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Abstract: This article examines the positive influence that Paul Beatriz Preciado's non-binary interpretation of Virginia Woolf's oeuvre may have on Woolf studies in Italy, particularly when compared to readings developed by scholars aligned with the philosophy of sexual difference. By placing Woolf in dialogue with queer, trans, and non-binary discourses, Preciado expands the modernist writer's legacy, reframing works such as *Orlando* (1928) as material-semiotic sites of ontopolitical and ethical inquiry. Moreover, through his docufilm *Orlando, ma biographie politique / Orlando, My Political Biography*, Preciado directly confronts the broader challenges of translating Woolf's experimental critique of identity into contemporary struggles for recognition and agency. Engaging critically with traditions that have often grounded Woolf's poetics in biological essentialism, the article traces how Preciado's approach redirects attention toward a more intersectional understanding of gender in Woolf's language and characterization. This paradigmatic shift underscores the tensions between historicizing Woolf's body of work and approaching it as a transdiscursive macrotext that evolves alongside the cultural and political landscapes shaping its critique. Ultimately, this study calls for a Woolf scholarship freed from the constraints of binary epistemic violence, and open to contradiction and multiplicity—one that frames the author's legacy not as a fixed narrative, but as an ongoing, transnational dialogue attuned to the philosophical and existential demands of the present.

Key words: Woolf, Preciado, Orlando, difference feminism, queer and non-binary theory

"Orlando, où es tu?": Paul Beatriz Preciado's Non-binary Reading of Virginia Woolf

ANDREA RASO

> You lie on the sea, you enter m/e by the
> eyes, you arrive in the air *I* breathe, *I* summon you
> to show yourself, *I* solicit you to emerge from this
> non-presence which engulfs you.
> — Monique Wittig, *The Lesbian Body*, 1973[1]

Introduction, on Woolf and difference feminism

"A text is a strange creature. A lifeless and static sign at first, it comes to life as soon as it establishes a relation with those who read it."[2] With these words, Spanish philosopher Paul Beatriz Preciado opens his reading of Virginia Woolf, published in *Libération* in June 2023. Preciado describes Woolf as a writer who, "being radically opposed to both neutrality and fixed identity, be it heterosexual or lesbian…made of her writing an eternal space of enunciative vibration, beyond the gender binary."[3] The intentionally provocative nature of this brief article has fueled controversy on both social media and within academia. In Italy in particular, numerous scholars and readers have contributed to the ongoing debate in defense of more traditional interpretations of Woolf's poetics—interpretations largely shaped by the philosophy of sexual difference, whose original goal was to assemble a rich genealogy of feminist historical figures in order to develop a new, anti-patriarchal symbolic order. This is the position of Nadia Fusini, one of the most authoritative voices in Woolf studies in Italy, who, in the introduction to her recent Italian translation of Woolf's *Orlando*, reaffirms Woolf's role as a guiding light of difference feminism, while expressing skepticism toward the way Woolf's non-heteronormativity has been "retrieved and backed by the boldness of LGBTQ alliances."[4] Fusini's caution in embracing a queer exegesis of Woolf points to a debate that extends far beyond literary studies, addressing the long-standing socio-political divide between difference feminism and the queer and trans edge of third- and fourth-wave feminisms—movements that have reconceptualized identity as an open category, one that, as we will see, some feminists such as Adriana Cavarero regard as dangerously universalist.[5]

However, by avoiding the paradigmatic relegation of Woolf's queerness to subtext, allegory, or mere historical limitation, recent scholarship has begun to shed light on the potential of queer readings of Woolf alongside, rather than in stark opposition to, some of the valuable insights of traditional feminist critique. Exploring the ethical implications of Woolf's aesthetics, Melanie Micir asserts, for instance, that "the many versions of Virginia Woolf currently in circulation—feminist Woolf, lesbian Woolf, celibate Woolf, crip Woolf, and queer Woolf, among others—need not neatly align with one another" to confirm their validity, since "the versions of Woolf circulating at any given time might well reveal as much about individual scholarly projects and sensibilities as they do about Woolf or her work."[6] Micir explains these tensions by pointing to the contested nature of Woolf's image in popular culture, a phenomenon that Brenda Silver had already documented in 1999 in *Virginia Woolf Icon*. In her in-depth study, Silver examines how

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[1] Wittig, *The Lesbian Body*, 36.

[2] "Un texte est une étrange créature. Signe inorganique et inerte, il prend vie lorsqu'il entre en relation avec celleux qui le lisent." Preciado, "Virginia non-binaire." All quotes in English have been translated by the author.

[3] "Radicalement opposée à toute neutralité, mais aussi à toute identité, qu'elle soit hétérosexuelle ou lesbienne, Virginia Woolf a fait de son écriture le lieu d'une vibration énonciative constante, au-delà du binarisme de genre." Preciado, "Virginia non-binaire."

[4] "Riprese e motivate da audaci alleanze Lgbtqi." Fusini, "Introduzione," in *Orlando*, 10.

[5] See Fasoli, "La differenza di Haraway"; Pitch, "Sul disegno di legge Zan."

[6] Micir, "Queer Woolf," 352.

Woolf has been subjected to a tug-of-war among diverse ideologies, each trying to determine the essence of the author's life and art.

Specifically, Silver reveals, with a nod to Michel Foucault, the pervasive anxiety about a "proliferation of meaning" within mainstream discourse, which leads her to identify "the complex intertextuality of Virginia Woolf icon," attesting to the writer's "mobility," that is, the potential of a "protean image and its powerful, frightening disruptiveness."[7]

Highlighting Woolf's firsthand contribution to the development of queer theory through autobiographical practice, Erica Delsandro even draws a parallel between her work and that of contemporary authors like Maggie Nelson, focusing on how their investment in the generative instability of identity has led to the creation of a *trans*-genre that responds epistemologically to the ontological recognition of *trans*-gender(s).[8] Woolf's influence on gender discourse and its ramifications is also reflected in recent cultural projects, such as the podcast *Three Transformations of Virginia Woolf*, produced by Ellie Richold for BBC Audio and hosted by Fiona Shaw. In the third episode, Shaw speaks with various Woolf experts and aficionados, including drag king Holly James Johnston, filmmaker Sally Potter, and Preciado himself, who comments that, at a time when the first successful gender-affirming surgeries were being carried out, Woolf took "psychiatric notions that at that time were thought to be pathological…and made them into a literary adventure, deciding not to kill the trans character at the end of the novel."[9] Orlando's resilience has since inspired an extensive array of interpretations, keeping the book relevant across generations: a book that was "ignored by the critics when it was written, then read as a feminist novel in the 1970s. Then again, in the 1980s and 90s it was read as a lesbian novel, and now it's being read as a trans/non-binary novel. This plasticity of character, I think, comes from the poetic charge of Woolf's language."[10]

It is with this transdiscursive nature of Woolf and her characters in mind that, in his 2023 article, Preciado retraced the critical reception of the modernist writer back to the feminist and lesbian readings that revealed how Woolf has historically been identified with what Laura Doan calls "Sapphic modernity," understood as a "visible modern English lesbian subculture."[11] Years later, however, Woolf was distanced from this lineage, prompting the discontent of scholars such as Stefania Arcara, who laments that "lesbianism has been deliberately *dissociated* from the author's feminist stance to the extent of being dismissed as an inconvenient matter of political correctness, a superfluous, limiting label" (original emphasis).[12] Arcara's statement stands in clear opposition to Fusini's rejection of a queer interpretation of Woolf's writings, as well as of the author's affiliation with queer and non-binary discourses. Fusini cautions that "we should not forget that whether Woolf uses the term *queer*, it is certainly not in the usual meaning attributed to it by today's identity trendsetters. *Queer*, in her language, stands for a form of eccentricity that breathes freedom from classifications. Was Woolf a lesbian? Hetero/homo-sexual? She herself ironically called herself 'Sapphic'."[13] Yet, to reduce Woolf's sexuality to a mere source of linguistic inspiration risks

[7] See respectively Silver, *Virginia Woolf Icon*, 16; 18; 76.
[8] See Delsandro, "The Trans Lifewriting of Virginia Woolf and Maggie Nelson."
[9] Shaw, *Three Transformations of Virginia Woolf*, 21:18.
[10] Shaw, *Three Transformations of Virginia Woolf*, 27:04.
[11] Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*, xii–xiii.
[12] "Il lesbismo è stato cioè artatamente *disgiunto* dalla visione femminista dell'autrice, arrivando a essere liquidato come fastidiosa questione 'politically correct' e come mera etichetta limitante." Arcara, "Il bacio di Sally," 3–4. Arcara's argument is directed at an introductory essay written by Fusini for the Italian re-edition of Woolf's early letters, where she comments on Woolf's "relationships with her 'women friends', which I put in inverted commas, to avoid reigniting the trite and useless controversy of a politically correct impulse aimed at forcing her into a category—lesbian, sapphic, or frigid—which is inconsequential" ("le sue relazioni con 'le amiche;' e lo sottolineo non certo per riaccendere la polemica stanca e inutile di un impeto *politically correct* volto a constringerla in categorie—lesbica, saffica o frigida—che lasciano il tempo che trovano"). Fusini "Da Virginia Stephen a Virginia Woolf," 13.
[13] "E si badi bene, se usa il termine *queer* non è nel senso standardizzato dagli attuali avventori del banco delle identità. *Queer* nella sua lingua vale nel senso di una ex-centricità che respira nella libertà dalle classificazioni. Woolf lesbica? Etero/omo-sessuale? Lei stessa…giocando, si definisce 'saffica.'" Fusini, "Introduzione" in *Orlando*, 17–18;

reinforcing an overly discursive interpretation of the materiality that underlies literary creation to begin with.

Moreover, the word *sapphic* carries complex historical and cultural implications, and its erotic force cannot be reduced to a form of non-sexual, platonic relationship between women, as Fusini seems to suggest. It is therefore particularly interesting that, in her role as Woolf's translator, Fusini herself helped re-establish the author's homosexuality in the Italian context. Woolf's 1925 novel *Mrs Dalloway* was, in fact, first introduced to Italian readers in 1946 through a censored translation by Alessandra Scalero, which euphemistically rendered the kiss scene between the protagonist, Clarissa Dalloway, and Sally Seton by having Clarissa's lips fall onto the petals of a rose, rather than on her lover's mouth. The lesbian eroticism of the kiss, emphatically described in the original as "the most exquisite moment of [Clarissa's] whole life," was finally restored in 1989 by Fusini—an element that critics have since been careful to reaffirm.[14] Still, the sexual tension that runs through the novel was soon redirected toward a less sensual conception of love in Fusini's own introduction to her translation, where she regards Clarissa as a virginal, almost conventual figure.[15]

While the reader encounters Clarissa at a moment in her life when she is battling with questions of desire after the fervor of youth and health has faded, Arcara perceives the insistence on Clarissa's frigidity as an interpretative distortion, one that stems from her failed erotic relationship with men, and serves as an attempt to separate Woolf from the explicit lesbianism of works such as Radclyffe Hall's 1928 novel *The Well of Loneliness*.[16] This tendency, Arcara contends, may be linked to the image of Woolf as passed down to us by her nephew, Quentin Bell, who described his aunt as a "sexless Sappho."[17]

While Woolf herself employs the term *sapphic*, this may be less an ironic gesture, as Fusini posits, than a strategic move to navigate the interstices of the homophobic censorship that had ensnared Hall.[18] Furthermore, the decontextualization of Woolf's use of terms such as *sapphistry* obscures the sexual tension evident in her relationships and correspondence with women such as Madge Vaughan, Vita Sackville-West, and Ethel Smyth, leading us to believe that Woolf's subtle treatment of lesbianism is merely the manifestation of an immature maternal fixation.[19] This view is supported by Fusini, who emphasizes the supposed decisive power of Woolf's marriage to Leonard Woolf, a man who was "neither homo nor bisexual, neither a poser nor a show-off, unlike many other men in Bloomsbury"—a definition infused, if not with latent homophobia, at least with a normative outlook that overlooks Bloomsbury's crucial attempt to vindicate free love.[20]

Conversely, Preciado believes that where Woolf is interpreted through difference feminism, her poetics have sometimes been constrained by a closed philosophical system—a critique that, it must be granted, might also be levelled at Preciado's gender-bending reading of Woolf. Nonetheless, while Preciado strives to challenge the patriarchal notions dictated by the regime of heterosexuality without rejecting the contribution of traditional feminist theory, several differentialist interpretations are marked by a deceptive rejection of all categories that fall outside the male/female binary and the subsequent idea of "woman" as an unproblematic notion. This

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[14] Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 30. See Basso, "Intervista ad Anna Nadotti."

[15] Fusini, "Introduzione," in *La Signora Dalloway*, xiv. It is true that Woolf compares Clarissa to a nun ("Like a nun withdrawing"; see Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 26), but this simile can also be read as symbolizing a woman's intimate interior space rather than frigidity—that "emptiness about the heart of life" which recurs in *To the Lighthouse* (1927) with Mrs Ramsay, who is described as having "shrunk…to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others" (see Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 26; 58).

[16] See respectively Arcara, "Il bacio di Sally," 2–3; 8.

[17] Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, 185.

[18] See Arcara, "Il bacio di Sally," 9.

[19] Woolf's letters to her women lovers often feature explicit references to lesbian sexual intercourses.

[20] "Non è omo- né bisessuale, non è un *poseur* né un'esibizionista, al contrario di molti altri maschi di Bloomsbury." Fusini, "Da Virginia Stephen a Virginia Woolf," 15–16. It is interesting to notice that Fusini not only came out with her new translation of *Orlando* (2023), but in 2019 she translated, together with Sara De Simone, the love letters of Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West, collected in *Scrivi sempre a mezzanotte*, edited by Elena Mufanò.

clash of ideals dates back to the historic conflict between feminist studies and gender theory concerning discourses of identity. Judith Butler's pioneering work—from *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter* to *Undoing Gender*— has shown how identity is not always synonymous with oppression. Hence, for instance, the relevance of acronyms such as LGBTQIA+, which, as Antonia Caruso reminds us, some consider "prescriptive" but which is actually "descriptive," like "a mushroom, which is visible, but whose spawn is invisible and pervasive."[21]

Moreover, while in Butler the category of identity is eventually surpassed by a less rigid process of subjectivation, their work has been interpreted as retaining the use of identity for its positional rather than essentialist connotation, making it a useful socio-political tool.[22] In contrast to Patricia Morgne Cramer, who believes that it is "queer distrust of identity labels of any kind [that] has filtered into Woolf studies as justifications for avoiding the term 'lesbian' in relation to Woolf," I find that it is precisely the rejection of queer readings by strictly heterosexual feminisms that has led to the return of what Butler condemns as the "belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex," which reinscribes women within the very essentialist schemes that difference feminism tried to disrupt in the first place.[23]

Curiously, the inflexible posture of today's Italian differentialist critics of Woolf lacks a counterpart in the Anglophone context. Scholars like Karen Kaivola, Jane Goldman, Nicola Wilson and Claire Battershill, to name a few, have all acknowledged and celebrated Woolf's queerness arising from the relative freedom she found, as a lesbian woman married to a man, from the dynamics of heterosexual paradigms.[24] Kaivola asserts that "we must remember that when [Woolf] did express desire, it was more commonly lesbian."[25] Conversely, philosopher Adriana Cavarero, guided by a more biological interpretation of Woolf, affirms that the modernist author "goes from the primacy of history to that of essence…from the thesis of gender as a cultural construction to the thesis that genders have a natural basis."[26] Fusini seems to agree, stating that in *Orlando*, Woolf "sketches a *quoad matrem* woman: a woman caught in the maternal posture assumed by those who give birth to and take care of the child" and that Orlando's male-to-female sexual transition is a "progress we can interpret as the demonstration that women are the highest version of the human; the human at its best is female."[27] To this essentialist assertion, Butler would probably respond that if "one is a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive…because gender…intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities."[28]

Cavarero is not a lone voice. Even Woolf's more overtly queer characters, like Orlando, have consistently been approached through a binary conception of the sexes, contributing not only to the delegitimization of Woolf's lesbianism, but also to the consolidation of heteronormativity as the primary lens for reading Woolf's macrotext. This tendency seems to confirm Arcara's argument that, by omitting Woolf's literary rendition of erotic lesbianism, Italian feminist scholarship also undermined Woolf's critique of the hetero-patriarchy.[29] In a related critique, Deborah Ardilli claims that "to view the whole of feminism as an echo chamber for other voices

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[21] "Prescrittivo…descrittivo;" "un fungo, visible, ma il cui micelio è invisibile e pervasivo." Caruso, *LGBTQIA+*, 3; 11.

[22] See Hall, "Chi ha bisogno dell'"identità'?" 313–31. Over the years, Butler's attitude has shifted towards a refusal of all categories, yet I contend that Stuart Hall's interpretation of Butler's early treatment of identity may lend itself to beneficial applications athwart neutrality in today's identity politics.

[23] Cramer, "Woolf and Theories of Sexuality," 131; Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 6.

[24] See Kaivola, "Virginia Woolf"; Goldman, *The Cambridge Introduction*; Wilson and Battershill, *Virginia Woolf and the World of Books*.

[25] Kaivola, "Virginia Woolf," 35.

[26] Cavarero, "Virginia Woolf and the Shadow of the 'I'," 41.

[27] "Descrive la donna *quoad matrem*: colta nella postura materna, di chi fa nascere e ha cura del neo-nato"; "un progresso…che potremmo interpretare così: la donna è la versione più alta dell'essere umano, l'essere umano al suo meglio è donna." Fusini, "Introduzione," in *Orlando*, 18–19. Emphasis mine.

[28] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 3.

[29] See Arcara, "Il bacio di Sally," 4.

[is] an eloquent metaphor of…a hetero-patriarchal declination of intersectionality."[30] Put differently, while claiming to embrace a pluralistic view of gender politics, difference feminism's insistence on male-female relationships and its stated distance from intersectional concerns, eventually risks trivializing questions like that of queer subjects' vulnerability, as it (only seemingly) does not affect cisgender women.

An overview of Woolf's treatment within the context of differentialist politicization is offered by Elisa Bolchi's meticulous archival research on how some Italian feminist collectives of the 1970s first reacted to and integrated Woolf's political ideals. As Bolchi writes, Woolf's reception coincided with the emergence of "the 'feminism of difference'…that bears the mark of Luce Irigaray's theory of sexual difference, whose founding ideas the [Milanese] collective identified in some aspects of Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas*, but struggled to see enacted in the fictional worlds of her novels."[31] It may be inferred that the Milanese collective's original aim was to free language from the constraints of the male symbolic order, given that, as philosopher Luisa Muraro observes, "symbolic incompetence has repercussions at a linguistic level, causing in the female speaker an uncertainty about whether words can truly say what she wants them to say."[32] However, by not recognizing the multiple representational possibilities offered by Woolf's fiction, the Milanese feminists eventually favored Woolf's political writings, thereby dismissing Woolf's germinal, creative language aimed at developing more nuanced onto-epistemological realities.[33] While under the banner of the Italian Virginia Woolf Society, founded in 2017, Woolf's novels, letters, and diaries have made a huge resurgence in the public sphere; these have often been subjected to interpretations that only sporadically diverge from the differentialist framework.

Preciado's somato-political interpretation of Woolf may instead be presented as a corrective to certain ideologies, not as an open attack on feminism, but as a queer collaboration with those feminists who are still attempting to challenge the binary complementarity of heterosexuality. Even non-academic readers of Woolf are no strangers to the author's early musings on the intersection of genre and gender when dealing with concepts such as history/historiography and (auto)biography. Furthermore, stories like *Orlando* (1928) now belong to a mainstream cultural imaginary, extending beyond the re-interpretation they are currently undergoing thanks to queer scholars. Preciado's own philosophy might be referenced in support of such a statement, particularly regarding the multiple manifestations of epistemic violence in both socio-political and cultural debates, whether or not in direct relation to Woolf.

In the context of identity politics, the afterlives of Woolf's text have much to offer. This includes Preciado's own docufilm adaptation of Woolf's irreverent biographical experiment, *Orlando, ma biographie politique / Orlando, My Political Biography* (2023), a visual-philosophical piece aiming not only at the disruption of polarized gender norms, but also of stereotypical representations of transgender and transsexual people, who have been historically presented with an *aut-aut* choice within the confines of the sexual binary. With Preciado, the outlines of a non-violent material-semiotic grammar come to the surface, enabling both the rebuttal of the fallacy that Woolf's oeuvre stands for the "quintessence de l'écriture féminine" and the transition out of a univocal episteme into the consolidation of new paradigms, where violence can be silenced and the eclectic voice of the Orlandos of the world can take center stage.[34]

Orlandesque life stories, from paper to screen

[30] "L'immagine del movimento femminista come una cavità aperta in cui si amplificano suoni emessi altrove potrebbe essere una metafora eloquente di…una produzione etero-patriarcale dell'intersezionalità." Ardilli and Zappino, "Manifesti femministi."
[31] Bolchi, "Filling the Void," 98.
[32] Muraro, *The Symbolic Order of the Mother*, 32.
[33] See Bolchi, "Filling the Void," 109.
[34] See Preciado, "Virginia non-binaire."

In 1927, when Woolf sat down to write what would become *Orlando: A Biography*, published just a year later, she could not have anticipated the lasting resonance of what she had described in her diary simply as "a book…which I write after tea."[35] More than a *divertissement*, *Orlando* is a deliberately ambiguous book. Although Woolf was anxious to clarify that she meant to write it "half in a mock style very clear & plain, so that people will understand every word," she also realized that "the balance between truth & fantasy must be clear"—arguing that merging the two reaches an ontological plane that transcends mere debates on the biographical genre.[36] As she progressed in constructing Orlando's character, Woolf discovered the communicative efficacy of a seamless, non-mimetic transition between reality and fiction. From the opening paragraph, she endeavors to forge a literary form that accommodates a subjectivity liberated from the constraints of traditional male or female discursive frameworks. She achieves this subtly, displaying a clear awareness of the power inherent in orthographical and syntactical manipulations: "He—for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it—was in the act of slicing at the head of a Moor which swung from the rafters."[37]

This incipit has baffled critics for almost a century, confronting them with a seemingly straightforward question: "If Orlando is surely a man, why would there be the urge of highlighting it?"[38] With this biography, whether inadvertently or not, Woolf manages to disturb the binary logic upon which both the social and symbolic orders of her age rested. To acknowledge this offers a preliminary explanation of what reading Woolf as a non-binary author might entail. Woolf, in fact, operates along rhizomatic, tentacular lines, both formally and in terms of content, in her treatment of literary genres and sexual and gender identity. She ultimately devises a new approach to storytelling, first as a biographer, and then as a nonfiction writer with *A Room of One's Own*, a book that is strictly related, chronologically and philosophically, to *Orlando*.[39]

It is common knowledge that Woolf's father, Sir Leslie Stephen, served as the editor of *The Dictionary of National Biography*, and his conservative ideas on what a life story should encompass were not lost on his daughter. However, in *Orlando*, Woolf transcends this initial apprehension toward her father's authority and authoriality, granting her narrator the prerogative to engage in an equal dialogue with him: "The true length of a person's life, whatever the *Dictionary of National Biography* may say, is always a matter of dispute."[40] To the same end, Woolf had already begun to move away from dissecting the lives of eminent figures, turning instead to those whose existence has been silenced by biased historiography. This is evident in her essays dedicated to anonymity, such as "The Lives of the Obscure" (1925), where she writes about the excitement that seemingly dull work can offer when dealing with the unexplored: "The obscure sleep on the walls, slouching against each other as if they were too drowsy to stand upright….Why reopen those peaceful graves, the librarian seems to ask, peering over his spectacles, and resenting the duty, which indeed has become laborious."[41]

Notably, though, Woolf had already adopted this approach as early as 1906 in the short story "The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn," which opens with the self-announcement of the story's woman narrator: "My readers may not know, perhaps, who I am. Therefore, although such a practice is unusual and unnatural—for we know how modest writers are—I will not hesitate to explain that I am Miss Rosamond Merridew."[42] Like Woolf, Miss Merridew is a maverick woman presented with the difficult task of navigating the genre/gender divide in order to produce a personal and collective *her*-story that could compete with the male-dominated canon: "I have exchanged a husband and a family and a house in which I may grow old for certain fragments of

[35] Woolf, *Diary*, 161.
[36] Woolf, *Diary*, 162.
[37] Woolf, *Orlando*, 11.
[38] Kappke and Maggio, "'Different though the sexes are'," 127.
[39] Sullam, *Leggere Woolf*, 91.
[40] Woolf, *Orlando*, 224.
[41] Woolf, "The Lives of the Obscure," 118.
[42] Woolf, "The Journal," 47.

yellow parchment…as a mother, so I read sometimes not without curiosity in the literature of my sex, cherishes most the ugliest and stupidest of her offspring, so a kind of maternal passion has sprung up in my breast for these shrivelled and colourless little gnomes."[43] This juvenile piece represents an early formalization of Woolf's opinions on the role of the woman historian, as well as on the relevance of women's long-forgotten stories in the official annals of England: "My point of view is that of a morbid eccentric, after all, and these are the people of truly healthy nature. Can't they write? they will tell me."[44] Here, Woolf is already anticipating themes that she would further investigate, especially in *Orlando*, such as how history treats gender disparities, reflecting a deeply entrenched patriarchal system designed to silence the voice of all minorities.

With *Orlando*, Woolf penetrates the complex pattern of sex and gender discourses and the question of literary genres, although a clear distinction between the categories of sex and gender would not be brought into focus until after her death, possibly with Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949). In fact, apart from one instance, where we are told of "a China robe of ambiguous gender," Woolf consistently uses the term *sex*, yet not always in relation to what is today known as *biological sex*.[45] It is worth noting that in the first manuscript version of the book, Woolf had even intended for her protagonist to have a double name, Orlando and Orlanda. Yet, as she opted for keeping Orlando under the unity of a single body and name, Woolf maintained the adjective *their*, as if to emphasize the permanence of multiplicity.[46]

It is apparent that the theme of dis/unity is as central in Woolf as that of gender/genre, but it deserves clarification. Toward the end of *Orlando*, we read of the protagonist that "[h]er own body quivered and tingled as if suddenly stood naked in a hard frost. Yet, she kept, as she had not done when the clock struck ten in London, complete composure (for she was now one and entire, and presented, it may be, a larger surface to the shock of time)."[47] To be "one and entire" may suggest confirmation of the reduction of Orlando's identity to one solid form, but it might just as easily regard Orlando's eventual self-awareness of his/her/their multiplicity. As Sara Sullam notes in the introduction to her recent Italian translation of *Orlando*, this ambiguity has given rise to semantic instability for scholars and critics:

> Woolf would seem to raise a question rather than providing a clear position….The term *queer*, initially introduced with political intent to overcome binary categorizations within the realm of homosexuality, has since multiplied into various, rarely harmonious, interpretations. This very semantic instability has led…to a juxtaposition of feminist and *queer* thought. In the case of Woolf, it is useful to emphasize that her fertile contradictions…also shed light on the lines of continuity between feminist and *queer* thought. Not necessarily in her own works—as Woolf wrote in the early 20th century—but, for instance, in the production of those explicitly inspired by Woolf's feminism.[48]

The cultural adaptations of Woolf's work demonstrate the validity of Preciado's approach to her legacy, which draws on multimedia and multimodal forms, often exploiting the visual and more overtly sensual immediacy of arts like cinema. Early on, cinema engaged with the psychologically dense style of modernist writers and developed adaptation strategies that, by

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[43] Woolf, "The Journal," 47.
[44] Woolf, "The Journal," 52.
[45] For the sole occurrence of the term *gender* in the novel, see Woolf, *Orlando*, 161.
[46] See Sullam, "Introduzione," xxx.
[47] Woolf, *Orlando*, 235.
[48] "Woolf aprirebbe una questione, più che fornire una posizione univoca….Il termine *queer*, categoria inizialmente proposta con intento politico per superare il binarismo nel campo omosessuale, si è poi diversificato in diverse accezioni, non sempre concordanti. Proprio questa instabilità semantica ha portato…a contrapporre pensiero femminista e *queer*. Nel caso di Woolf, è utile sottolineare che le sue fertili contraddizioni…illuminano anche le linee di continuità tra il pensiero femminista e quello *queer*: non tanto nella sua opera—perché Woolf scriveva nel primo Novecento—ma per esempio nella produzione di chi al femminismo di Woolf si è esplicitamente ispirato." Sullam, "Introduzione," xxxii-xxxiii.

blurring the fiction/reality boundary, could capture the unspoken dimensions of existence on screen. Late in her life, Woolf herself would theorize what she calls her "usual visual way of putting it," namely the method she learned to navigate the semiotics of personal existence in order to transfigure it into art.[49] This "visual" quest was a result of having always lived under the influence of visual arts, shaped first by her close relationship with her sister, Vanessa Bell, a painter experimenting with abstraction, and later by her intimate friendship with the art critic Roger Fry, who in 1910 introduced London to the Post-Impressionists with an exhibition at the Grafton Galleries, leading Woolf to record that, "on or about December 1910 human nature changed."[50]

Notwithstanding, Woolf's reaction to the rise of cinema was more reserved than her embrace of painting, as attested by her essay aptly titled "The Cinema" (1926). Beyond snappy comments such as "the art of the cinema seems a simple and even a stupid art," Woolf was able to sense its potential, despite her wariness toward its reliance on other art forms, particularly literature.[51] She argued that this reliance risked making film adaptations mere imitations, aesthetically pleasing, but inconsistent below the surface: "the poet's images…are compact of a thousand suggestions, of which the visual is only the most obvious or the uppermost."[52] Instead, she focuses on what cinema might achieve "if it were left to its own devices"; not an easy task, given that, "what characteristics does thought possess which can be rendered visible to the eye without the help of words?"[53] In short, Woolf believed that cinema might have thrived on the residue of literature, leaving behind what only words can describe, and building on what cannot be told, but could be more efficiently *shown* by appealing to affects—the hermeneutical thread shared by literature and cinema: "But if so much of our thinking and feeling is connected with seeing there must be some residue of visual emotion not seized by the artist or painter-poet which may await the cinema."[54]

Despite Woolf's suspicions of cinema-as-art, the ambiguity at the heart of *Orlando* has proved fruitful for filmmakers eager to adapt modernist literary works. As early as 1977, the famous skating scene on the frozen Thames at the beginning of *Orlando* was re-enacted in one of PBS's *Simple Gifts* Christmas short films. Subsequent adaptations include the world-famous version by Sally Potter, starring Tilda Swinton as Orlando and Quentin Crisp as Queen Elizabeth I. Before that, German director Ulrike Ottinger had produced a more daring rendition in *Freak Orlando* (1981), while, most recently, British author Jeanette Winterson is working on an eight-part TV adaptation.[55] Beyond film, the novel's influence has extended into the wider cultural sphere. The 2020 Met Gala, themed "About Time: Fashion and Duration," featured an Orlandesque flair thanks to the collaboration with Sally Potter, while the haute couture collection designed by Clare Waight Keller for the Spring 2020 Givenchy runway show in Paris was inspired by the passionate love letters between Woolf and Vita Sackville-West, to whom *Orlando* is dedicated. Furthermore, *Woolf Works*, a contemporary ballet conceived by choreographer Wayne McGregor, premiered in 2015. Overall, Woolf's engagement with visual and performing arts is far deeper than one would imagine and certainly an aspect worth exploring, considering not only that she produced a series of articles for *British Vogue*, but that she even posed for the magazine, establishing close relationships with its editors, one of whom, Dorothy Todd, became a sort of image consultant for Woolf.[56]

Adding to the conversation, Preciado has retrieved Woolf's philosophical intuitions to expand upon them at a distance from the traditional means of philosophy, producing a docufilm situated midway between fiction and non-fiction. When the Franco-German television network

[49] Woolf, *Moments of Being*, 137.
[50] Woolf, *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*, 4.
[51] Woolf, "The Cinema," 348.
[52] Woolf, "The Cinema," 352.
[53] Woolf, "The Cinema," 350–51.
[54] Woolf, "The Cinema," 351.
[55] See Lofthouse, "Jeanette Winterson CBE."
[56] Gutiérrez, "El poder de la ropa," 45.

ARTE first contacted him for the production of a film about his life, he was adamant that he would not grant his permission, especially because of the industry's habit of fetishizing trans people's tribulations, often from the vantage point of those whom Preciado calls "binary" directors. He explains that "when I say 'binary' filmmaker, I don't just think of someone binary who will do my biography as horrible or horrifying. I am speaking about a particular gaze, a particular way of looking at the body."[57] Eventually, they reached a compromise: he would agree to work not on his own life story, nor on the direct rendition of someone else's life and work. Instead, he would provide the political significance behind his experience and put it at the service of an adaptation of Woolf's *Orlando*. The result is an acclaimed film, which was awarded three prizes at the 2023 edition of the Berlin Film Festival.

Preciado's philosophy-on-film

In *Orlando, My Political Biography*, Preciado attempts to follow Woolf's example in that, through artistic experimentation, both contemplate the potential of invented narratives to shed light on ontological facets that have traditionally eluded biographical accounts. Preciado is aware that "[i]t is not easy to invent a new language, to invent all the terms of a new grammar," but he also intuits that theory cannot precede the imaginative act of creation.[58] As a philosopher, he knows that his discipline has no immediate grip on popular culture and that becoming an amateur director would put his life-long work as a thinker and activist to the test. It is not surprising, then, that when asked about the reasons for making the film, he answered that "[p]hilosophy is a very DIY medium in reality; you don't need anything (just time and your intelligence) to be able to do it. And it offers an enormous amount of freedom. But filmmaking is another matter entirely."[59]

The "matter" has to do with form, not with philosophy, whose objective is made explicit in Preciado's writings: "I carefully avoid using the word freedom, I prefer to speak about finding a way out of the regime of sexual difference, which does not mean instantly becoming free."[60] His purpose is thus multi-layered. Firstly, it consists of "the spectacle of political writing.…of my body, my mind and my monstrosity, of my desire and my transition;"[61] and of treating the living body not "as an anatomical object, but as what I call 'somatheque,' a living political archive."[62] Secondly, it strives to demonstrate that "[i]n the dominant medical and psychological discourse, the trans body is a colony," branded with the fire of imperialism.[63] As for his methodology, Preciado argues: "Mimetism is a poor tool when thinking about gender transition since it still relies on binary logic."[64] This rejection of mimesis is central in Woolf too, since, as Agnibha Banerjee observes, "[t]he polymorphous, protean figure of Orlando…becomes for Woolf an open discursive field that allows her to challenge, participate in, undermine, and exceed the epistemic constructs of the past as well as the present."[65]

To accomplish his project, Preciado resorted to "a poetic, almost metaphysical version of gender transitions," by casting himself and twenty-five trans and non-binary actors, including amateurs, ranging in age from 8 to 70, whom he asked to embody Woolf's fictional character while sharing their own personal narratives.[66] For the sake of historical accuracy, a series of archival materials from the mid-twentieth century about transgender experiences is presented throughout the film, depicting the authentic historical struggles of individuals like Orlando in their pursuit of

[57] Preciado, "Paul B. Preciado on *Orlando*."
[58] Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak?*, 42.
[59] Preciado, "Interview by Philippe Azoury," 8.
[60] Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak?*, 25.
[61] Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak?*, 29.
[62] Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak?*, 35.
[63] Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak?*, 36.
[64] Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak?*, 38.
[65] Banerjee, "'She was of it,'" 138.
[66] Preciado, "Interview by Philippe Azoury," 12.

recognition and visibility. One notable figure is Christine Jorgensen (1926–1989), the first transsexual woman to ever receive worldwide media attention. A film editor herself, Jorgensen even formulated a cinematic theory of transgender subjectivity: "Being trans," she asserted, "means editing, having the right to edit one's life differently."[67] Thus, the result of Preciado's efforts is a dynamic but situated convergence of narratives , in what he calls "a counter-trans-history or a dissident heterotopia," respecting the ambiguity of Orlando's nature and Woolf's predicament.[68] We read:

> And here it would seem from some ambiguity in her terms that she [Orlando] was censuring both sexes equally, as if she belonged to neither; and indeed, for the time being, she seemed to vacillate; she was man; she was woman; she knew the secrets, shared the weaknesses of each….Thus it is no great wonder, as she pitted one sex against the other, and found each alternately full of deplorable infirmities, [that she] was not sure to which she belonged.[69]

Interestingly, Preciado's film opens with his expression of gratitude for Woolf and his motives for wanting to tell a collective rather than an individual story: "Someone asked me once: 'Why don't you write your biography?' I replied: 'Because fucking Virginia Woolf already did for me in 1928.'"[70] Drawing parallels with his own life story, Preciado's adaptation of *Orlando* immediately confronts the audience with a non-binary interpretation of the original text. Filling in the gaps in Woolf's embryonic arguments, but retaining the seeds of her far-sighted imagination, Preciado's narrating voice seeks a trans-authorial collaboration and apologizes: "I am sorry for using those words, 'fucking Virginia Woolf.' I say it with tenderness and admiration because what you wrote appeared to me as impossible to beat."[71] His reasons are expressed in a "letter" to his Virginia, which appears on a laptop screen a couple of minutes into the film:

> Dear Virginia Woolf,
> I am writing to you to tell you the story of my life as a trans, non-binary person. The problem (or chance) is that you preceded me in writing my own biography when you published Orlando a hundred years ago.[72]

Preciado confronts the pitfalls of adapting a seminal work like *Orlando* for today's world, often contesting the original and acting as an iconoclast toward Woolf's revered image. He proceeds at the deliberate pace of the activist he is, filling in narrative gaps whenever he feels compelled: "There are passages in Orlando's life, dear Virginia, that you forgot to mention. For that, I have no other choice but to tell you about these if I truly am to write their biography, that is to say, my biography."[73] He weaves the plot of a *faux* fictional film, retaining the ironic solemnity of the source text while reclaiming concepts such as role-playing through the amateurish talent of the starring figures—young and old actors wearing neck ruffle collars over modern attire (see Figs. 1 & 2).[74] Each participant intertwines personal anecdotes with those of Orlando, creating a conceptual complementarity within a footage that does not try to conceal cinematic artifice. But beneath his gratitude, Preciado also vents his anger—the kind of anger that Audre Lorde once

[67] Preciado, "Interview by Philippe Azoury," 20.
[68] Preciado, "Interview by Philippe Azoury," 12.
[69] Woolf, *Orlando*, 117.
[70] Preciado, *Orlando, My Political Biography*, 01:10.
[71] Preciado, *Orlando, My Political Biography*, 01:25.
[72] Preciado, *Orlando, My Political Biography*, 02:47.
[73] Preciado, *Orlando, My Political Biography*, 12:50.
[74] The pictures included in the article are available in *The Party Sales*'s archive and are all film's stills, with the exception of Figure 6 (retrievable at https://www.thepartysales.com/movie/orlando-my-political-biography/). Every reasonable effort has been made to identify and contact the copyright holder(s) of all images reproduced in this publication. Any omissions are unintentional and will be corrected in future editions.

defined as "a grief between peers" whose "object is change."[75] Such anger is directed at the times when Woolf's steps falter in following Orlando's ordeals, but Preciado is aware of how anachronistic it would be to expect from Woolf what it took a century to process and articulate: "You pictured us trans people as aristocrats from colonial England who, one day, wake up in a female body. You couldn't have known, it's true, that that's not how one becomes trans. That is much more complicated. People risk their lives each time."[76]

Figure 1

Figure 2

Woolf is not the sole interlocutor confronted by Preciado's doubts. His questions are also directed, among others, at Sally Potter. Whereas Potter's 1992 *Orlando* was critically acclaimed because of its "intersection of text, adaptor, audience, and institution of production" that "appear to be in crisis," Preciado is unconvinced by Potter's attempt to challenge the idea of a definite sexuality.[77] He thinks this approach neglects to question the prevailing hegemony of heterosexuality, as it remains informed by the dynamics of the binary:

> Sally Potter's film was disappointing for trans and non-binary people like me. It's very much anchored in a culture of transvestism, of a binary imagination, and a gay aesthetic that is fascinating if you're interested in the London of the 80s and 90s, but which has paradoxically contributed to making trans and non-binary culture invisible. I love Tilda Swinton but, unfortunately, she couldn't play Orlando without erasing the gender transition.[78]

Particularly if compared to Robert Wilson's avant-garde play *Orlando* and Ulrike Ottinger's film *Freak Orlando*, Potter's mainstream representational choices come through as a "normalization of androgyny" that leaves gender and class structures very much in place.[79] Characteristically, Preciado alters course, intersecting Woolf's words with his own and those of other Orlandos:

> PRECIADO [*narrating off-screen*]: Here is the youth, Orlando.
>
> OSCAR ROZA MILLER (ORLANDO): Right now, I identify as non-binary, although I find myself in a constant state of change.
>
> PRECIADO [*off-screen*]: His style was not like that of the men of letters of his age nor did it resemble that of women.
>
> OSCAR ROZA MILLER (ORLANDO): There could be no doubt about my sex, no matter how the fashion of the time tried to disguise it. Clothes as well as my corporeality gain importance because I desire to be perceived as possessing no gender whatsoever, nor man nor woman.[80]

Metaphoric not dysphoric: Orlando(s) Come-Home!

[75] Lorde, *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*, 113.
[76] Preciado, *Orlando, My Political Biography*, 01:37.
[77] Silver, *Virginia Woolf Icon*, 216.
[78] Preciado, "Interview by Philippe Azoury," 10.
[79] Silver, *Virginia Woolf Icon*, 231.
[80] Preciado, *Orlando, My Political Biography*, 06:05.

As the hectic lead-in of the film wanes, Preciado redirects the narrative to the psychiatrist's waiting room, animating the scene with a pharmaco-political anthem. The lounge turns into the setting for a music video, blasting the ingenious lyrics of a pop song containing the epitome of Preciado's philosophical message: trans people and trans histories are "synthetic, not apologetic," but most importantly, they represent the outline of a nature that is "metaphoric, not dysphoric."[81] Preciado the philosopher clearly appeals to Achille Mbembe's notion of 'necropolitics'—defined as a power taking control over the administration of death, be it bodily or legal, and involving "the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and population."[82] Following these examples, Preciado defies the over-medicalization of trans people, who have been labeled as psychotic individuals, and proposes the idea of a *dysphoria mundi* instead, as we are invited not to be "the doctor's bitch."[83]

With this premise and no specific preamble, the film quickly draws parallels between *empire* and *psychiatry*—two normative institutions whose effect on body politics is deeply ingrained in our consciousness, and whose mutual connivance Jane Goldman traces throughout much of Woolf's work.[84] Dysphoria is thereby contrasted with the linguistic and temporal dimensions that Woolf herself defied as she amused herself following Orlando in his/her/their passage across the centuries. As Derek Ryan notes, "*Queering* enacts a move from categorizing noun to continuous, changing verb," and in fact, Orlando's body is dynamic, much like his/her/their perpetually shifting gender identity—still an evolving flux even at the end of his/her/their paper-life.[85] Preciado picks up from this, collecting the fragments of Orlando's identity and handing them to his/her/their heirs: "I wanted to write to you," Preciado is heard confiding to Woolf, "to tell you I am one of your Orlandos. I am alive, I have come out of your fiction. If only you knew, today the world is full of Orlandos. We're in the process of changing the course of history."[86]

As already mentioned, Preciado questions Orlando's aristocratic origins, which are historically tied to imperial-colonial agendas, as evoked right from the beginning of Woolf's book, when Orlando is seen slicing at a Moor's head. In Preciado's reading, Orlando is brought down from the aristocratic heights of his beloved Knole estate to the streets, where he encounters the less grandiose but equally relevant experiences of transgender and transsexual people forming a political chorus, a polyphony of voices narrating a collective human history.[87]

> OSCAR ROZA MILLER (ORLANDO): Life does not at all look like a biography, it is not a series of events or sentimental adventures, or descriptive scenes. Nor is it at the service of daily existence. It consists of metamorphosis, in letting oneself be transformed by time. The aim is not merely to become another, but multiple others.[88]

Significantly, the recasting of Orlando's mutable history also serves to dismantle the paradigms supported by those who, unwilling to adopt an intersectional perspective, perpetrate systemic violence by denying certain people their right to existence. Such paradigms have been challenged through an anti-dualistic approach, yet, as Bruno Latour writes, in "abandoning dualism our intent is not to throw everything into the same pot, to efface the distinct features of the various

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[81] Preciado, *Orlando, My Political Biography*, 20:30.
[82] Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 19.
[83] See Preciado, *Dysphoria mundi*, 25 and 20:40.
[84] See Bragg, *In Our Time*.
[85] Ryan, *Virginia Woolf and the Materiality of Theory*, 108.
[86] Preciado, *Orlando, My Political Biography*, 01:55.
[87] As a matter of fact, Woolf hinted at the Sackville-Wests', and consequently at Orlando's, humbler origins, through the character of Orlando's grandmother, who is not of noble descent, as was the case with Vita's grandmother, Josefa Duràn, a Spanish gypsy dancer, and the dedicatee of *Pepita* (1937), a biography of her written by Vita herself. For more on Vita's mixed background, see Julie Vandivere's "The Bastard's Contention."
[88] Preciado, *Orlando, My Political Biography*, 10:50.

parts within the collective."[89] Instead, the charge is against the epistemic viciousness that Preciado was unfortunate enough to experience firsthand when, back in 2019, he received an invitation to address a gathering of 3,500 psychoanalysts at the annual conference of the École de la Cause Freudienne in Paris. Standing before a professional community that would have traditionally diagnosed him with gender dysphoria, Preciado attempted to unveil medicine's imbrication with the colonial ideology of sexual difference. Met with disruption and jeers, the philosopher was unable to complete his address, later published in a pamphlet with an English version titled *Can the Monster Speak?*, which honors figures such as Susan Stryker[90] and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.[91]

Expanding on the pivot of Woolf's book, namely Orlando's bodily and psychological metamorphoses, Preciado completes Woolf's project by insisting on intersectionality and transnationality. Orlando's revolutionary transformation, Preciado tells us, is four-fold: poetic metamorphosis, love's metamorphosis, creolization, and sexual metamorphosis. The first change occurs in language: "The first revolutionary metamorphosis is poetic, that is the right to change the name of all things."[92] Only then comes love, which is "the most profound of metamorphoses."[93]

Noticeably, the sexual discourse is the last to be mentioned and is preceded by a process of creolization—one that is "enacted by stepping out of one's own culture."[94] Here, Preciado places queer body politics in conjunction with orientalism, (de)colonialism, and racialization, suggesting a transnational perspective on the analytical tools we employ to understand the complexity of humanity in a mutating world. By including versions of Orlando that do not belong to dominant discourse, Preciado offers a critique of any Eurocentric vision that risks limiting the cultural representation of multi-ethnic groups. In fact, for a long time, queer studies have been subjugated by the tendency of traditional white feminisms: first, to dismiss aspects such as class and race in their battle against the patriarchy, and then, to adopt a façade of Blackness while struggling to recognize that one form of oppression does not excuse, or exclude, another.[95] Preciado notices the same attitude in many fictional and non-fictional representations of trans identities and expresses his concern that such a dynamic might perpetuate a deterministic mindset, allowing white people to engage in their activism with a notable lack of awareness: "We are all Black and right now we are Blacker than ever.…The future is not a single white page."[96]

Preciado focuses on how the sex transition of Woolf's Orlando takes place in Constantinople, far from the respectable land that England claims to be: "Why does the change of sex occur in the colony? You got to know all too well this colonial voyage, Virginia.…Maybe that's why you imagined the colonial city not as totally stranger to Orlando, but rather the mirror place where he understands his bastard condition."[97] It is in this phase of his/her/their life that the once rigidly structured Orlando of Woolf begins to dissolve, giving way to a newfound freedom of body and mind that comes to characterize him/her/them:

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[89] Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern,* 193.

[90] In his works, Preciado explicitly refers to Stryker's appropriation of monstrosity as a defense of trans people, as found in writings such as "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix."

[91] In "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak tackles the ways in which certain knowledge systems and structures silence specific voices and perspectives, especially, but not exclusively, those of marginalized groups in legal contexts: "The legitimation of the polymorphous structure of legal performance, 'internally' noncoherent and open at both ends, through a binary vision, is the narrative of codification I offer as an example of epistemic violence." See Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak," 36.

[92] Preciado, *Orlando, My Political Biography*, 23:57.

[93] Preciado, *Orlando, My Political Biography*, 23:58.

[94] Preciado, *Orlando, My Political Biography*, 54:50.

[95] Lorde, *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*, 31–37.

[96] Preciado, "Iels sont l'avenir"; "Nous étions noirs et nous sommes maintenant plus noirs que jamais."

[97] It is worth noting that there has been a critique of the use of Constantinople in the novel from an orientalist perspective. See Jaime Hovey's article "'Kissing a Negress in the Dark'." Also, see Preciado, *Orlando, My Political Biography*, 52:33.

> exist, even to this day, rumours, legends, anecdotes of a floating and unauthenticated kind about Orlando's life in Constantinople – (we have quoted but a few of them) which go to prove that he possessed, now that he was in the prime of life, the power to stir the fancy and rivet the eye which will keep a memory green long after all that more durable qualities can do to preserve it is forgotten.[98]

As José Gutiérrez notes, "Orlando dynamically…self-defines their sexual identity, continually reshaping it based on a mutating worldview legitimized by the epistemological space at their disposal."[99] Put differently, only when allowed to continue along moveable temporal and geographical coordinates—where all socio-normative rules are suspended—can *Orlando* honor the ambivalence of his/her/their nature.

However, Preciado does not reject a situated perspective, as he pays tribute to the real-life Orlandos of western trans history and activism, such as Jorgensen and the French actress Coccinelle (1931–2006), welcoming them home from what he describes as a 'somatic-political exile' ("exil somatopolitique").[100] Preciado's retrieval of archival documents is relevant not only in terms of the materiality of trans people and their past psycho-physical journeys, but also because it complicates, as it did for Woolf, any dialectical relationship with temporality. In line with modernist writers and their interest in an alternative way of narrating inner and outer life, Preciado wonders how to account for one's existence in the 21st century. Woolf already guides us in Orlando's journey through time and the consequent collision with the so-called 'spirit of the age'; through Orlando's non-linear relationship with such spirit, she presents us with what we do not yet know or lack the courage to recognize as reality.

Similarly, Preciado re-elaborates Woolf's voyage through time, genres, and genders by insisting on how she navigates a canon that is at once literary and material, epistemological and ontological.[101] The value of *Orlando* lies in "the temporal rendition of the narrative, which projects the treatment of sex and sexuality onto a horizon that is deliberately non-historically determined and fantastical," and that is why, "throughout the 20th century and right into the present day, it has lent itself to vastly different interpretations."[102] Thus, in the film, Preciado reflects on the problematic relationship with the past as experienced by trans and non-binary people:

> Orlando…suffers…from the isolation, shame and rejection caused by their own difference. Orlando understood that their non-binary condition could not be justified by their family heritage. They had to go down into the crypt, where generations of unknown and forgotten ancestors lay side by side in coffins piled one on top of the other. Orlando found a strange charm in thoughts of death and corruption. But in these melancholy moments, they saw the heads of the dead as an operator of mutation. To look into a skull as if into a mirror, to make an inner portrait of oneself that takes into account the temporal and quasi-geological dimension of each life.…Writing my biography, Virginia, also means descending with Orlando into the darkness, where there are neither portraits nor witnesses. To enter the realm of the dead is to understand that we are heirs to a history that has been erased, and to learn to honour the dead, the faceless ones who have gone before us. The Orlandos of history, who succumbed to institutional, family, economic and social violence, are like skeletons lost in the archive.[103]

The question of identity is tied to the temporality of the book, to Orlando's progressive approach to the present, and to the challenge the present time represents in the discovery of

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[98] Woolf, *Orlando*, 92.

[99] "Orlando va autodefiniendo dinámica … su identidad sexual, la va remodelando según una cosmovisión mutante que se legitima en función del espacio epistemológico del que dispone." Gutiérrez, "El poder de la roba," 66.

[100] Preciado, "L'opération."

[101] The critique of heteronormativity meets the disruption of chrononormativity in Jessica Seidel's "Trans Times."

[102] "nel corso di tutto il Novecento e fino ai giorni nostri, si è prestato a letture diversissime." Sullam, "Introduzione," xxx.

[103] Preciado, *Orlando, My Political Biography*, 39:00.

owning multiple identities. *Orlando* explores the shock of positioning oneself in the present: "No one need wonder that Orlando started, pressed her hand to her heart, and turned pale," Woolf writes, "[f]or what more terrifying revelation can there be than that it is the present moment? That we survive the shock at all is only possible because the past shelters us on one side and the future on another."[104]

To capture the intersectional and transnational matrix of a world where sex, gender, race, and even time contribute to the creation of nuanced subjectivities, Preciado turns to fiction also in his personal life, admitting that even his "future existence has become possible not within reality but in fiction and thanks to fiction."[105] Consequently, his 'philosophy-on-film' comes through as an ironic dismantlement of all clichés, such as the trite western conviction that non-European countries are regulated by prejudiced thought systems. This preconception is visually refuted by the appearance on screen of a Black Orlando recounting the fondness with which their non-Western family welcomed their non-binary identity:[106]

> AMIR BAYLLY (ORLANDO): I grew up only with my mother, who's French. My father is Rwandan, and I didn't have any immediate contact with his side of the family until I was, I think, 17 or 18. They knew me before my transition but when I had to tell them what I was going to do, in the end, they took it very well. I think that's something that surprises a lot of people in general, because we often imagine African or non-western families as being more close-minded when it comes to questions of gender and sexuality.[107]

The result is a dialogue between cultures, epitomized by this new Black version of Orlando who, right before falling into a deep sleep, is seen lying in bed while reading Monique Wittig's *The Lesbian Body* (see Fig. 3)—a novel that informed many of the stylistic choices made by Preciado in conceiving his film. As he recalls elsewhere, "I came across a Spanish translation of Monique Wittig's novel *The Lesbian Body*, in 1977…I remember the bookseller's expression of contempt, but also of relief at the thought that he would finally be rid of this book, as though it were a leaky vessel oozing nauseating slime, sullying his shelves."[108] Thus, with Preciado, the sweat and the dirt of the living body are not omitted, but become non-violent weapons against the sterility of the medical gaze onto inter- and transsexual corporealities. From Wittig, Preciado has also learned the importance of perspective and of making one's singularity into a political entity: "One must assume both a particular and a universal point of view," Wittig believed, "at least

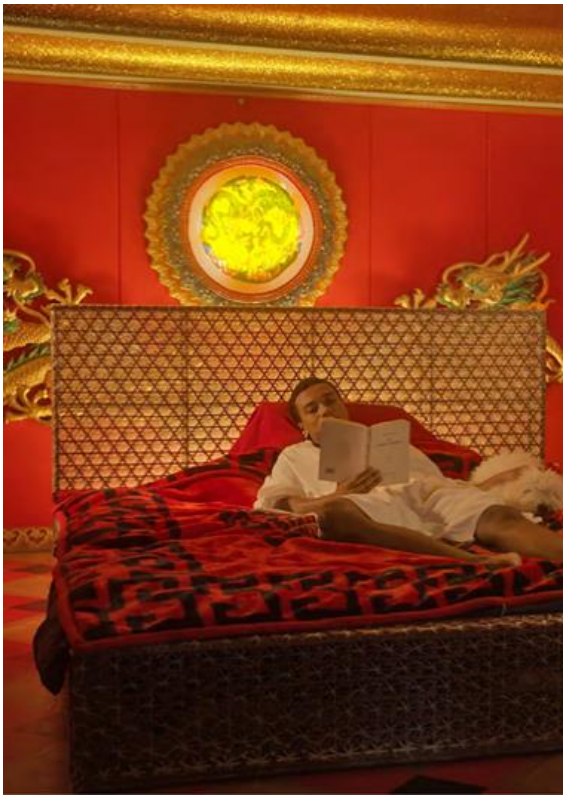

Figure 3

[104] Woolf, *Orlando*, 219.
[105] "Mon existence future est devenue possible non pas dan la réalité mais dans la fiction et grâce à la fiction." Azoury, "Paul B. Preciado: 'Je voulais faire une sorte de philosophie filmée.'"
[106] Contemporary African authors such as Akaweke Emezi have been reviving anti-identitary notions of subjectivity like that of *ogbanje*, an above-the-binary form of reincarnation found in Nigerian Igbo mythology. See Magaqa and Makombe, "Decolonising Queer Sexualities," 25.
[107] Preciado, *Orlando, My Political Biography*, 55:47.
[108] Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak?*, 23.

to be part of literature, that is, one must work to reach the general, even while starting from an individual or from a specific point of view."[109]

Therefore, rather than crafting a conventional biography, Preciado rejects all omniscient forces, both narratological and ontological, letting trans and non-binary people become the storytellers of their own bodies and lives, as well as the spokespersons for all the Orlandos silenced within the workings of historiography. Preciado is not calling for the dissolution of all identities, and his attitude is certainly not exclusionary of white, cis, or heterosexual people. His is a call to action for us all: "I am not forcing the disclosure of subjective private positions, but the acknowledgment of a political enunciation within the regime of colonial heteropatriarchal power."[110]

Once the process of creolization is complete, the film turns to the delicate issue of surgical sexual transition. Like many non-binary activists and thinkers, Preciado advocates for the full recognition of trans people's rights beyond dualistic institutional frameworks that reduce subjectivity to the bureaucracy of paperwork and biodata. From this perspective, 'nature' is reframed through a gaze that departs from the essentialist and bioconservative resistance to opening the category of 'woman' to trans women who have not yet undergone intimate surgery, or who choose not to do so. Rather than serving as a normative ground, nature emerges as a form of materiality that exists outside the constraints of biologism, enacting a contemporary concretization of Woolf's call for a literature that "has somehow to be adapted to the body."[111] Preciado is highly critical of the latent obligation to have one's sex materially reassigned, which equates to having one's life reinscribed within a binary onto-epistemology, through either an FtM or MtF transition:

> The clinical notion of gender invented by [John] Money sees it above all as an instrument of rationalization for a living being whose visible body is only one of the parameters. The invention of gender as an organizing principle was necessary for the appearance and development of a series of pharmacopornographic techniques for the normalization and transformation of living beings – a process that includes photographing "deviants," cellular diagnosis, hormonal analysis and therapy, chromosomal readings, and transsexual and intersexual surgery.[112]

Specifically, the problem with intimate surgery is, once again, a matter of representation. Preciado himself felt forced to accept reassignment to the male sex to obtain legal rights over his own life: "The medicolegal system forces me to commit a legal suicide in order to permit my resurrection as man."[113] As a first reaction to being pressed and pulled from one pole of the sexual binary to the other, Preciado decided to keep his birth name, Beatriz, appropriating the oxymoronic sound of a name like that of Woolf's 'Lady Orlando.' It should be noted, however, that Preciado found the everyday violence of the heteropatriarchal system to be more oppressive than his transition itself. Recalling his mastectomy, he describes the liberating effect he experienced, in spite of his physical pain: "the political joy and the feeling of a new freedom overcame pain and even the memory of pain."[114] Preciado's position is clearly ambivalent: on the one hand, he rejects the image of trans people as heroes resisting the patriarchy in that, as he writes, "I am an Orlando where writing has become chemistry. But I would like to avoid the heroic account of my transition."[115] On the other hand, the film's punk verve serves to reevaluate sexual

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[109] Wittig, "The Point of View," 67.
[110] Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak?*, 52.
[111] Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 117.
[112] Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 111.
[113] Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 111.
[114] "La joie politique et la sensation d'une liberté nouvelle remplacent la douleur et même le souvenir de la douleur." Preciado, "L'opération."
[115] Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak?*, 39.

metamorphosis as a positive non-dualistic experience: "Transition is not a process between the two [sexes], but a voyage headed for an unknown land."[116]

Preciado recaptures the sense of serenity that permeates Woolf's book: "The change seemed to have been accomplished painlessly and completely and in such a way that Orlando herself showed no surprise at it."[117] As noted by Helen Wussow, "[t]he joy provided by Orlando is not the joy of recognition…but rather the acknowledgment of the supreme joke of the text and its image, a jest which serves to dislocate codes of perception and meaning."[118] In other words, the joy of Woolf's and Preciado's Orlandos is not rendered by the sublimation of physical pain, but by the suspension from identity-based shortcuts that the transition provides. Medicine as an institution, by contrast, plays no active role in it. Long before Preciado, Woolf too mocked the patronizing behavior of physicians, whose reliance on so-called 'hard' scientific remedies to treat Orlando's unexplainable death-like sleeps proves less effective than fiction:

> [T]he doctors were hardly wiser then than they are now, and after prescribing rest and exercise, starvation and nourishment, society and solitude, that he should lie in bed all day and ride forty miles between lunch and dinner, together with the usual sedatives and irritants, diversified, as the fancy took them, with possets of newt's slobber on rising, and draughts of peacock's gall on going to bed, they left him to himself, and gave it as their opinion that he had been asleep for a week.[119]

Woolf herself had no easy relationship with medicine, especially psychiatry, as evidenced elsewhere in her works. This is the case of *Mrs Dalloway*, where Dr Holmes, Septimus Warren Smith's physician, and Dr. William Bradshaw embody the negative impact of an epistemically violent medical institution, which treats Septimus with the sole aim of reintegrating his neurodivergent, shell-shocked mind into the normative conception of what a respectable veteran should represent in post-war Britain. Instead, by suspending the agency of medical authority, Preciado manages to escape from unethical diagnoses, while paying tribute to Woolf's personal experience: "You too, Virginia, got to know violence and depression, as a girl violated by her own brother; as a young woman, perhaps a non-binary one, who loved women but could not impose herself as lesbian; and finally as a frail adult institutionalized by contemporary psychiatry."[120]

Accordingly, Woolf's Orlando's death-like sleep evokes the legal death Preciado mentions when speaking about the transitioning process, and indeed, he considers the age-old symbolism of sleep and dreams to be an active recoding of the body, as a political rather than reactionary moment: "In your book, Orlando's change of sex comes in his sleep. I told myself that if that could happen to Orlando, then it could work with me, too. So, sleep has become for me the magical realm where gender transition took place.…I pictured my bed as an operating table, dream-like and painless, where my lying body got recodified."[121] Preciado reflects on the power of envisioning oneself as fiction during REM sleep and criticizes documents as institutional prostheses, namely the common tool of complicit patriarchal—legislative, surgical, psychiatric—manifestations: "The transition does not begin in sleep, as a passive moment of unconsciousness, but rather in dreams, as the active emergence of desire from memory."[122]

Preciado channels his anger at the pharmacological regime of sexual difference into a creative challenge enacted on the linguistic plane of narrative. Hence, the film's most ironically

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[116] "La transition n'est pas un parcours entre les deux mais un voyage en terre inconnue." Cinéma du grütli, "Orlando, ma biographie politique Synopsis/Critique."
[117] Woolf, *Orlando*, 103.
[118] Wussow, "Virginia Woolf and the Problematic Nature of the Photographic Image," 13.
[119] Woolf, *Orlando*, 51.
[120] It must be said that Woolf's Orlando's change of sex does not occur with the aid of surgery, so the allusion to medicine's ineffectual cures mostly implies the lack of valid psychological support both in Orlando's and Woolf's worlds. See Preciado, *Orlando, My Political Biography*, 40:50.
[121] Preciado, *Orlando, My Political Biography*, 11:50.
[122] Preciado, *Orlando, My Political Biography*, 69:46.

dramatic scene, which displays a surgical operation not on a trans person's body, but on a physical copy of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* (see Figs. 4 & 5). After assuming metaphorical control over Woolf's text, Preciado puts on his lab coat, initiating with his scalpel an ethico-onto-epistemological recodification of the representation of the trans body, finally freeing it from the violence of ideological language: "We do not operate on individual bodies, but on political history. It's the regime of sexual difference that needs surgery. There's a dearth of historical debates on which we ought to intervene."[123] Putting his hands on Woolf's defense of Orlando's love of art and life, whose poetic strength is so often mistreated in a materialistic world—rendered with the solemn statement that "Violence was all"—Preciado's hopeful gesture functions as a powerful dismantling of deterministic and apocalyptic scenarios: "It's necessary to survive the violence and get to tell our stories. It's necessary to tell our stories in order to survive violence."[124]

Figure 4

Figure 5

As the film closes with the picture of three small Orlandos in a film editing suite, viewers are left with the possibility of new beginnings, carrying out Christine Jorgensen's secular sermon that being trans means "having the right to edit one's life differently" (see above): "The world of tomorrow belongs to the new Orlandos. They will be editing the film of history, and it's for them that you wrote your book, even though you didn't know it, and that I now make this film."[125] Eventually, as the audience prepares to leave, a familiar face suddenly lights up the big screen again: it is Virginie Despentes. The French writer and filmmaker, author of the ground-breaking *King Kong Theory* (2006) and a former lover of Preciado, Despentes makes a cameo in the role of a judge who, "in the face of the collapse of the patriarchal-colonial regime, and through the powers

[123] I refer to the neologism "ethico-onto-epistemology" proposed by physicist and material feminist Karen Barad, who employs it "to mark the inseparability of ontology, epistemology, and ethics. The analytic philosophical tradition takes these fields to be entirely separate, but this presupposition depends on specific ways of figuring the nature of being, knowing, and valuing." See Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 409. Also, see Preciado, *Orlando, My Political Biography*, 90:50.

[124] Woolf, *Orlando*, 21; and see 41:40.

[125] Preciado, *Orlando, My Political Biography*, 93:16.

conferred on me by Virginia Woolf and literature, I declare the abolition of the assignment of sexual difference at birth…I therefore grant planetary and non-binary citizenship," all the while handing brand new documents to the whole cast of non-binary Orlandos.[126] She concludes: "But what is an identity document, if not a piece of written and printed paper, a little booklet containing a political fiction? Shared, collectively constructed fictions that we forget we can question, modify, or, to put it another way, fictions that we can lay on an operating table."[127]

Conclusions on the future of Woolf studies

From feminisms, veering toward queer discourses, and landing on trans and non-binary considerations, all the way through to social media and even fashion, Virginia Woolf has consistently provoked discussion around the hidden aspects of her art, life, and even death. Preciado does not miss the opportunity to leverage the rough spots of a figure and poetics that critics and scholars have attempted to consign to fixed categories. With irony and intellectual rigor, he avoids any possible accusations of a sterile, politically correct attitude, and leaves us, if not with fewer unanswered questions, at least with the prospect of a new intersectional horizon of interrogation within Woolf studies. This might engender what Jessica Berman calls a dialogue between transnational and transgender matters in *Orlando*—a "'trans' text [that] challenges the normative dimensions of regimes of nationality and disrupts the systems of embodied identity that undergird them. It pushes us to recognize that any discussion of transnational or world literature must also attend to the assumptions of embodiment and gender identity that are attached to the concept of the nation."[128] A similar perspective might even serve as a springboard for post-anthropocentric readings of Woolf's exploration of the limits of the human. The film's poster (Fig. 6) gestures toward this possibility through its reference to Woolf's canine biography *Flush* (1933), an early example of how a nonhuman perspective can enrich, rather than threaten, human understanding of reality.

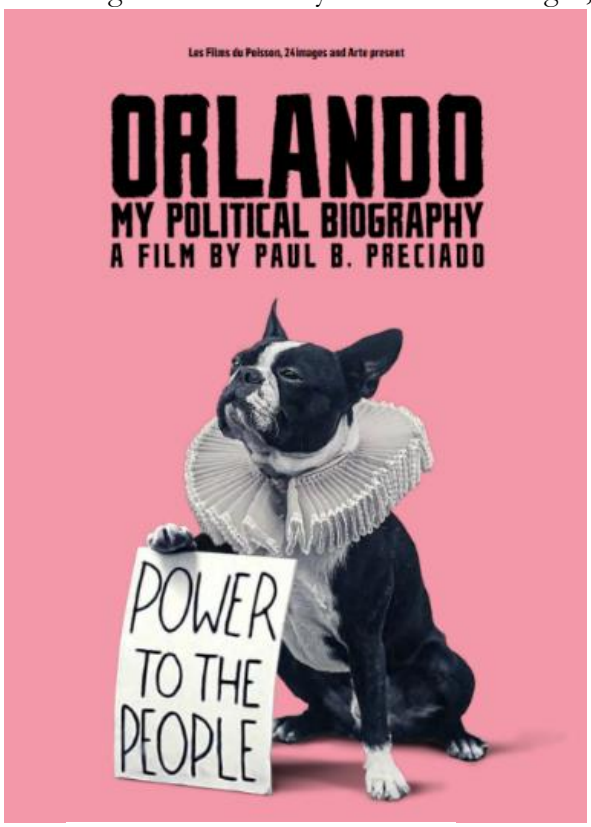

Figure 6

Leaving single ideologies and fixed systems behind, Woolf came close to giving the final answer to her own question: "What is the value of a philosophy that has no power over life?"[129] From the burlesque tones of her biographies, through the psychological density of her experimental novels, up to her late production—reduced to scraps and fragments, strangled by the

[126] Preciado, *Orlando, My Political Biography*, 94:15.
[127] Preciado, *Orlando, My Political Biography*, 86:00.
[128] Berman, "Is the Trans in Transnational the Trans in Transgender?" Consistent transnational research on Woolf has come about quite recently, thanks to studies like *The Edinburgh Companion to Virginia Woolf and Transnational Perspectives* (2025), edited by Bolchi, Viana, Keane, Latham, Okumura, and Kılıç.
[129] Woolf, *Diary*, 340.

'unreal' violence of war—Woolf's writings restore meaning to life: "nothing is real to me unless I write it down," she admitted, since "thinking is my fighting."[130]

By relying on the multiplicity of Woolf's suggested itineraries, Preciado's non-binary approach opens all closed paradigms, discovering a Woolf where Orlando's identitary fluidity finally overthrows biologism. Here, the hermeneutical value of the materiality of emotions takes over formalism—a question that engaged and, at times, tormented Woolf throughout her life: "First when we speak of form we mean that certain emotions have been placed in right relations to each other; then that the novelist is able to dispose these emotions and make them tell by methods which he interprets, bends to his purpose, models anew, or even invents for himself" (my emphasis).[131]

Preciado warns that to superimpose Woolf's womanhood onto her 'non-binary' artistry, one must acknowledge that the notion of 'woman' is inherently expansive, despite the reductionist reclamation of a series of qualities traditionally associated with the feminine—the reproductive body, sensitivity, motherly care—as values intrinsic to Woolf's production. A similar perspective, Preciado argues, is limiting in that it reinforces the gender binary already articulated within the patriarchy and, as Audre Lorde eloquently reminds us, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."[132] On the contrary, Preciado rediscovers *Orlando* as a transdiscursive artwork in continuous oscillation between the private and the public, and specifically the political. He does so by retracing the history of *Orlando*'s reception, its rediscovered lesbian genesis, and interpretations of the androgynous, as well as the ensuing wide-ranging debate: does *Orlando* transcend sexual difference, or does it function as a rhetorical experiment aimed at reaffirming it? Avoiding the limit of a single answer, Preciado reverses the binary nature of this question and demonstrates how *Orlando* invites readers to dwell with the trouble of contradiction rather than resolve it.

In conclusion, Woolf and Preciado may be recognized as thinkers whose creative minds, one century apart, delineate the non-violent blueprint for new ways of telling life through fiction, past and present. For its political vigor, *Orlando* should indeed be recognized as a main artery of Woolf's macrotext, and not as a comical *unicum* secluded from the political seriousness of her literary quest. After all, as Woolf herself once retrospectively admitted in her diary, "Orlando taught me how to write a direct sentence; taught me continuity & narrative, & how to keep the realities at bay.…Orlando was the outcome of a perfectly definite, indeed overmastering impulse."[133] She went on: "I want fun. I want fantasy." Regardless of its carnivalesque style and parodic tones, she then added: "I want (& this was *serious*) to give things their caricature value" (emphasis mine).[134] This attests to a highly imaginative way of attempting to get to what, as she wrote, "I might call a philosophy."[135]

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[130] Woolf, *Diary*, 285.
[131] Woolf, "On Re-reading Novels," 129–139. The reference is to the 1922 essay, yet the words of this specific quotation were not included in the original version and are found instead in the typescript later published by Leonard Woolf.
[132] Lorde, *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*, 89.
[133] Woolf, *Diary*, 203.
[134] Or because of such a carnivalesque style, as Madelyn Detloff would contend in "Camp Orlando (or) Orlando," where she reads *Orlando* by rehabilitating 'camp' as a category whose queer dramatic irony can exercise political, influence. For more, see Detloff's Norton critical edition of *Orlando* (2025). See also Woolf, *Orlando*, 203.
[135] Woolf, *Moments of Being*, 71.

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