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Timelessness of Cultural Tension Towards Progress

Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and Cornel West's *Race Matters* are both manifestos that draw attention and propose solutions to the marginalization of large populations. Woolf hypothesizes that the 'androgynous mind,' or thinking without regard for one's own sex, is necessary to end gender-based prejudice. Similarly, West concludes that 'moral reasoning,' or making decisions without consideration of race, is the only way to move beyond a long history of racism. Virginia Woolf and Cornel West share a common vision of society liberated from narrow classification of people based on a single attribute. West's concept of 'moral reasoning' is in some sense an extension of Woolf's 'androgynous mind,' although the contexts of their arguments were different.

According to Woolf and West, in order to achieve the ideals of the 'androgynous mind' and 'moral reasoning,' both the dominant and oppressed members of society must have enough self-confidence that they are not threatened by the other. When discussing the roots of the subordinate position of women, Woolf draws attention to the role of male and female self-confidence. She believes that male insecurities led to the "importance of a patriarch who has to conquer" making half of the human race by nature inferior to himself (Woolf 35). At the same time, Woolf urges her female audience to develop greater confidence, instructing women to "write what [they] wish to write" without concern for how society will respond to their literature (Woolf 98). Therefore, in order to obtain the ideal 'androgynous mind,' all people must possess an internal equilibrium that prevents males and females from subordinating or feeling subordinate to the other gender. West's analysis of race relations follows similar logic. To West, the conservative political establishment is a chronically racist system in which the only black

people who achieve influential government positions are "those who accept the rules of the game played by white America" (West 42). The persistence of this political system demonstrates conservative white Americans' insecurity about their own power because it blocks pathways for other social groups to gain political strength. Just as Woolf exhorted women to throw off self doubt in patriarchal 1920's England, West calls for marginalized black citizens to protest the conservative system by becoming confident freedom fighters. According to West, freedom fighters are both followers and leaders who use 'moral reasoning' and "have the audacity to take the nihilistic threat by the neck and turn back its deadly assaults" (West 31). Because it is easier to submit oneself to despair, freedom fighters, like androgynous writers must have great reserves of confidence to avoid succumbing to the strictures imposed by the dominant culture.

West and Woolf both point to economic disparities as impediments to achieving their ideals of 'moral reasoning' and the 'androgynous mind'. When visiting a famous all male university, Woolf compares the large sums of money "poured in from the coffers of kings and queens and great nobles to ensure that hymns should be sung here and scholars taught" (Woolf 9) to the impoverishment of the women's college where "it was only after a long struggle and with the utmost difficulty that they got thirty pounds together" (Woolf 20). If men and women thought without regard to sex, such inequalities would not exist because "Mrs. Seton and her mother and her mother before her [would have] learnt the great art of making money, like their fathers and their grandfathers before them" (Woolf 21). This equal opportunity in money making, stemming from an androgynous worldview, would result in greater opportunities for all citizens. Similarly, West claims black poverty "is primarily due to the distribution of wealth, power, and income--a distribution influenced by the racial caste system" (West 93). Many politicians believe the racial caste system has been dismantled by affirmative action. West, however, argues that affirmative action and similar policies intended to promote racial equality

disproportionately benefit middle-class black individuals. This does nothing to correct the economic disparities that are the root of the problem. If 'moral reasoning' were to prevail, class, rather than race alone, would be the basis for affirmative action, and eventually the racial caste system would dissolve.

Both West and Woolf believe that a more enlightened mindset fosters greater creativity for interpreting complex issues. The 'androgynous mind' "transmits emotion without impediment [and] is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided" (Woolf 98). The ability to use both the male and female sides of one's brain removes the societal limitations about how one 'should' think as a man or woman. This mental independence allows one to consider multiple perspectives, a habit in analyzing complicated problems. West speaks of similar benefits of 'moral reasoning'. Comparing 'moral reasoning' to playing in a jazz band, West states, "individuality is promoted in order to sustain and increase the *creative* tension with the group" (West 151). Each player uses a different instrument and either riffs on the current melody or diverges from it, incorporating something new, which in turn the entire group responds to in a shared group consciousness. West suggests that a similar collective perspective could be applied to race relations in the United States. 'Moral reasoning' would allow for the free flow of creative new ideas among society's 'players' and the emergence of a completely new 'sound'. By embracing such creative tension, a greater understanding of intractable political issues will be achieved.

Although Woolf's 'androgynous mind' and West's 'moral reasoning' are parallel in many ways, they emerged at different times in history. In some sense 'moral reasoning' is an extension and enlargement of the 'androgynous mind'. Women in Great Britain did not receive electoral equality in parliamentary elections until July 1928. In October of that year, Woolf gave the lectures that became *A Room of One's Own*. Although women's suffrage in Great Britain was an important step, Woolf clearly felt the vote would be insufficient in providing women

freedom within society. Woolf instead fought for more profound cultural change rooted in property ownership rights for women. She fights specifically for the ability of women to make their own money and have 'a room of their own' (Woolf 108). West expands Woolf's goal of economic independence to economic redistribution. West's essays were published in the 1990's, three decades after the Civil Rights Act outlawed discriminatory voting practices in the United States and over one hundred years after the Emancipation Proclamation. West argues that racial economic disparity is so great that it undermines the legal framework of equality. West's 'moral reasoning' thus goes even farther than Woolf's 'androgynous mind' in calling for a radical socioeconomic reconfiguration.

West and Woolf express a common vision: a society free from prejudice based on appearance or the superficial labeling of people. However West's 'moral reasoning' could be considered more comprehensive than Woolf's 'androgynous mind'. For example, both Woolf and West denounce the prominence of Manichean categories in society. Woolf believes, "it is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple"; in each person, the male and female principles must collaborate in order for one to be fully realized as human (Woolf 104). In his analysis of Malcolm X, West calls for democratic alliances with broad moral visions that are energized not only by black rage but that "focus this rage where it belongs: on any form of racism, sexism, homophobia, or economic injustice that impedes the opportunities of 'everyday people'" (West 150). Therefore, West's ideals can be seen as a more inclusive extension of Woolf's androgynous society.

West borrows and extends Woolf's ideas whether he realizes it or not. This is consistent with their mutual love for Jane Austen. Woolf considered Jane Austen to be one of the few authors who wrote free of self-consciousness, with an incandescent and androgynous mind which West refers to as 'heterogeneous expression'. Jane Austen's novels illustrate West's and Woolf's shared view that self-confidence is required for progressive social change, and that

people are liberated when they are not narrowly classified according to a single attribute. Also, like Austen, they both believe that the coexistence of contrasting perspectives results in a richer, happier, more just world. The writings of Woolf and West are records of different stages in the continual struggle to break free from old social bounds. It may seem implausible for Woolf and West to speak with the same voice given their backgrounds and personalities, but despite differing historical contexts, sex, and race, they share a common vision of a liberated society.

West, Cornel. *Race Matters*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993. Print.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989. Print.

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