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The Case for Contradiction: Locating Vitality in Queer Nonsense
through Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography*

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“He stretched himself. He rose. He stood upright in complete nakedness before us, and while the trumpets pealed Truth! Truth! Truth! We have no choice left but to confess—he was a woman.”

— Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (137)

In contrast to real-life trans narratives, Orlando’s transition from man to woman comes as a surprise. Orlando seems to have no motive for this transition. He was perfectly comfortable as a man. Yet he accepts his newfound womanhood with grace and indifference: “Orlando looked himself up and down in a long looking glass, without showing any signs of discomposure, and went, presumably, to his bath” (Woolf 138). As a fictional narrative which evades typical trans-biographical conventions that follow a “wrong body narrative”, *Orlando: A Biography* by Virginia Woolf holds a contentious place as a trans-narrative (Caughie 510). Indeed, *Orlando* does not, and cannot represent a true lived trans experience. Our biographical subject is “free to move beyond h/er body”, shuttling between male and female presentation with ease (Prosser 168). Yet through its fictional and experimental format, *Orlando* is also free to refuse a unified political identity, free also from the essentialism of identity that “wrong body narratives” demand, and able to approach broader questions within trans and queer theory.¹ As a fictional biography, *Orlando* questions the heteronormative demands for narrative stability and linear progression, suggesting instead that the experience of life is in fact multiplicitous, contradictory, and thus indescribable within narrative. *Orlando*’s narrator-biographer asserts life’s indescribability by refusing the stabilization of identity through interjections of doubt and contradiction, resulting in cacophonous, indecipherable noise. Through a devaluation of narrative

¹ In an attempt to express Orlando’s multiplicitous and contradictory identity, I represent Orlando using both he/him and she/her pronouns, reproducing the disorientation and instability that characterizes Orlando’s gender presentation throughout the novel. Due to *Orlando*’s fictional basis and the noted lack of distress that Orlando experiences during and after gender transition, I assume that Orlando comfortably lives as both a man and woman, meaning that both pronouns are suitable for this character. Additionally, by using both pronouns, my essay further reveals the ways in which gender is not natural, but constructed and valorized through language.

(an ironic move given that *Orlando* is a written novel) and an embrace of nonsense in the form of contradiction and silence, Woolf suggests that real life lies outside of narrative.

As a text which plays with biographical conventions, narrative demands for stability are especially pronounced. Biography demands that narrative follow a stable linear progression. Melanie Micir characterizes biography as demanding a “seemingly inviolable progression of the body through time” focusing on “birth, education, inheritance, marriage, children and death” (Micir 116). Characterized this way, biography as a genre reinforces Lee Edelman’s concept of “reproductive futurism” which describes the implicit demand in society that we must work collectively and uniformly towards the benefit of the symbolic Child, who represents the “emblem of futurity’s unquestioned value” (Edelman 4). Biography, as a project which was historically intended to teach future generations how to emulate successful lives, unsurprisingly continues to valorize the concept of the Child and the framing of the world in terms of reproductive futurism (Micir 14-15). Edelman situates queerness in opposition to this framework, refusing “every substantialization of identity” and “history as linear narrative ... in which meaning succeeds in revealing itself—*as itself*—through time” (Edelman 4). Thus queerness serves to destabilize the linear, stable, revelatory demands of narrative, and promotes the disruption of identity.

In J. Halberstam’s *In a Queer Time & Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, the author characterizes biography about transgender people as a sometimes violent process which uses temporal logic, “the benefit of hindsight” to frame “passing as deception, dishonest, and fraud” (Halberstam 48). These biographies about transgender people written by nontransgender people stabilize transgender narratives by characterizing their lives as “strange, uncharacteristic, and even pathological” (Halberstam 55). Halberstam explores the consequences of trans

narratives that demand “truth”, “forcing the transgender subject to make sense” (Halberstam 48, 54). Yet to embrace transgender lives within narrative is a complicated task; the project of transgender history is “paradoxical because it represents the desire to narrate lives that may willfully defy narrative” (Halberstam 49). Too often, biographers in their attempt to distill “truth” from the narrative ignore the beautiful “transgender lives in the glory of all their contradictions” (Halberstam 56). While Halberstam points to the complicated dynamics involved in narrating trans lives, Jay Prosser emphasizes the importance of developing trans narratives to make these bodies legible, declaring that “transsexuality is always narrative work, a transformation of the body that requires the remolding of life into a particular narrative shape” (Prosser 4). Prosser notes that such narration is required in order for doctors to authorize a subject’s transition (Prosser 9). Certainly, the trans subject shapes and is shaped by narratives of medical discourse, tending towards a stable narrative of gender-dysphoria, where the feeling of incongruence between body and mind is eventually resolved through medical intervention. Yet Prosser admits that trans bodies are rendered contradictory and uninterpretable in critical theory, where trans seems to represent both the literalizing of gender binaries and the deliteralizing of them, either reinforcing hegemonic structures or subverting them (Prosser 16). While Prosser focuses his argument on the medical and political necessity of narrating trans lives, he admits to the complicated project of trans narratives and their unstable place within politics.

As a fictionalized biography, *Orlando* is free from the imperative to make trans-life legible within narrative for political or medical legitimacy. Neither definitively trans or not trans, *Orlando* uses gender instability and ambiguity to embrace contradiction as revealed through trans-narratives but not definitive of trans-narratives. Our character’s ambiguous identity tests the limits of language in describing non-normative gender identities, but further, questions the

ability of narrative to represent life at all. Refusing reproductive futurism through a refusal to reveal, Virginia Woolf not only celebrates contradiction and indecipherability in *Orlando*, but additionally highlights that all life, especially “gender-normative lives” are “contradictory at every turn” (58). Woolf implies that narrative’s demand for gender normative identities (i.e. stable gender identity), results in deception and artifice; this poses a counter-narrative to claims that transgender lives are deceitful and ingenuine. Exposing the reality of life as multiplicitous and contradictory, transition is normalized; stability is denaturalized. In doing so, *Orlando* avoids “assign[ing] the transgender life to the inauspicious category of nonsense ... [and] contradiction” (Halberstam 54). Rather, *Orlando* as a subject who transitions from man to woman simply exposes the instability of identity in all individuals. By emphasizing the cracks in the narrative through a highly visible narrator-biographer and making obvious the process of biography creation, Woolf simultaneously shows the dishonesty in narrative in its enforcement of stability as well as the natural contradiction of life.

To explore how *Orlando* disrupts narrative demands for stability, I first explore the ways in which contradiction permeates the narrative and prevents sense making. First, the narrator-biographer disorients the reader, inhibiting the reader’s ability to follow the narrative through interjections of contradiction in regards to *Orlando*’s gender identity as well as the narrator-biographer’s identity. Continuing to unearth the consequences of contradictory, unintelligible narratives, I will investigate how this strategy of contradiction disturbs the project of literary criticism. The intentional contradiction and instability of the narrative results in a body of criticism which confuses itself as scholars of Woolf’s *Orlando* persist in their efforts to identify a character in a narrative that actively thwarts these attempts. The critics’ investment in identification and narration illuminates the impact of contradiction as a queer strategy.

As part of my argument, I will also explore the appearance of contradiction in its relationship to narrative time. While heterosexual time enforces the concept of narrative “revealing itself through time”, Woolf alternatively proposes that time actually disrupts knowing, as the experience of time inflicts changes upon individuals such that they may never be stable (Edelman 4). The phenomenon of time thus produces a multiplicity of identity that manifests as contradiction within the narrative.

The final section of this essay will approach alternative strategies of queer resistance to narrative’s “reproductive futurism”. Understanding life’s inexpressibility within language, Woolf suggests that life resides outside of narrative. By revealing contradiction as a natural part of life, and stability and narrative as imposing unnatural structure upon our experiences, Woolf locates a freedom from heterosexual reproductive narratives not only through an embrace of contradiction, but of silence. Silence, gaps, and fissures in the narrative gesture towards a vitality of experience that can never be expressed in language.

Thus, to begin: *Orlando* refuses the stabilization of gender identity through an interjecting voice of doubt within the narrator-biographer. Through these interjections, the narrator-biographer marks the disruption of gendered identity by time. From the very first sentence, the narrator-biographer’s doubt surrounding Orlando’s gender comes through despite their² efforts to appear certain: “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” (Woolf 13). Our narrator-biographer has only uttered one word of the narrative, and is already doubling back to explain himself. This explanation, however, only

² Throughout the narrative, I refer to the narrator-biographer using gender neutral terms. I choose they/them pronouns following the narrator’s assertion that they “enjoy the immunity of all biographers and historians from any sex whatever” (Woolf 220). Additionally, however, I invoke a more symbolic understanding of the pronouns they/them to refer to the plurality of identity displayed through the multiple contradictory voices that the narrator adopts. In fact, many times the narrator-biographer refers to themselves in the plural “we”, potentially signifying the presence of multiple narrators.

garners more confusion. Despite declaring that there is “no doubt” of Orlando’s sex, his sex is “disguised” and hidden from view. By attributing the confusion surrounding Orlando’s sex to the “fashion of the time,” the interjection additionally suggests that sex is a mutating category whose meaning changes in relationship to time. The meaning of gender or sex is multiplied when dealing from multiple time frames, such as in a biography, where the biographer describes events from the past from a present viewpoint, and thus is always imposing the present view upon the past and obscuring our understanding. As Loretta Stec writes, “the certainty of uncertainty leaves the readers’ perception in motion and initiates them into the process-oriented quality of the novel as a whole” (Stec 189). Shuffling through modern and antiquated notions of gender reveals gender as a process of perception, where readers become aware of the constructed stability that narrative requires.

As the narrator-biographer moves past their disorienting interjection, the violent act of “slicing” enters us into the narrative, alluding to the masculine, racist violence that biography typically upholds and values. The act of violence alludes to the practices of Victorian biographers who “tell of events rather than character, [emphasizing] achievement, action, decisions, and conflict rather than the tumultuous inner lives of their subjects” (Micir 115). Yet while the sentence appears to follow such practices, the moment also disorients the reader, working deconstructively to confuse Orlando’s place within time and gender further. As Elizabeth Freeman writes, the moment “immediately establishes that Orlando is, temporally speaking, as out of joint as the desiccated head with which he parries” (108). Fighting battles long concluded, Orlando has mistakenly located his masculinity in the colonial violence of the past, while remaining secluded in the domestic sphere of the attic, “steal[ing] away from his mother and the peacocks in the garden” (13). Indeed, Orlando’s play at masculinity is imaginary,

relegating his performance as artifice, despite the narrator biographer's claims to undeniable authenticity. In one sentence alone, the narrator-biographer casts doubt on Orlando's gender and place in time; his youth places him precariously between both feminine and masculine worlds of both antiquated and present time. Confusion and disorientation occurs in the narrative to disrupt the biographical form which reinforces hegemonic social powers. Through these interjections, *Orlando's* introduction suggests that this fictional biography will struggle against, rather than reinforce biographical conventions.

In addition to interjecting language, the narrator-biographer reveals how the conventions of narrative and language require a stable identity by making visible the impossible challenge of narrativizing gender transition. Language's demand for a gendered subject and narrative's demand for a stable subject displays that when narrating transition, contradiction is inevitable. As such, *Orlando* enacts Halberstam's claim that trans lives resist narration (Halberstam 45). After a surreal interlude where three mystical figures, Ladies Chastity, Purity, and Modesty attempt to conceal Orlando from the viewer, they are shooed away by the trumpets of "truth" revealing that:

Orlando had become a woman—there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity. Their faces remained, as their portraits prove, practically the same. His memory—but in the future we must, for convention's sake, say 'her' for 'his,' and 'she' for 'he'—her memory then, went back through all the events of her past life without encountering any obstacle. (138-9)

Like the first sentence of the novel, the narrator-biographer makes use of the em-dash, interjecting another claim of certainty with the phrase, "there is no denying it" (138). In both instances, the narrator follows the same pattern of refusing uncertainty, while inserting doubt through the words "though" or "but". Additionally, the interjection inserts the present moment into past events, hinting at the mutability of gender over time. While Orlando is declared a

woman, the narrator-biographer continues to use masculine pronouns. There seems to be a hesitation to declare such a tangible change as marked by the subject pronoun; the narrator-biographer protests: “Orlando remained precisely as he had been”. By proclaiming that both Orlando is changed and the same, the narrator-biographer points to the failure of language to impart the actual experience of the transition, which Pamela Caughie argues must acknowledge “the recursive nature of time in the process of gender formation” (Caughie 510). Gendered pronouns dictate that change happens instantaneously, that he becomes she in a moment. Yet through a confusing lag, referring to a woman as “he”, the text suggests that transition is a process, that gender’s fluctuations cannot be fully represented in language. Language, rather than clarifying and descriptive, is depicted as contradictory and paradoxical. As a consequence of this confusion, the narrator-biographer slips into gender neutral they/them pronouns to describe Orlando. The convention of using they/them pronouns to refer to a singular person, however, is a contemporary phenomenon that is still gaining acceptance (OED). To highlight its growing acceptance, the word was noted as the “Word of the Year” by Merriam-Webster in 2018 (Merriam-Webster). Bringing in our contemporary understanding of the pronoun to our understanding of the conventions of Woolf’s time, it’s worth considering the implications of using they/them both as a non-binary singular pronoun, but it is also just as important to explore the conscious use of a plural pronoun for a singular person. By using the plural pronoun, the narrator-biographer pushes against the “conventions” of the time that demand that one body occupy a singular pronoun. The use of “their” suggests that multiple selves can exist within a singular body. Refusing to collapse the past into the present, Orlando maintains both a male and female identity within the text. Yet despite this struggle to express a natural duplicity of identity, the narrator-biographer through their use of narrative must eventually

submit to the rules of language, correcting “his memory” for “her memory”. However, by exposing the process of correcting the past, “His memory...her memory then,” we see how narrative collapses the process of identity formation into a singular “stable” state. By lingering in the moment of transition, Woolf reveals narrative’s inability to describe “process” and exposes its demand for stability. The text’s struggle to narrate Orlando’s transition demonstrates how the rules of language force us to declare Orlando’s gender as if it were stable when in reality it is anything but.

These two moments speak to Virginia Woolf’s understanding of time as not a linear process where we pass from one stable moment to another, but instead where the present moment is “a platform to stand upon,” as Woolf writes in her own memoir, “A Sketch of the Past” (Caughie 502). By understanding the present as a platform, a position in space to reinterpret moments from the past, biographical narrative is as much shaped by the events that it recounts as well as the “spirit of the age” that it is written from (Woolf 246). This understanding explains the corrective impulse that occurs when reading and writing the past, yet simultaneously, by understanding the present as “a platform”, we understand our interpretations are contingent. No “correction” can truly be correct. Understanding narrative as reading the past and present folding in on each other, Woolf ties narrative contradiction as a consequence of instability across time (Caughie 501).

Not only does the narrator-biographer introduce doubt when narrating Orlando’s gender, struggling against narrative demands for stability, the narrator's own identity is rendered unstable. Frequently introducing outside voices and contradictory viewpoints, the narrator-biographer blurs the distinction between their voice and others, confusing the reader’s ability to identify the narrator. As Orlando adjusts to her new identity as a woman, she becomes

more “modest as to her writing” and more vain “as to her person” (187). Yet when describing the theories of gender that explain the change in Orlando’s behavior, rather than share their own reasoning, the narrator-biographer first turns to the opinion of “some philosophers” who say that clothes “change our view of the world and the world’s view of us ... So, having now worn skirts for a considerable time, a certain change was visible in Orlando, which is to be found even in her face” (187). The lack of quotation marks around the unnamed philosophers’ thoughts blurs the distinction between the narrator’s contributions and the philosophers’. In a long passage extending over a page, the reader is immersed in this argument, without any hint that the narrator-biographer might disagree. In fact, the narrator-biographer seems to participate in this viewpoint, noting physical changes in Orlando’s face, directly contradicting their past statement that “their faces remained, as their portraits prove practically the same” (138-9). Left with these two conflicting statements, the reader is left unable to reconcile the two.

Yet in the next paragraph, the narrator-biographer dismisses the above viewpoint despite allowing the argument significant space and evidence. The narrator-biographer shares that they hold a completely opposite viewpoint, that “the difference between the sexes is, happily, one of great profundity. Clothes are but a symbol of something hid deep beneath. It was a change in Orlando herself that dictated her choice of a woman’s dress and of a woman’s sex” (189). Confusingly, though the narrator-biographer claims to hold this second viewpoint, this view is provided far less space to justify itself. As the narrator-biographer continues, they introduce yet more contradiction, writing, “in every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above” (189). Only a couple sentences apart, the narrator-biographer claims that internal changes determine external presentation, and also that

internal changes occur without changes in external presentation. Overwhelming the reader with a variety of viewpoints without clear direction to the correct conclusion, the narrator-biographer fails to pick a side, thwarting our attempts to identify them. As Caughie writes, “The novel is often said to uphold this androgynous concept of sexual identity. Yet more important than which theory of identity Woolf may hold is her capturing the coexistence of conflicting notions of sexual identity that vary not only among sexologists and writers, but even within any one writer’s works” (Caughie 515). Chris Coffman similarly concludes, “what seems to be an earnest debate over the origins of human behavior turns out yet again to be an elaborate tease [essentially] declaring the matter undecided” (Coffman par. 19). Woolf demonstrates the instability of identity not only by complicating our reading of Orlando’s gender identity, but simultaneously confusing our understanding of our narrator’s view on gender as a concept.

As a consequence, the self-contradiction permeating the narrative has produced similarly contradictory analysis within literary criticism, where authors disagree on anything from Woolf’s philosophical conclusions about gender, to even basic plot points. Sifting through the various theories on sex, critics feel compelled to choose a side, to determine for themselves what Woolf theorizes about gender, and consequently about the possibility for non-binary and androgynous identity. Brenda Helt argues that “the androgynous mind is presently an impossibility precisely because of the social realities accompanying embodiment,” positing that “because a body will always be interpellated as either male or female, even the sex-changing Orlando can partake only fleetingly of an androgynous mind” (Helt 120-1). Helt seems to follow the “philosophers” viewpoint that feeling a woman depends on moving through the world like a woman, engaging in conversation with prominent poets “while wearing voluminous skirts”. Both Helt and the philosophers emphasize society’s role in shaping Orlando’s internal feeling. They argue that

these external social expectations for women, expectations of dress or behavior, are the driving agent of Orlando's internal change. This view that society determines gender becomes her basis as to which to deny the possibility of lasting androgynous identity. In contrast, Pooja Mittal Biswas takes a completely opposite stance, writing that "Even if no non-binary pronouns are applied to Orlando within the text, Orlando is clearly non-binary and presents as such" (Biswas 55). Biswas additionally states that "Orlando, as the novel progresses, becomes comfortably genderqueer both in mind and in presentation" (Biswas 55). Biswas agrees with the narrator's professed viewpoint that "Orlando's internal metamorphosis results in an external change" (Biswas 59). By understanding gender identity as independent from societal forces, Biswas argues for Orlando occupying a space outside the socially determined roles of man and woman. Biswas claims that Orlando becomes progressively androgynous, while Helt claims it as a temporary fleeting state. These starkly contrasting narratives are the result of the narrator-biographer's intentional contradiction.

Confusion over Orlando's identity as non-binary or androgynous extends further to an even more baffling discourse on how many times Orlando changes sex. While the discourse on Orlando's androgyny makes more sense—they/them pronouns are only applied to Orlando once, and Orlando's vacillation between sexes usually results in a binary presentation, therefore plausibly inviting discourse—Orlando's sex change seems far more straight forward. However, as we shall see, this supposed "fact" of the narrative becomes contentious due to the narrator-biographer's self-contradiction. Brenda Helt asserts that "Orlando actually changes sex only once; her subsequent changes are changes of clothing only, and seem primarily nods to convention" (Helt 122) This conclusion is confusing however, as Helt emphasizes society's role in shaping a Orlando's female identity, and when she dresses as a man, she is treated and viewed

as such. How can Orlando change her presentation and not change her treatment in society? Does simply a knowledge of women's oppression in society mean that her presentation as a man can no longer be genuine or true, but simply a costume? While Helt attempts to create distinction between cross-dressing and gender transition, *Orlando* intentionally confuses the boundaries of both categories. Holding the opposite view, Loretta Stec argues that "The novel as a whole moves towards not just frequent sex changes, but towards a sense of perpetual change in selfhood ... This is the modernist self that challenges notions of strict binary gender identity" (Stec 191). Stec argues that Orlando's change in presentation are genuine changes in sex. Indeed, there is evidence within *Orlando* to support both points, for the narrator-biographer writes both that "her sex changed far more frequently than those who have worn only one set of clothing can conceive" (221) but also declares the "simple fact" that "Orlando was a man till the age of thirty; when he became a woman and has remained so ever since" (139). These two moments assert different relationships between presentation and gender; one draws a connection between them, while the other refuses such connections. As a result, neither critics nor readers can reach a conclusion; *Orlando* has succeeded in its refusal to narrate.

As critics try to engage with the text to form their own conclusions and arguments around trans theory more broadly, these contradictions within the text lead to some unfortunate misreadings. Astonishingly, one critic even writes that Orlando never has a child; Biswas writes that "heterosexual reproduction is wholly absent from the narrative" (Biswas 56). Yet Orlando *does* have a child, despite the dreamlike, cacophonous and abstract passages that obscure the event from the view of the reader. After an abstracted narration of a near death moment that occurs presumably as a result of her labor, the birth of Orlando's son is announced: "'It's a very fine boy, M'Lady,' said Mrs. Banting, the midwife. In other words Orlando was safely delivered of a

son on Thursday, March the 20th, at three o'clock in the morning" (295). Other critics have attempted to sidestep the contradiction presented by Orlando's participation in heterosexual reproduction to reassert her stable place within transgender theory, writing that "reproductive time appears in the text only to be swept away by the vicissitudes of the present, a life-plot that will not conform to normative temporality" (Stec 192). Yet certainly, Woolf's choice to include this moment is not just a mere fluke, an aspect of narrative that is conveniently swept away. While the moment may be brief, it certainly had a strong effect on its primary reader, Vita Sackville-West.³ While Vita showered Virginia with praise, exclaiming that she was "dazzled, bewitched, [and] enchanted," moments that perpetuate heterosexual demands of biography stick out. Vita "wrote privately to Harold to say she didn't see why Orlando had to marry and have children" (Lee 519-520). Rather than to prioritize reading queer narratives as opposed to heterosexual narratives, ignoring or sweeping away Woolf's intentional inclusion of heterosexuality, Vita's reaction suggests that Woolf's incorporation of these narratives were intentional, perhaps even more unnatural for Orlando's character than her queer escapades. These moments of marriage and childbirth thus are intentional interjections that add to the instability of Orlando's identity and place, refusing categorization as a whole.

Beyond the intentional contradiction that the narrator-biographer inserts into the narrative, contradiction arises due to the already complex state of trans theory in general: the conflict between trans theory that calls on transness to deconstruct identity and the political necessity of a trans identity for which to advocate for rights and freedoms.⁴ Biswas's engagement

³ Virginia Woolf dedicated *Orlando* to her friend and lover, Vita Sackville-West. The character Orlando is inspired by Vita's life and family. For more information on Vita, Virginia, and the creation of *Orlando*, see *Virginia Woolf: A Biography* by Hermione Lee pp. 490 - 528.

⁴ Chris Coffman in "Woolf's *Orlando* and the Resonances of Trans Studies" provides an excellent summary of the different theoretical models in trans studies, namely between one camp who works to denaturalize norms of gender and sexuality and another camp that emphasizes "desires for bodily transformation and fixed cross-gender identifications" (1).

with contemporary trans language enters her into a conversation where “Orlando’s textual presentation remains enduringly non-binary, and ripe for revisioning through the contemporary queer lens” (Biswas 60). By engaging with the political discourse on correct language to describe transgender individuals in her analysis of *Orlando*, Orlando’s transition is understood through a medical lens, where she argues that the narrative supports “the far more trans-positive ‘gender confirmation surgery’” as opposed to “the heteronormative term ‘gender reassignment surgery’” (Biswas 59). Holding the opposite viewpoint, Loretta Stec argues that *Orlando* provides an alternative to the contemporary medicalized language surrounding transgender identities, Orlando’s alternative path “had the potential to avoid some of the damage done to transgender people in the act of categorizing, diagnosing and medicalizing their complex selves from the late nineteenth century into the twenty-first” (Stec 193). Other scholars, such as Helt provide an understanding of *Orlando* that stems from the psychoanalytic theories of sexuality during Woolf’s time, engaging in conversations about inversion and the psychic hermaphrodite, who is “bi-sexual” in that they are “born psychologically dual-gendered” (Helt 116). Still, other critics have investigated the text as a depiction of lesbianism, and a few have interpreted *Orlando* through the lens of bisexuality (Coffman par. 5). As we have touched on earlier, Jay Prosser writes that “*Orlando* is emphatically not about transexuality. Indeed, *Orlando* is not about the sexed body at all but the cultural vicissitudes of gender” (Prosser 168). Through this exploration of the critical space, transness is revealed not only as contentious through *Orlando*’s intentionally contradictory narrative, but contradictory at its core. Critics struggle to categorize *Orlando* as a trans or not-trans because gender nonconformity expresses itself in different terms across time, as shown through Helt’s analysis. Additionally the theoretical vs. medical narratives surrounding trans narratives add further disorientation.

Amusingly, the narrator-biographer seems to anticipate the critical debate surrounding Orlando's identity and place in trans theory, self-aware that the production of knowledge through narrative remains fundamentally opposed to the presence of contradiction. Literary criticism of *Orlando* in some ways must always fail, especially if it attempts to distill truth and essential meaning from a text that refuses such. As a forewarning to the debate surrounding Orlando's "true" sex, the narrator-biographer seems to suggest an alternative path amongst all the hubble bubble: "But let other pens treat of sex and sexuality; we quit such odious subjects as soon as we can" (139). In other words, the narrator-biographer reveals that the debate surrounding "sex and sexuality" requires identifying a discernable subject that tends towards stability, rather than allowing for contradiction, change and multiplicity within the self. Indeed, "Woolf alludes to sexological categories skeptically ... through her occasionally dull-witted biographer-narrator" (Stec 190). The possibility for categorization depends on stable and distinguishable subjects, a notion which Woolf complicates through her "dull-witted" and self-contradictory "biographer-narrator" who thwarts identification and stability at every turn. Instead, the narrator-biographer urges us to resist the desire for categorization and identification, and focus on a world that embraces contradiction. While Melanie Micir argues that this moment "implicitly criticizes the unwillingness of so many biographers to write about sexual matters", despite professing disdain for those who engage in the debate, Orlando's narrator-biographer *does* engage in the discourse surrounding Orlando's gender as shown earlier in this essay (Micir 118-19). Thus, rather than reading this moment as a critique of biographers' self-censorship, this moment simultaneously points to assumptions about subjecthood inherent in questions of "sex and sexuality", and also engages in yet another moment of contradiction. The narrator-biographer, in asking us to ignore these categories, also asks us to question our

allegiance to them. Orlando at once dodges and engages in trans discourse, making the narrative both about theorizing trans lives and lives more generally.

Though we have primarily focused on Orlando's narrator-biographer in order to expose contradiction within the narrative, Orlando's efforts to self-narrate also display a disavowal and multiplicity of self, broken across time. Self-narration creates distance between the present and oneself; this phenomenon is demonstrated in two conflicting passages, where Orlando in one moment says to herself, "how women in ages to come will envy me!" when reflecting on her time spent with prominent poets Pope, Addison, and Swift (212). In fact, the narrator-biographer discloses that "when anybody says 'How future ages will envy me,' it is safe to say that they are extremely uneasy at the present moment" (212-3). Orlando's disavowal occurs in her self-narration because she imagines herself as the audience to her own memoir. Investing her sense of joy and accomplishment in other's *future* opinions, marks a dissatisfaction with the present. The narrator-biographer suggests that self-narration imparts a denial of the self in that one is disassociated from present feelings. This denial of self falls in line with Edelman's idea of reproductive futurism, where present pleasure is denied for the benefit of the future, or the Child. In contrast, when Orlando watches regular townsfolk drinking tea together, "though she never heard a word that any of the three shadows said", "so absorbed was she in the sight that she forgot to think how other ages would have envied her, though it seems probably on this occasion they would" (223). The narrator-biographer, through their interjections within these two episodes, demonstrates that when one is truly invested in the experience of life, narration becomes unnecessary. Reflecting on one's moment in time as related to future moments, is in fact, a denial of and disassociation from the present self. Furthermore, by contrasting the wordy

conversations that Orlando shares with great poets to the silent conversation she witnesses from afar, the narrative suggests that words disengage the body from life.

The narrator-biographer discloses more on this viewpoint in a later section where through a stream-of-consciousness narrative, Orlando tries to name herself and enter herself into the narrative. Yet as the narrator-biographer shows, unification of the self is impossible; as Orlando tries to unify herself, various selves arise and disappear at a startling pace. Only in silence is Orlando present in herself.

When she had ceased to call “Orlando” and was deep in thoughts of something else that the Orlando whom she had called came of its own accord; as was proved by the change that now came over her as she passed through the lodge gates into the park ... And she fell silent. For it is probable that when people talk aloud, the selves (of which there may be more than two thousand) are conscious of dis severment, and are trying to communicate but when communication is established there is nothing more to be said. (313-4)

The effort to consolidate oneself requires negotiating between all various selves existing across time, which are naturally contradictory and cannot be collapsed into a unified whole. Thus, only when one lives in the present moment free from the impulse of narration do the selves fall into synchronization.

By understanding life as inherently contradictory through the passage of time, it is thus possible to both submit to the age and also remain free from it. As the narrator writes, “she need neither fight her age, nor submit to it; she was of it, yet remained herself” (266). The ability to live a contradictory existence that both submits to the age and resists the age is located in Orlando’s relationship with Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine. While Orlando’s love for Shelmerdine is technically a heterosexual relationship, there are simultaneously genderqueer aspects to the relationship which invite confusion and contradiction. When Orlando confesses her love to Shelmerdine, asking him not to leave her, she cries “you’re a woman, Shel!”

Shelmerdine responds, with an identical cry, “you’re a man, Orlando!” he cried” (252). Orlando and Shelmerdine refuse to designate between themselves the role of man or woman; their relationship is dynamic and changing, as the text later shares through a humorous digression that reveals that Orlando calls Shelmerdine different names depending on her mood. Orlando begs Shelmerdine to stay, placing her in the role of pursuit, despite the fact that he is the man on horseback who has come to rescue her. Shelmerdine, who must respond to Orlando’s pursuits, is placed in feminine role where he must either “yield” or “refuse” Orlando’s attention (155). By confusing each other’s identities in the relationship, both embody the masculine and feminine roles within the relationship. With each other, they live free from identity, able to live outside of the social roles they were assigned, and enjoy identity formed through interpersonal relations. As Halberstam writes:

Transgender proves to be an important term not to people who want to reside outside of categories altogether but to people who want to place themselves in the way of particular forms of recognition. Transgender may indeed be considered a term of relationality; it describes not simply an identity but a relation between people, within a community, or within intimate bonds. (49)

In the intimate bonds between Shelmerdine and Orlando, transgender occurs as a relationship between people, through the changing roles the two come to play in relation to each other. Neither Shelmerdine nor Orlando can be recognized as playing the male or female role in the relationship, yet that does not mean that they reside outside the categories of male and female. Instead, they simply complicate the notion of identification in the first place, and create identities formed through relationships with others rather than relying on identity as a way to distinguish individuals.

The trans aesthetics of conflicting masculine and feminine characteristics appear in other relationships too; all significant relationships in Orlando’s life, specifically Orlando’s romantic

relationships, can be considered trans in that they also resist stable narrativization. Yet unlike the relationship between Orlando and Shelmerdine, these other relationships ultimately fail because they do not accept each other's instability and contradiction. For example, the only other character who changes pronoun use in the narrative, the Archduke/duchess Harry/Harriet, provides a foil to Shelmerdine's acceptance of Orlando's dual gendered identity. While the Archduke/duchess Harry/Harriet partakes in queer aesthetics that mix masculine and feminine presentation, he/she submits to heterosexual demands of narrative to stabilize identity. When Orlando first meets this individual, the individual goes by Archduchess Harriet. The narrator-biographer hints towards the individual's masculine qualities, mentioning her "very tall" stature of "six feet high" (113-114). Additionally, Archduchess Harriet "wore a headdress into the bargain of some antiquated kind which made her look still taller" (114). This moment parallels Orlando's visual presentation on the first page, where "the fashion of the time" plays into the gendered appearance of the individual (13). Antiquated fashions are thus established as disturbing our read of the individual's gender, pointing to gender's variance and instability across time. Yet while this fixation on Archduchess Harriet's height might seem to impose restrictive and oppressive definitions on what it means to be womanly and feminine, further on we notice that like with Orlando and Shelmerdine, it is where Archduchess Harriet strays from a conventional feminine presentation where Orlando finds connection with her. The narrator-biographer comments, "had she not shown a knowledge of wines rare in a lady, and made some observations upon firearms and the customs of sportsmen in her country, which were sensible enough, the talk would have lacked spontaneity" (115). These "masculine" interests add to the liveliness of her person, rather than contribute to her disguise or the malicious deception that characterizes many real-life accounts of cross-dressing or transgender-aligned individuals.

This positive characterization of androgyny asserts that life lies in the acceptance of universal gender instability, suggesting that artificiality *actually* lies in normative mode of gender presentation.

The artifice of normative gender roles is emphasized in Archduchess Harriet and Orlando's reunion, upon which Archduchess Harriet reveals herself to be "actually" Archduke Harry. Upon this shocking revelation of Harriet's "deceit", the pair fall into acting out the conventions of heterosexual courtship, "they acted the parts of man and woman for ten minutes with great vigour and then fell into natural discourse" (179). Whereas Harriet's unintentional reveal of traditionally masculine hobbies vitality within their conversation, when acting out the roles of heterosexual courtship, these moments suck the life out of their interaction. Here, heterosexual modes of interacting are denaturalized, opposed to "natural discourse", and considered incredibly rigorous and tiring scripts. Archduke Harry in his "revealed" form further imposes unnatural concepts of stable identity upon both himself and Orlando. In exposing the "true" story, we notice immediate gaps in the narrative that arise out of Archduke Harry's drive towards stability. In his retelling of their courtship, Archduke Harry declares:

That he had seen a portrait of Orlando and fallen hopelessly in love with him; that to compass his ends, he had dressed as a woman and lodged at the Baker's shop; that he was desolated when he fled to Turkey; that he had heard of her change and hastened to offer his services (here he teed and heed intolerably). For to him, said the Archduke Harry, she was and would ever be the Pink, the Pearl, the Perfection of her sex. The three p's would have been more persuasive if they had not been interspersed with tee-hees and haw-haws of the strangest kind. (179)

While the Archduke has inhabited both a male and female social role, he conforms to the social rules of "biologists and psychologists" that demand a stability in gender, that one "has always been" (139). Archduke makes use of heteronormative narrative demands, validating one identity (Archduke Harry) while relegating the other (Archduchess Harriet) as deceitful or "counterfeit"

(Halberstam 45). Yet the narrator-biographer resists the Archduke's stabilizing narrative, referring to Harry as "the Archduchess (but she must in future be known as the Archduke)" (179). The word "must" indicates a reluctance on the part of the narrator-biographer to ascribe to Archduke Harry's narrative; they call into question whether this "revelation of truth" can really "correct" the past. Despite Archduke Harry's self-narration guiding a narrative of stable gender identity, the narrator-biographer's obligatory tone adds doubt to this stabilized narrative. Other critics have read Orlando's disdain towards Archduke Harry as the consequence of societal constraints that prevented Woolf from bringing homosexual desire to the forefront, relegating the queer to reside only in subtext. Pooja Mittal Biswas writes that Orlando's disgust towards Archduke Harry suggests that "queerness must be subtextual and kept to the margins, or risk being ridiculed" (Biswas 42). Yet while Orlando certainly holds disgust towards this man who supposedly dresses as a woman to disguise his homosexual attraction, Orlando's disdain for the Archduke arises out of his imposed stability upon Orlando's own identity.

The Archduke functions as an imposer of heterosexual narrative structures by demanding that Orlando remain a stable gender as well. As a gesture of devotion towards the female Orlando, Archduke Harry says that "she was and would ever be the Pink, the Pearl, the Perfection of her sex" (179). This sentence contradicts the narrative of Orlando's life which we have come to understand through our narrator-biographer. Orlando changes sex at least once; as readers we are aware of Orlando's past as a man. Declaring her the "Pink, the Pearl, the Perfection of her sex" forcibly narrates Orlando as essentially a woman, ignoring her past as a man. In contrast to the Archduke, Orlando embraces contradiction within her existence as a part of her experience rather than a mistake that must be corrected. Through her multiple selves both masculine and feminine, not essentialized as any one gender, "the pleasures of life were

increased and its experiences multiplied” (221). Multiplicity of identity, while against stability, increases the vitality of life. Despite explicit knowledge of Orlando’s change in gender, (the Archduke switches from using he/him pronouns to she/her pronouns midway through his narration) the Archduchess/Archduke assumes that he can stabilize her gender, and define her against her own understanding of herself. Woolf thus reveals the ridiculous delusion involved in subscribing to narrative demands for stability, revealing that artifice is located in this heteronormative demand rather than in queerness.

The experience of multiple gendered identities within the novel mirrors Virginia Woolf’s actual lived relationships with many of her close acquaintances and lovers, which was typical of those in the Bloomsbury Group known for their “unconventional sexual arrangements” that extended beyond marriage (Stec 185). Indeed, Virginia Woolf’s romantic relationship with Vita Sackville-West was the inspiration for Orlando; Virginia first tells her that Orlando is “all about you and the lusts of your flesh and the lure of your mind ... Also, I admit, I should like to untwine and twist again some very odd, incongruous strands in you” (Hermione Lee 512). The novel was also proclaimed famously by Nigel Nicolson, Vita Sackville-West’s son, as “the longest and most charming love letter in literature” (Nicolson 202). Vita and Virginia’s relationship, mirroring that of Shelmerdine and Orlando, similarly shared some of the gender-bending, role-switching dynamics. Both writers, Virginia and Vita’s letters to each other allowed for playful duplicity of identity around each other, and freedom from their societal roles. Vita, attempting to persuade Virginia to visit Berlin, writes of a “sodomites ball” where “a lot of them were dressed as women, but I fancy I was the only genuine article in the room ... There are certainly very queer things to be seen in Berlin, and I think Potto [Virginia] will enjoy himself” (Glendinning 212). Vita’s letter to Virginia opens up playful space for a duplicitous identity;

there is both Virginia the recipient of the letter, and Virginia as “Potto”. Loretta Stec interprets this moment as proving that Virginia Woolf is indeed “flexibly gendered, even if not as persistently as Vita” (186). Indeed, this moment points to a certain type of flexibility of roles that the two enjoyed with each other in their relationship. However, more interestingly, thinking of the letter as a form of narrative, Vita addresses her letter to Virginia but names her in the third person. This choice suggests a distance or contradiction between the Virginia reading the letter, and the alternate Virginia as Potto who would enjoy the Berlin scene. While we could certainly read this moment as revealing something about Woolf’s identity, I believe that this moment more interestingly confuses the idea of Woolf having a stable identity at all.

Woolf, in her construction of *Orlando* as a fictional piece that is expressly based on real historical figures, plays with the idea of individuality and identity through her unique blend of Vita’s real life history with Woolf’s fictional history of Orlando. Woolf is notably energized by this merging project, “A flurry of teasing, suggestive letters let Vita know how much she was now being ‘made up’, and how much pleasure this was giving her author: ‘Is it true you grind your teeth at night? Is it true you love giving pain? If I saw you would you kiss me? If I were in bed would you — I’m rather excited about Orlando tonight’” (Lee 512). In Woolf’s excitement about the possibilities of creating a fictional biography about her real life friend and lover, she seems to delight in the rumor and contradiction that she might be creating about Vita. Just as Vita has written Potto as Virginia into her letter, Woolf blurs the distinction between Orlando and Vita, both at once highlighting their differences but also asserting their similarities. One key moment of Woolf’s delight in complicating the concept of identity is in Woolf’s use of “portraits of Sackville ancestors (for Orlando as a young man), photographs of Vita (for Orlando as a woman) and a portrait of Orlando’s lost love, the Russian princess ‘Sasha’. (This would be

Angelica, now a ravishing nine-year-old.). Virginia and Vita went together to Knoles to choose obscure Sackville ancestors” (Lee 512). The decision to have Vita’s obscure ancestors represent her fictional self’s male past collapses history in unique and confusing ways. These ancestors are brought into the present, becoming visual symbols of Orlando (and presumably Vita’s) masculinity. Yet also, the inclusion of Vita’s ancestors as portraits of Orlando brings to light the ways in which ancestors *are* in fact a facet of us. The past is brought into the present. Our identity cannot be independent from our ancestors, yet rarely do we picture ourselves as the perfect image of our ancestors. As another way of viewing it, Orlando has come to stand in for two separate individuals. Not only is Orlando’s identity multiplied, but additionally Orlando has collapsed multiple individuals into one figure.

So far, we have considered the ways in which narrative, particularly biographical narrative, demands a stable identity. Contradiction we have located as the primary strategy of resistance towards narratives’ stabilizing impulses. Yet there are many other ways that Woolf playfully refuses to narrate, other than through contradiction. The final section of this essay will consider some of the strategies that Woolf uses to locate life outside of narrative, namely through silence. Woolf locates understanding and knowledge in the extratextual, the silences, as well as the material ‘silent’ objects that bear traces of human life. As Halberstam urges us, “The project of subcultural historiography demands that we look at the silences, the gaps, and the ruptures in the spaces of performance, and that we use them to tell disorderly narratives” (187). We will indeed investigate the intentional gaps that Woolf creates in order to tell disorderly narratives that free us from “standard lives” (Micir 123).

The following two scenes demonstrate how the refusal to narrate, displayed through silence, disrupts heteronormative storytelling. Moments of marriage and birth are interwoven

with moments of silence, emphasizing that the most significant moments of life can never be expressed in language. Returning to the relationship between Shelmerdine and Orlando, Woolf not only explores the freedom in their relationship built out of their mutual acceptance of contradiction and duplicity within their relationship, but additionally by refusing to narrate and the writing in silence. By describing Orlando and Shelmerdine's connection as instantaneous, as love at first sight, the narrator-biographer marks their relationship as something that cannot be known or revealed through narrative. The narrator-biographer shares that "in fact, though their acquaintance had been so short, they had guessed, as always happens between lovers, everything of any importance about each other in two seconds at the utmost, and it now remained only to fill in such unimportant details as what they were called; where they lived; and whether they were beggars or people of substance" (251). Connection is located outside of narrative. Narrative can only describe such unimportant details of identity such as name, geographical locale, and class. True connection comes through an exchange of nothingness, language so mundane that Orlando and Shelmerdine could be saying nothing.

For they knew each other so well that they could say anything they liked, which is tantamount to saying nothing, or saying such stupid, prosy things, as how to cook an omelette, or where to buy the best boots in London, which have no lustre taken from their setting, yet are positively of amazing beauty within it. For it has come about, by the wise economy of nature, that our modern spirit can almost dispense with language; the commonest expressions do, since no expressions do; hence the most ordinary conversation is often the most poetic, and the most poetic is precisely that which cannot be written down. For which reasons we leave a great blank here, which must be taken to indicate that the space is filled to repletion.

As I have depicted above, Woolf literally inserts blank space into the narrative. The narrator-biographer locates the vitality of conversation outside of the literal words shared between the pair. Connection does not come from through the utterance of intelligent words, but rather from a more elusive shared experience between individuals. Acknowledging the failure of language to ever completely impart its intended meaning, the narrator-biographer creates gaps, emptiness, and silence as a placeholder for the vast quantities of vitality and meaning located outside of narrative. Language, in its effort to express, often falls into contradiction and paradox: “the commonest expressions do, since no expressions do; hence the most ordinary conversation is often the most poetic”. We must acknowledge the failure of language to describe our true meaning, stop explaining ourselves, and leave the rest to imagination. Nothingness is described multiple ways here; it is at once described as “saying nothing” in the form of saying useless or mundane things. Nothingness further is represented through the literal blank space. Constantly contradictory, the narrator-biographer turns away from language to embrace the potentiality of silence.

In a similar moment, the narrator-biographer teases the reader in our desperate hunger for information, writing: “So at last she reached her final conclusion, which was of the highest importance but which, as we have already overpassed our limit of six lines, we must omit. Orlando, having come to this conclusion, stood looking out of the window for a considerable space of time” (291). Instead of learning Orlando’s conclusion, we sit with her in an empty “space of time”. By claiming to have “overpassed our limit of six lines,” the narrator-biographer points to narrative structure and constraint as preventing true revelation. Simultaneously, the moment also suggests that any written revelation could not depict the true importance of the conclusion. Instead, by sitting at the window with her, we are left to imagine a revelation even

greater than what can be written. Importantly, this revelation occurs right before the birth of her son. Orlando and Shelmerdine's magical connection occurs right before their marriage. Two moments of silence lead to marriage and birth, supposedly "heterosexual" milestones or pillars of heterosexual narrative. Yet in these milestones, we are left feeling dissatisfied because the most important parts of these moments are left unnarratable, blank, and concealed through their inexpressibility in language.

Contradiction and silence: these are interventions to the heteronormative power structures that narrative reinforces and dictates. Through evasion and cacophony, *Orlando* renders language inadequate to capture the vitality of lived experience. As a fictional biography, Woolf plays with the heterosexual demands across time, demands that life must encompass birth, marriage, childbearing, and death. As a wry critique of these demands, *Orlando* reveals the fickle and unstable phenomenon of life which can never be represented through narrative. Narrative's project requires description, revelation, and conclusion—yet life is fundamentally contradictory, unstable, and inconclusive. In conversation with Edelman, my essay agrees that the project that queerness must not work for reproductive futurism. Yet, while Edelman implies that queerness as opposed to the social must be anti-relational because of its position outside of the political, I suggest that while queerness requires anti-relationality in its imposition of contradiction within narrative, there lies outside narrative a potential for genuine connection between individuals that does not ascribe to politics. *Orlando* upholds queerness in its deconstructionist power but allows for true connection through its destruction.

To finish off, perhaps it would be fit to re-read the first passage of the novel yet again as an acknowledgement that endings do not conclude but rather create openings for further destabilization. In this paragraph, however, rather than focusing on Orlando, let us instead focus

on the “Moor” which Orlando slashes through. *Orlando* begins with a death, describing a life long gone. In a morbid and disturbing way, *Orlando* shows that even in death, we continue to signify, even as we know longer consciously act in the world. Our identities are subject to constant flux, determined by forces out of our control. The “Moor” who fought in the “fields of Africa” now swings “gently” and “perpetually” in Orlando’s attic. The felt presence of past lives is always upon us. We may continue to hold significance to strangers we have never met. A stranger victim to the Great Frost holds an important place in Orlando’s mind. As the novel concludes, Orlando exclaims, “I take up a handbag and I think of an old bumboat woman frozen in the ice. Someone lights a pink candle and I see a girl in Russian trousers. I hear goat bells. I see mountains. Turkey? India? Persia?” her eyes filled with tears” (305). The moment calls back to the Great Frost which occurs in Chapter One, where the frost causes instant petrification of individuals such that they turn immediately to stone, repurposed as scratching posts and drinking troughs for passing sheep and cattle (34). More than a sardonic and facetious treatment of death, the text demonstrates instability of identity. While we may narrate our lives in hopes of stabilizing our sense of self, identity is in constant flux, in life and beyond it.

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