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A Multiplicity of Singularities:

Isolation and Interdependence in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*

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Michael Joyce

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To all the Rhodas of this earth,

who long for the other side of the world where the swallow dips her wings.[1]

We can be the cork, and the foam, and the girl.

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[1] Woolf, Virginia. *The Waves.* 1931. Harvest Books. 1978. Print

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The Waves *chronicles an England that emerged from the First World War with the end of its colonial hegemony, the breakdown of traditional relations between the sexes, and the frustrations of individuals… they now live in an England that is no longer a model that the world can follow or its citizens believe in."*

—Michael J. Hoffman and Ann ter Haar, **"**Whose Books Once Influenced Mine"

"Humanity is a rupture of being."

—Judith Butler paraphrasing Emmanuel Levinas, "Precarious Life."

"What is at issue is not uncertainty at all, but rather indeterminancy… there are not inherent properties and there are not inherent boundaries of things that we want to call entities before the measurement… the very act of measurement produces determinate boundaries and properties of things."

—Karen Barad, "Matter feels, converses, suffers, desires, yearns and remembers"

In *The Waves,* a 1931 novel told through the interwoven voices of six characters,

Virginia Woolf writes the following passage from the perspective of Rhoda:

> What I say is perpetually contradicted. Each time the door opens I am interrupted.
> I am not yet twenty-one. I am to be broken. I am to be derided all my life. I am to
> be cast up and down among these men and women, with their twitching faces,
> with their lying tongues, like a cork on a rough sea… I am the foam that sweeps
> and fills the uttermost rims of the rocks with whiteness; I am also a girl, here in
> this room (107).

Rhoda states that her words are contradicted by others, but her words are also

contradictions in and of themselves. Rhoda is a girl standing in a room. But she is also

foam filling the innermost rims of rocks. Rhoda here defines herself in relation to "these

men and women"— to the wider society in which she is living. This society is the sea she

is caught within. Virginia Woolf is transfixed by the sea. She is equally drawn to the

cork, continually emerging and submerging in the swell of the waves. Yet the self—the

cork— is at the same time the foam, spreading over the rocks. To Woolf, 'the self' is a

multiplicity of singularities. What anyone else sees when they look at someone can come

nowhere close to resembling the complicated and contradicting fragments that make up a

person. What in large part drove Virginia Woolf's writing was the urge to set a person's

singularities on the page, without simplifying, without compromising any of the

complexity and nuance of their character.

Woolf speaks explicitly of this impulse in her 1924 essay, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs.

Brown." She starts by pointing out that while most people's interest in character

diminishes with age, a novelist's does not. Novelists, she argues, are not interested in

character simply for practical purposes. They feel that there is something inherently and

ceaselessly interesting in character itself: "The study of character becomes to them an

absorbing pursuit; to impart character an obsession" (Woolf 3). For Woolf, this obsession

is heightened because the generation of writers before her have, by laying "an enormous stress upon the fabric of things," failed to capture the intimate realities of character itself (16). Woolf points out that the Edwardians "have given us a house in the hope that we may be able to deduce the human beings who live there," and for the new generation of modernist writers, this is not enough (Woolf 16).

It isn't that Woolf is not interested in material things. She does in fact believe material things can be utilized to develop a character, just not in the way the Edwardians think. The British writers of the late 19th century describe solid objects in place of divulging the contents of a character's mind— it is this with which Woolf disagrees, for it implies that everything can be encompassed by what is tangible. In 1929, Woolf writes in her diary: "Now is life very solid or very shifting? I am haunted by the two contradictions" (qtd. in Stewart 138). In much of Woolf's writing, she explores this question by treating solid objects as catalysts for philosophical musings, something that prompts a character's mind to digress or their trajectory to shift, such as the titular subject of her short story "The Mark on the Wall" or a lump of sea glass in "Solid Objects." By acting as jumping-off points, these random objects highlight the self's own fluidity.

Part of why *The Waves* is considered to be arguably the most challenging to read of Woolf's works, is that this technique is absent. *Materiality* is absent. Only in the interludes between sections where a scene of an oceanfront house is repeated, do solid objects appear. There is a line in the story "Solid Objects" that reads, "nothing was so solid, so living, so hard, red, hirsute and virile as these two bodies for miles and miles of sea and sandhill" (Woolf). Take away the first part of that sentence and we are left with "miles and miles of sea and sandhill." That is what reading *The Waves* feels like. The

narrative excluding the interludes consists entirely of philosophical digressions, one tumbling into the next, for we never leave the characters' minds. In this "play-poem," as Woolf called *The Waves,* material items do not explain character. Contradictions do.

Or perhaps simultaneities is a better word, for Woolf shows us that theories that seem logically impossible in fact offer the most accurate view. In her 1923 essay, "Poetry, Fiction and the Future," she writes that "the modern mind is full of monstrous, hybrid, unmanageable emotions," listing ruminations that would generate such emotions: "That the earth is 3,000,000,000 years; that human life lasts but a second; that the capacity of the human mind is nevertheless boundless; that life is infinitely beautiful yet repulsive; that one's fellow creatures are adorable but disgusting; that science and religion have between them destroyed belief; that all bonds of union have broken" (Woolf 75). Woolf employs simultaneity as a tool, as a means of thinking about a subject. But what's clear in this passage is that Woolf is not grappling with character on an individual level alone. These examples allude to a relationship between the self and a wider social context. She is deeply interested in character, but she is also a social thinker. She would likely argue that it is impossible to examine one without exploring the other.

Woolf sees a person as a set of fluid, contrasting singularities that is also reflected on a larger scale. Her idea is that we, meaning all human beings, are connected: "that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern" (qtd. in Chun 53). She explores this conviction in her autobiographic essay "A Sketch of the Past" when she describes the whole world as a work of art: "we are parts of the work of art…we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself… one's life is not confined to one's body and what one says and does; one is living all the time in relation to certain background rods or

conceptions" (qtd. Chun 53). Is this bond between one and many good or bad? The answer is, of course, a contradiction: it is both, and neither.

The problem as I see it, is that we as people commonly understand ourselves the way we understand particles. Two particles of matter cannot be in the same place at the same time, for they are "localized entities" (Barad). If mental states were like particles, a person could not desire something and despise it simultaneously. If identities were like particles, we could possess not multiple differing singularities but one alone. But what if human beings function not like particles, but like waves? Waves are not entities; they are disturbances in fields. Quantum physicist Karen Barad tells us to think about how if you drop two rocks in a pond, you will see an overlapping set of concentric circles. Unlike particles, waves *can* occupy the same place at the same time. "That is what they are famous for doing" (Barad). With this in mind, Virginia Woolf's life-long affinity with waves comes into focus. Woolf's personal philosophies rest on the conviction that we each occupy many positions at the same time: "We are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself." We are capable of holding contradictions. We are simultaneous. We can desire something and despise it. We can be a girl in a room and a cork in a rough sea. We are not confined to our bodies, for we are not localized entities so much as we are a constantly shifting compilation of overlapping disturbances.

Rhoda in *The Waves* refers to her struggle to move through the world as reflecting "part of the emerging monster to whom we are attached" (Woolf 65). Though to varying extents, all the characters in the novel experience frustration and pain associated with this tie to one another and to their social context. The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas theorized about a human's ties to "the other," meaning any other person, writing that "My

ethical relation of love for the other stems from the fact that the self cannot survive by itself alone, cannot find meaning within its own being-in-the-world" (qtd. in Butler 132). I believe this idea is central to *The Waves*. The narrative is told through the intertwining voices of six school friends: Bernard, Susan, Neville, Jinny, Louis and Rhoda. There is also a seventh named Percival who is significant as an object of admiration, but I will not be concentrating on him, since we do not hear from him directly and my focus here is on the narrative voices. The characters refer to one another as friends, though their connection feels less the result of conscious choice than the byproduct of proximity. Nevertheless, they need each other.

As small children, there is a natural, comforting unity in their bond. The characters are like waves, flowing into and over one another. There are no edges to their identities; they are not yet bounded and defined. The novel's first three pages can be disorienting for a new reader for this reason. Every sentence, the voice changes:

> "I hear a sound," said Rhoda, "cheep, chirp; cheep, chirp; going up and down."
> "I see a globe," said Neville, "hanging down in a drop against the enormous flanks of some hill."
> "I see a crimson tassle," said Jinny, "twisted with gold threads."
> "I hear something stamping," said Louis (Woolf 9).

One voice after another, the cycle varying and continuing. This proximity of their voices evokes a feeling of closeness, of harmony. Then there's a shift. Louis speaks for a whole page, Jinny and Susan for half a page each after him. The space between "said Neville" and "said Jinny," for example, keeps widening as their turns speaking grow longer. When each character begins speaking for two, three, four pages at a time, the effect is one of independence, constructing thoughts alone. Woolf's structuring choice mirrors her narrative one— the concept of individuality takes hold of her characters. They learn to

understand themselves as distinct from one another, each a particle inhabiting its own immutable space.

How we view ourselves relationally actually mirrors not just the conventions of particles, but of words. The 19th century Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure observed that units of sound are not characterized by their own positive qualities, but rather, simply by the fact that they are distinct, different from the other units of sound: "Phonemes are above all else opposing, relative entities" (119). Children largely come to understand who they are by recognizing who they are not— *he is loud, I am not. She can do a cartwheel, I cannot.* Our process of defining ourselves is one of identifying our differences from those around us. Bernard evokes this idea as the end of the novel: "But we were all different. The wax — the virginal wax that coats the spine melted in different patches for each of us… We suffered terribly as we became separate bodies" (Woolf 241). When this separation is understood through a lens of what a person lacks, the natural result is that around people they will feel inadequate, lesser, but alone they will feel even emptier.

Literary critic Laurie Leach puts her finger on the tension Woolf depicts in *The Waves* between longing for and despising both connection and individuation: "All must acknowledge the reality of both human isolation and interdependence…Neither absolute individuality nor perfect identity with others is possible or ideal. Friendship threatens individuality, but an authentic identity cannot be maintained in isolation either" (59). Here again is a contradiction, and an incredibly complex one at that. In order to truly portray what it means to live with these warring wants, a writer needs to implicitly understand the desires for both independence and dependence as two of the infinite number of wave-like disturbances that yield a human being. Virginia Woolf does not see

anyone, anything, as a localized entity. The question for her becomes, how can she get language to accurately reflect this intricately overlapping wave-like relationship between a person's many selves, and between these many selves and the society they inhabit?

Woolf makes it clear that the tools of the Edwardians are not adequate for the task. These tools have already been swept into the past with "smashing and crashing" as modernists have begun, she writes, "to destroy the very foundations and rules of literary society. Signs of this are everywhere apparent. Grammar is violated; syntax disintegrated" (Woolf 18). No longer confined by the literary traditions of the past, it is language itself that proves the largest obstacle. Woolf's relationship with the medium of words was always complex. She was a prolific writer from a very young age—written words were always a "natural means of expression" for her (Eisenberg 253).

Yet language endlessly frustrates her as well—her sense of it as an artificial convention seems to mirror her critical view of the patriarchal, manufactured modes of social life. Woolf sees language as most often rigid, dividing a world that should be unified. In *The Waves,* N. Eisenberg points out, Woolf makes the case that language is employed to mark and serve our individual selves as opposed to our communal and united selves (254). But Woolf does not blame language itself entirely. Language does have an inherent rigidness, an inadequacy to fully express complex emotions. But language is more pliable than we are taught to believe. Virginia Woolf sees its restrictiveness as lying primarily in the way human beings manipulate it. Woolf's response to this perception of hers is put best by Judith Allan: "Her problems with titles, with definitions, and with the limitations and hierarchies inherent in genres, lead to her

constant attempts to transform them – to find a less constrained mode of expression, and ultimately, to express the contradictions inherent in words, in life" (52).

Woolf sees humans as suffering from a prescribed individuation, and language is befalling the same fate. In her book *Virginia Woolf and the Politics of Language,* Allan quotes Virginia Woolf as writing, "a word is not a single and separate entity, but is part of other words. It is not a word indeed until it is part of a sentence. Words belong to each other…how can we combine the old words in new orders so that they survive, so that they create beauty, so that they tell the truth? That is the question" (44). Replace 'words' with 'human beings' and Woolf's social philosophy is as apparent as her linguistic one. Virginia Woolf's fixation on capturing the interplay between self and society is inseparable from her intellectual and literal wrestles with language. A successful portrayal of the former requires deconstructing the constraints we impose on language, without concealing the grueling work that doing so takes. She accomplishes this in part by calling attention to the constructed nature of text, to texts as words, by using interruptions such as 'but' and 'yet' as well as ellipses, parentheses and other self-conscious references. And again, she is rejecting the particle idea of everything being whole and distinct from all else.

Noticing the way Woolf's sociological and ontological perspectives mirror her observations of language, prompted me to think more about linguistics in a metaphorical light. de Saussure conceptualized language as a structured system of linguistic signs or units that organize the mass of confused thoughts that fill our minds (120). Language is our tool to understand not just other people but ourselves. The key point de Saussure makes is that the value of a sign is determined by the other linguistic signs around it: a

word's importance grows or shrinks in relation to its external environment within the language system, not from its internal components (117). Put this idea in a human context, and it observes that in terms of how people are treated in society, each individual person does not determine their own worth, nor is that worth fixed. This is a large part of why living within a social framework causes so much suffering— none of us have full control over how others sees us, control over whether we are elevated or debased. Our positions can shift constantly without our literally having a say.

Yet there is a natural and beautiful element to this lack of individual control that we fail to recognize. Linguistic meanings are not independent, because they need other linguistic signs within their language system to determine what they are (de Saussure 117). That is the problem, but also the solution. It is all in how we approach and interact with this reality. Generally, we are terrified by this lack of control over our status, and so engage in a struggle to define others to prevent them from doing the same to us. But Woolf tries to understand this dependence differently, as a connection we are meant to have, that we need to be whole. To be happy. Like de Saussure, she observes that words are not separate entities, but phrases this in a simple, more comforting way: "words belong to each other." However, we are latching together words, latching ourselves to others, in the wrong way. In a forceful, even violent way. *The Waves* is her means of exploring different modes of fusing words, fusing people.

In doing so, Woolf discards the traditional demarcations of genre, dialogue, exposition, narrative arc and character relationships. She does this increasingly throughout her career, but never are these modes more warped and disregarded than in *The Waves,* the seventh of her ten novels. Here, the lives of six characters are set against

temporality and their individual consciousnesses— images from one mind leap to another to carry the reader through the novel. There are no demarcations between one mind and another aside from the simple 'Bernard said,' 'Susan said.' Furthermore, no boundary exists between what might be spoken aloud and what might be a character's internal thoughts—what seems private sometimes, but not always, elicits a response. But is this internal monologue or literal dialogue then, or does an extrasensory current connect them? Are they tapping into a universal consciousness? These are the kinds of questions with which Woolf prompts readers to grapple.

The inability to categorize these six voices has created a conundrum for anyone who tries to write about them. There simply is no word to define their mode or modes of expression. Woolf has crafted a way of communicating and processing that we cannot fully comprehend. The fact that she uses 'said' indicates that their speech really is, at some level, speech. Yet the only times we feel *certain* the characters are speaking out loud to one another are in two separate passages of dialogue between Louis and Rhoda, the couple times in adulthood that all six friends reunite and Louis and Rhoda bond over their feelings of exclusion.

For the most part, a character picks up on something the character proceeding has just expressed, giving the initial impression that they have heard the other and are now responding. But the nature of what they are saying is deeply personal and never fully responded to— these speeches feel very much like the characters talking to themselves, or directing their reflections to the universe. For this reason, many critics call them soliloquies. This I think is more accurate than dubbing them colloquies, but really, they are some transcendent hybrid of the two. Scholar Allison Hild puts it well: "If this is

choral speech, then each individual has his or her own range, and the tone of the novel is one of harmonies, not unities" (70). Each harmony is a distinct set of notes that *can* be played on its own, but is not meant to be. When layered, harmonies interweave and play off of one another. This is the nature of *The Waves'* six voices— these minds are separate and yet connected. Another simultaneity.

In her critical essay on *The Waves,* Hild writes, "The circularity, the source for so many of the novel's rhythms, houses a daring exploration of consciousness developed by way of fresh language. In an attempt to transform ideas more immediately into images, Woolf s language refuses the old, stale formulations of many of her contemporaries" (77). Hild credits the circularity created by the novel's rhythms for much of the novel's rule-breaking innovation. I agree, but what is so interesting is that these rhythms and repetitions are at the same time creating an unmistakable beat, a new structure. In the background of this near-mystical, unspooling narrative, is the constant and unrelenting march of time. *The Waves* opens with the sun rising over the ocean, and by the end of the book it has sunken beneath the horizon.

But time is less marked by the movement of the sun than it is by the waves incessantly pounding the land in the interludes that separate each leap to a few years in the future. Woolf gives us no shortage of images that stand in stark contrast to the winding, fluid nature of the characters' voices, in the way they evoke a steady, unrelenting rhythm: "Gradually as the sky whitened a dark line lay on the horizon dividing the sea from the sky and the grey cloth became barred with thick strokes moving, one after another, beneath the surface, following each other, pursuing each other,

perpetually" (7). There is that division, the disruption of unity that Woolf deplores, and these intense bars (Hours? Years?) rushing toward the viewer.

The waves appear in every interlude, creating a distinct dependability. Yet a structure born out of repetition extends beyond the interludes into the characters' ruminations as well. For one, the image of waves occurs again and again throughout the novel. But even more obvious are the various images-slash-phrases associated with a certain character that become their refrain. Louis's image is that of a chained beast stamping on the shore: "I hear something stamping… a great beast's foot is chained. It stamps, and stamps, and stamps" (Woolf 5). Rhoda's motif is a tiger leaping, or about to leap. Iterations of the same phrase are so consistently returned to from beginning to end that they also reinforce a sense of a structure, a repetitive beat.

While each character possesses their own refrain, there are moments where one character evokes an image belonging to another, or where one motif is integrated with a second, such as when Louis uses metaphors to explain how he feels in comparison to the others: "I am also the caged tiger, and you are the keepers with red-hot bars" (Woolf 128). Here Louis draws on his own refrain of a beast trapped, "chained," yet explicitly adopts Rhoda's tiger image. More generally, when the narrative shifts from one voice to another, the succeeding character often echoes the last image from the one preceding as they turn it in a new direction, not unlike one wave continuing into the next.

This deft and frankly telepathic fluidity has something to do with a contentious split in readings of *The Waves*— a substantial minority of readers and literary critics interpret the novel's six characters as encompassing one individual. That is to say, there were never six friends who grew up together, but rather one narrator parceling out their

identity into six imagined selves in order to express the paradoxical complexity of his/her/their character. I disagree. I believe Woolf crafted six distinct characters, each with their own unique backstory, physical attributes, life events, personalities, longings and fears. Yet I would argue that nothing is clearer proof of how Woolf seeks to dissolve the propositional givens of speech, than the fact that this dispute exists. How many other authors have written a set of characters that could be plausibly boiled down to one individual? Those who view the six characters as one, are far from crazy. The boundaries between individuals are blurred for a reason, as she uses language to subvert grammatical, propositional certainty.

Psychically, emotionally, they *are* one person— Virginia Woolf. Not one hundred percent exactly, but essentially. In order to explore and express the complex and contradictory ideas, emotions, thoughts in her mind— to make rational language depict the irrational— she fragments herself. Between six individuals exist the contents of one mind. So yes, in a sense, the six are one. But I think to negate the existence of six separate people is to miss the point. I believe one reason Woolf created multiple narrators is to circumvent the restrictions of language that would make it difficult to express such contradictory identities and impulses in one person.

But I think the second reason for this fragmentation is to make the case that *we are not as separate and different as we think we are.* Let's return to Woolf's comment: "A word is not a single and separate entity, but is part of other words. It is not a word indeed until it is part of a sentence" (Allan 44). It is crucial to remember that Woolf utilizes a linguistic framework to develop her own social theory. Woolf believes that we are permanently linked, and yet suffer feelings of intense loneliness because we fail to

recognize it. The older we get, the more we forget the natural unity we have with one another. Louis, Rhoda, Jinny, Susan, Neville and Bernard are six unique human beings who share so much more than any one of them realizes. They battle the same emotions because they are impacted by the same contradicting internal and external impulses.

Through these six narrative voices, Virginia Woolf brings to light an ontological entanglement: human beings naturally contain a multiplicity of selves and these selves are bound to all other selves. Yet most human beings live their lives in constant conflict internally and with one another, feeling simultaneously suffocated and isolated. I am fascinated by this entanglement, the fraught aspects of our multiplicity of wave-like disturbances, because recognizing the forces creating them is essential to understanding Woolf's approach to accurately portraying a character on the page. The elements I have mentioned— Rhoda as a cork in the sea, people as parts of a work of art, the notion of 'the monster' to which human beings are attached, the fluid movement from voice to voice in *The Waves,* its march of time and rhythmic beat, the characters' shared longings for independence and unity— are all the result of Woolf's engagement with this ontological entanglement. It's important then, to dissect it and identify the forces that compose it.

The first piece of it, as I conceptualize it, is that each person is pulled by two contradicting internal forces. One is the desire to be her own untethered self or selves— someone who makes her own decisions, who can be alone to do as she pleases, think as she pleases. The second is a longing to belong to something greater than himself. To be part of a harmonious, united community. To share in emotions, to not have to be alone in what he feels. To have admiring and understanding friends and lovers who he

understands and admires without jealousy, because none are distinct— all share joy and grief. However, if people are not distinctive, they lose the sense of having their own singularities.

Things are further complicated by two contradicting external pressures that seem to mirror the internal ones, and yet have key differences. One of these pressures is to be a successful individual—to be charismatic, to command attention, to be exceptional. To avoid being lost in the crowd. The second pressure is to conform—one should stand out but not too much. What people do and say, how they behave, how they express themselves and relate to others, must fit within a limited set of expectations. These pressures are the same for men and women in the abstract, but what fulfilling the expectations looks like in real life is different depending on gender and other social factors. But how does a person comply with these pressures simultaneously?

The first pressure is really enveloped by the second pressure. Being a likeable, self-possessed, successful individual is part of what it means to conform. Every person follows the same rules and never deviates too far in thought and behavior, and yet are not *too* similar that they are not their own separate self. These external pressures are fairly easy to identify. Ask anyone and they could probably tell you how they have been pushed to excel and be "unique," and yet are conscientious about avoiding the label "odd" or worse by making sure to follow certain implicit rules that distinguish the outsiders from the accepted. This is a balancing act walked more or less successfully by four of Woolf's six characters in *The Waves*. I think all of us still have the two internal warring desires as well, they are just rarely put into words. Perhaps it is because we don't have words to accurately express the feelings.

The internal desire to inhabit personal singularities freely appears at first to line up with the external pressure to stand out. But there is a key difference— the pressure to be an individual is all in relation to other people. People want to stand out *from* others, be successful *compared to* others. Being an individual is a conscious positionality. A person must pay attention to everyone around them in order to then fashion themselves differently in a positive light. But the internal desire is entirely different: in this context, someone is their own being because they think whatever they want to, do whatever they want to, are simply free from all constraints. To be totally uninhibited in that way, a person can't position themselves in relation to others. As soon as they do that, other people's expectations and judgments are felt by and influence a person.

It's important to note that I do not use the word *individual* in reference to the internal desire to be a free being. *Individual* is a term and concept weighted with social expectation. It also evokes the sense of being one thing. One self. The concept of the individual is exactly what Virginia Woolf pushes back against in her writing. For her, this idea is part of the oppressive patriarchal framework that undercuts the ability for there to be fluidity, unity. What *The Waves* is all about really, is that there is no one self. We each are made up of many selves. The problem is we are taught to pare ourselves down, trick ourselves into thinking we can and must be one self.

Just as the longing to be many selves is distinct from the pressure to be an individual, the innate desire to belong does not match up with the pressure to conform. Both involve being part of something bigger, but with the pressure to conform, people are not naturally uniting and living in harmony. They are deliberately subscribing to certain ways of acting and thinking that are not inherent. They are learned. On top of that, they

are responding to the pressure to be an individual, so there is a layer of constant comparing and competing to try to stand out and be different, while still remaining within this imposed uniformity. So yes, there may be a community and a like-mindedness, but if anything, it is a coalition, not a union with each other. A true union can't exist where there is competition, judgement and constant monitoring of how different a person can be. The internal desire is for unity and harmony— a naturally occurring, fluid sharing and understanding.

And yet the vast majority of people seem to push aside both internal desires in order to comply with the external pressures. In fact, the fiction writers of the 19th century devoted many of their novels and short stories to rendering the drama of conformity on the page. Woolf's favorite novelist George Eliot was one of them, as were Thomas Hardy, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Mona Caird and Kate Chopin. Works like *Tess of the d'Urbervilles,* "The Yellow Wallpaper" and "Story of an Hour" depict, in the words of Professor Heesok Chang, "the beautiful soul being destroyed by the tyranny of the mundane." Woolf on the other hand, illustrates the damage of complying with these pressures, but moves further into exploring the suffering that comes from not doing so.

Woolf's characters who do largely live according to social expectations, still battle with feeling unsatisfied and lonely. Feeling stifled in one's thoughts and actions and also isolated is, frankly, part of the human condition in western society, because we aren't fully living out either of our internal desires. We, by and large, do not follow our whims and are not part of a fluid, harmonious whole. Still, some struggle more than others. Specifically, those who are artistic, sensitive, curious, introspective— think too much— seem often to be the most impacted by their internal desires and the most at odds

with the pressures of their society. Virginia Woolf counted herself as one of these people, and crafted two likewise embattled figures in *The Waves—* Rhoda and Louis.

Rhoda and Louis are influenced by the societal forces telling them to stand out and fit in while dealing with inner turmoil— all they want is to be their own selves, not beholden to anyone, not having to compare themselves to anyone. They want to just *be.* This means that they often don't want to be around people, because people make them feel inadequate, aware of the things they ought to be saying and doing and being. And yet they don't actually want to be alone. Louis seeks social recognition and Rhoda tries to pass as a social human being in order *not* to be alone. They really do want to *belong,* but not like this. They just want to belong in a completely natural, innately unifying way, not in the way being in a community works in reality.

All of this is an approximation, a summary, as well my own conjecture. What I have said does not express what it really feels to be in this position, caught in the tides of all these forces. How do you truly articulate entanglements? The internal in general is so difficult to articulate, especially when in conflict with vast external forces. Writers are very often the artistic, odd, over-thinking types— individuals not unlike Louis and Rhoda. Yet they want to write everything down, to be able to apply language to everything. The English language is simply not adequate. What people like Rhoda and Louis feel— there are no words for that emotional conflict. This returns us to Woolf's frustrations with language and her attempts to subvert its limitations.

In his book *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common,* Alphonso Lingis considers what it feels like when you "find yourself at the limit of the powers of language" (108). Lingis writes,

> It seems to you that the problem is not simply that you do not have the skills in speaking or that you cannot come up with the right things to say or because you have no experience in this kind of situation, but that language itself does not have the powers. There is not in the words and the combinatory possibilities of language, the power to say what has to be said (108).

This is the question at the heart of this thesis: How does Virginia Woolf depict in writing, what cannot be expressed in words? Specifically, the intersection of these contradicting external and internal pressures and the warring emotions they produce.

I'm also interested in how Woolf's methods compare to the methods of other authors attempting the same feat, which is why I am bringing into conversation with Virginia Woolf and *The Waves,* the works of three authors: E.E. Cummings' 1940 poem "anyone lived in a pretty how town," Jamaica Kincaid's prose poem "Girl" first published in *The New Yorker* in 1978, and A. Van Jordan's prose poem "from" which appears in *M-A-C-N-O-L-I-A,* a 2004 narrative told through poems. This endeavor to express the inexpressible is deeply personal, for while these writers create characters separate from themselves, they infuse them with their own emotions and questions. I do not think we can separate these writers' urges to do what they do from their own life experiences and views of the world. This drive of theirs is born from experiences, as is their own struggles to reconcile paradoxical aspects of their innate self and environment.

A few years after her father died, Virginia Woolf reflected on how he reacted to her mother's death when she was 13. In these reflections, we can see Woolf grappling privately with the limitations of language: "he was like one who, by failure of some stay, reels staggering blindly about the world, and fills it with his woe. But no words of mine can convey what he felt, or even the energy of the visible expression of it" (Hammond 148). Woolf encountered death again and again in her adolescence and young adulthood,

and I think each of these experiences, coupled with bouts of mental illness, built up in

Woolf a personal sense of urgency. That urgency is expressed in this passage from

Virginia Woolf's diaries:

> If I never felt these extraordinary pervasive strains—of unrest or rest or happiness or discomfort— I should float down into acquiescence. Here is something to fight; and when I wake up early I say to myself Fight, fight. If I could catch the feeling, I would; the feeling of the singing of the real world, as one is driven by loneliness and silence from the habitable world. And this curious steed, life, is genuine. Does any of this convey what I want to say? But I have not really laid hands on the emptiness after all (qtd. in Miko 63).

Lingis puts his thumb on the urgency expressed in Woolf's prose when he writes, "Now

you find you have to be there and have to speak. You have to say something— something

that language cannot say…and something that is, in the end, inessential. It is the saying

that is imperative" (113).

Though it is true that language can never transcribe exactly what goes on inside of

each of us, it is common discourse that really gets in the way of at least getting close.

Lingis defines common discourse as a rational system in which everything that is said

draws on the laws and theories of rational discourse (110). There is a consistency, a

coherence, a universality in this discourse. It is what is expected. It makes sense and is

used to make sense of the world. But Woolf, Cummings, Kincaid and Jordan all

recognize the limits of rational discourse, and so develops their own modes of expression

in order to "lay hands on the emptiness."

Each of these authors emerged out of sharply differing time periods and social

locations. Virginia Woolf, the daughter of the esteemed author and critic Leslie Stephen,

was born into London's educated elite in 1882, coming of age in 1900. She was

privileged in terms of her status, home, financial security and exposure to books and

intellectual discussions. Yet she also endured a lot— the deaths of her mother and half-sister before she was grown, her difficult, self-consumed father, her sexually abusive half-brothers, the loss of her father and brother before she turned 25, not to mention many limitations and expectations imposed by gender norms and her forever percolating mental illness. All these and more shaped Woolf, and therefore shaped her writing.

Virginia Woolf found herself limited by both language and upper-class London society. From the beginning, she was high-strung and imaginative, and hungry for learning. Yet she was not allowed to pursue a formal education, and was pressured to live according to the standards set for attractive young ladies from respected families. Woolf was complex and many-sided, but she lived in a society that expected her to fit into a narrow, rigid mold. I don't believe Woolf's bouts of mental illness were solely biological— I think they were at least in part induced by living in a state of restriction.

When Woolf began ruminating on *The Waves,* she was adamant that traditional narrative structures were not capable of expressing what it felt like to grow up in upper-class British society, to express what it felt like to be *her.* What I would argue is that Woolf had multiple parallel dynamics going on in her head and her life that the structure of the English language is not set up to depict, so she took these innumerable fragments and spread them between interconnected characters. She then rounded them out with complimentary elements from other people she knew or knew of. Woolf also explored the concept of universal consciousness without having to go beyond the level of character, by structurally blurring the boundaries between dialogue and internal monologue. This way she didn't have to change language, she just changed its format to express the essence of being and becoming.

E.E. Cummings is similar to Woolf in that he also was born into financial and racial privilege, albeit in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Twelve years younger than Woolf, he came of age on the eve of World War I. Woolf's childhood before her mother's death was a fairly happy one, but Cummings' was close to idyllic. The playful liberation Cummings experienced as a child would never cease to influence his writing. Cummings' status as a white man with an elite education and his father's financial support cannot be brushed aside when analyzing his work. It is easy to fall into the trap of focusing solely on how obstacles and oppressions shape an author on the implicit assumption that only negative experiences produce interesting approaches and themes. But this isn't the case— much of what makes Cummings' work what it is, has its roots in his privileged vantage point. For he had the audacity to wholly disregard the rules of grammar and fundamentally alter language, and was still considered (despite critics) a venerable poet.

Yet much of Cummings' poetry possesses threads of cynicism and darkness. He was a man who felt deeply. Even as a child, he was aware of something broken. A young Cummings wrote, "I stand hushed, almost unbreathing, feeling the helplessness of a pity which is for some whole world" (Cheever 23). Later in his life he likely dealt with clinical depression, and became deeply critical of traditional mores, of the values and approaches espoused in Cambridge. If anything, Cummings shows that feeling restricted by society's pressures is not unique to disadvantaged groups. These forces are certainly more stifling for some than others, but that is a whole worthwhile conversation in and of itself. The point here is that any individual can chafe against societal customs and expectations, however warranted. Cummings certainly did.

E.E. Cummings wanted to live freely, according to his priorities, not anyone else's. He was a poet, so he wanted to express his freedom and opinions with words. His methods for doing so differ from Woolf's. Cummings approached language in the same way he approached his society. Both contained infinite arbitrary rules, so he chose not to succumb to society's expectations or language's. If he followed the rules of grammar, there would be a limit to what he could express, same as if he lived according to customs. So instead he broke language apart and turned it on its head. By employing language illogically, he got it to express the irrational.

Jamaica Kincaid in terms of biography, is the antithesis of both Woolf and Cummings: Raised in British-controlled Antigua in the 1950s and '60s, her early experiences were shaped by poverty, colonialism and gendered expectations. Sent against her will to the U.S. to make money for her family as an au pair, Kincaid instead cut ties with her family for twenty years and carved a life for herself first as a journalist and then as a writer. In one interview Kincaid states,

> I think I want to live a long life in which I attempt to be free. It's a paradox because the freedom only comes when you can no longer think, which is in death… In the meantime, you struggle to make sense of the external from the things that have made you what you are and the things that you have been told are you: my history of colonialism, my history of slavery, and imagining if that hadn't happened what I would have been (Kincaid and Vorda 9).

Kincaid is clearly wrestling with the same questions I am— these various forces and how they interact with the self and how these interactions change based on environment. Her entanglements with the limits of language come from her early experiences as well as from the intersections of being black, female and an immigrant, among other things.

Jamaica Kincaid's relationship with language is shaped by her experiences with colonialism. English was a language imposed on her people. Her influences were not

West Indian like herself. She indicates a resistance to credit specific people with inspiring her writing, but says, "My writing, if I owe anybody, it would be Charlotte Bronte. It would be English people. It would be Virginia Woolf. It would be Wordsworth, it would be Shakespeare, it would be the King James version of the Bible. I had never read a West Indian writer when I started to write. Never. I didn't even know there was such a thing" (Ferguson and Kincaid 169). Kincaid fell in love with reading and writing as a young girl, but her relationship with it will always be fraught. English was not constructed to apply to the experiences of a person like her. It was constructed, if anything, to *oppress* a person like her. It is out of this reality that her prose poem "Girl" was written. "Girl" is a litany, a deluge really, of non-stop instructions, orders and admonishments to a daughter who only manages to insert her voice twice, first to be ignored as if she never spoke, and then to have the meaning of her words twisted into a lash used against her.

For Kincaid, the limitations of language translate into literal limitations on what a person is allowed to do and be. She portrays this through painting a portrait of a real-life relationship. "Girl" is about a mother and a daughter, but it is also portraying a much larger dynamic through this portrayal of language's domineering use. Kincaid later reflected, "I used to think I was writing about my mother and me. Later I began to see that I was writing about the relationship between the powerful and the powerless. That's become an obsessive theme, and I think it will be a theme for as long as I write" (Ferguson and Kincaid 176). Kincaid conceptualizes the powerful and the powerless in her writing as colonizer and colonized because that is her lived experience, and so it should be read that way. But while reading it this way, we can also understand the powerful as a society, and the powerless, an individual within the society.

The range of restriction and oppression experienced differs widely depending on social location of course, but feelings are personal and relative— someone who has broken a finger and someone who has broken a leg might both say honestly that it is the worst pain they have ever felt. The actual level of pain experienced radically differs, but the person's emotional response and perception of that pain is similar. That example can be used as an analogy for the individual in society. Compared to the other authors, Cummings had it all. Yet his work is still shaped by feelings of intense frustration at being restricted by his society.

Unlike Woolf and Cummings, Kincaid does not actually try to transcend language's limitations. Kincaid's response to the limitations of language is to expose them and then walk away. The ending of "Girl" is poignant—after the daughter's second attempt at communication backfires, the piece ends. The girl does not keep trying to argue. She knows she can't win. But there is no reason to keep taking abuse either, if the speaker won't listen to reason. We can imagine her turning and walking away. In real life, this is what Kincaid did— she made up her mind not to keep living according to other people's orders and went her own way.

As in Kincaid's, systemic racism is an ever-present aspect of A. Van Jordan's life. The age gap between Kincaid and Jordan is just about the same as the one between Woolf and Cummings. Kincaid emigrated to the U.S. not long after Jordan's birth in 1965 in the thick of the Civil Rights movement. But unlike the other three, Jordan is not a ubiquitously known figure, first arriving on the literary scene in 2001 after starting out as a journalist. Little biographical information is available beyond his alma maters and publications, in part because Jordan has not thus far written anything based directly on

his lived experiences. However, his writing is heavily influenced by his viewpoints and concerns, which have in turn been shaped by his social location. Jordan identifies closely with where he grew up: Akron, Ohio, incidentally the hometown of America's favorite rags-to-riches athlete—LeBron James. Akron is historically a rubber and tire manufacturing city where a third of residents are black and the population living below the poverty line is edging on 30 percent.

Using poetry as his medium, Jordan chose to focus on MacNolia Cox, the long-forgotten near-winner of the 1936 national spelling bee, who lived and died in Akron. Jordan immersed himself in this story of a gifted black girl born in the same town as him 30 years earlier. Drawing on his attachment to the African American community of Akron, his skills as a journalist, and his sensibilities as a poet, Jordan shows us, the American public, how our racist, sexist, classist structures and norms stifled the potential of a brilliant individual, and what her internal responses may have been. MacNolia did not have the word she needed to become champion. It wasn't a word she was supposed to have, as the white judges gave her one in the last round that was not on the list. And yet the lack of a word that in this context never should have existed, permeated everything that occurred for her after.

Jordan in an interview, echoes the point Lingis made about the burning need to circumvent language's restrictiveness:

> For me, the first order of business is just to say something and have someone respond to it and to be moved in some way by it and to feel like I've reached them, like I've communicated…I'm trying to say in a poem something that we can't get in the newspaper, and that's what I mean by a higher form of language. I'm trying to get to a higher level of truth, which we normally aren't allowed to talk about. I think it's a very different dialectic when we're dealing with something through the form of a poem as opposed to a magazine or a newspaper or TV show (Jordan and Rowell 916).

A. Van Jordan takes the most investigative, observational approach to confronting the limitations of language. While in the shoes of MacNolia Cox, Jordan illustrates how at twelve, this gifted black girl learned the limits of what her society would allow her to accomplish. She then proceeded to live her life within these limits, trying to make something of her life through living by the rules. Jordan uses language innovatively in order to portray this: In "from," we gain a window into adult MacNolia's relationship with a controlling man through the framework of a dictionary entry. Her story is delineated by definitions, because she allows language to define her. Each numbered definition is a rule for the use of the word, and MacNolia tries repeatedly to make something of her life by living according to rules. Yet it is never going to work, because the rules were not made to reward someone like MacNolia, or someone like Jordan. In "From," Jordan depicts parallel abusive relationships MacNolia is stuck in: one with the man in the poem, and one with language, which in turn serves as a metaphor for 20th century American society.

Jordan does not transcend the limitations of language per se; but he exerts authority by exposing these limits, in much the same way Jamaica Kincaid does. It is perhaps not a coincidence that the two authors who have experienced racial and colonial oppression view their language and their society through a critical, expository lens, grappling with how these limitations create a pervasive power dynamic, while the white authors who indirectly benefited from colonialism view the restrictions on a more individual basis, and possess more faith that one can actually bypass the limitations of language.

I want to return now to Rhoda and Louis. These two characters rendered by Virginia Woolf in *The Waves* embody most viscerally—most painfully— the quandary of living in the rip currents of contrasting internal and external pulls. Virginia Woolf was almost 50 years old when she wrote *The Waves*. It is her reflection on what it is to be human, what it means to live in a society such as Britain's. In her diary, she refers to the voice of the novel as that of "a mind thinking," and as "some continuous stream." Yet she expresses in her diary great difficulty in putting this voice into writing (qtd. in Richter 132). What she eventually lands on is a division of this voice. The narrative's six characters became vessels into which Woolf pours observations, grievances, questions, like a fleet of ships in the sea of life. It is as if she wrote these all down and then grouped them into categories, and to each category assigned a person.

There is much overlap and nuance, but generally speaking, Bernard got the reflections and questions on writing inspiration and storytelling; Jinny got those on the sexual dynamics between men and women; Neville dwells most on the agonies of desire; and Susan on motherhood. Louis and Rhoda, it seems deliberately on the part of Woolf, share a category. Due to the inadequacies of language mentioned earlier, it's impossible to put a concise label on what that category is, but it most directly addresses the hydraulic-like forces of internal and external. These two characters are the most critical of and dissatisfied with the social structures they live within, and are shaped by aspects of their identities that set them apart.

Louis comes to England from Australia for his schooling. Unlike Bernard and Neville, he is not from intellectual aristocracy. He is self-conscious to the point of obsessiveness over the fact that his father is "a banker from Brisbane" and he speaks with

an Australian accent (Woolf 20). His colonial origins define his lack: when Bernard moves on to the University of Edinburgh and Neville to Cambridge as their fathers likely did before them, Louis reflects, "I have no firm ground to which to go…I go vaguely, to make money vaguely" (67). Bernard says of him later, "He pores in an office over some obscure commercial document…Louis the best scholar in school" (92). It is a financial necessity for Louis to conform to a traditional, practical, career trajectory in a way that it isn't for Neville and Bernard who are both well-to-do creatives, spending much of their time writing poetry and starting stories, respectively.

We know far less about Rhoda's roots. In fact, she seems to be the most unrooted. As a child, Louis tells us that "Rhoda has no father" (20). This is the most we ever learn of her family, but to grow up without a father at the turn of the 20th century is no insignificant thing. Susan, in contrast, talks frequently, lovingly, about her father, a rural clergyman. Jinny's father isn't around either, but this is surmised through learning that she lives in London with her grandmother— we are told who she has instead. With Rhoda, we are told only who she does *not* have. But Rhoda is defined by lack in more than just this concrete sense. As Woolf seemed to see it, there were two principal social embodiments between which women could choose— sexuality or maternity. If a woman appeared motherly and succeeded in the duties of the home, she could sometimes get a pass on being alluring and refined. This was the role into which Susan fit. A more playful, gregarious woman— like Jinny— could be accepted if she inhabited her sexuality, showed off her femininity. Rhoda meets neither the maternal nor sexual standard, and thus is not considered socially respectable. If Louis is marked by his

merchant-class, immigrant origins, then Rhoda's outsider status is largely a result of her gender.

Neville, imbued with a self-possessed air, groups the two together as he interrogates their dissatisfaction with British society: "But then Rhoda, or it may be Louis, some fasting and anguished spirit, passes through and out again. They want a plot, do they? They want a reason? It is not enough for them, this ordinary scene" (Woolf 198). This recalls Heesok Chang's observation of 19th century novels depicting "the tyranny of the mundane." Louis and Rhoda are the "beautiful souls" trying not to be swallowed by it. Neville is critical of their social world as well, but he is at ease within it in a way Louis and Rhoda are not. He's not searching for answers, because he feels he has things figured out. The other three also pick up on the affinity between Louis and Rhoda, but in Woolf's typical contradictory fashion, Louis and Rhoda are at the same time the most contrasting of the characters. Their struggles are similar, and yet how they react externally, how they move in the world, could not be more different.

I imagine Woolf writing down for her last category, emotions and frustrations and questions that are deeply personal rather than adopting them from others. This naturally produces a character that is an intensified version of herself: Rhoda. Intensified, because Rhoda inhabits Woolf's deepest insecurities and anguish without the social, charismatic, humorous aspects of Woolf, which went to other characters. As a result, Rhoda is ethereal, incredibly sensitive and ensconced in her thoughts. The gendered self is an act Rhoda is incapable of performing. Her social clumsiness and bare authenticity suggests a profound, intangible intelligence. But Virginia Woolf wasn't just trying to reproduce herself. As she was writing the book, she repeatedly insisted to herself in her diary that it

should not be an autobiography. She wanted its story to be "the life of anybody" (qtd. in Dick 50). The whole point of *The Waves* is that all these struggles are not one person's but everyone's, as we are all more connected and similar than we think, even when on the outside we may appear to be radically different. This is because we cope with and react to these same forces in varying ways.

To illustrate this, Woolf took the same elements that make up Rhoda and created Louis. It is well-known that Woolf's inspiration for Louis's personality is the poet T.S. Eliot. Six years younger than Woolf, T.S. Eliot was born in St. Louis, Missouri and immigrated as a young man to England, the birthplace of his ancestors. Eliot worshipped English culture, its age-old structures, formalities, traditions. He proceeded to become as British as he possibly could, to a point where native Englishmen joked that Eliot was more English than they were. What Eliot respected and strived for stands in stark contrast to the stances of Woolf, who was of course deeply critical of English society's rigidity and all its trappings. Like Eliot, Louis is a product of British colonialism, drawn back to the colonizer. He remains in England in his adulthood, perpetually attempting to become "English" while hyperaware of his otherness.

Neville acutely captures the divergence of Louis and Rhoda when he observes, "Rhoda flies with her neck outstretched and blind fanatic eyes, past us. Louis, now so opulent, goes to his attic window among the blistered roofs and gazes where she has vanished, but must sit down in his office among the typewriters and the telephone and work it all out for our instruction, for our regeneration, and the reform of an unborn world" (Woolf 198). The titular narrator of T.S. Eliot's famous poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" could in fact be describing Louis as well as himself in the poem's

lines: "Deferential, glad to be of use, / Politic, cautious, and meticulous; / Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse; / At times, indeed, almost ridiculous— / Almost, at times, the Fool" (Eliot l. 114-118). Louis thinks highly of his own intellect, but is also highly restrained and deeply critical of himself in social situations.

Much of *The Waves* centers on self-perception: the characters grappling with who they are, what they want, what they must do. Yet as I pointed out earlier, how people choose to act and what they choose to prioritize is influenced by the pressure to conform and the pressure to be admired. How a person views other people and how they view themselves is intertwined. Bernard, in critiquing his own reliance on interactions with others to know himself, draws a comparison: "When Louis is alone he sees with astonishing intensity, and will write some words that may outlast us all. Rhoda loves to be alone… I am incapable of the denials, the heroisms of Louis and Rhoda" (Woolf 133). The characters in *The Waves* are constantly referring to the other five through observations and assumptions. In doing so, they illustrate just how out of sync we are with one another, like overlapping waves creating constructive and destructive interference. Sometimes people are quite accurate in their assessments, such as Neville's observation of Louis and Rhoda, but very often they are not.

In this case, Bernard believes Louis and Rhoda are "the authentics," feeling whole and clear about themselves when they are alone (Woolf 117). And yet Louis and Rhoda are the two most insecure about their ability to be genuine, unsure of their identities. Louis says as a child, 'I will not conjugate the verb, until Bernard has said it" (20). Years later, he still doesn't trust his own impulses: "I repeat, 'I am an average Englishman; I am an average clerk', yet I look at the little men at the next table to be sure that I do what

they do" (94). Louis disdains these "little men" and yet still feels a need to fit in with them, for he thinks of himself as "other," having emigrated from Australia. As a result, he obsesses about his presentation and the hypothetical judgments of others. J. Alfred Prufrock's self-reflection evokes this aspect of Louis with uncanny accuracy: "Time to turn back and descend the stair, / With a bald spot in the middle of my hair — / (They will say: "How his hair is growing thin!") / My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin, / My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin — / (They will say: "But how his arms and legs are thin!")" (Eliot l. 39-44). Louis cannot feel whole alone, for everyone else is always on his mind.

Bernard is likewise confident that Rhoda "loves to be alone" and yet she declares, "I am sick of privacy" (160). Echoing Louis, she says "I pull on my stockings as I see them pull on theirs. I wait for you to speak and then speak like you" (131). Neither would describe themselves as "authentics." On the contrary, they consider themselves frauds. This is in part because they too, misjudge others. At one of the group's reunions, Rhoda says she came not to see them, but "to light my fire at the general blaze of you who live wholly, indivisibly and without caring" (Woolf 131). But the reality is that all of them care deeply about what others think, and none of them feel complete. This comes back to Virginia Woolf's perception: none of us feel whole because we are not living out the innate urge to connect and commune with one another sans comparisons or expectations. Furthermore, we are incapable of forming these intrinsic bonds because each of us thinks we are the only one suffering in the way that we are. That no one else is in need of this kind of connection. A large part of Louis and Rhoda's pain originates in the failure of everyone to communicate openly— to use language to *connect*. Louis thinks everyone

judges him for his accent, and yet really, they only start judging him for being self-conscious about his accent. And Rhoda tears herself down because she is certain everyone else feels capable and confident when they actually are just pretending to be.

One of the significant decisions Woolf made was to detach her characters nearly entirely from familial bonds and histories. Allusions to parents, spouses or children are fleeting and mostly insignificant. In Woolf's other works, relationships between family members play a central role. She does not deny their importance. But possessing these bonds does not mean that we do not still struggle to communicate and feel othered, alone at times. Woolf chose to hone in on this point, explore it without distraction. By stripping away these webs of people in *The Waves,* she is able to make the characters' growing awareness of separateness and difference a driving force throughout the narrative.

This failure to connect that Woolf depicts in *The Waves,* is reminiscent of *Howards End,* the 1910 novel by Woolf's long-time friend and writing peer, E.M. Forster. In it, Forster makes clear upfront his concern regarding the notion of connection, for the epigraph to *Howard's End* is simply and boldly, "Only Connect…" What isn't so clear is what, specifically, connection means in this context. Our clue comes from the character of Margaret Schlegel, who feels the urge to point out to Henry Wilcox, her fiancée who is afraid of and guilt-ridden by his own erotic desires, that his salvation "was latent in his own soul, and in the soul of every man. Only connect! That was her whole sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer" (qtd. in Kirsch).

 The influence of family ties, the links between individuals, is a large presence in *Howards End.* Yet the connection Forster is perhaps most intent on, is an internal one.

Henry Wilcox's problem is that he cannot fuse his personality as he understands it, with his erotic desires. This intense difficulty of connecting our public, conventional, personalities with internal desires is one Forster lived himself, and he seems very much to recognize the pain this causes. Forster wrestled with his homosexual identity throughout his life, making only heterosexual desire explicit in his writing until *Maurice* was published posthumously, in accordance with Forster's instructions. It seems likely this experience lies behind his forceful urge to "Only Connect…"

Forster is relevant here, because the inability to connect is also a fundamental part of *The Waves,* especially for Louis and Rhoda. We see them struggling to connect on a physical, social level, but they are battling within themselves as well, unable to reconcile their conflicting desires to belong and break away, while also battling feelings of fundamental inadequacy as a human being. It's a cycle of sorts— they can't connect internally because they are struggling to connect externally, and they are having trouble doing that because they aren't able to assemble a unified sense-of-self, let alone establish unity with others. Margaret Schlegel's words could just as well be directed to Louis and Rhoda: "Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted." *Only connect the prose:* Forster and Woolf both seem to recognize the essential role that language, communication, plays in achieving or failing to achieve connection.

We are not born misunderstanding others or feeling incomplete. As infants and small children, we are the most whole we will ever be. Hoffman and ter Haar call it the state of "prelapsarian oneness" (53). Woolf believed in this and expresses a sense of unquestioned continuity and closeness in her six characters at the opening, when they are all small. They take for granted that they are a piece of something larger. There are no

hoops to jump through, no rules to obey, in order to be a part of it. All they must do is *be.*
However, that state is quickly replaced by the concepts of *me* and *you* and *they,* as the
children learn to view themselves as separate entities. This lesson is most painful for
Louis and Rhoda.

　　In the case of Louis, the reader sees the moment at which he becomes acutely
aware of himself as an individual to whom others react. In this scene, it's as if Louis
knows that he is on the cusp, at the point of no return in his growing up. He hides on the
other side of the hedge from the others, praying "let them pass…let me be unseen." Yet
Jinny does see him, and he sees her coming: "Now an eye-beam is slid through the chink.
Its beam strikes me. I am a boy in a grey flannel suit. She has found me. I am struck on
the nape of the neck. She has kissed me. All is shattered" (Woolf 13). *Strikes. Struck.*
Shattered. This is a little girl kissing a little boy on the neck while out playing, and yet
Woolf's language evokes a sense of violence and destruction. A cosmogenic shattering.
Louis's time as part of an undifferentiated whole has been lost.

　　Integral here is Louis's evocation of "I" and his labeling of himself: "I am a boy
in a grey flannel suit." Louis's name and the adage of "I" quickly become things to which
Louis clings, they become his chant: "'I have signed my name,' said Louis, 'already
twenty times. I, and again I, and again I. Clear, firm, unequivocal, there it stands, my
name. Clear-cut and unequivocal am I too" (Woolf 167). What is Woolf trying to show
here? Why does Louis feel such a strong urge to write his own name and to claim himself
in this way? I found my answer in Jamaica Kincaid. Though not talking about Virginia
Woolf, what Kincaid is ruminating on echoes Woolf when she says that she has come to
see claiming oneself as a sign of insecurity, because "if you are not sure, you are always

saying 'I am.'" She draws from her own experience growing up in a British colony: "If you don't possess and claim yourself, someone else will. You keep declaring that you are in full possession, which is to say you are on guard. If you are not on guard, someone will come right in and take you" (Ferguson and Kincaid 65).

Louis *is* insecure— he never stops comparing himself to others, assuming they must all be measuring him up. He cannot control what they think, and that terrifies him: "I hate the others, because it is for them that I do these antics, smoothing my hair, concealing my accent…I am also the caged tiger, and you are the keepers with red-hot bars" (Woolf 128). He feels trapped by stares, at the mercy of people's opinions. His reaction is to do as Kincaid articulates, and possess and claim himself in a desperate effort to feel in control of who he is. Kincaid remarks, "ideally, it would be great just to be Buddhist-like about it, just sort of be. I am. I am not declaring it" (qtd. in Ferguson and Kincaid 65). But Louis never gets to that point.

Woolf would agree with Kincaid. Her view of "I" as a linguistic deception is put best by the following: "The "I" is only ever temporarily and conditionally the possession of the speaker/writer since any other speaker/writer can repossess it without notice. While seeming to confirm identity in language, pronouns and even proper names incessantly undermine the individuality and placement of anybody in language" (Lucenti 84). Woolf is forever returning to the intersections between language and social/societal relations. One helps her make sense of the other and vice versa. Woolf notices how we cling to this pronoun and to our given names because we associate them with affirming us as human beings, reassuring our sense of self. And yet the symbol of our uniqueness is everyone else's symbol of uniqueness too. Everybody is "I," at the moment they utter it. And for

every one *Louis,* there are a thousand more. This again, is a limitation of language.

Language fundamentally cannot express the reality of each one person being unlike any

other person who has ever lived or will live. Because this is the truth, isn't it? It's the

Koch snowflake paradox. No one is *exactly* like anyone else, and yet we are all "I." What

affirms our identity simultaneously undermines it. This logic underlies Woolf's choice to

show Louis using his name as a life boat of sorts. He hopes declaring it will get him to

shore, get him through life as a complete person. But the boat has a leak.

   The narrator in A. Van Jordan's prose poem "From" offers an interesting

counterpoint to Louis' notions of identity. The poem can stand on its own with an

anonymous narrator, but here I'm going to put the poem in its larger context as a piece in

the story of MacNolia Cox. MacNolia had her own shattering moment at the 1936

national spelling bee, when the white judges gave MacNolia the word "nemesis"— a

word that did not appear on the official word list, causing her to lose. Until then,

MacNolia believed she had agency. She knew she was smart. She planned to be a doctor.

But she learned at age twelve that she did not have the control she thought she did. She

realized that the way others viewed her would determine so much in her life, and no

amount of smarts could change that. In "from," the poem told through definitions,

MacNolia is a young adult in a relationship with a controlling, soon-to-be abusive man.

As the narrator, MacNolia at one point reflects on her identity as seen through the eyes of

this man, in much the way Louis reflects on how he is viewed by the other five in *The*

Waves. Yet their conclusions diverge. Louis is terrified of standing out, being read as

different. For him, having authority over his identity means being able to blend in. The

problem for MacNolia is that she is *not* distinguished from others. Through the character

of MacNolia, Jordan, like Woolf, addresses the concept of identity not being fully controllable, but his angle juxtaposes hers.

In definition six of the word *from,* A. Van Jordan illustrates MacNolia's awareness of how she is perceived: "6. As being other or another than: He couldn't tell me *from* his mother; he couldn't tell me *from* his sister; he couldn't tell me *from* the last woman he had before me, and why should he—we're all the same woman" (27). Louis mistakes the "I" for something affirming. MacNolia does not. Louis thinks that declaring, *I* am this; *I* am that, will make his presence "clear-cut and unequivocal," so that no one will be able to twist his identity into something he doesn't recognize. MacNolia is aware that no number of I-statements will ever be enough to compel others who are not so inclined, to see her as MacNolia Cox. Full stop.

On one hand, when MacNolia says "we are all the same woman," she is likely tapping into the Woolf-like concept of connectivity, acknowledging how she and these other black women share some deeper unity. But on the other, she is exposing the fact that to the man in the poem and many more, she is interchangeable, disposable. She lacks singularity in his eyes. Jordan, and thus MacNolia as his narrator, understand what Lucenti observes here: "We are each open to substitution, never firmly anchored in any address. In that sense, identity is always a form of reduplication, since it is endlessly mimed in language" (84). Here again, linguistic truths mirror ontological and sociological truths. Wherever white supremacy exists, black individuals are viewed by whites as interchangeable and indistinguishable from one another, like names switched out in a sentence. And in language, the "I" is continually being repossessed, not unlike how black women's control over their own bodies has been torn from them for centuries.

Waves also reflect this cycle of reduplication and repossession: Each wave is a singular phenomenon, and yet to us, one wave is indistinguishable from another. Furthermore, every wave that crashes on the shore recedes back into the ocean from which it came, and another wave takes its place. Not unlike how the influence of a novel might recede as the sociopolitical context shifts and a new novel surges into the public consciousness, for a time.

"Identity is always a form of reduplication," Lucenti writes. Writing is to some degree a process of reduplication also. Just as people adopt mannerisms and perspectives of their parents and friends, so too do writers reiterate in new forms, ideas and images that appear in the works of other authors, both consciously and not. Characters echo and riff off of characters, across the bounds of books. This is what I see happening with "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and *The Waves,* published fifteen years later. I did not intend to keep bringing up Eliot's poem, but whenever I read a passage from Louis, the poem's beleaguered narrator's words rush forward in my mind.

Woolf portrays in Louis the same intense anxiety that Eliot explores in Prufrock. The following lines in his poem suggest a feeling of being trapped on display, under interrogation: "And I have known the eyes already, known them all— / The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase, / And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin, / When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall, / Then how should I begin / To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?" (Eliot l. 54-59). Standing with Rhoda while watching the other four approaching, Louis expresses a similar feeling when he says, "What do I think of you — what do you think of me? Who are you? Who am I? — that quivers again its uneasy air over us, and the pulse quickens and the eye brightens and all the insanity of

personal existence without which life would fall flat and die, begins again" (Woolf 232).

The latter half of that passage is laden with apprehension, revealing Louis's perception of

life as frighteningly uncontrollable, "insanity." Louis's response is to attempt to reduce

chaos to order (95). Questions of identity in the eyes of himself and in the eyes of others,

haunt Louis, just as they haunt Prufrock.

Very early in *The Waves,* Louis observes Rhoda during a math lesson quite

perceptively: "And as she stares at the chalk figures, her mind lodges in those white

circles, it steps through those white loops into emptiness, alone. They have no meaning

for her. She has no answer for them. She has no body as the others have" (Woolf 22).

Rhoda is the only character by whom Louis is not intimidated. She is as lost in her

identity and as overwhelmed by all the crisscrossing pressures and desires as he is. *Alone.*

No meaning. No answer. The words Louis chooses in observing Rhoda accurately reflect

much of what Rhoda feels. Life to Rhoda is one big math problem she must solve alone,

and yet the rules by which it must be solved do not make sense to her. She imagines

herself, the lone one who fails to find the answer, excluded: "I begin to draw a figure and

the world is looped in it, and I myself am outside the loop; which I now join — so — and

seal up, and make entire. The world is entire, and I am outside of it" (21). More than

anyone else, Rhoda understands that our true natural state is one of fluid connection with

one another. What she doesn't understand until late in life is that she can't connect like

this because her society has failed to make such a union possible. She chastises herself

for not feeling whole.

Rhoda places part of this blame on her inability to "have a face" (33). To comply

with the everyday pressures to conform and be respected, each of us continually change

"our face." This phenomenon is an entire field of study in sociology, termed dramaturgy. The pioneer of this field, Erving Goffman, argues that every person chooses to act a certain way in each individual social situation, determined by the variables at play and the person's goals for each interaction. This doesn't mean the front is not genuine, but it doesn't come naturally. We learn how to adopt ways of acting to make ourselves liked, to get the things we want, to fit in (Goffman, 30). Rhoda's concern over this social norm aligns her with Prufrock too, when Eliot writes in his voice, "There will be time, there will be time / To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet" (l. 26-27). The other five of Woolf's characters do this, prepare a face, which is why they are able to conceal how incomplete and lost they feel. But Rhoda doesn't know how to put on fronts like the others do: "But here I am nobody. I have no face. This great company, all dressed in brown serge, has robbed me of my identity" (Woolf 33).

This notion of other people as threats to our sense of self is one that Judith Butler dwells on in an essay of hers, "Precarious Life." The essay presses the importance of address for understanding how moral authority is asserted and sustained. Butler suggests that in some way "we come to exist, as it were, in the moment of being addressed, and something about our existence proves precarious when that address fails" (130). Rhoda usually fails to give a socially adequate response when others address her, a reality that causes her to question her right to be in that space, and even her worth as a human being. But the significance of being addressed by others isn't just about having that ability or not. Butler makes the case that regardless of how we respond, those who address us bind us to them in ways we cannot avert or avoid: "This impingement by the other's address constitutes us first and foremost against our will or, perhaps put more appropriately, prior

to the formation of our will" (130). *Impingement* is the perfect word to describe Rhoda's view of the people around her. The passages narrated in Rhoda's voice indeed cause "the situation of being addressed" to feel like a manifestation of demands that come from a nameless elsewhere, that articulate her obligations and press them upon her. The other five characters in *The Waves* impinge on Rhoda. She sees them as anchoring her down, stripping her of agency, while at the same time making her feel like nothing.

When Rhoda is young, she tries to adapt, tries to respond to the addresses of others. She attempts to don a front like everyone else: "I will seek out a face, a composed, a monumental face, and will endow it with omniscience, and wear it under my dress like a talisman" (33). A talisman can represent a form of preternatural protection, and to tuck something like a necklace under one's clothes is an intimate, personal gesture, signifying that the object is for the wearer alone. The fact that Rhoda describes possessing "a face" in this way suggests that she sees assuming this performative armor as her ticket to make it through the world, as a way to keep her from falling apart. For Rhoda, to not have a face means to be always in search of one. But the truth is that she doesn't know how to be anything other than what she is. This makes her extremely vulnerable and she shrinks within herself.

What Woolf expresses through Rhoda, right down to her language choices, evokes Goffman's theory of impression management so clearly that I was certain she must have read Goffman's work. In fact, it could have been the other way around—Virginia Woolf published *The Waves* before Goffman turned ten. Woolf was every bit as much a sociologist as she was a novelist. She just expressed her sociological theories and observations through her creative writing. Goffman is great at laying out these ideas in

clear, logical terms so a person can comprehend the main tenants of the theory. He creates a framework. Woolf takes the same observations, but puts them to paper with a different goal in mind. She's not interested in identifying the sociological realities— she's intimately familiar with them because she lives them every day, viscerally. What interests her is the challenge of getting language, written words, to reflect the personal act of living these realities. Releasing her internal experiences onto paper is Woolf's attempt at escaping them.

Rhoda is the most disoriented of the characters and the most disorienting for the reader. Woolf doesn't want to describe Rhoda's state; she wants to make the reader *feel* what Rhoda feels. This is a means through which Woolf manipulates language. It can't say exactly what she wants to express, what Rhoda wants to express, so in Rhoda's voice, Woolf writes mainly in extended, evolving metaphors that evoke the emotion, the confusion, the entangled and shifting nature of what living feels like for her:

> As I fold up my frock and my chemise, so I put off my hopeless desire to be Susan, to be Jinny. But I will stretch my toes so that they touch the rail at the end of the bed; I will assure myself, touching the rail, of something hard. Now I cannot sink; cannot altogether fall through the thin sheet now…. Let me pull myself out of these waters. But they heap themselves on me; they sweep me between their great shoulders; I am turned; I am tumbled; I am stretched, among these long lights, these long waves, these endless paths, with people pursuing, pursuing (28).

This is just one passage of many from Rhoda where we can glimpse a struggle taking place. Like Louis, she feels caught in a whirl of chaos where she has the sense that she is losing control of her own body and being. Louis's knee-jerk response is to cling to his name, write it out over and over. Rhoda's method of regaining control is to seek out something physically solid— "I will assure myself, touching the rail, of something hard. Now I cannot sink." But all the forces of society, the desires inside herself, the march of

time— so many things that have no solid form— push and pull at her. There are no words for this experience, so Woolf turns to concepts we do have words for, things we can envision— "these long lights, these long waves, these endless paths"— and trusts the associations and symbols attached to do the work that language cannot.

It is reasonable to assume that Rhoda's complex, intense emotions cannot be alleviated all that much by holding onto a bedframe. But the device of having Rhoda latch onto something physical, highlights the overwhelmingly abstract nature of what she is dealing with. What causes Rhoda such pain is not like a broken arm that can be seen and named and treated. This was always Woolf's problem: she dealt with severe mental illness throughout her life that could not by nature be given some straightforward diagnosis. She would be consumed by something so tangible to her, and yet beyond the reaches of language to identify and explain.

Woolf uses Rhoda to express this experience: "I am like the foam that races over the beach or the moonlight that falls arrowlike here on a tin can… I am whirled down caverns, and flap like paper against endless corridors, and must press my hand against the wall to draw myself back" (131). What is more isolating than suffering that is inherently invisible to everyone but the sufferer? Rhoda is surrounded by intense emotions she can't see, touch, name or show to anyone. But a wall can be seen and touched and named. By Rhoda, but also by Woolf who has the language to describe a wall and uses it as a juxtaposition to highlight Rhoda's plight and its wordless nature.

Stephen Miko notes that Virginia Woolf held the opinion that "exactly" is an inappropriate word to use in any context, for the act of living can never be described *exactly.* He writes that the self and world lack coherence to Rhoda, she does not see how

anyone can say what they mean, what life means: "Rhoda offers us a painfully naked view of Virginia Woolf's own persistent fears. Not being able to continue means, finally, not being able to cover over or lace together gaps in one's own continuity by words" (Miko 74). Woolf's coping mechanism was writing, was putting her emotions into words. This meant then, that she was forced to innovate her way around language's limits.

Rhoda sees herself as struggling with life in a way no one else does. She is excluded by their completeness: "I myself am outside the loop… The world is entire, and I am outside of it" (Woolf 21). Yet Louis evokes the same imagery as Rhoda to describe a similar feeling of exclusion from something whole: "The circle is unbroken; the harmony complete. Here is the central rhythm; here the common mainspring. I watch it expand, contract; and then expand again. Yet I am not included (94). Woolf repeats images and metaphors to alert the reader to similarities between Louis and Rhoda, without needing to spell them out. For instance, when Louis describes himself as "always the youngest, the most innocent, the most trustful. You are all protected. I am naked" (97). Ten pages later, Rhoda voices her own sense of vulnerability in the same terms: "Hide me, I cry, protect me, for I am the youngest, the most naked of you all" (107). Through this mirroring, we have already associated the two by the time Woolf explicitly connects them. Throughout childhood and young adulthood, Rhoda and Louis continually note how the other does not fit in the world the same way their other friends do. However, as the passages above reveal, neither make a move to bond over this sense of difference. Both call themselves "the youngest," claim to be the *most* of something. The terms point to self-isolation— both are *the one* that has it hardest.

As adults, all six spread in different directions but come back to be altogether twice in the novel. Over the course of this first dinner, Louis and Rhoda begin to address one another for the first time. As they both observe the other four's interactions, their viewpoint shifts from *I* to *we,* signaling the start of some sort of alliance. They imagine the others as part of a procession, and they are the spectators. Rhoda then brings this alliance into the concrete world by naming what they are together: "And while it passes, Louis, we are aware of downfalling, we forebode decay. The shadow slants. We who are conspirators, withdrawn together to lean over some cold urn, note how the purple flame flows downwards" (141). Louis affirms it in an aside: "Listen, Rhoda (for we are conspirators, with our hands on the cold urn), to the casual, quick, exciting voice of action, of hounds running on the scent" (143).

This is an intriguing word choice on the part of Woolf. Louis and Rhoda do not call themselves allies or partners, but *conspirators—* a word with sinister connotations, often associated with dishonesty, shiftiness, scheming. Yet *conspirator* also comes from *conspire,* whose second definition is "to act in harmony toward a common end." Both interpretations make sense in this context. Louis and Rhoda would naturally identify with negative connotations because they view themselves so critically. They also share an end goal, as they both are trying to navigate a world that causes them great pain. But their affinity is not something they celebrate— it is just an indication that envy and exclusion are afflictions they have in common.

Rhoda and Louis have not yet become lovers in this scene, but they form a relationship here that will continue throughout the novel. The two of them stand as misfits living in a society of rules, customs, patterns, that has no place for their kind,

much like the "anyone" and "noone" in E.E. Cumming's poem "anyone lived in a pretty how town." The town Cummings depicts is one of monotonous routines. "women and men(both little and small)" (l. 5) keep their heads down and go about their business. They do not appreciate nature or contemplate life's big questions. What Cummings describes witheringly are the same attributes Rhoda and Louis loathe in their own British society— homogenous people refusing to recognize complexities of time, place, history, emotion. These people form social networks from which Rhoda and Louis feel excluded. The protagonist of Cumming's poem, "anyone," also does not fit into the steady, grinding rhythm of his town: "he sang his didn't he danced his did" (l. 4). The people of the town "cared for anyone not at all / they sowed their isn't they reaped their same" (l. 6-7). They do not include anyone in their routines.

Louis and Rhoda view dwelling within social circles as equivalent to being possessed by "an imperious brute" (Woolf 143). anyone seems to feel similarly, as does "no one," a second character who enters the picture and values anyone when the rest of the town does not: "noone loved him more by more... anyone's any was all to her" (Cummings l. 12, 16). While anyone and noone live their life, the people around them carry on: "someones married their everyones… said their nevers they slept their dream" (l. 17, 20). Louis and Rhoda's disgust toward society doesn't stop them from longing to belong anyway; anyone and noone are outsiders too, but *they don't care.* Rhoda and Louis care all too much. At that first reunion, Louis observes to Rhoda, "They speak now without troubling to finish their sentences. They talk a little language such as lovers use" (Woolf 143). Rather than conceptualizing him and Rhoda as the lovers in this situation, Louis associates lovers with the others. He positions them as having all that he and Rhoda

lack. Louis and Rhoda don't *like* how the others live. They align with anyone and noone in this. But they don't see their position outside the circle as freeing, like anyone and noone do.

In time, Louis and Rhoda do become lovers. But the reader is not made aware of this fact until after the relationship has ended. Louis first mentions it only glancingly— "Rhoda has left me," and later remarks that she "is gone now like the desert heat" (203). Scholar Michael Kramp observes, "we may hear as much about Rhoda leaving Louis as we do about their relationship" (43). In fact, we hear significantly more about the leaving than their time as acknowledged lovers. This is not an accident. The stark difference between anyone and noone and Louis and Rhoda is that anyone and noone are joyful. And even when they are not happy, they feel: "she laughed his joy she cried his grief" (Cummings, l. 14). Rhoda and Louis feel too, but theirs is a lonely, isolated suffering. Rhoda identifies the issue herself: "I left Louis; I feared embraces" (Woolf 206). anyone and noone are the only people in the "pretty how town" who are not alone, because they share their inner thoughts and feelings with one another. But Rhoda and Louis can never really move past their self-perceptions of being *the one* who struggles. They both are too mired in their own pain to help the other, and let the other help them. Too stuck to form the natural connection they desire.

Woolf skips to the end of their relationship to make this point: Rhoda and Louis's love is as doomed as their longing for fulfillment. Kramp suggests that Rhoda's love connection with Louis was "perhaps her last desperate attempt to assume a socially sanctioned female role" (43). Maybe so. If this is why, Rhoda contrasts noone even more. noone loved anyone *in spite of* social sanctions, which would have steered her away from

such an odd bird. But Rhoda keeps trying to make herself into a person she

fundamentally is not. When Louis reflects on Rhoda leaving him, he refers to her as the

one "with whom I shared silence when the others spoke." But that's the problem. All they

are comfortable sharing is silence. What they *need* to share are their insecurities and

dreams, and a language of love.

However, the ending of the pair's romantic relationship is not the end of their

connection to one another. That would be too simplistic for Virginia Woolf. Rhoda and

Louis never lose their similarities, they just don't know how to use those similarities to

help themselves and each other. The second and final reunion between the six characters

occurs as they reach middle age. By this point, Rhoda has left Louis. But after dinner

when everyone goes out for a walk, the two drift together in a seamless, unforced way.

There is a subtle but clear shift in their mindsets from the first to the second reunion. At

the first dinner, feelings of forced and unwanted exclusion dominated their conversation.

At this second one, the separation between them and the other four feels, if not entirely

voluntary, at least not unwelcome either. Louis begins, "And going with them, Rhoda,

swept into their current, we shall perhaps drop a little behind," to which Rhoda responds,

"Like conspirators who have something to whisper" (232). The Latin origin of "con" is

"together with," while "spirare" translates to "breathe." So etymologically, *conspirator*

literally means "breathe together." This interpretation resonates on a deeper level. During

this scene, it does feel like Louis and Rhoda are indeed "breathing together." Rhoda

brings back their old identity as co-conspirators, but this time she and Louis are not

"withdrawn," listening to people they can't join. Now they "have something to whisper."

This separation is not about lack. Rhoda and Louis *choose* to stop by the stone urn and watch the others vanish.

Woolf instills into the characters themselves, her conviction that as lovers Rhoda and Louis could never last. Rhoda recognizes this impossibility when she says to Louis, "If we could mount together, if we could perceive from a sufficient height, if we could remain untouched without any support — but you, disturbed by faint clapping sounds of praise and laughter, and I, resenting compromise and right and wrong on human lips, trust only in solitude and the violence of death and thus are divided." Louis responds, "For ever, divided" (232). For all that they despise their society's rules and rituals, neither is able to stop being affected by them.

In his memoir *The Enormous Room,* E.E. Cummings makes a point that speaks powerfully to Rhoda and Louis's quiet yet powerful acknowledgement of their inability to let go of what causes them pain:

> There are certain things in which one is unable to believe for the simple reason that he never ceases to feel them. Things of this sort— things which are always inside of us and in fact are us and which consequently will not be pushed off or away where we can begin thinking about them— are no longer things; they, and the us which they are, equals A Verb; an IS (399).

I think Cummings would have irritated Virginia Woolf in many ways, but he was also a kindred experimental soul, reimagining the possibilities of words and grammar. I imagine this observation of his would have resonated with her. First of all, he uses language to comment on a sociological reality: for us to believe something is real, that something needs to be a *thing.* A thing represents something that can be touched, seen, smelled, heard, tasted. *Belonging,* for example, is an abstract word but that abstract word is really an umbrella term for potential nouns: friends, hugs, conversations, shared meals, etc. But

Cummings says that if we internalize something enough, those nouns become intertwined with the verb "to be." Belonging *is* me. We stop being able to conceptualize *belonging* as a reality outside of our own heads.

This all sounds very abstract, but Woolf provides us with an example of Cummings' theory. Rhoda laments that she and Louis "trust only in solitude and the violence of death." Everything in which Louis and Rhoda cannot trust, exists within their thoughts and internal emotions— the concepts of unity, being whole, belonging, freedom from judgment, unconditional love and so many others. All these ideals have consumed Louis and Rhoda's thoughts since childhood. They have imagined them and wished for them for so long that they have become woven into the fabric of their being. These things can no longer be conceived of as potential realities, because to be a reality, the thing, like "embraces," which Rhoda says she fears, would have to be able to exist separate from her. Someone else would have to do the embracing. But for Rhoda, this longing to be embraced is now part of *her*— It is a scenario she plays out only in her imagination. This desire has become so internalized that she no longer believes intimacy with another person is actually possible. In this way, Rhoda and Louis's greatest obstacles are their own minds.

Alone after this second dinner, Rhoda and Louis become self-aware enough that their envy of the others fades. They realize that Bernard, Jinny, Susan, Neville, are not the answer to their problems. They will never be united with them. They know they can't connect with one another either. But for that moment in the dark by the stone urn, they can at least take refuge in this shared knowledge. There is a sense of peace that comes with recognizing the futility of one's desires. At least a person can stop struggling to

obtain something out of reach. But the two of them also understand that this lucidity will not last. As soon as the other four return, Rhoda and Louis will once again be swallowed by their feelings of inadequacy. Woolf illustrates this imminent reality in how Louis responds to the other four's return: "They are on us. The southern sun flickers over this urn; we push off in to the tide of the violent and cruel sea. Lord help us to act our parts as we greet them returning." The sentence following, drives it all home: "We have destroyed something by our presence,' said Bernard, 'a world perhaps" (232).

This termination of Louis and Rhoda's intimate exchange— the last time readers see them together— and the last three lines of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" read like sister waves crashing on the same shore. The poem ends, "We have lingered in the chambers of the sea / By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown / Till human voices wake us, and we drown" (Eliot l. 128-130). Though very different in personality and writing style, both Woolf and Eliot draw on the sea to put into words the painful experience of being forced into the present, into the cacophonous, crushing, social world.

In the wake of the second and final reunion, the lives of Rhoda and Louis diverge dramatically, but not unexpectedly. Early on in their adulthoods, Bernard remarks on the path Louis, "the best scholar in school," has set out for himself. Bernard says he often feels Louis's "eye on us, his laughing eye, his wild eye, adding us up like insignificant items in some grand total which he is for ever pursuing in his office" (Woolf 92). There is unmistakable irony here— Louis is tormented his entire life by his certainty that the others are always watching him, evaluating him. Meanwhile, Bernard sees *Louis* as constantly evaluating *them.* And Bernard is not wrong. If a person is concerned about being scrutinized for signs of difference, they must then scrutinize those people in order

to figure out what they need to do to not be labeled as different. Louis is no exception. He is constantly watching someone, sizing up someone. Louis ends up doing to everyone else precisely what he loathes others for ostensibly doing to him.

Yet Louis's hypocrisy is only a small piece of the trap in which Louis's insecurities have landed him. The elements of society that torture him are the same ones in which he seeks solace: "Louis roots himself between open envy of those with the right legs and tongues and an uncritical admiration for the larger structures of inheritance and tradition within which those legs and tongues work…Ironically, these very structures of social class and inheritance are the same barriers which marginalize Louis" (Lucenti 80). One way I think we can conceptualize living within the social structures to which Lucenti refers, is to imagine a community as a hydroelectric waterwheel: all of its rules, expectations and customs, written and unwritten, make up the wheel, which is built over a stream, in the path of a waterfall. Human beings are the water creating the stream. As they rush over the drop, some of them are funneled into the wheel, causing it to turn. This water—the community—rotates around the axel, producing kinetic energy that is directed into generating whatever needs power.

Louis channels himself into this wheel. He confines his energy to its circular motion and tries to convince himself that dedicating himself to powering machines is what he wants. We see him doing this when he says, "I am half in love with the typewriter and the telephone. With letters and cables and brief but courteous commands on the telephone to Paris, Berlin, New York, I have fused my many lives into one" (Woolf 168). Louis agonizes over how British society doesn't recognize or appreciate his

complexities. And yet he celebrates his supposed success in collapsing these identities, streamlining himself into one concentrated cycle of water.

But Louis cannot be fully represented by a hydroelectric wheel. His life also resembles an abusive relationship. Many of the reasons people stay in abusive relationships are mental and emotional. Part of the abuse can be the victim coming to believe they are broken and their abuser is the one who can fix them. That victim is Louis in a nutshell. It is also MacNolia Cox in "From." The final definition Jordan gives in "from" is this one: "9. Outside or beyond the possibility of: In the room, he kept me *from* leaving by keeping me curious; he kept me *from* drowning by holding my breath in his mouth; yes, he kept me *from* leaving till the next day when he said *Leave*. Then, he couldn't keep me *from* coming back" (Jordan 28). From the poem's opening onwards, the reader becomes increasingly clear about the fact that the man in the poem is not a good partner. But the reader only knows this because MacNolia as the narrator is making the observations. To at least some extent, she is clear-eyed about the man's character. But at the same time, the narrator is well aware that no matter how terrible the man makes her feel, she is going to return to him again and again. Despite everything, he is her lifeline. She says herself, "he kept me *from* drowning."

We see MacNolia caught in the same type of damaging cycle as Louis. And Jordan meant for this sort of association to be made. In one interview he says, "I don't necessarily think if I'm writing about a young black girl in 1936 in Akron, Ohio that somehow that's different from anyone else who is experiencing the feeling of being cheated or counted out or powerless" (qtd. in Nashville Review and Jordan). Woolf and Jordan are both depicting a harmful phenomenon that while intensely personal, has its

roots in societal issues. Because the thing is, if someone is in an abusive relationship, they have a relationship. They are not *alone.* That is a community's insidious trick: it can make people feel overwhelmingly lonely.

Every day we are surrounded by people, on the metro, in restaurants, at the desks around us at work. We may interact with many of them, but each of us has our routines and responsibilities, our own backstories and worries and goals. We realize that no one else understands what it means to be *me.* Everyone is absorbed in their own lives, at the same time that they share space and conversation. No one's acts of living exactly resemble anyone else's. So we feel lonely. This sense of being alone then provokes us to seek more connection, as if another drink with a person at a bar, a new set of co-workers, a family trip or attentive lover, will drive out the cold, sickly feeling of loneliness. This how a city stays bustling, how customs continue to be followed, how capitalism marches onwards. But nothing has actually changed. Our particular life is still ours alone.

Louis and MacNolia want so badly not to be alone, that they will move toward people, professions, practices they know will damage them. This is just as true for Rhoda, and slightly less so, the rest of Woolf's characters. Bringing back the particle, "localized entity" idea, we often think of *longing for* a thing and *hatred of* a thing as mutually exclusive emotional states. But if Virginia Woolf has shown us anything, it is that they are not. It's as if Rhoda and Louis have surface winds from opposite directions within them, creating waves that collide with one another. One of these winds is a hatred for what their society demands of them. The other is an intense, instinctive need to be part of a whole, to belong to someone or something.

At the end of *The Waves,* Bernard is the last man standing. In his final extended soliloquy, he reflects on each of his five companions. When he gets to Louis, he notes that thanks to Louis's discipline, he did find success in his career. But Bernard adds, "His life, though, was not happy" (Woolf 244). This harkens back to Bernard's much earlier observation of Louis adding up the others into "some grand total." Bernard imagines back then that one day Louis's addition would be complete and "our total will be known; but it will not be enough" (92). The elderly Bernard confirms that Louis never found the freedom and unity for which he longed: "Unhappy, unfriended, in exile he would sometimes, in moments of confidence, describe how the surf swept over the beaches of his home…He was without those simple attachments by which one is connected with another" (244). Water that rises into a unified wave forms the surf Louis liked to describe— an unbroken line of foam. Louis was unable to forge this connection, become part of that unbroken line. Finding shelter in the same place that makes that shelter necessary might make for a passable coping mechanism, but it won't ever be a solution.

For the better part of *The Waves,* Rhoda attempts like Louis to be a "normal" member of society— to channel herself into the hydroelectric wheel. Louis's problem is that he spins the wheel too fast, generates too much power. He becomes too systematized, too rigid. Rhoda's problem is that for all she tries, she keeps slipping out of the wheel back into the stream before it begins to turn. For a while she sees making the wheel spin as her only salvation, but unlike Louis she has no admiration or respect for the system. At one point Rhoda says (to no one but herself), "I hate all details of the individual life. But I am fixed here to listen. An immense pressure is on me" (107). This pressure, whether explicitly mentioned or not, is always palpable around Rhoda. It's as if Woolf crafted

Rhoda as a character perpetually hauling a 50-pound sack of grain on her shoulders. She is astutely aware of her society's demands. She feels them viscerally. What she feels just as much are the forces within her, pulling her in other directions. The result is an acute sense of being in the wrong place at the wrong time: "I must take his hand; I must answer. But what answer shall I give? I am thrust back to stand burning in this clumsy, this ill-fitting body, to receive the shafts of his indifference and his scorn, I who long for marble columns and pools on the other side of the world where the swallow dips her wings" (107).

Reading *The Waves* post March 1941 is a different experience than it must have been to read it in the ten years preceding. The visceral eloquence with which Rhoda's pain is wrought, will cut deep no matter what the reader knows about the character's creator. But the parallels between Rhoda's reflections and choice to end her life in *The Waves* and Woolf's cannot be ignored. Whenever we hear Rhoda's voice, we are given a sense of a struggle taking place. She is "thrust back to stand burning" in an "ill-fitting body." Woolf expresses in Rhoda a feeling that to live, she has to constantly battle in a way no one else does: "I am afraid of the shock of sensation that leaps upon me, because I cannot deal with it as you do — I cannot make one moment merge in the next. To me they are all violent, all separate" (131). Similar language appears in "A Sketch of the Past" when Woolf writes of the "shocks" she experienced as a child, how they were moments of non-being, horror and revelation that shaped her philosophy of art (Chun 53). In her suicide note to her husband Leonard, March 28, 1941, she writes, "*I have fought against it, but I can't any longer*" (qtd. from smith.edu). She echoes this in a last letter to her sister Vanessa: "*I can't fight any longer*" (qtd. in Brooks). After writing these, she

loaded her pockets with stones, walked into the river near her home, and let herself drift

to the bottom.

Knowing how Woolf's life ended, some lines of Rhoda's are truly chilling: "I am

sick of prettiness; I am sick of privacy. I ride rough waters and shall sink with no one to

save me" (160). Rhoda herself reads like a human characterization of a suicide note.

"Wander no more, I say; this is the end" (164). To Leonard in that final note, Woolf

writes, *"I feel we can't go through another of those terrible times. And I shan't recover*

this time. I begin to hear voices, and I can't concentrate. So I am doing what seems the

*best thing to do" (*qtd. from smith.edu). Rhoda's tone and Woolf's appear nearly

identical. Both sound resigned and resolute.

After Rhoda says, "Now I will relinquish; now I will let loose. Now I will at last

free the checked, the jerked-back desire to be spent, to be consumed" (Woolf 164), she

goes on living for quite some time, still around 65 pages later. Woolf lived for another ten

years after crafting Rhoda. Perhaps their tones are what they are because the process of

letting go has been a lifelong ordeal. Woolf had to cope with mental illness from the time

she was a child, and Rhoda is already suffering when we first hear her speak. While their

final acts might look rash to us, it seems to me that they are anything but. I think it is

likely that Woolf was close to certain for years that she would end her life. The only part

up in the air was when. In putting Rhoda onto the page, it is possible that Woolf was

consciously writing her own conclusion.

Woolf relies heavily on metaphor to express Rhoda's thoughts. She also adopts a

certain cadence and chooses specific words that evoke a sense of things always coming

unwanted and unrelenting at Rhoda alone. It's as if she's standing on a beach as huge

waves roll in one after another: "'The swing-door goes on opening,' said Rhoda. 'Strangers keep on coming, people we shall never see again, people who brush us disagreeably with their familiarity, their indifference, and the sense of a world continuing without us'" (107). And later, "Reckless and random the cars race and roar and hunt us to death like bloodhounds. I am alone in a hostile world" (160).

The image of an isolated figure being hit by one crashing wave after another, similarly comes to mind when reading Jamaica Kincaid's prose poem "Girl," where the oppressive force of a society is represented through the barrage of instructions, commands and criticisms from mother to daughter: "This is how you smile to someone you don't like too much; this is how you smile to someone you don't like at all; this is how you smile to someone you like completely… this is how to bully a man; this is how a man bullies you; this is how to love a man" (Kincaid). The mother's endless counsel is all in the same tone, infusing the prose poem with a repetitive rhythm, fortified by repetition of the mother's concern over the girl being perceived as—and becoming— "a slut." The explicit inspiration for the poem came from Kincaid's relationship with her mother. Kincaid acknowledges that her mother's approach was well-intentioned, as in her mind these rhythms served a guide, a helping hand. Yet these rhythms can be interpreted quite differently. For what the mother in the poem sees as aids to living in the world, the girl views as "extraordinary oppression" (Kincaid's term) which, Kincaid says, "is one of the things I came to see" (Kincaid and Vorda 59). Woolf, like Kincaid, conceptualizes rhythms as both positive and negative forces.

Woolf's relationship to both rhythm and waves is an intriguing one. Virginia Woolf loved waves her entire life. She adored music, and found solace and beauty in

rhythms in general, especially in the rhythm of waves. Waves are an archetypal symbol of feelings and biological rhythms, of consciousness and life— a wave of heat, a wave of sound, a wave of remorse or jealousy, etc. They also serve as a structuring tool for Woolf. While developing the six voices in *The Waves,* Woolf wrote in her diary, "The thing is to keep them running homogeneously in and out, in the rhythm of the waves" (qtd. in Stewart 447). In another entry in 1930, we see her drawing on rhythm to conceptualize the novel's form: "Suppose I could run all the scenes together more? —by rhythm, chiefly…I don't want the waste that the breaks give; I want to avoid chapters; that indeed is my achievement, if any here: a saturated, unchopped, completeness" (qtd. from uah.edu).

In the interludes that separate the novel's jumps in time, waves are a constant, perhaps the only constant, as the sun moves higher and then lower in the sky, shifting how everything else appears. Rhythm is a refuge; it does not desert. Yet rhythms in the novel are also overwhelming, for in these same interludes exists the rhythm of the day passing, time passing. There is something overwhelming in that. In the same diary entry about fusing scenes together by rhythm, Woolf writes that she wants to avoid breaks "so as to make the blood run like a torrent from end to end" (qtd. from uah.edu). The language she chooses here to talk about rhythm is laden with a violent, forceful undertone. Many of the rhythms in *The Waves,* like that of the "swing-door opening," strangers that "keep on coming," cars that "race and roar"— are exhausting, assaulting even. Like everything else in the worlds Woolf creates, rhythm is multifaceted, making life difficult and bearable, both.

In the end, Rhoda does what Louis does not. She lets go. We could say she gives up, or we could say she finally finds freedom. Neither are untrue. Rhoda eventually stops trying to fit in. She unleashes her anger, her criticisms of the world around her. She looks around her, clear-eyed, exclaiming, "What dissolution of the soul you demanded in order to get through one day, what lies, bowings, scrapings, fluency and servility!" (Woolf 206). There is a release happening here. One can imagine Rhoda finally letting out the breath she has held all her life. Throughout the novel, having criticized herself for not being able to "make one moment merge in the next," not knowing how to "run minute to minute and hour to hour" (131), Rhoda, now in middle age, for the first time stops blaming herself: "How you snatched from me the white spaces that lie between hour and hour and rolled them into dirty pellets and tossed them into the waste-paper basket with your greasy paws. Yet those were my life" (206).

These white spaces are also the silences between words. In music, breaks are as much a part of a piece as the notes. In writing and speech, the importance of a pause is not so recognized. Rhoda dwelled in these gaps, in the silences she felt most at peace. But she was imbued with a sense that somehow this was wrong, that she should see herself in the words and not between them. But these were not the right words for her. Rhoda at last seems to realize that the structures she lives within— including language— are at fault for her feeling inadequate and out of place. The white spaces were dirtied by others, they were never inherently so.

In Jamaica Kincaid's own life, she reached a similar point. She did what her family expected of her all through her adolescence but once she arrived in the U.S. as a young woman, she decided to stop following anyone else's rules. Kincaid has brought

that same attitude into her writing, resisting expectations put upon authors: "People like me just sort of usurp all the boundaries and just mix them up and just cross borders all the time. We just have no interest in the formalities. We are not interested in being literary people. We have something to say that is really urgent" (Ferguson and Kincaid 166). In "Girl" we aren't told what the daughter ends up doing, but to use Woolf's language, we see the "dissolution of the soul" being demanded, and the beginnings of a resistance taking root.

The daughter is the recipient of all these instructions— she is the entire focus of the piece— and yet she utters only twenty words, two sentences buried in the avalanche of her mother's unasked for and unending guidance. The first sentence the girl utters, well into the poem, is a factual correction: "*but I don't sing benna on Sundays at all and never in Sunday school*" (Kincaid). Her mother does not acknowledge the girl said a word—she simply moves on to the intricacies of sewing buttons. The second sentence of the girl's, and second to last sentence of the prose poem, is a logistical question: "*but what if the baker won't let me feel the bread*?" This time her mother responds to her, but with irate judgment: "you mean to say that after all you are really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won't let near the bread?" (Kincaid). The reader can feel the girl being shrunk smaller and smaller by the authority figure. Her voice is either invisible, or elicits an attack. But she *does* ask the questions. And Kincaid openly identifies herself in the girl. It's not a stretch to imagine that the mother's voice cuts off because the girl is no longer listening.

Rhoda eventually stops listening too. First, she begins to take back some control by directing her fury away from herself and onto the London society in which she is

living. But Woolf didn't see this as enough. Rhoda will never be able to fully express the suffering she has endured. She doesn't have the words. They do not exist. There is still so much pain with which she must live. She is still trapped by the limitations of language. It is only after the fact, secondhand through Bernard, that we learn what ultimately happens: "Rhoda leaves us, flying past us to the desert" (266). Which is a nicer way of saying that she walks into traffic and kills herself.

Louis did not do this. He kept going until "he burned himself out…desiring perfection" (Woolf 266). So is Louis stronger than Rhoda? Did Rhoda give up? Michael Kramp says no, arguing that we should view Rhoda "as a powerful resister of the social machine's desire for individualized agents." He suggests that her so-called inability to occupy a specific and distinct role should really be interpreted as an ability to resist society's desire "for separate beings who can perform isolated capitalistic tasks" (42). I agree. But only Virginia Woolf will ever fully understand why Rhoda made the choice that she did.

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