

Composing at the Kitchen Table

Rhiannon Scharnhorst

abstract | *The kitchen table is an object that challenges notions regarding what counts as space for composing practices, in part because it is an object often associated with oppressive representations of domesticity. Therefore, women who choose or prioritize the kitchen table as a creative space practice a particular form of resistant cultural work that intertwines their composing practices with their everyday, lived experiences. The kitchen table then becomes a space through which feminisms are practiced and shaped by the table, making the table a space of resistance against hegemonic notions of what counts as feminist practice.*

keywords | feminisms, writing, tables, space, homeplace, resistance



Figure 1: From April 26, 2018: the author's kitchen table as it looked when this article was first composed, scattered with her writing materials (laptop, paper, pens) and everyday ephemera. Copyright, Rhiannon Scharnhorst, 2019.

This essay begins as a simple observation: some women write at kitchen tables. I wonder why. I wonder what the kitchen table offers these women that desks or offices or comfortable beds cannot give them. I wonder how the kitchen shapes their writing and whether the kitchen table itself has any impact on how or what they write. In other words, can I feel the table behind the page? I think of the table as the figurative surface, the site upon which women write about their lives by using language to capture thoughts, images, and emotions that are particular to their histories. But I also wonder about the table in a literal sense: does its surface, whether smooth or sticky, scarred wood or scratched plastic, impact the writing of those who use it? Do the words stand taller by resting on the stability and weightiness of the table? Or, do they feel like rushed, dashed-off sentences written in haste between making dinner, talking with friends, and being interrupted because the kitchen is the heart of the home? I wonder, too, whether the table supports difficult sentences, winding sentences that pour out from the page, like a glass of water spilled across its surface, rushing, rushing, rushing to cover the whole surface before it reaches an edge and spills over onto the floor.

How is the kitchen table different from a desk or a table in a dining room? Is a kitchen table different from a piece of plywood balanced across two bricks or Jane Austen's fancy writing box, now housed in the British Library?¹ Objects do things for writers; they have an impact, and that impact can be felt, meaningful. Writing boxes, for example, were small, portable cases that housed writers' accoutrement, and they, as rhetoric scholar Laura Micciche has argued, "created an aura around writing, investing tools with an energy and power that enabled writers to gain pleasure from writing—or from the idea of writing, which might be equally gratifying."² Just as tools of writing shape the writer, the kitchen table shapes writing in ways that set it apart from other writing on other surfaces in other spaces.

Turning the kitchen table into a composing space may be considered a privilege in the same way that having a desk of one's own suggests an intellectually-privileged space. Yet, historically, the kitchen table has not been given the same consideration as the desk. In the field of writing studies, the desk is still paramount, even when scholars turn to other writing spaces. For example, Nora Weinerth's "A Desk of One's Own" mentions a writer working at a kitchen table, but her analysis ends by suggesting the table as just another desk.³ She does not pay homage to the table as a space integral to the work produced, the table as differently shaping the writing that happens on its changing surface. As the materiality of writing spaces changes, and continues to change, so do my questions.

I don't know that I can answer all of these questions about the kitchen table yet, or if they are answerable to any degree of certainty. This essay suggests that one starting point is to look at some of these tables through photos, poems, essays, presses, letters, or stories. What follows is a series of meditations on different kitchen tables. I begin with a focus on Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) to orient myself and the reader in the materiality of writing, and from there, move in and out of different stories, particularly those of women of color, to make sense of how objects like the table also become spaces upon which we shape our writing and our writing shapes us. I use the vignette style not to separate these stories from each other but to offer multiple sites of beginning and not to privilege my own narrative as a white academic woman.⁴ Although these stories are interwoven through my voice here, they are also the artistic practices of diverse and individual women, and I do not want to conflate their work and their feminisms into one monolithic narrative.

In writing this essay, I do not mean to minimize the importance of culinary artisanship, but I want to focus on art coming from the kitchen that is not strictly culinary. In each of the works I analyze, women of color use the

kitchen, and particularly the kitchen table, as the canvas upon which they create expressive work that does not include food as its primary focus. This is not to say I want to divorce culinary or domestic work from the artistic forms of expression I analyze—just that my analysis does not originate from sole attention to culinary and domestic work. By starting at the table, we can ask larger questions about materiality and meaning: who uses the kitchen table? Who abandons it? What gets put on, taken off, pushed aside from it? Who is around it, and who isn't?

A note here about my citation practice: in crafting this essay, I listened, a few times, to Toni Morrison's 1993 "Nobel Lecture in Literature" and walked away chanting: "Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge."⁵ To wit, I see citational practice as one avenue to deny oppressive language. Thus, following Sara Ahmed in *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), I claim citation as "feminist bricks" and "feminist memory," or "materials through which, from which, we create our dwellings."⁶ In that spirit, this dwelling was created by reading work by women, and especially by reading work by women of color. I cite them to signal my own debt to their knowledges but also because any contribution I make toward feminist scholarship has been profoundly shaped and influenced by their words. To them, I give deep thanks.

The Feminist Table

I first center my material focus on space in a macro-sense (the room), but I want to continue to push further to consider, in a micro-sense, the surface upon which composition happens (the table). Scholars of composition like Hannah Rule suggest this turn, who writes:

The figure of the room is foremost meant to emphasize that writing activity is

never not emplaced: composing processes only happen through things, spaces, time, action, and bodily movement. This point may feel obvious, but it has been concealed by long-standing incorporeal constructions of processes that, for example, see writing first as abstract thinking or as located first in social space or discourse communities.⁷

Rule draws on Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), in part, because Woolf's argument for women writers to have their own writing space still influences feminist writing scholarship. While *A Room of One's Own* has its limits—such as its focus exclusively on women who are financially well-off and presumably white—it does draw my attention back to the critical meaning inherent in spaces. It participates in a conversation about how women were able to write in the small spaces of time between domestic duties. My question: who are the women who are thinking, writing, and composing art—and especially art that would identify itself as feminist—in spaces where Woolf would find it unlikely? I write this essay to further Woolf's close attention to the materiality of writing, and particularly how she draws my attention to the critical social and political capital of the room, to suggest that the writing experience is also influenced by the surfaces people write on, like the kitchen table.

Woolf's inquiries into writing in *A Room of One's Own* develop through a prolonged looking and studying, a systematic analysis that ties images and ideas together; I model this essay on that process. Her method involves looking for gaps in the archives and concocting a narrative to advance her inquiry. I see the kitchen table as a gap in the writing archive, an object integral to writing yet often overlooked in the vignettes that follow. Kitchen tables bear the weight of our lives in motion; in this way, they function as ephemeral archives. By an archive, I mean a record, even fleeting, of the things that matter, that need tending to, that are important enough not to throw away yet, that need to be handy. They bear the detritus of everyday living alongside the work of ourselves and others within our communities.

The detritus of the everyday appear in Woolf's asides—like what writers are served for lunch—which textures her writing with the mundane and dissolves the boundary between intellectual work and the everyday. Broadly conceived, Woolf's writing develops along parallel lines: look/study, gap/whole, inquiry/story, walking/eating. The writing process mimics the intellectual inquiry she engages in. This parallelism is also provided by objects like the kitchen table; while it physically stands as its own thing, its surface provides parallel spaces for writers' lives and art: eat/write, intellectual work/domestic work, mine/yours. Things and ideas become interwoven, twined together, inseparable. The work intertwines with interruption, making the table a space of constant change. While this parallelism could suggest a stagnant binary, I instead see it as laying bare the labor that goes into the writing process. Writing alongside ideas that do not seem integral becomes a part of the very story itself. Writing with the interruption becomes part of the ebb and flow of process.

This writing practice does not divide the weightiness of lived experience from itself. Instead, the writer takes the images and emotions and weight of life and writes right alongside them. I imagine here Audre Lorde's *Zami: A Biomythography* claiming itself as literature, myth, biography.⁸ Lorde's work refuses categorization just as writing at the kitchen table refuses the division between writing and not-writing, instead claiming not-writing as integral to practice. Or I hear Gloria Anzaldúa, writing in a letter to third world women writers:

Forget the room of one's own—write in the kitchen, lock yourself up in the bathroom. Write on the bus or the welfare line, on the job or during meals, between sleeping or waking. I write while sitting on the john. No long stretches at the typewriter unless you're wealthy or have a patron—you may not even own a typewriter. While you wash the floor or clothes listen to the words chanting in your body. When you're depressed, angry, hurt, when compassion and love possess you. When you cannot help but write.⁹

Writing at the kitchen table folds person and writer into one, demystifying the notion that writing can only happen in particular spaces or for particular people. Writing happens because it must happen, it needs to happen. Writing, then, becomes a tool for feminists; it gathers emotion together with writing practice and combines them into one.

The kitchen table is a space within the figurative room of one's own that has been overlooked by writers who privilege clearly demarcated writing spaces. Woolf herself overlooks the notion that some writers must snatch moments to write in between things, spaces, times. To further Woolf's own attention to materiality, I turn to the work of contemporary queer scholars of color, like Sara Ahmed, who writes in *Queer Phenomenology* (2006): "The table is not simply what Woolf faces but is also the 'site' upon which she makes her feminist point: that we cannot address the question of women and fiction without asking the prior question of whether women have space to write."¹⁰ Writers bring their work into spaces, like rooms, but they also make their points upon those spaces, the tables. As writing happens, the surface of the table is changed, in ways small (like errant pen marks) and large (like the stacking of page upon completed page, raising the table). Kitchen tables, then, become archives of feminist tensions. They are objects that feminists often associate with patriarchal oppression because of their relationship to ideologies of domesticity. But for women who bring their writing to these tables, especially writing that they consider feminist, their surfaces are changed. The writers physically mark the tables' surfaces with their points of feminist tension. It is through these acts that the tables change from domestic objects to feminist spaces. No wonder some women writers need large spaces and strong surfaces to hold up their work.

The Shared Table

Think of the kitchen table as a surface that evokes the feelings of a “homeplace,” the space that bell hooks describes as “the construction [by Black women] of a safe place where Black people could affirm one another and by so doing heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination.”¹¹ Through hooks’s theorization, the table becomes a surface upon which Black women can both express care for themselves (through writing) and care for their communities (through storytelling). It is a surface that shapes Black women and their stories and that Black women shape for their own needs. hooks continues this notion in “An Aesthetic of Blackness: Strange and Oppositional” (1990), where she describes how an object can tell a story about a community of Black women. She writes: “This is the story of a house. It has been lived in by many people. Our grandmother, Baba, made this house living space. She was certain that the way we lived was shaped by objects, the way we looked at them, the way they were placed around us.”¹² In this configuration, objects themselves shape individuals and shape houses into spaces for living. If we extend this understanding of objects, it follows that the way writers make use of the kitchen table as a surface for expression also shapes the expressions themselves.

I do not think it is a coincidence, then, that Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, hattie gusset, and Cherrie Moraga started a publishing house in 1980 and named it Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press. Indeed, their reasoning behind the name posits the kitchen table as an important emblem of resistance against white, male, and heteronormative publishing houses. As Barbara Smith wrote nine years after the founding of the press:

Freedom of the press belongs to those who own the press . . . [and] On the most basic level, Kitchen Table Press began because of our need for autonomy, our need to determine independently both the content and the conditions of our work and to control the words and images that were produced about us. As feminist and lesbian of color writers, we knew that we

*had no options for getting published except at the mercy or whim of others—in either commercial or alternative publishing, since both are white dominated.*¹³

The press's name also emphasizes that while individuals may experience oppression differently, feminist work begins in a shared place, such as around a kitchen table. Seeing the importance of the kitchen table to women of color in particular locates it in a history of feminist resistance demanding individual autonomy also rooted in community support, especially since that support is necessary for many women who do not come from the sort of privilege that white women writing into white-dominated publishing do. The press operates as the antithesis of the white woman writer locked away in her own room.

By naming their press after the kitchen table, Smith, Lorde, Gusset, and Moraga make visible the labor that goes into creating an emblem of resistant cultural work. As Smith writes: "Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press is a revolutionary tool because it is one means of empowering society's most dispossessed people, who also have the greatest potential for making change."¹⁴ While there is evidence to suggest that Smith originally felt a dissonance between the grueling, on-the-ground work of activism and the intellectual and cultural work of the press, she found the success of their publications, like *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), to be indicative of the need for women of color, particularly queer women of color, to have a press devoted to their cause. By creating a space where women of color can respond to a culture that tries to oppress them, the press practices resistance that is just as integral to initiating change in the publishing world, both politically and socially. The press, in a sense, becomes the literal expression of the kitchen table of its namesake, operating as a feminist space for writing.

Kitchen Table Press "emerged in an effort to keep *Bridge* in print," as Cherrie Moraga recounts in the Afterword to the 2015 edition of *This Bridge*

Called My Back.¹⁵ The anthology, which was the first major publication of Kitchen Table Press, is still in print today.¹⁶ By keeping *Bridge* from going out-of-print, the voices of the anthology, many of which focus on the importance of writing and collective action, were given shelter. The interwoven history of Kitchen Table Press with *Bridge* suggests the importance of the table as a space of creation, a shelter for voices that need to speak and that need to be heard. As Smith concludes, the table disrupts the hegemonic narrative of a singular voice crafting a singular history:

*We chose our name because the kitchen is the center of the home, the place where women in particular work and communicate with each other. We also wanted to convey the fact that we are a kitchen table, grassroots operation, begun and kept alive by women who cannot rely on inheritances or other benefits of class privilege to do the work we need to do.*¹⁷

It was through the collective work of feminist artists who did not have access to the privileges engendered by race, class, and heteronormativity that Kitchen Table Press succeeded, publishing nine books from 1980 to 1996, including the two anthologies that are still in print today, *This Bridge* and *Home Girls*. Both anthologies collect myriad voices and genres into one volume, mimicking the sort of conversations that happen around kitchen tables.

It is with the emblem of the table that Smith, Lorde, Gusset, and Moraga honored that process, bridging the need for women to have a space to communicate with each other while also creating a volume filled with radical writing from a myriad of personal experiences. They made a new “image” of publishing through the evocative use of the table, extending in the form of a publishing house devoted to writings by women of color another possibility for hooks’s “homeplace” to take shape in the world.

The Messy Table

The scarred top of a well-used kitchen table records feminist tensions alongside personal attachments, which in turn also shape the surface of feminist tables and by extension, the feminists themselves. Photographer Carrie Mae Weems captures the intertwined identities of personal and political life in the *Kitchen Table Series* (1989–1990), a series of twenty photographs and fourteen accompanying text vignettes that position the table at the heart of one Black woman's life, with Weems herself filling the role.¹⁸

The table creates a space vibrating with intimacy, and around that intimate space, Weems purposely stages actors and objects (a makeup mirror, a photo of Malcolm X, a notepad). While seemingly organic snapshots of everyday life, Weems intentionally constructs the images to tell the story of a self-possessed Black woman with a “bodacious manner, varied talents, hard laughter, multiple opinions.”¹⁹ The series was groundbreaking in its representation of one Black woman's interiority and life as a feminist artist, identities that Weems explores around the multi-purpose surface of the kitchen table.

The table is the focal point of the room and of the photographs, and it is around and on the table we see women writing, teaching, sharing stories, having sex. As Weems recounts in a 2018 interview: “Life is pretty messy stuff. Can we use this space, this common space known around the world, to shine a light on what happens in a family, how it stays together and how it falls apart?”²⁰ She turns the table from an object into a space, as it fills the frame of each of the photographs to the point that there is no other space surrounding it. The table becomes the space.

Within this space, Weems locates one Black woman's identity. Indeed, her conceptualization for the series as a whole appears to be about identity. Art historian Sarah Lewis writes in the forward to a recent publication devoted to

Weems's series: "How were women going 'to image themselves'? This was Weems's guiding question during the earliest movements of conceiving the *Kitchen Table Series* as she reflected on the corpus of photographic images of women up to the 1980s and what wasn't there."²¹ Put another way, what stories are women going to tell—not imagine—about themselves? This telling is founded on the idea that women of color deserve to see and create everyday representations of their lives. As Weems says of the series in a 1996 interview with Dana Friis Hansen: "I was trying to respond to a number of issues: woman's subjectivity, woman's capacity to revel in her body, and woman's construction of herself, and her own image."²² Instead of crafting fictions that disempower Black women, as many racist images have, Weems strives to create a new image of a multifaceted but everyday Black womanhood.

Each of the photographs in the *Kitchen Table Series* is the same size, and the kitchen table does not move, always extending past the bottom frame and out towards the viewer. Weems, as the unnamed woman, appears in all of the images, but the other actors change. The woman is alone in five of the images; in another nine, she is joined by female friends or a young girl; in six, she is joined by a man. Weems uses her Black female body in each image to interrupt the methodically arranged and simple background of each photograph, for she is always the focal figure, most often positioned directly across the table from the viewer. She tells a new story about Black womanhood that pays homage to the messiness that takes shape on the table, and in turn, is shaped by all that it can hold. The intimacy shared by the people around the table also supports the table's powerful purpose in Weems's work; as the table extends out of the frame towards the viewer, we are implicated into the process going on around the table.

In one of the most striking images, the woman stands alone, with her hands placed on the table, directly staring at the viewer.²³ Although the table is

charged with multiple, sometimes conflicting, emotions, her gaze invites us into the space, invites us to feel all that she herself is feeling. Weems wants the viewer to participate in her development of a Black woman imagery with a feminist objective. She suggests the table itself can bear the weight of this proposition; it can hold not only the detritus of everyday life, it can also become the space through which everyday life is shaped.

The images of the woman and the man are often tense, suggesting Weems's own concerns with monogamy, which are echoed in the text vignettes of the series. One of the vignettes begins, "She felt monogamy had a place but invested it with little value. It was a system based on private property, an order defying human nature."²⁴ Because of this statement, the images in which the woman shares her life with other women resonate, particularly a triptych of the woman and a young girl as her daughter.²⁵ The first image shows the woman reading, with her daughter standing behind and to the left of her, staring at the book on the table. The second image shows them in a standoff, presumably arguing over the homework laid out on the table in front of the daughter. The final image of the triptych shows them working side-by-side, the woman writing and reading while the young girl also writes in her own notebook. In this triptych, the table unites different generations of Black women through literacy and education. It becomes a space of support, shaped by the tensions between mother and daughter.

This support is part of Weems's storytelling quest: the table occupies a space where intersections of identity, as well as daily life and work, are located. The table bears the weight of Weems's stories while also acting, in Adrienne Edwards's words, as a "support mechanism for daily life."²⁶ It is both refuge, homeplace, and revolutionary, resistant place. It is in the kitchen, and upon the table, where many rituals are shared among women, and it is through this collective experience, as Weems argues, that women eventually define and

redefine their own image of feminist womanhood.

The Table-in-Motion

If you throw a party, where does everyone end up? Even when there is not enough room or it is too hot or too crowded or you cannot get to the other side of the room, where does everyone go? The answer is the kitchen, where family and friends alike gather to debate and laugh and eat and cry and drink. The kitchen itself becomes a joyous space of transformation, where food becomes a meal, where stories become books, and where strangers become friends. Perhaps no one else captures this joyous feeling, the constantly evolving and changing space of the kitchen, better than Vertaemae Smart-Grosvenor. As a self-defined Geechee girl (an otherwise pejorative term for Creole women in lowland South Carolina), Smart-Grosvenor catalogues her life and culinary heritage through her writing, art, and work in public radio. In her 1970 cookbook-memoir-travelogue *Vibration Cooking*, arguably her most well-known work, Smart-Grosvenor recounts how people pass by and through her life as she remembers and records all the places that she has lived and all the food that she has cooked and eaten along the way. The work is, as the author's note suggests, "a synthesis of her varied experiences both here and abroad and utilizes recipes as focal points in the author's adventure."²⁷ But the book ends in her kitchen, about which Smart-Grosvenor writes: "I would explain that my kitchen was the world."²⁸ Subsequent editions of *Vibration Cooking* have included poems, eliminated particular words, and changed the "To Be Continued" section to a section titled "Continued..." after the body of the memoir. The book changes shape just as the kitchen table takes on different shapes.

But it is not until the very end of the memoir, in the "Continued..." section

that I glimpse Smart-Grosvenor's kitchen table. In a short prose poem, she celebrates the way the kitchen functions as a space of creation. While the table lurks in the shadows, it seemingly appears as the surface behind the text (and yes, the following text is reproduced in all capital letters, just as it is in her work):

THE KITCHEN IS THE MOST IMPORTANT ROOM IN MY HOME.

TIS THE PLACE FROM WHICH I DO MY THING.

I EAT IN THE KITCHEN.

WHEN FRIENDS DROP IN SOMETIMES WE NEVER LEAVE THE KITCHEN.

I JUST DO EVERYTHING IN THE KITCHEN.

I WROTE THIS BOOK IN THE KITCHEN.

WHEN I SEW IT [sic] SET UP THE SEWING MACHINE IN THE KITCHEN.

I IRON IN THE KITCHEN.

THE OTHER DAY I TRIED TO MOVE THE PIANO IN BUT
COULDN'T GET ANYONE TO HELP ME.

THE CHILDREN DO THEIR HOMEWORK IN THE KITCHEN.

SOMETIMES THERE IS SO MUCH HAPPENING IN THE KITCHEN
THAT I CAN'T GET TO THE STOVE TO COOK AND WE HAVE
TO CALL CHICKEN DELIGHT.²⁹

The surfaces upon which all this creation happens are not made explicit, but the embodied nature of creating certainly is. We can feel the vibrancy and motion in all the kitchen activities that Smart-Grosvenor lists, which highlight a creative life in motion. Even with the absence of the table in the poem, there are so many activities crisscrossing over each other that we can sense the table behind the words, holding up the sewing machine, the iron, the homework pages, and plates. It is an object that I can feel behind the pages, supporting and teasing out the relationships between creative acts and mundane, everyday acts of living.

The Next Table

It is through the objects we have in view—the objects that we use and prioritize—that we orient ourselves towards a certain way of being/becoming. What does it mean to turn toward something in writing? To write your way across a table? To write a new way? The artistic works considered in this essay draw our attention to the surface of the table as one such space. This material turn emphasizes that writing is an emplaced activity, a thinking, communicating, ever-evolving practice that requires and is shaped by the surfaces upon which it happens. It also suggests that these surfaces have power, that they shape the women and the works that happen around them.

In thinking through my own experiences and in thinking through the writing of this essay, I have come to believe a few things to be true about the kitchen table. I list them here:

1. Things intermingle on kitchen tables in ways that they do not on more clearly demarcated spaces like desks.
2. A kitchen table typically has more than one seat, if not a full circle of seats. We can talk and write and share around the table.
3. The table can spark new ideas through this gathering-in-placeness, of objects, of people, of labors.
4. It brings together diffuse, multiple forms of labor—domestic, academic, personal, public—onto a single surface.
5. It can be an object that anchors the home—the heart of the home is in the kitchen. But what happens around the table is also transitory—people pass by, stop in for a second, and continue on. It vacillates between stagnant object-ness and ephemeral space-ness.
6. The kitchen table most often lives in a space that is shared (not private or locked away).
7. When people come into a home, they do not ask permission to go into the

kitchen.

8. Writing at the kitchen table refuses the notion that writing is a rarefied act enshrined in mythos. The kitchen table loudly proclaims writing is happening *here*, in a mundane, everyday world.
9. The kitchen table can be covered in material, literally made into a space where a woman can expand because she can spread out. Women-spreading, writing-spreading.
10. You can lay across a table. It can hold your whole body up when you're too tired to keep at it.

Kitchen tables are so rarely described in any detail by the artists and writers who make use of them, a conclusion I came to rather late in this writing process. Kitchen tables are often just there, waiting for change to happen upon their surfaces. Why is it that a space that lurks behind the paper is so rarely described in any depth? Why is it that people know the minutiae of many writers' kitchens, of many chefs' kitchens, but not how they make use of kitchen tables? I do not have an answer to this question, but I do have a suggestion. Perhaps, instead of continuing my lament that people cannot see all the tables in these artists' lives, I can acknowledge that I do see the work that comes from them. While the table is not listed in the acknowledgements or thanked in a forward, it is there in all the different voices, speaking in their own ways across the table to one another. The writers who use the table are, metaphorically, laying each of their stories upon it, creating a surface that holds stacks and stacks of thoughts expressed in all matter of media. As Sara Ahmed observes in *Queer Phenomenology*,

Consciousness itself has been imagined through the metaphor of the table: tabula rasa, the blank slate. The table is what 'waits' for writing, for the very 'marks' that transform the potentiality of life into the actuality of being. Life becomes writing on the table, which evokes futurity as a present mark: when we say 'the writing is on the table' we imply that a specific future has already been decided.³⁰

This turn towards futurity implies the possibility for change; it indicates that “the terms of its appearance will be different. It might be that quite a different table comes into view.”³¹ Instead of assuming a meaning for the kitchen table before the composing practice has begun, we might allow its future to remain open. We might see the kitchen table as an undecided space, a space open to fluidity in use and definition. It might also be that the kitchen table, as a surface, influences and shapes the figure of the feminist writer differently than the lone writer locked away in her room. Put another way, I begin this essay by gazing directly at a commonplace object and lingering over its possibilities. In doing so, I am struck by what the table tells me, how it challenges how I see the world, and how it can suggest what is missing. It has become much more than just an object. Cherrie Moraga evokes this same feeling in her conclusion to *This Bridge Called My Back*, and I find it fitting to end my essay with her exchange across a kitchen table: “‘There was no body to talk to,’ my companion reminds me. We sit across the kitchen table. ‘Yes,’ I say, ‘that’s why we wrote the book.’”³²

Biography

R. Scharnhorst is a hybrid PhD student specializing in nineteenth-century English literature, feminist rhetorics, and composition at the University of Cincinnati (UC). Her work examines the intertwined relationship of food, feminisms, and writing practice. She most recently received a fellowship from the English Department at UC to continue her research in taste pedagogies as imagined through nineteenth-century American composition textbooks.

Notes

This essay took shape around a table of sorts, albeit not one in the kitchen. I’m deeply indebted to all my seminar peers who listened while I returned, endlessly, to tables in everything we read, and who offered terrific feedback on the many iterations of this essay. I especially extend gratitude to Laura Micciche, my own feminist hero. And finally, to another R. Scharnhorst, to my partner Ben, and to Lou, the cat that always interrupts at the right moment.

¹ “Jane Austen’s Writing Desk,” Western Manuscripts Collection, The British Library, <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/jane-austens-writing-desk>.

² Laura R. Micciche, “Writers Have Always Loved Mobile Devices,” *The Atlantic*, August 18, 2018,

<https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/08/writers-have-always-loved-mobile-devices/567637/>.

³ Nora Weinerth, "A Desk of One's Own," *College English* 40, no. 5 (1979): 529–530. For another work that privileges the desk over the table, see Casey O'Brien Gerhart, "The Cook, the Student, His Wife, and their Teacher," *Writing on the Edge* 21, no. 2 (2011): 39–56. In particular, Gerhart writes of her kitchen table being remade, literally, into a desk.

⁴ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1929).

⁵ Toni Morrison, "The Nobel Lecture in Literature," in *Available Means: An Anthology of Women's Rhetoric(s)*, eds. Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), 419.

⁶ Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 15–16.

⁷ Hannah Rule, "Writing's Rooms," *College Composition and Communication* 69, no. 3 (2018): 404.

⁸ Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1997), 32.

⁹ Gloria Anzaldúa, "Speaking in Tongues," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, eds. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Albany: SUNY Press, 2015), 168.

¹⁰ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 61.

¹¹ bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 42.

¹² *Ibid.*, 103.

¹³ Barbara Smith, "A Press of our Own Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 10, no. 3 (1989): 11.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁵ Cherrie Moraga, "Afterword," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, eds. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Albany: SUNY Press, 2015), 251.

¹⁶ The anthology is now published by SUNY Press.

¹⁷ Smith, "A Press of our Own Kitchen Table," 11.

¹⁸ This style is the partial inspiration for my essay. As Carrie Mae Weems reflects in an interview with *W Magazine* thirty years after *Kitchen Table Series*: "But you know, I've always thought that both the photographs and text operate quite independently, and together they form yet a third thing, something that is dynamic and complex and allows you to read something else about the photographs. I don't think of them as being necessarily dependent on one another. Rather, they exist side by side, in tandem." See Stephanie Eckardt, "Carrie Mae Weems Reflects on Her Seminal, Enduring *Kitchen Table Series*," *W Magazine*, April 7, 2016.

¹⁹ Carrie Mae Weems, "She'd been pickin em up and layin em down, moving to the next town for a while, needing a rest, some moss under her feet, plus a solid man who enjoyed a good fight with a brave woman..." *Kitchen Table Series*, 1990, screenprint on paper, National Gallery of Art.

²⁰ Megan O'Grady, "How Carrie Mae Weems Rewrote the Rules of Image-Making," *New York Times Style Magazine*, Oct. 15, 2018.

²¹ Sarah E. Lewis, "Foreword," in *Carrie Mae Weems: Kitchen Table Series*, eds. Carrie M. Weems, Adrienne Edwards, and Sarah E. Lewis (Bologna: Damiani, 2016), 6.

²² Dana Friis Hansen, *From Carrie's Kitchen Table and Beyond* (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum, 1996), 6.

²³ Weems, "Untitled (Woman standing alone)," *Kitchen Table Series*, 1990, platinum print, National Gallery of Art.

²⁴ Weems, "She felt monogamy had a place but invested it with little value," *Kitchen Table Series*, 1990, screenprint on paper, National Gallery of Art.

²⁵ Weems, "Untitled (Woman with daughter)," *Kitchen Table Series*, 1990, triptych, platinum print, National Gallery of Art.

²⁶ Adrienne Edwards, "Scenes of the Flesh: Thinking-Feeling Carrie Mae Weems's *Kitchen Table Series* Twenty-Five Years On," in *Carrie Mae Weems: Kitchen Table Series*, eds. Carrie M. Weems, Adrienne Edwards, Sarah E. Lewis, (Bologna: Damiani, 2016), 11.

²⁷ Vertaemae Smart-Grosvenor, *Vibration Cooking, or Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl* (New York City: Ballantine, 1970), 220.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, xv.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 210.

³⁰ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 182.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 62.

³² Moraga, "Afterword," 251.