

Women Writing, Women Teaching

Speculating on Domestic Space

by Barbara McLean

On lit ici les réflexions de l'auteure sur le lien entre l'enseignement universitaire et la communauté et l'importance de la communauté sur l'enseignement.

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I am a university teacher. One of the things I do is to try to bring community issues into the classroom and bring the classroom into the community. I have to own right away that I am working in an elite institution, with an elite group of people who are able to attend university; I cannot reach all areas of the community—but I don't think I'm stuck away in an ivory tower either.

This article is about what I do and how what I do intersects with community work being done on changing patterns of violence against women. It is about the kinds of work I teach—generally women's writing—and about what is happening in that work. It is also about how I teach that work, and about how methods of teaching can work to change methods of dealing with power and authority. And I do this in terms of domestic space. I invite you to speculate with me on what domestic space means in the lives of women, in writing and in teaching, and how it can be changed, refigured, reformed in new ways.

Let me go back in time and start with Jane Austen. What was domestic space like for Jane Austen and for her characters? And what was it like for her contemporary reader? Well, if you read Jane Austen, or you've seen

any of the recent films of Jane Austen books, and if you can remember back to studying any of the novels, you will recall that domestic space is central to Jane Austen's work. They are novels about women at home, in their families, waiting to get married and get into homes of their own.

Domestic space in Jane Austen is delicious. It is always clean, without anyone visibly cleaning it. Her domestic space is always large, except

for the odd disadvantaged neighbour who lives in a small house with only one or two servants and little income. It is filled with flowers and food, prepared in quantity, but by whom? This we do not know, for we never get into the kitchens in Jane Austen.

Primarily we are in the common sitting room, the space where conversations take place, where visitors arrive, where embroidery is done, painting, piano-playing, singing. We are aware of libraries where Austen's father characters hide out their days or meet with prospective sons-in-law. And there are bedrooms, but only for meeting with sisters.

When I teach Jane Austen I like to show pictures of her domestic spaces—the lavish houses she modelled her books on, the grounds surrounding where all the walks took place. But I also like to ask my students how such domestic spaces got to be so wonderful. Where did the money come from? Who does the work? What goes on in the kitchens? Who empties the chamber pots? Who cuts the grass, cleans the stables, kills the fatted calf? Who, in fact, does the dirty work to make everything appear so clean? I like to think about what is behind the elegant domestic space.

So far, however, I am suggesting a domestic space which is blissful.

Women sitting in long dresses, pulling their silken threads through their embroidery hoops. Dipping their brushes into paints, practising their Mozart on the pianoforte. A life of ease and luxury. But this is not really what Jane Austen is about. She is painting this picture, but there is a palimpsest—another picture underneath her wash—and occasionally she leaves a little window open in her overlay and we see through.

Jane Austen conveys a feeling of confinement in domestic space. These women are trapped in their luxurious landed classes. They must marry. It is their only chance for any autonomy, and it isn't even that. They must trade the confinement of a daughter for the confinement of a wife where their power will be over their own households—over their own servants.

Think of the laws behind the traditional female lack of power: the marital promise to obey, women as chattels, as property, primogeniture—the inheritance laws which deem property goes to the eldest son, no divorce, married women not able to own property. Austen shows her realization of the narrowness of domestic space. In *Persuasion* she writes of women and then of men: "We live at home, quiet, confined, and our feelings prey upon us.... You have always a profession, pursuits, business of some sort or other, to take you back into the world immediately...." (207).

So the home is shown as the special place for women. It is the woman's domain; the man is in the library, brought out on occasion to be polite, for meals; the children are with their nurse, brought down to be shown, to perform perhaps, then taken away again. Women run Jane Austen's houses. They order dinners and manage the seating plans. But what sort of power is this? And what sort of control do they have beyond it? And what happens behind closed doors?

Women are kept inside because they will be safe there. This is the concept; they are safe from censure, safe from scandal, safe from the sun, the gunfire of the pheasant hunt, the coarseness of business or trade or the professions, safe from war. Men go out to meet the rigours of money-making and imperialism and gaming and sport. But women are confined.

I don't want to denigrate domestic space. Certainly I enjoy the power I have over my own domestic space, the privilege of having a domestic space and the pleasure of arranging it, of making it comfortable for the people I share it with. But I think we have to see it as both a place of comfort, and a place of containment.

Jane Austen wrote her way out of her domestic space. Her imagination took her away, her skill and critical insight presented it as superficially charming and subtextually confining. I like my students to see that.

Jumping into this century, I also teach Margaret Atwood, specifically *The Handmaid's Tale*. This is also a text about domestic space. But domestic space is overtly presented here as dangerous, confining, controlling. Domestic space is a prison in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Gilead, the name of this mythical place in *The Handmaid's Tale*, is set up as a religious community, set on returning a complicated world to the simple structures of the past, where women reside in the domestic space, and are restricted from the affairs of the state.

Women are confined, by law, by a militaristic dictatorship in houses in specific roles as breeders—the Handmaids, Marthas—the domestic servants, Aunts—trainers of handmaids, Wives—the barren housewives of the Commanders, and Unwomen—those who are sent off or killed for so called “antisocial activities” such as “gender treason” (being lesbians or feminists).

I find that my students make lots of connections between the denial of freedoms in this text and the move towards neoconservative methods and ideology in our own society. But Atwood wants us to make comparisons with factions in our society which promote a return to “family values” which restrict women's power and uphold patriarchal hierarchies. She presents a domestic space which is rigidly constructed to promote the ideology and agenda of the state.

There are not enough babies in Gilead; the population has been affected by some disaster which has rendered many sterile or damaged, and most of the wives of the men in power are unable to reproduce. So the state sets up a system of awarding Commanders their own handmaidens. Reproduction is reduced to a ceremony, of breeding, which occurs in a regulated way within the house, the Handmaiden lying in the arms of the Wife in the master bedroom.

There is no overt violence in the scene; the canopy on the bed, the white lace, could come right out of Jane Austen, but the horror of the submissive rape is there on the page.

are not allowed to read, to communicate, to know what became of their families, to have any future other than as breeders and submissive servants to the state.

Margaret Atwood takes Jane Austen and looks at her through a different lens. She speculates on domestic space as a containing, regulating, inhibiting structure, hiding behind a facade of beauty, comfort, and peace.

To jump back a bit, I also like to teach Virginia Woolf, whose works don't often get made into movies, but who is big in the feminist curriculum. Woolf splits Austen and Atwood in the middle, writing at the early part of this century. Woolf moved to get women away from the confines of domestic space, out from the economic dependence on men. Woolf said “a woman must have money and a room of her own” (6). Still the room—still the domestic space. But the room has to be one's own. As a woman one needs to control the room, control the domestic space. If we have our own keys, our freedom to enter or exit that space, at will, we have achieved what Woolf suggests. If we work to free women from the

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The Handmaiden submits or dies, submits or is sent to clean up toxic waste in the colonies. Submits or goes to some unknown, perhaps worse hell. She has a choice which is no choice at all. The domestic space is clean (once again there are servants), tidy, with flowers and food and white curtains. The Handmaidens are fed and clothed and kept warm. But they

confines and restrictions of domestic space, we are working to achieve what women in our society need—and what we see they do not yet have.

Austen sets us up to see that domestic space needed to be looked at, that speculations needed to be made. And Woolf presents the idea of empowering women to refigure their own space, to make that space a room

of their own. Atwood shows us what could happen if domestic space is allowed to bind, how women can be locked up in domestic spaces, belittled, tortured, murdered.

So I teach these texts, and many others, and allow my students to make conclusions about the place of women in domestic space, in society. I get a lot of feedback on their mothers, their grandmothers, their own lives. In that space of the classroom, I try to deal with problems of domestic space.

I look at literary domestic space. I ask them about the character Sally in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. I have read that book many times but only on the most recent time through did I notice Sally. Not that there is much to notice; Sally is never seen, never described, has no lines to speak. Sally is only referred to by Lydia in a letter: "tell Sally to mend a great slit in my worked muslin gown" (318). There's Sally, invisible servant working away in bad light in the basement or the attic, mending by candlelight.

I also look at the space of the classroom itself. As a teacher I have to own my power in the classroom. So far the university senate decrees that I have to assign marks to my students. They have to do assignments, and I have to evaluate them. That alone gives me a lot of power. I also have the power of the person at the front of the room—in the classroom I'm in charge. It is really my space to domesticate or not. So I own that power and I talk about it with my students.

I feel authority is invested in me as a professor. But authority is one of the evils of our society. I work in the classroom to de-authorize my position and to empower my students. There are a lot of ways of doing this.

One of the first things I do is share some of myself with students. I think it is important that they know who I am and what I expect, so I try to make that very clear. I also talk about what my expectations are, what the expectations of the university are, and then I invite them to work with me to make the class operate in a safe, open manner. I start by talking about what they can call me. Often I write on the

board Dr. Barbara McLean and suggest that they can call me any one or combination of those words. If they feel more comfortable with a little distance, they will call me Dr. McLean, if they want to be chummy, they can call me Barbara. I ask them to tell me their names and something about themselves. I ask them to tell me what they want to be called. I make no assumptions. I write that down and try to remember it.

We talk about guidelines. We talk about what is appropriate in class and what is comfortable. We talk about issues of confidentiality and safety. We talk about getting to our cars together and safely at night if it's a night class. And I talk about guidelines always being just that—guidelines open to change and revision—open to discussion and reevaluation. I find the more power I share, the better the class is and the harder the students work. If I let them set up areas of the curriculum, or questions for the exam, or the method of dividing up a class, they work together to come up with challenging ideas and often more difficult approaches than I might have assigned.

We work on consensus and on collaboration, always, however, with the realization that the power differential is there. This can be difficult. I like to work with problem-based learning. If I can get the students to set up the problem even better. I like to do group assignments to encourage collaborating and a sense of community in the class. I mark my students' essays in pencil. I tell them when I don't know things.

I'm such a postmodernist I've come to distrust the very concept of truth I think, but it shows in my teaching in that I am not wedded to answers. It's true I like some better than others, but I really believe I am in the classroom to learn and to facilitate, not to spew out truths to fill up empty vessels. This can be problematic, particularly for first year students who are trying desperately to find out what I want, what is the truth, what is the real meaning of the poem, the proper take on the novel, the reading I want

on the short story. Some students are used to learning facts and regurgitating them for exams. They can be uncomfortable in my classes, but I usually find that when they get on to the idea of taking responsibility for their own learning they engage with the material better than if it is delivered to them on a plate.

I have learned some strategies to help quiet students talk and to encourage unsure students to take chances. I never call on someone at random by name. Humiliation has no place in the classroom, no place in the world, no place in any space, domestic or otherwise. There is fear in being a student, fear in speaking; I recognize that and try to make people feel comfortable. The word "wrong" is not in my teaching vocabulary; students never have wrong answers; they could be made stronger, or parts of them could be emphasized. I might even say they were pushing it a bit, but they aren't wrong. Being told they are wrong leads to their being silenced, feeling abused.

I give time for students to answer. Some people put their hands up right away and want to get talking; many more, usually women or visible minorities, or both, take longer to respond. Partly this is culture. Women and minority cultures are silenced. People haven't wanted to hear from them/us much. We have to give time for their responses. The average professor waits two to three seconds for a response to a question in class. Many people need ten seconds or more. I wait. And I get a lot more interesting responses from a lot more people.

Whenever I can I assign journals in class. I try to make my students feel safe enough to write whatever they want in these journals, which I treat with confidence. But I do not demand anything personal. I allow it; but I don't require it. Students can have as much space as they need in my classes. At least that is my goal.

My objective as a teacher is to have my students go out and change the world. I don't care if they learn how to recognize the difference between iambic pentameter and trochaic hex-

ameter. I like them to learn to love literature and to improve their writing skills. I love it when they take off on a literary or theoretical problem. But I don't see my job as telling them how to think about texts, or teaching them act and scene numbers and characters' names. I want them to learn from the classroom dynamics and from the literature about society, about power and authority, about humanity, about tolerance, about gender imbalance, and of course about good writing too.

I want to empower them to choose their domestic spaces according to their own needs and desires, and I want them to witness the de-authorization of the larger space—the classroom, the university, the world as a possibility for them and for others. I also want my students to pass on the message about the dangers and dilemmas of domestic space, to those who cannot be there, cannot be here.

The university is an elitist institution. Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf, and Margaret Atwood are elitist writers. It is my hope that in a small way, one text at a time, one classroom at a time, I can work towards spreading the idea of refiguring power in the domestic space, speculating on domestic space in ways which empower individuals to empower others to make domestic spaces safe spaces, not confining spaces, for everyone.

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LORETTE C. THIESSEN

The Disintegration

Our bodies dissolved,
as if in water,
melting into the heat of reckless creation.
We fucked as if to make and
wake all the children,

our private, frenzied homage to life.
Both of us were fragile.
We brought shiny ribbons
to tie up the bits and pieces with the other.
Both of us saw home,
and perhaps,
for each of us,
it was the first time we had ever seen it.

I had fled other lovers,
the crazy hands of innocence and her jesters.
But you took me to the place
where the tears were,
suckling me hungrily as if my dark fluids
would give life to you.

We ate the food we'd scrounged
with beggar's hands,
and fed each other.
I came to you naked in the same manner;
I came starved, and wild.

I will always recollect
the image of my reflection
in the Greyhound window
as I sped away from your arms.
It seemed the first time in ages
that I saw myself
instead of you.

Lorette C. Thiessen's poetry has been published in Venue Magazine, Grain, Fiddlehead, Rattle, the White Wall Review, and many others. When she is not busy writing, she can be found in downtown Toronto selling other people's books or at home reading other people's poetry out loud to her cats.