interlaced spheres.
Ultimately, Clarissa cannot reconcile with one, fixed identity, which ensues in a self-deconstruction (and reformulating) of identities. In effect, Clarissa “ghosts” herself, Othering her body, or bodies. But she, undoubtedly, is rooted in real time in a masculine economic sphere, as is substantiated with the ironic, accumulated mass of labels she has collected: that of wife, daughter, sister, mother, and hostess. Hence, Clarissa Dalloway is, all at once, both a ghost and non-ghost, and she survives the gaps of her body to emerge as a true flesh-and-blood ghost. There is no neat wrapping up by the ending of the novel although Clarissa is there, for she is silent, always present in the ideas of those who perceive her, a receiver of gazes unable to read her. This essence of all and nothingness is what crafts through Woolf’s heroine a universal feminine figure, or a figure of feminine writing embodied. Surely the glimmers of such an idea, the possibility of a beginning, emerge through Clarissa who may well echo Cixous’s Medusa: “I am for you what you want me to be at the moment you look at me in a way you’ve never seen me before” (Cixous 429).
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Abstract

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In Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf’s protagonist disrupts notions of the real and unreal, inverting time through the vehicle of memory. In her narrative, Clarissa breaks traditional structures of masculine time and linear narrative by remembering and invoking. She embodies performances of mother, daughter, sister, wife, and hostess. However, her multitude of performances do not cement an identity that “sticks,” but rather reinforce her incapability, or refusal, to fully occupy any one role that is expected of her. Clarissa’s female body, her memories, and “ghost” bodies trouble the concept of feminine identity. Woolf thus presents a character who performs a plurality of identities in queered time and spaces; within each identity category are gaps that allude to the possibility of nonidentity. These unresolved spaces manifest what supposedly should not, and cannot, exist in the forms of real and unreal bodies. Thus, Clarissa as all-identities and nonidentity opens up possibilities for the female body, sexuality, and feminine identity. Ultimately, she does not resolve her problematic position in a masculine economic sphere, which ensues in a self-deconstruction (and reformulating) of identities. In effect, Clarissa Others her body, or bodies, emerging as a true flesh-and-blood ghost. Her performances suggest possibilities for a universal feminine figure, or a figure of feminine writing embodied.

Key Words: Feminine writing, Ghosts, Plurality of identities, Body, Memory

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