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Écriture féminine as an intoxicating epistemological device: queer decolonial reorientations in Virginia Woolf

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Abstract: This article re-evaluates Virginia Woolf's work through queer and decolonial lenses (Ahmed, 2006; Butler, 2017, 2024; Lugones, 2008; Mignolo; Walsh, 2018), illustrating how it disrupts entrenched gender binaries and colonial structures that reinforce hierarchical power dynamics (Oyěwùmí, 2021), albeit ambiguously. Central to the argument is the concept of "intoxication," influenced by Derrida's (2005) *phármakon* and Hélène Cixous' (1975) *écriture féminine*. This concept is a radical force that can potentially dismantle rigid Western epistemologies. Woolf's feminist writing, particularly in *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), exemplifies this subversive use of intoxication to challenge oppressive norms and reimagine identity beyond patriarchal and racist colonial constraints. The article also explores the embodiment of (trans)feminine intoxication, offering a framework for understanding how trans (in)existence and queer performativity are often misrepresented or misaligned within literary traditions. Drawing on Zhao Ng's (2023) analysis, it critiques how trans characters are frequently subsumed into and reduced to romantic metaphors within cisgender or broader queer paradigms. In contrast, the article advocates for a decolonial and transfeminist critique (Nascimento, 2021) that transcends binary gender constructs, proposing a transformative intellectual praxis that embraces diverse epistemologies while resisting the limitations imposed by Western thought.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf; *Écriture féminine*; Intoxication; Queer narratives; Decoloniality.

Introduction

This article explores the embodiment of (trans)feminine intoxication (Cixous, 1975; Derrida, 2005; Ng, 2023; Oyěwùmí, 2021; Woolf, 1938), offering a framework to understand how trans (in)existence and "general" queer performativity (Ahmed, 2006; Butler, 2017, 2024) are not profoundly intertwined. Singaporean critic Zhao Ng (2023) examines how trans characters in literature are often marginalised or rendered invisible, their experiences reduced to romantic metaphors within queer or cisgender paradigms. In works such as *Nightwood* by Djuna Barnes, Ng argues that trans existence is frequently romanticised or subsumed into broader queer narratives, thereby erasing its unique specificity. In a context where cisgender and transgender women continue to assert their epistemological presence, the legacy of Western

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thought persists in relegating them to subaltern roles, reinforcing a hierarchical logic that privileges masculinity, and even establishing oppositions between them, for cisgender, is seen as superior concerning transgender. This dichotomy, rooted in patriarchal and colonial frameworks, has long shaped the construction of knowledge, power, and identity.

Virginia Woolf's work, when re-examined through queer and decolonial lenses (Ahmed, 2006; Lugones, 2008; Mignolo; Walsh, 2018), presents a critical opportunity to challenge these oppressive structures. By disrupting traditional binaries, this study contributes to Literary Theory by proposing an aesthetic centred on intoxication–an epistemological tool that, I believe, Woolf's feminist writing (Woolf, 1929, 1938) powerfully exemplifies, especially in *Orlando: A Biography* (1928). Here, intoxication is not merely a metaphor but a radical epistemological force capable of destabilising the rigid hierarchies of gendered Western epistemology (Oyěwùmí, 2021). Additionally, intoxication serves to call into question prejudicial discourses that portray trans and LGBTQ+ people as "sick" or as dangers to societal norms, revealing how they are perceived as disrupting or "intoxicating" traditional structures of gender and sexuality. By reframing this pessimistic view, intoxication is repurposed as a tool of liberation, challenging oppressive norms that pathologies of non-conforming identities. According to the Nigerian feminist scholar Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmí (2021), Western thought is profoundly marked by biological discourses that have been exerting a considerable influence on other peoples around the world through colonial processes, whose epistemologies do not centre the body in such a hierarchical way. Departing from Oyěwùmí's analysis, we must dismantle the myth of universality sustained by White Western thought, which assumes its epistemology is the only valid one. Acknowledging the limitations of Western frameworks opens space for recognising diverse ways of thinking and understanding the world.

Drawing on Derrida's (2005) concept of the *phármakon* as both remedy and poison and Hélène Cixous' (1975) notion of *écriture féminine*, this article explores the undecidability of language and its potential to dismantle oppressive systems. Feminine writing, framed as an intoxicating force, reconfigures established modes of thought. The discussion is further enriched by decolonial and trans/queer perspectives that challenge not only gender binaries but also the colonial structures that uphold them. Without engaging in situated debates, the ideological frameworks constructing the Global North and South in opposition function within a Eurocentric, imperial logic (Lugones, 2008; Mignolo; Walsh, 2018). Recognising the

discursive mechanisms perpetuating colonial power is crucial for avoiding superficial inclusions of subaltern voices in global dialogues. Furthermore, in Queer Studies, Sara Ahmed (2006) critiques the cultural and geographical trajectories that shape intellectual practices, advocating for a departure from familiar, linear paths to explore alternative ways of thinking. Woolf's exploration of gender offers critical insights into reimagining the body and identity beyond colonial and patriarchal constraints (Helt, 2016). By also engaging with Judith Butler's (2024) critique of the gender binary as a colonial imposition, this article highlights the urgency of dismantling both gender binaries and the imperial and colonial logic that shape intellectual discourse and operate even in dissident groups.

Woolf's feminist writing, therefore, opens new orientations for a decolonial queer critique, revealing the intersections of gender norms and racist colonial structures. This shift in discourse, informed by decolonial and trans/queer theories (Ahmed, 2006; Bento, 2017; Nascimento, 2021; Ng, 2023), is essential for developing new epistemological modes that resist colonial and binary systems. Ultimately, I advocate for a critical transformation in intellectual praxis, rethinking identity, embodiment, and resistance through decolonial and transfeminist lenses. By treating *écriture féminine* as an intoxicating, transformative force, this study proposes new ways of imagining thought and identity, breaking free from the restrictive binaries imposed by colonial and patriarchal ideologies.

Virginia Woolf's *écriture féminine:* a racialized reading

In 1918, Virginia Woolf wrote a review for *The Times Literary Supplement* titled "Women Novelists", addressing *The Women Novelists*, a study by R. Brimley Johnson. In the review, Woolf commends Johnson for not approaching literature written by women in a biased or prejudiced manner. She praises his ability to remain impartial, meaning that he did not allow the prejudices of his gender to influence his reading. Furthermore, Woolf notes that Johnson was conscientious in highlighting the "peculiar qualities" of women's writing and the social and historical conditions underlying their literary production. From Johnson's perspective, Woolf explains that women wrote under a "tyrannical" male dominance, which, for example, led George Eliot to adopt a male pseudonym when she wrote. Despite this coercive male force,

Woolf argues that women possess an "imperious instinct" (Woolf, 1918, p. 70). While fiction may lead them to adopt various pseudonyms, the feminine perspective is inscribed beneath the masculine pseudonym.

> The women who wished to be taken for men in what they wrote were undoubtedly familiar enough; and if they have given place to the women who wish to be taken for women the change is hardly for the better, since any emphasis the sex of a writer is not only irritating, but superfluous. As Mr. Brimley Johnson again and again remarks, a woman's writing is always feminine; it cannot help being feminine: the only difficulty lies in defining what we mean by feminine (Woolf, 1918, p. 70).

When discussing feminine writing, it is essential to approach with caution what is understood as "feminine." As Woolf critically reflects in her work, while she praises Johnson's seemingly unbiased approach, she also ironically critiques an identity logic that exclusively associates femininity with women. By marking what is written by women as "feminine" and men as "masculine," a binary logic of opposition between the feminine and the masculine persists. This reinforces an epistemologically biological order, linking what is socially and culturally constructed as male and female in Western thought (Oyěwùmí, 2021). Such a framework not only limits our understanding of identity but also excludes other modes of identity expression, even leading to censorship, such as the case of *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) by Radclyffe Hall, whose novel faced harsh censorship due to its portrayal of lesbianism, calling lesbians (including Hall herself) "sexual inverts", and claiming for acceptance (Helt, 2016).

Based on *A Room of One's Own* (1929) – a feminist manifesto in which Woolf explores the relationship between women and fiction, advocating for writing that transcends binary and combative logics between men and women, masculine and feminine – it seems that Woolf seeks to problematise and rethink cultural femininity. The notion should no longer attach femininity to subordination but, instead, be understood as a new pathway that helps envision a new method of writing. In other words, we must contemplate a form of writing in which gendered divisions can be questioned and even dissolved.

Nearly a decade later, in a feminist and pacifist manifesto *Three Guineas* (1938), considered a continuation of *A Room*, Woolf examines the irregular disjunction between male

and female experiences. She begins by raising a question that had yet to be answered: "How, in your opinion, are we to prevent war?" (Woolf, 1938, p. 1045). First, according to Woolf, war could never be caused by women because they had no access to military life. As a result, they could not understand the patterns of male thought that led to warlike actions. Moreover, education is highlighted as the critical aspect that distances women from understanding war, and consequently, they cannot prevent it. Having access to education would be the primary means of preventing war. However, Woolf asks if women received the duplicate titles as men, wouldn't a warlike and oppressive mindset lead them? (Woolf, 1938, p. 1064).

The type of education Woolf envisions for both men and women opposes formal education that reinforces a logic of exclusive inclusion. It is worth noting that when Woolf published *Three Guineas* in 1938, women were already attending universities such as Girton College and Newnham College in Cambridge, where Woolf had delivered her 1928 lecture "Women and Fiction," which inspired *A Room.* Nevertheless, women were still not permitted to receive their degrees. Not until 1948 did these colleges begin to grant degrees to women. Before this, women lived on the threshold–simultaneously inside and outside of effective knowledge production. This liminal position, Woolf suggests, holds a unique power, as noted by Woolfian scholar and literary critic Davi Pinho (2017).

Woolf envisions an education that provides access for both men and women without sectarianism. This education should exist neither in the public sphere–historically fuelled by a warlike and masculine logic–nor in the private sphere–historically feminine and marginal, operating inside and outside effective thought production. In other words, if the public sphere fails by propagating the logic of war and the private sphere keeps women on the margins of thought, it is time to embrace an education transcending this binary–public and private.

In *Three Guineas*, Woolf conceives women's "teachers" as figures of poverty, chastity, derision, and freedom. These figures, she argues, would return powerfully and affirmatively. Poverty would teach one to live with just enough to maintain independence. Chastity would teach one not to sell ideas for money. Derision would teach one not to advertise one's merits. Freedom would teach one to rid oneself of the unrealistic pride that divides thought into religious and nationalistic factions (Woolf, 1938, p. 1101). These metaphorical teachers represent a new cultural identity that educates and guides men and women toward life and

education where oppressive divisions between masculine and feminine are epistemologically dissolved.

> When we have expressed an opinion upon the surface we have done all that we can do. It is true that the surface may have some connection with depths, but if we are to help you to prevent war we must try to penetrate deeper beneath the skin. Let us then look in another direction – in a direction natural to the educated men's daughters, in the direction of education itself (Woolf, 1938, p. 1058).

Woolf's manifesto ventures into diverse directions, opposing war and repression. Yet entering a truly unexplored logic would require rethinking women – historically and culturally regarded as the receptacles of femininity, particularly "the daughters of educated men" –outside an identity-based framework. But how can we peel back this historical and tyrannical skin to look in another direction? Offering degrees to women implies social and political impacts and a reimagining of femininity, allowing it to be represented effectively across different spheres of knowledge.

While Woolf's critique is significant, it remains limited by her positionality as a white, cisgender woman of privilege. If Woolf herself faced societal restrictions, it becomes crucial to racialise and expand this debate to ask: What happened to Black and transgender women? The educational and intellectual opportunities that Woolf envisions, while important, reflect a racialised and cisgender privilege. Black and trans women were often relegated to roles such as prostitutes, servants, nannies, and criminals – excluded not only from intellectual spaces but from fundamental human rights. Race constitutes a "lived experience", making the identification as "Black British" appear paradoxical within a white-centred society. British society historically failed to recognise people of colour as "fellow citizens", reinforcing their marginalisation (Evaristo, 2021). This debate can also be extended to reflect on trans experiences (Nascimento, 2021). Thus, Woolf's exploration of women's access to education and intellectual arenas must be expanded to include the experiences of transgender women and women of colour, whose access to these spaces has been doubly obstructed by both gender and racial barriers.

The year 1948, which Pinho (2017) highlights as pivotal for women's education, is significant. However, for Black women – particularly in colonial and postcolonial contexts –

access to education was compounded by additional layers of exclusion. While Woolf critiques the binary logic of masculine and feminine inscriptions in knowledge, this discussion must also address how race intersects with gender, further complicating access to intellectual spaces. For Black people, the tyranny Woolf describes was compounded by systemic racial discrimination, rendering their experiences and voices even more ghostly within the mosaic of knowledge (Jones, 2023).

Thus, while Woolf's proposition rests on the fluidity of thought and the breaking of binary gender constructs, this conversation must extend beyond gender to address the racial hierarchies that persist in intellectual and educational institutions. The performances of men and women that Woolf imagines sliding between the masculine and feminine must account for how race shapes these performances, often in ways that silence or marginalise trans and Black people. Therefore, Woolf's vision of inclusive education must be reimagined to confront not only gender but also the racialised dimensions of exclusion from knowledge, offering a more intersectional critique that encompasses the experiences of "plural" women (Collins; Bilge, 2016).

In *A Letter to a Young Poet* (1932), Woolf suggests that in every poet, all poets of the past live on. When one writes, the ghosts of past writers watch over the writing. She argues that Shakespeare, Dryden, Pope, and Tennyson are ancestors whose legacies drive the pen forward (Woolf, 1932, p. 162). However, she criticises poetry about "nothing" – verses that refer exclusively to the poet's self, lacking connection to other lives or hopes for the future. This, she suggests, would mean the death of poetry. Woolf raises questions for the "young poet": Since men have grown complacent with the classics of dead poets, how can we awaken them to rethink this necrophiliac writing? How can we shift from this literature of death to explore the worlds of other lives?

Woolf proposes to John Lehmann[2], her friend and the essay's imaginary recipient, that writing must also create space for female voices. To reimagine literature, Woolf proposes that

[2] From 1931 to 1946, John Lehmann worked as the director of Hogarth Press, which was owned by the Woolfs. When The Waves (1931) was published, Lehmann wrote a letter to Virginia Woolf in which he praised the novel and suggested that she should define her views on modernist poetry. On September 17, 1931 (Selected Letters, 2008, p. 294-295), Woolf enthusiastically responded to the letter. Since she believed The Waves would be a failure, she expressed great gratitude, happiness, and relief that Lehmann had admired her work. Finding the idea of writing a letter to a young poet brilliant, Woolf imagined Lehmann as her recipient in A Letter to a Young *Poet*. In this,

thought should be constructed in a "bisexual" manner (Woolf, 1932, p. 169), with both masculine and feminine energies working together in the poet's mind, which may be thought as a "transexual manner", actualising Woolf's debate. She argues that literature's stagnation stems from its reliance on a single point of view. This call for inclusion extends beyond gender, as Woolf's vision, when racialised, demands a more expansive rethinking of whose voices and experiences shape the literary and intellectual landscape.

Woolf provides foundational contributions to feminist thought, mainly through her critique of phallocentric language and her push to break binary gender norms. These ideas open critical avenues for discussions on marginalised identities, offering epistemological alternatives for the experiences of Black and transgender women today. However, Woolf's approach to race remains deeply ambiguous, particularly when considering her participation in the 1910 Dreadnought Hoax. This hoax was orchestrated by Woolf's brother, Adrian Stephen, and a group of Bloomsbury friends. The prank involved the group disguising themselves as a royal Abyssinian delegation (from modern-day Ethiopia) to deceive the British Navy into granting them a tour of the HMS Dreadnought, a symbol of imperial military might. Woolf and her fellow pranksters wore blackface and elaborate costumes with turbans and fake beards, speaking in gibberish to impersonate the African royals. The hoax was a success, embarrassing the British Navy when the truth was later revealed, but its racial implications are troubling, as Danell Jones emphasises in her book *The Girl Prince* (2023). Although intended as a critique of British imperialism and the pretentiousness of military institutions, the use of blackface in The Dreadnought Hoax highlights Woolf's entanglement in the racist humour of her time. The prank relied on stereotypes of African people and the belief that such a farcical portrayal would be convincing enough to fool the British authorities. While Woolf and her companions saw themselves mocking the establishment, they also perpetuated harmful racial caricatures for comedy (Jones, 2023).

Another ambiguity is present in *A Room*, as Jeanne Dubino (2021) points out. Woolf rarely mentions sub-Saharan Africa in her works, and this fleeting reference to a "fine negress" (Woolf, 1929, p. 74) is one of the few. The scene depicts a white woman passing by a Black

she intended to discuss the challenges of modernist fiction and the shortcomings of poetry, which she considered necrophiliac. Finally, she suggested that Lehmann write a response letter titled *A Letter to an Old Novelist* (Woolf, 1932, p. 320).

woman, reflecting Woolf's experiences within the colonial and racist context of early 20th-century Britain. Dubino situates this encounter within the broader colonial mindset, suggesting that even progressive thinkers like Woolf were influenced by imperialist and racist attitudes. Racial hierarchies were deeply ingrained, and white critics often interpreted Woolf's narrator as a representative of all women, ignoring how the Black woman was turned into an "Other" in the text.

Despite her racial blind spots, however, Woolf was not entirely oblivious to her privileges as a white woman. In both versions of her only play, *Freshwater: A Comedy* (1923/1935), Woolf anticipates post-colonial critiques by satirising the British Empire differently when compared to the racist hoax in 1910. Through the character Charles Cameron, who absurdly romanticises India (he means Ceylon/Sri Lanka but says India), Woolf mocks colonial escapism: "What are these? [He picks up the braces.] Braces. Fetters that bind us to the wheel of life. What are these? [He picks up the trousers.] Trousers. Fig leaves that conceal the truth. What is truth? Moonshine. Where does the moon shine forever? India" (Woolf, 1935, p. 14). Woolf's comedic treatment demonstrates her awareness of the absurdities of colonialism, even as her views on race remain conflicted. In addition, when discussing women's rights, Woolf does not consider any changes effective if other differences are not contemplated, as she reflects in *Three Guineas*.

> You shall swear that you will do all in your power to insist that any woman who enters any profession shall in no way hinder any other human being, whether man or woman, white or black, provided that he or she is qualified to enter that profession (Woolf, 1938, p. 1122).

While Woolf's contributions to feminist discourse are often ambiguous, her engagement with race reflects the limitations of her time and her effort to grapple with privilege and oppression artistically. One key concept Woolf develops is the idea of an "Outsiders' Society", which she envisions in *Three Guineas* as a space for those who refuse to conform to patriarchal norms: "refusing to join your society [patriarchal society]; by working for our common ends – justice and equality and liberty for all men and women – outside your society, not within" (Woolf, 1938, p. 1142). This imagined society represents Woolf's exercise in thinking through the intersections of privilege and marginalisation. Woolf's position about the Outsiders' Society

is complex. As a white woman, she benefits from the racial privileges of her time, making her "inside" the dominant structure in terms of race. Nevertheless, as a queer woman and a critic of patriarchy, she positions herself "outside" of mainstream society. This duality – inside and outside – shapes Woolf's perspective and critique. She uses the Outsiders' Society to explore the overlapping and intersecting axes of privilege and oppression, recognising that while she experiences marginalisation as a woman, she is still complicit in racial hierarchies due to her whiteness.

Her works, such as *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*, then, reflect this tension. Woolf strongly critiques gendered oppression, envisioning a world where women have the space and independence to create freely. However, her engagement with race remains superficial, and her critiques of colonialism, such as in the Dreadnought Hoax and her fleeting reference to a "fine negress", reveal a tacit ambiguity regarding racial hierarchies. This dynamic tension between feminist critique and complicity in colonial racial structures provides a fertile ground for contemporary scholars of intersectionality, post-colonialism, and decoloniality (Mignolo; Walsh, 2018). Woolf's Outsiders' Society offers a mode for thinking about resistance and exclusion in complex and intersecting ways, highlighting how different forms of privilege and oppression coexist. It challenges us to reconsider the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion and how those who critique the system from its margins can still be implicated in other forms of dominance. In this sense, Woolf's legacy is a simple critique of patriarchy and an ongoing reflection on the contradictions of privilege, exclusion, and complicity – offering insights for those engaged in intersectional and decolonial feminist thought today.

In *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1975), French philosopher Hélène Cixous introduces the concept of *écriture féminine*–feminine writing and inscription–asserting that it is time for women to inscribe themselves into the historical mosaic in a substantive way, free from the shadows of conventional masculine approaches. These lives deserve to be told. Writing becomes the realm where forgotten and silenced lives can be made whole. Historically, as women were sidelined and their intellectual value questioned, fiction provided a means to reveal truths that reality often obscured (Woolf, 1929). Departing from Cixous' *écriture féminine* and Woolf's feminist writing, we can now address the intersection of race and gender and also account for transgender experiences. Although Woolf and Cixous primarily critiqued traditional

male-centred writing, they laid the groundwork for opening spaces where marginalised identities can reclaim narrative authority today.

Écriture féminine creates a space of possibilities where women can freely express themselves–not just women of the present but those hidden in the shadows of the past who never had the chance to become figures of reference. As Cixous (1975) states, the future must no longer be determined by the past. Although past impositions persist to this day, we must move toward the future, constantly questioning the darkness of our time, as Giorgio Agamben (2009) would argue. This darkness, produced by past neglect, is illuminated when we interrogate these silences to create a new past for the future. In this way, *écriture féminine* becomes an essential theoretical and methodological tool for creating new linguistic and cultural spaces for future generations. Nevertheless, this space must be broadened to account for Black and trans women, whose voices have been historically excluded, adding new layers to this debate promoted by Woolf and Cixous.

Words are full of echoes, memories, and life. They do not live in dictionaries but in the mind (Woolf, 1937). Thus, *écriture féminine* is not merely about women's voices but about setting into motion the feminine, historically imposed upon women, through writing. This inscribes feminine thought into unexplored territory, a story that must be told anew. "We are not what we are said to be", asserts Cixous (1994a, p. xix). She describes possessing an "I" that escapes her–a wandering ghost whispering in her ear. What is whispered can only be deciphered through language, a limitless territory that always preceded her (Cixous, 1994a, p. xix). If something escapes her as a woman, language will be remembered–and through writing, men and women can reinscribe this so-called feminine. After all, Woolf (1929) posits that all great poets' writing is feminine and androgynous. Yet, the logic of thought is a vast battlefield (Cixous, 1994a), operating through hierarchical and oppositional systems that always anticipate a subordinate to serve the powerful. Cixous argues that this logic is phallocentric, as women are consistently associated with the negative, subordinate pole. This phallocentric logic must also be viewed through the lens of racial and gender hierarchies to understand how it reinforces the marginalisation of Black and trans people.

Bulgarian-French philosopher Julia Kristeva, in *About Chinese Woman* (1974), discusses female suicide, using Woolf's 1941 suicide as an example, suggesting that a woman might take her own life because she refuses to be an object of phallocentric language in which

she is imprisoned. Kristeva suggests that Woolf sought refuge in the a-symbolism of being; unable to be the subject of her language, suicide became a form of rebellion against male, oppressive power. However, Kristeva overlooks important aspects of Woolf's work. While her analysis contributes significantly to psychoanalytic studies, seeking the "no" of language as a form of transgression remains locked in a system of opposition: yes and no, weak and strong (Pinho, 2021). In *Three Guineas* (1938), Woolf emphasises that the feminine does not share the logic of war but engages in daily battles, often as the loser. This place of "losing oneself" is fundamental to modernist poetics. Thus, men and women must lose themselves to compose from another place – at the threshold of time, where the new emerges.

> Indeed, in Homeric times I was Achilles. I know why. I was the antiking. And I was passion. I had fits of rage that made History difficult. I didn't give a damn for hierarchy, for command, and I know how to love. I greatly loved women and men. I knew the value of a unique person, the beauty, the sweetness. I didn't ask myself petty questions, I was unaware of limits, I enjoyed my bisexuality without anxiety: that both kinds harmonized within me seemed perfectly natural to me (Cixous, 1994a, p. 73).

Cixous's proposal is one of harmony. In a world without wars, the thought constructed through writing opens up numerous possibilities. *Écriture féminine* envisions a break from the old infernal cycles, moving in a new direction where writing can dream and invent new worlds (Cixous, 1994a, p. 72). Like Woolf, Cixous situates this vision at the symbolic, cultural, and ghostly levels. Contrary to Kristeva's interpretation, the goal is to embrace the "yes" of language, a return to language (Pinho, 2021). As Woolf urges, "Think we must" (Woolf, 1938, p. 1088).

Écriture Féminine and its Intoxicating Potency

For Woolf, literature can be violent (Woolf, 1932). It has the power to oppress and suppress lives. This raises the question: How can *écriture féminine* be expressed in a symbolic world designed to uphold the masculine without violence? This struggle becomes the feminine's anguish, shared by both women and men.

In *Angst* (1977), Cixous uses the metaphor of the "newborn woman" to represent the feminine, who finds herself up against a *He*, the masculine, who confidently expresses himself through his language. There is a battle of words, striking her without mercy. The anguish of having to fight using her opponent's tools makes her want to flee, seeking refuge from the brutal presence of the masculine. In this space, she would not have to face the selfishness of this *He*, who only sees, plays with, and pities himself. Cixous describes this *He* as someone who devotes his life to writing (Cixous, 1977, p. 78), but in doing so, he erases her reality as the "newborn woman". The fiction *He* admires leads to isolation and loneliness. The question then becomes: how can one escape this cycle of violence?

Writing has an intoxicating potency, and those who write must appropriate this tool without having to express themselves within the suffocating moulds of *His* language: here lies the anguish of the writer. Cixous (1994b, p. 27) says:

> I do not believe that writing – insofar as it is a production of desire – or the desire which can do anything, cannot be defined, not that it is to be defined in accordance with death's border. Death is nothing. It is not something. It is a hole. I can fill it with fantasies, and give it a name, freely. I can also think of castration. But nothing human, nothing real, obliges me to. Nothing can stop me from thinking otherwise, without accounting for death.

The language that safeguards the primacy of the masculine (and the white cisgender people, we must add) is built upon tombs, reproducing rather than transforming the works of the dead poets. However, as Cixous suggests, death is merely a void that can be filled with fantasies–with life. It is a ghost that dissipates desires for castration. The goal is not to perpetuate the same kind of violence nor to submit to it as an act of negation. The writing of the feminine, as embodied by this "newborn woman", seeks transformation. It enters the symbolic world by navigating the boundaries between sanity and madness, tradition and shadow, past and present.

"I wanted to transform: for me, fiction, which is a kind of action, is effective. The desire which produces it will make possible what desires it" (Cixous, 1994b, p. 28). Through writing, once unimaginable worlds can be conceived, but the emotions of fiction are always diffuse and fragmented. As Woolf observes in "Indiscretions" (1924), speaking of emotions is often considered "indiscreet." Furthermore, discussing them in art risks falling into a binary

opposition between masculine and feminine. However, what both Woolf and Cixous aim to emphasise is that women writers are engaged in a process of creative transformation. They do not simply reproduce the past but reimagine and reshape it, filling the gaps left by traditional white masculine discourse with new, vibrant possibilities.

> […] [are] not men when they write, nor are they women. They appeal to the large tract of the soul which is sexless; they excite no passions; they exalt, improve, instruct, and man or woman can profit equally by their pages, without indulging in the folly of affection or the fury of partisanship (Woolf, 1918, p. 75).

Écriture féminine, therefore, distances itself from intolerant sectarianism, as the emotions of fiction transcend gender. Woolf's concept of "bisexual writing", androgyny in *A Room*, anticipates Cixous's *écriture féminine*, where both men and women benefit from a peaceful construction of thought. Let us teach the young to hate war, Woolf urges in *Three Guineas* (Woolf, 1938).

On the other hand, it is essential to recognise that transformation introduces zones of instability, where Derrida's concept of *phármakon* from *Plato's Pharmacy* (2005) becomes significant. Woolf's illness, metaphorically linked to feminine writing–sick and faltering–serves as a reorganisation of the tradition of masculine primacy (Santiago, 2020). *Écriture féminine* emerges as an intoxicating force within tradition and writing, extending the boundaries of thought. As with the *phármakon*, which can be interpreted as both "remedy" and "poison", writing becomes both a cure and a toxin for tradition. It can heal by remembering and immortalising, but it can also destroy by forgetting and omitting.

Derrida's assertion that the natural illness of the living is essentially defined as an allergy, a reaction to the aggression of a foreign element, further deepens the metaphor (Derrida, 2005, p. 56). He suggests that the most general concept of illness must be allergy since the body's natural life is meant to follow only its endogenous movements. *Écriture féminine*, by this logic, acts as an allergic reaction within the body of literary tradition–a response to the aggression of a foreign, patriarchal element. This provokes an allergic response, disrupting the system to preserve the body's natural state.

Thus, I believe *écriture féminine* is intoxicating and provokes these allergic reactions, seeking simultaneously to kill and to give life–to disrupt and reinsert the feminine into the

literary tradition in intersection with the trans-racial agenda. It functions like *phármakon*, destabilising the old order, but in doing so, it breathes life into tradition, reshaping it to accommodate the previously marginalised. This allows for the emergence of new perspectives, transforming literature into a space of continuous renewal. Just as the illness of the physical body follows endogenous reactions, even though the virus causing the allergy originates outside the body, thought too can be compared to this allergic body–affected by the *écriture féminine* virus–which operates within a logic once considered untouchable. However, the *phármakon* is something that, always coming from the outside and acting as an external force, will never possess a definable virtue (Derrida, 2005, p. 57). In other words, the *phármakon* is ghostly and functions within a logic that transcends oppositions and subordinations.

Derrida examines the dual meaning of the Greek term *phármakon*. In analysing the Platonic dialogue between Phaedrus and Socrates, where the origin of writing is discussed, Derrida questions why translators tend to choose the meaning of "remedy". He argues that understanding *phármakon* as undecidable is crucial for grasping its use in *Phaedrus* (2016). Stripping this term of its ambiguity reinforces the binary logic upon which Western tradition is built, a logic that it struggles to escape. This binary mindset seeks to erase differences, always favouring one pole at the expense of the other. About the male-female binary, Woolf observes this movement of exclusionary inclusion, particularly in her essay "Women Novelists" (1918), where she interrogates the meaning of femininity. Thus, by maintaining the undecidable nature of the *phármakon*, Derrida points towards a new logic of thought–one that operates without violence or erasure.

Derrida also attributes this undecidability to writing, which he calls a *phármakon*. To support his argument, Derrida refers to a game of kinship between father and son (Derrida, 2005, p. 29), suggesting that writing exists beyond the staging of speech. In this scenario, the son is orphaned from any clear origin, rendering writing another trace between *logos* and truth. *Logos* is not the father, but its origin is fatherly. In an anachronistic sense, one might say that the speaking subject is the father of his speech. This is not merely a metaphor, as becomes apparent when considering this relationship's conventional and rhetorical function. *Logos* is like a son, a son who would self-destruct without the presence and support of his father – the father who speaks for him and on his behalf. Without the father's presence, *logos* is reduced to writing (Derrida, 2005, p. 25).

Derrida grounds his analysis in classical antiquity, notably in *Phaedrus* (2016), a historical period when rhetoric reinforced the power of speech, relegating writing to a secondary position. Following Derrida's interpretation, *logos* was considered the legitimate offspring of speech. Writing, however, was both parricidal and orphaned (Derrida, 2005, p. 26), constructed through the indiscriminate repetition of myths, dead knowledge, and "accumulated stories" (Derrida, 2005, p. 19). Devoid of a living voice, writing becomes a potent performance – where both its poison and remedy reside. Writing has two gestures: it reproduces and imitates; it simultaneously engages with life while distancing itself from it, much like a spectre, a ghost.

Moreover, if one were to think that something like the *pharmakon* – or Writing – far from being dominated by binary oppositions–initiates its potential without being fully understood within them. Let us consider that it is through something like writing – or like the *pharmakon* – that the enigmatic distinction between inside and outside can be articulated. We must also recognise that writing as *phármakon* does not allow itself to be confined within the space it defines, nor does it submit to the concepts derived from it. Instead, it leaves behind only its ghostly trace, haunting the logic that attempts to dominate it while still being a product of it. This would compel us to embrace movements so strange that they transcend what we might call logic or discourse (Derrida, 2005, p. 59). Thus, Derrida suggests that writing, like the *phármakon*, exists beyond the traditional oppositional logic that has structured Western thought. Instead, it functions where the boundaries between inside and outside are blurred, resisting confinement within any singular concept or framework. This spectral, undecidable nature of writing defies the dominance of fixed logic or discourse, opening possibilities for new modes of thought and expression.

The important lesson is that writing intoxicates engaging in a dual action that affects tradition and living discourses' dogmas. Writing, as a ghost of reality, moves in multiple directions, capable of both healing and poisoning. Cixous–a close collaborator of Derrida–masterfully navigates these linguistic games of appearance, working with the subalternity of the feminine and inscribing a new femininity. *Écriture féminine* plays with life and death, healing and poisoning, from the space the feminine has historically occupied within the metaphysical binaries of Western thought.

Derrida's concept of the *phármakon* is a dangerous supplement, one that forces its way into that which believes it does not need it while also allowing itself to be breached, violated,

filled, substituted, and completed by the very trace that expands itself and, in doing so, disappears (Derrida, 2005, p. 68). In this process, the opposition between masculine and feminine becomes untenable. Rather than maintaining these binary categories, we should strive for a neutral language that functions as a simulacrum, admitting a mosaic of diverse fragments and images. The feminine in writing holds the potential to intoxicate tradition and tradition, in turn, allows itself to be intoxicated, despite its resistance to the return of the feminine. This is precisely what writers like Virginia Woolf aim to achieve: disrupting and intoxicating tradition.

This concept takes on new dimensions when we incorporate racial and transgender debates. The masculine-feminine binary not only fails to capture the complexities of gender but also perpetuates racial hierarchies that exclude Black and trans women from the literary canon and intellectual spaces. *Écriture féminine*, when viewed through an intersectional lens (Bilge; Collins, 2016), becomes a tool for destabilising not only patriarchal traditions but also the racialised and cisnormative structures that have historically marginalised diverse identities. Moving beyond these binaries, writing can become a transformative space that reclaims narrative authority for those traditionally silenced.

While the silence of sculptural or pictorial space may be seen as normative, writing presents as an image of speech and distorts more what it attempts to imitate. Rather than merely substituting an image for its model, writing inscribes the living time of the voice within the space of silence and the silence of space (Derrida, 2005, p. 105). To view *écriture féminine* through the lens of intoxication is to see racialised (trans)feminine writings and inscriptions as forces capable of transforming and operating outside the coercive and repressive logic of the dominant discourse.

Derrida also emphasises that this happens within the “silence of the living space”, where masculine and feminine blend as forces of action. These forces reject rigid categorisation, function beyond warlike logic, and transcend the need for hierarchical distinctions. In *Three Guineas* (1938), Woolf urges us to teach the young to despise literal and metaphorical war. She suggests we face the Medusa–representing the silenced, feared feminine–and leap into the abyss with her, allowing ourselves to be intoxicated by a new language and a new form of writing that embraces the fluidity of identity and the complexity of experience, particularly for those marginalised by race and gender, I would argue.

In this context, the disruption Woolf seeks in tradition is not just a feminist revolution but a decolonial and trans-inclusive one, considering our reception of her words today. The rethinking of language, writing, and identity must account for the voices of Black and trans people, expanding *écriture féminine* to encompass all those previously excluded from literary and intellectual spaces. Through this intersectional lens, writing becomes a tool for reimagining not just gender but also the very structures that sustain exclusion and oppression.

In the following section, I will briefly explore how this concept of intoxication further disrupts not only form and content but also genre and gender, particularly in trans lives and narratives, as depicted in Woolf. Using Woolf's *Orlando* as an example, I will engage with Zhao Ng's interpretation of their angelic (in)existences, demonstrating how intoxication blurs the boundaries between life and art, as well as gender and identity. This last discussion will highlight how both authors transform our understanding of literary and corporeal bodies, opening new avenues for thinking about the intersections of genre, gender, and existence.

Embodied Writing: Woolf's Transromance as an intoxicating device

Zhao Ng's article "Trans Romance: Queer Intimacy and the Problem of Inexistence in the Modern Novel" (2023) offers a valuable epistemological contribution to examining trans subjectivity and queer intimacy in literature. According to Ng's argument, "inexistence" is a condition where trans figures are only partially visible, never fully recognised or acknowledged within social, historical, and patriarchal realms. This resonates strongly with Woolf's *Orlando*, where the protagonist's fluid gender identity over several centuries embodies the sense of trans (in)existence, challenging the constraints imposed by binary gender norms.

The narrative of *Orlando* follows the life of a young Elizabethan aristocrat who aspires to become a writer and poet. Orlando begins drafting a book titled *The Oak Tree*, and upon sharing his drafts with other writers, faces various negative critiques. While pursuing literary refinement, Orlando falls in love with a Russian princess but suffers profound disillusionment when she returns to her country, abandoning him. This experience leads the protagonist to reflect on love, friendship, and social disparities, as despite having everything materially, Orlando feels incomplete and unable to fully express himself through writing. In a surprising

twist, during one of his diplomatic missions, Orlando, initially described as a man, undergoes a magical transformation and becomes a woman. This metamorphosis not only challenges the gender conventions of the time but also allows Woolf to explore innovatively the cultural and historical fluidity of gender and the limitations imposed by social norms.

This fantastical depiction of Orlando's gender transformation and other aspects of the work, such as the fact that no other character questions this change, is one of the most prominent reasons the novel escaped censorship (Doan, 2001; Parkes, 1994). Moreover, despite the apparent religiosity – a significant factor in the banning of Radclyffe Hall's novel, *The Well Of Loneliness* (1928) – being present in the scene where the protagonist's transformation is marked by the appearance of Our Lady of Purity, Our Lady of Chastity, and Our Lady of Modesty in Orlando's room (Woolf, 1928, p. 95), where she lay asleep for seven consecutive days, this does not become a relevant topic for criticism leading to the novel's censorship, due to the fantasy that surrounds the entire scene. Additionally, the work avoids direct appeals to social acceptance, unlike Hall's novel. As Woolf writes: "Let biologists and psychologists determine. It is enough for us to state a simple fact: Orlando was a man till the age of thirty, when he became a woman and has remained so ever since" (Woolf, 1928, p. 98).

Woolf's *Orlando* presents a protagonist who transitions from male to female and is in a constant transformation, much like the trans characters Ng describes. Orlando's gender fluidity mirrors the state of being that Ng characterises as never fully present or fully realised within normative frameworks. This tension between visibility and invisibility is central to Woolf's narrative as Orlando navigates a world that sees gender as fixed yet lives a life that defies those fixed categories.

Ng also introduces the notion of close reading as a form of haptic experience–a type of intimate, almost physical contact between the reader and the text. This intimacy, however, comes with the risk that cis queer readers may unintentionally appropriate trans bodies by projecting their (binary) interpretations onto them. Woolf anticipates this potential issue in *Orlando* by maintaining a critical distance between the reader and the protagonist's interior life. While Orlando's transformations are visible to the reader, Woolf withholds full access to Orlando's internal experiences, thereby avoiding a reduction of trans identity to a simple metaphor for fluidity or romanticised transformation. Orlando's existence remains ethereal yet

materially grounded in life's challenges, such as nearly losing property upon becoming a woman.

Moreover, Woolf's depiction of Orlando can be read through Ng's concept of "angelic" figures in trans literature, often portrayed as transcending societal norms while fragmented or detached from material reality. Orlando's transformation, which goes unquestioned by the surrounding characters, shares this ethereal quality but also remarks Woolf's critique of the romanticisation of identity. By positioning Orlando between forms of existence, Woolf disrupts the rigid binaries that categorise individuals as either male or female. This mirrors Ng's concerns that trans figures in literature are often stereotyped, detaching them from the plural materialities of their lived experiences. Woolf's treatment of Orlando resists this detachment, offering a character inhabiting social and material realities while challenging normative gender expectations.

In addition to embodying Ng's discussion of trans inexistence, *Orlando* also aligns with the principles of *écriture féminine*, as earlier outlined in this article. Woolf's experimental narrative style, her fluid portrayal of gender, and the continuous transformation of Orlando's identity represent the intoxicating force of *écriture féminine*. As discussed earlier, departing from Cixous (1975) and Derrida (2005), *écriture féminine* is a subversive tool that helps us envision and deconstruct patriarchal and colonial narratives, allowing for multiple identities and experiences. Orlando's fluidity–gender and narrative structure–exemplifies this intoxicating potential, blurring the boundaries between male and female, past and present, and fiction and reality.

By framing Orlando's transformations as magical and materially significant, Woolf presents a narrative that aligns with Ng's call for a more respectful understanding of trans identities that resist appropriation and reduction. "He stretched himself. He rose. He stood upright in complete nakedness before us, and while the trumpets pealed Truth! Truth! Truth! we have no choice left but confess – he was a woman" (Woolf, 1928, p. 97). Woolf's intoxicating writing allows for a deeper engagement with trans identities, recognising them as complex and multifaceted rather than merely symbolic or stereotyped. The novel's ability to weave together the fantastical with the material realities of gendered existence mirrors Ng's critique of how trans bodies are often misrepresented or subsumed under broader queer

frameworks. “No human being, since the world began, has ever looked more ravishing. His form combined in one the strength of a man and a woman’s grace” (Woolf, 1928, p. 98).

Thus, Woolf’s *Orlando* exemplifies the intoxicating potential of *écriture féminine*, not only as a tool for subverting binary structures of gender but also as a framework for radically rethinking embodiment and identity. The novel’s refusal to settle into a singular gender identity and its engagement with historical and social complexities make it a key text for understanding the intersections of gender, identity, and narrative form. Through the lens of intoxication, we may see Woolf challenging the literary and societal norms constraining identity, offering a liberating and “angelic” vision of existence that is continually in flux and open to transformation.

Finally, Woolf’s *Orlando* is a pioneering text that intoxicates traditional understandings of gender and identity. By resisting fixed categories and offering a protagonist who navigates the fluidity of gender and time, Woolf reimagines what it means to exist outside of societal binaries. This intoxicating force, as discussed throughout the article, provides a powerful lens for understanding the transformative potential of (trans) feminine writing and its potential to disrupt and reconfigure oppressive structures in intersection with race.

Final Considerations

Based on the discussion of race, gender, and intoxication within the context *of écriture féminine*, the article emphasises how Virginia Woolf’s work, particularly *Orlando*, offers a framework for rethinking oppressive systems through a queer and decolonial lens. By devising and employing the concept of intoxication, this article shows how Woolf destabilises rigid binaries of gender and challenges patriarchal Western epistemology through her work, even though her take is ambiguous regarding race, as we have seen. Through Derrida’s notion of *phármakon* and Cixous’ *écriture féminine*, I tried illuminating how (trans)feminine writing is a transformative force, disrupting traditional structures that have marginalised trans and racialised bodies. Woolf’s exploration of gender fluidity in *Orlando* and her critique of established norms allows for a critical reorientation of identity (Ahmed, 2006), one that does not reduce the complexities of trans and queer existences to romantic metaphors or invisibility

(Ng, 2023). The *écriture féminine* as an intoxicating device becomes powerful in dismantling colonial and patriarchal systems, providing new epistemological paths for reimagining the body, identity, and lived experiences in the so-called Global North.

The article's conclusion suggests that by integrating the feminist agenda into a decolonial and transfeminist framework, Woolf's work not only addresses gender but also invites further exploration of race and trans narratives. This broadens the scope of feminist literary criticism, urging scholars to consider how race, gender, and sexuality intersect in ways that resist both binary thinking and the historical silencing of marginalised voices. Thus, Woolf's white feminist writing, viewed through the lens of intoxication, serves as a radical tool for liberating thought and identity from the confines of oppressive societal structures that symbolically operate in both the Global South and the Global North.

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Écriture féminine como um dispositivo epistemológico intoxicante: reorientações *queer* e decoloniais em Virginia Woolf

Resumo: Este artigo reavalia a obra de Virginia Woolf através de lentes queer e decoloniais (Ahmed, 2006; Butler, 2017, 2024; Lugones, 2008; Mignolo; Walsh, 2018), demonstrando como ela perturba de maneira ambígua os binarismos de gênero enraizados e as estruturas coloniais que reforçam dinâmicas de poder hierárquicas (Oyěwùmí, 2021). No centro do argumento está o conceito de "intoxicação", influenciado pelo *phármakon* de Derrida (2005) e pela *écriture féminine* de Hélène Cixous (1975). Este

conceito é uma força radical que tem o potencial de desmantelar epistemologias rígidas do Ocidente. A escrita feminista de Woolf, particularmente em *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), exemplifica esse uso subversivo da intoxicação para desafiar normas opressivas e reimaginar a identidade além das restrições patriarcais e coloniais racistas. O artigo também explora a incorporação da intoxicação (trans)feminina, oferecendo uma estrutura para compreender como a (in)existência trans e a performatividade queer são frequentemente mal representadas ou desalinhadas nas tradições literárias. Baseando-se na análise de Zhao Ng (2023), critica como personagens trans são frequentemente subsumidos e reduzidos a metáforas românticas dentro de paradigmas cisgêneros ou queer mais amplos. Em contraste, o artigo defende uma crítica decolonial e transfeminista (Nascimento, 2021) que transcende os construtos binários de gênero, propondo uma práxis intelectual transformadora que abraça epistemologias diversas, ao mesmo tempo resistindo às limitações impostas pelo pensamento ocidental.

Palavras-chave: Virginia Woolf; *Écriture féminine*; Intoxicação; Narrativas *queer*; Decolonialidade.

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