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"Bodily Territories: Lust, Landscape and the Struggle for Female Space in Woolf's *The Voyage Out* and Atwood's *Surfacing*"

In her lengthy critical essay *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf inquires into the absence of the female genius in the literary canon. As she mourns this lack of feminine representation on her own bookshelves—"looking about the shelves for books that were not there"—Woolf questions the opposition between what she refers to as the lyrically "suggestive" female sentence, and the dominant, subject driven, "I" of the male sentence (AROO, 45, 98). Woolf carves out a creative space for feminine narrative and focuses primarily on the landscape that is dominated by the "I". This "I" representing both the masculine epic narrative and a metaphorical phallus, obliterates the surrounding landscape of the novel. This landscape signifies the role of women in literature; ever present, yet, not at the forefront, or well developed. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf encounters a masculine text with palpable disdain. As her hypothetical villain "Mr. A." composes a novel that serves as an example of the metaphorical dominant signifier "I", Woolf, with desperation, attempts to see beyond the "I" and to read the landscape behind:

> "But after reading a chapter or two a shadow seemed to lie across the page. 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" (100).

Because it represents the women that remain hidden in an opaque shroud of historical non-representation, this landscape becomes territory for the modern woman to reclaim. This landscape, not merely a literary space, is metaphorically linked to the territorial claiming of the female body due to patriarchal domination. The female body manifests itself throughout literature as a blank canvass onto which future generations are inscribed. This body, much like the body of a literary text, insures immortality to the author. It is in Woolf's own writing that the landscape is at the forefront and it is the female body that she seeks to reclaim in her first novel *The Voyage Out*. Woolf unknowingly passed this torch, this desire to explore literary and bodily territory, to Canadian Author Margaret Atwood. It is in her second novel, *Surfacing*, that Atwood presents a thematically similar take on territorial struggles in the framework of modern marriage. Both women, though separated by decades of supposed feminist progress, reveal that marriage remains a game of territorial occupation.

In *The Voyage Out*, Woolf presents a heroic, but naive protagonist that faces the possibility of losing herself to the conventions of marriage. Woolf begins the novel, arguably the most conventional fictional prose in her catalog, with a literal and figurative departure from post-industrial England. As the ship makes its way across the Atlantic, the cast is removed from traditional patriarchal societal structure, yet the psychological imprint of hegemony remains. Rachel experiences a bildungsroman in which she seeks to establish her undeveloped identity only to have it threatened by her impending marriage to Terence. This threat of marriage and convention marks the end of Rachel's odyssey.

Throughout their voyage, isolated at sea, the characters experience much sexual tension

due in part to their new surroundings. Early on in the voyage, Richard Dalloway, a conservative British politician, seizes a moment with Rachel in order to assert his physical and social dominance over her. As a storm rages outside, Dalloway kisses the naive Rachel, who, upon confessing the incident to her Aunt Helen shortly after, reveals that she had no idea that men desired to have women. This "desire," not merely a sexual desire, is a compulsion to claim or to occupy. As Rachel learns about sex, she becomes aware of its territorial implications. It is after this realization Rachel suffers from an all too real nightmare: "She dreamt that she was walking down a long tunnel…at length the tunnel became a vault and she was trapped in it…wherever she turned she was alone with a deformed man… whose face was pitted like an animal…" (72). Terrence, a struggling author vacationing in South America and Rachel's eventual fiancé, expresses the same need as Dalloway for physical assertion immediately after his first encounter with Rachel. Terrence, with the blessing of Helen who is intending on having Rachel married off before her father returns, takes Rachel to the edge of a seaside cliff in order to view the fish below the surface of the water. Rachel is immediately seized by the calmness of the water below and at once drops the largest pebble she can find in order to disrupt the surface. This break in convention is not merely a childish act; it is Woolf's homage to creative disruption of modern thought. Rachel takes, quite literally, her future in her own hands and changes the surface of the water forever. Ironically, it is at this moment that Terrence feels his first compulsion to claim Rachel: "her body was very attractive to him…. For the moment he could not think what he was saying. He was overcome with the desire to hold her in his arms" (201).

As they journey down river, the characters on the boat finally reach what they have sought: a native village, which appears to be inhabited primarily by women—a subliminal portrayal of a feminine matriarchal utopia. Much like the incident on the cliff, the subversive

threat of the matriarchal village incites a rebellious struggle within Terence to assert his masculine identity and it takes an epic epiphany for Rachel to discern his motives. As she and Terence become one emotionally, Rachel's physical and intellectual being is in danger of being occupied. When they make a brief pause in their journey down the river, Terence and Rachael undergo their emotional fusion: "'This is happiness, I suppose.' And aloud to Terence she spoke, 'This is happiness.' On the heels of her words he answered 'This is happiness'"(276). This parroting of emotional expression marks Rachel's first steps to an understanding of the domineering relationship she will enter into if she marries Terence. It is immediately following this statement that Rachel's lyrical epiphany takes place:

> "A hand dropped abrupt as an iron on Rachel's shoulder; it might have been a bolt from heaven. She fell beneath it…. Helen was upon her…Over her loomed two great heads, the head of a man and woman, of Terence and Helen. Broken fragments of speech came down to her on the ground. She thought she heard them speak of love and then of marriage" (276).

Though not the first time, Helen and Terrence discuss the possible coupling of he and Rachel. It is the realization that Terrence desires her, as Dalloway did during the voyage that brings about Rachel's ultimate demise. Much like the metaphorical underworld that threatens to consume Rachel after her encounter with Dalloway, this epiphany leaves Rachel with a choice: submission or release. After their return from the village, Rachel takes a fever, and, as she vacillates in and out of consciousness, Rachel is aware of the threat to her body and mind if she emerges from her fever. The figures at her bedside, though caretakers, appear threatening to her: "At last the faces went further away; she fell into a deep pool of sticky water, which eventually closed over her head… while all her tormentors thought that she was dead, she was not dead, but curled at the

bottom of the sea" (331).

It is when Rachel envisions herself outside of the patriarchal society in which she is intellectually, emotionally and sexually imprisoned, that she realizes her impending marriage to Terrence would mean mental colonization. Rachel, unable and unwilling to surface, is aware that relinquishing her body is the only way to preserve it.

Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood explores the possibility of reclaiming the female body in her novel *Surfacing*. Like Rachael, the unnamed Surfacer seeks her identity in a watery, maternal underworld; however, rather than sacrificing herself in order to save her identity from patriarchal society and marriage, the nameless protagonist in Atwood's epic rises to the surface to the potentiality of reclaiming her body and mind.

Written nearly five decades after *The Voyage Out*, *Surfacing* continues Woolf's inquiry into the role of marriage in a modern society. The unnamed female protagonist of *Surfacing* is very much like Rachel, but with a distinct past. A successful children's storybook illustrator, the Surfacer is very much socially inept, but, due to her experiences, has developed survival skills for both the practical and the emotional.

The Surfacer embarks on a journey through the colonial Canadian landscape in search of her father who has been missing for several weeks. Along with her are her live-in boyfriend Joe and his friends Anna and David, a married couple whose relationship is a rather pessimistic treatment of modern marriage. The Surfacer's past, though hidden from the characters surrounding her, is presented through mild stream of consciousness. What the reader discerns from the Surfacer's internal monologue is that before she became involved with Joe, while she was still in college, the Surfacer began a sexual relationship with her drawing professor, a man who was married to another woman. The unnamed professor impregnated the Surfacer and

forced her to abort their baby. It appears that the Surfacer does not mourn the child, rather, she expresses emotional discomfort at having been impregnated and literally occupied by a foreign entity and then forced to abort it. Both the impregnation and abortion were acts of subjugation and the utter lack of bodily control, rather than the acts themselves, is what haunts the Surfacer. For example, as she remembers her abortion, the Surfacer's previous wedding to another man disrupts her stream of consciousness and the two events become literally indistinguishable. The abortion, coerced and yet voluntary, is likened to the marriage because of its relevance to her inability to occupy her own territory.

Toward the end of their stay in the rural Canadian landscape, Joe proposes that the Surfacer marry him when they return to the city. Much like Terrence as he begins to desire Rachel's body after she impulsively breaks the surface of the water with a stone, Joe attempts to assert his physical power over the Surfacer:

> "He had moved closer, he was being logical, he was threatening me with something 'No' I said… It was because I didn't want to, that's why it would gratify him, it would be a sacrifice..." (87).

Joe's desire to marry the Surfacer is not merely an attempt to prove his love to her, in fact, he himself never admits to loving her throughout the novel. Instead, Joe subconsciously craves convention in the form of a monogamous relationship in which he is the singular occupier. The Surfacer refuses because she is wary of his motives:

> "Prove your love, they say. You really want to marry me, let me fuck you instead. You really want to fuck, let me marry you instead. As long as there's a victory, some flag I can wave, parade I can have in my head" (87).

As she slowly stakes her claim to the landscape both within and around her, the Surfacer

searches for her father in a metaphorical underworld. Certain that he has been studying cave paintings in an area that was recently flooded, the Surfacer is faced with no other choice than to search the underwater caves for his body. As she is diving, the Surfacer encounters a formless black mass with vacant eyes: "I gulped breath, stomach and lungs constricting, my hair sticky like weeds, the lake was horrible, it was filled with death, it was touching me" (143). Unlike the calmness Rachel feels in her underwater katabasis, the Surfacer is terrified and emerges, unable to relinquish her body to the same watery death that consumed Rachel.

Several days following Joe's proposal, the threat of the encroaching American and Canadian industrial developers triggers her resolute urge to protect her territory. The Surfacer, aware that she is fertile, seduces Joe in order to regain physical control of her body. Just as Rachel made her mark with the pebble on the surface of the water, Atwood's protagonist seizes her only chance to take back what the men of her past have claimed and make it her own.

Surfacing pays homage to *The Voyage Out* not only with its thematic similarities pertaining to marriage, but it also treads the same linguistic path as Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. Like the "I" of Mr. A's sentence, a shadow lies across the northern Toronto landscape in the form of colonial discourse. The linguistic barriers between the English and French speaking locals is likened to a colonizer and colonized relationship throughout the novel and the Surfacer's inability to comprehend emotion defined by words.

Much like Woolf's inquiry into the lyrical suggestive, Atwood's novel questions language as a means of psychological domination; however, Atwood's protagonist rebels against total linguistic form. Throughout the novel, the Surfacer sympathizes with the French speaking rural natives and yet, once she understands that they too threaten her landscape, she understands that though they may appear to be the dominated faction, they are not innocent: "My country

sold….the people were sold along with the land and the animals, a bargain, sale…les soldes they called them, sellouts" (133). The Surfacer vows to found a colony with her unborn child and never teach him language because this absence of linguistic influence will preserve him and "make the truth possible" (160). What this ambiguous "truth" represents is uncertain, but it is clear that, to the Surfacer, the only solution to physical and mental domination, is a reversion back to a matriarchy; a clean slate. Therefore, her child not only represents the child she aborted at the request of her previous lover, but also the potential for a matriarchal genesis without the threat of man's influence.

Though each woman rebels differently, it is the same rebellion. Rachel, due to the social constraints of the time sacrifices everything in order to prevent the claiming of her entire self. The Surfacer, on the other hand, rises to the Surface in order to embrace potentiality. Reclaiming their bodies means not only taking control of themselves physically, but also creatively. Both Rachel and The Surfacer, through their sacrifices and victories, assure more territory for the women they inspire. By acquiring this freedom to create, Rachel and the Surfacer not only salvage their bodies from the oppressive patriarchal system, they reclaim their minds from the imaginary borders of masculine domination.

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