THE BODY SPEAKS: SOMATIC ERUPTION IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *ORLANDO* AND AUTOTHEORETICAL REFLECTIONS

by

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The first half of this thesis aims to understand the presentation of gender ambiguity in Virginia Woolf's 1928 novel *Orlando* through two motivated treatments of Orlando's body—one being story and the other discourse—proposing a metaphor of somatic eruption on both a discourse and story level. This corporeal eruption results from the pressure of various limitations, such as sociocultural norms/gender expectations, the body, and language. The second half of this thesis responds to Woolf's *Orlando* through the genre of autotheory. The delineation of my own lived experiences complements the themes explored in Woolf's writing, modernizing and personalizing the topics of somatic eruption and the limits accompanying women's lived experiences.

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Introduction

> "'THE TRUTH! at which Orlando woke. 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 confess– –he was a woman" (137).
>
> -–Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*

In the quotation above, Virginia Woolf's 1928 novel *Orlando* invites the reader to ask a multitude of questions. Why does Orlando change sex? Is Orlando truly a woman? Can we trust the narrative voice that is telling us this is the truth? Was Orlando ever a man? It is nearly impossible to read this work without wondering what Woolf is trying to say through Orlando's corporeal transformation—corporeal transformations that we observe over and over again through Orlando's repeated sex oscillations and Woolf's proliferation of metaphors. But it is the relationship between what happens, and how this information is told, that provides insight into what Orlando's body is really saying, why it is so unstable, and how it cannot help but erupt.

Little research has proposed a metaphor for looking at the body in Woolf's literature. One scholar, Iryna Galutskikh, suggests that the Woolfian body is a "body without limits," pointing to Woolf's use of "deformed" and "shapeless" body imagery that "implies having open, indefinite or permeable limits" (184). While Galutskikh's metaphor is useful in beginning to understand Woolf's delineated literary body, it falls short in its fidelity to limitlessness and its oxymoronic proposal of "permeable limits," as well as its omission in citing what any of these open limits might look like beyond physicality. Most notably, Galutskikh neglects to note that in order to transgress a limit, there must be the existence of a limit, rather than the absence of a limit, and that the limit is what builds pressure to allow the body to transgress it.

Ultimately, the purpose of this study is to propose a metaphor of eruption to describe the body in *Orlando*. This fills in the gaps of Galutskikh's analysis, which only looks at discursive bodily presentation, by holistically approaching the treatment of the body through a story versus discourse analysis and by explaining what limits put pressure on the body in *Orlando*. The body cannot solely be represented through a metaphorical "limitlessness," but rather, the Woolfian body is highly limited. The metaphor for eruption stems from an analysis of various limitations that create mounting pressure on Orlando's body and cause it to erupt rather than to stop at such limitations. Limitations discussed include sociocultural norms, where the body is cast in specific social roles and bound to these roles (Hite); linguistic limitations, where language may not lend itself to androgynous presentations of the self—emphasized by the period Woolf wrote in—and the male literary tradition (Gay); and body-oriented limitations, where the body is a limitation in relation to the mind (Eriksson). The somatic eruptions which result from these limitations occur on both a story and discourse level, as evidenced by Orlando's within-story sex change and Woolf's discursive depictions of corporality. These discursive eruptions prove to be necessary on top of story-driven eruptions as limits reveal themselves on various textual levels.

This study begins with a close reading of *Orlando* to understand the body through a narratological approach using two specific narratological treatments: the first being the body in "story" and the second body in "discourse." The story versus discourse distinction is commonly summed up as what is being told versus how it is being told (Herman). Scholar H. Porter Abbott's chapter "Story, plot, and narration" in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative* further separates these terms, stating that

"Story is an event or sequence of events (the action), and narrative discourse is those events as represented" (23). Discursive representation can additionally be summarized as rendering and is typically demonstrated by the material an author adds to a story, such as figurative language. Another notable term in describing a fictional story is the term "diegesis," which, in this paper, is best defined as the "storyworld evoked by the narrative text and inhabited by the characters" (Herman 276). Therefore, I will use the word "diegetic" to represent the story world and discursive to represent the presentation of this world. The distinction between such terms can help us understand *Orlando*'s bodily presentation and the meaning such presentation produces.

Current narratological literature on Woolf tends to examine her discursive narrative techniques. A great deal of research demonstrates the feminist modernist techniques Woolf uses, combing poetry and prose and using free indirect discourse, stream of consciousness, and other modes of experimental narration (Lanser). Her unconventional narrative approaches often lend themselves to the study of feminist narratology, which combines formal and feminist literary gestures by integrating feminist politics into traditional narratological forms (Staveley). Additionally, Woolf's experimentation through discourse can typically be thematized. For example, scholar Pamela l. Caughie proposes a "double discourse" in *Orlando*, suggesting that Woolf successfully oscillates between opposing possibilities (which Caughie calls a "bistable vision") through a mocking tone, unstable narrative voice, and an undecided viewpoint, creating an ambiguous discourse. While a great deal of research unpacks Woolf's discourse, little research examines the relationship between story and discourse in

Orlando, or any of Woolf's texts, motivating my analysis that examines this relationship and proposes a metaphor that links the two.

Beyond a discourse versus story narratological frame, this paper points to scholar Molly Hite's theoretical concept of a double body. In her essay "Virginia Woolf's Two Bodies," Hite argues that there are two bodies in Woolf's work, one that is cast in social roles and bound to social norms, a body which she calls "of fact," and the other which draws from modernist representation to overcome prescribed social roles, a body which she calls "of vision." As a result, Hite suggests that Woolf creates a distinct "female modernist body" but that this visionary body can only exist in a very restricted and metaphorical sense. Hite fails to acknowledge the extent to which the body refuses to conform even in the body "of fact." Therefore, my model is more successful in demonstrating that the story body does attempt to breach, transgress, and transcend various limits. I additionally argue that the diegetic body breaks through some limits to find others waiting to take their place; both bodies, however, are corporeal responses in an attempt to circumvent sociocultural conventions and limitations on the body.

Hite is right to point to two types of bodies in Woolf's work, but fails to see evidence of eruption. The double body in my analysis is the diegetic body and the discursive body to propose an overarching "erupting body" while Hite uses the terms "fact" and "visionary" when looking at the Woolfian body to suggest Woolf contributed the creation of a "female modernist body" to modernism. This notion of a "female modernist body," however, notably limits the body to a single gender, contrasting my analysis, as I suggest Woolf creates an androgynous body in *Orlando* to move beyond

gender expectations. Thus, Hite provides some theoretical background for this paper concerning sociocultural limitations and modernist feminist bodily presentations, but her work does not examine the way various limitations interact to create a mounting pressure on the body that causes it to erupt on various textual levels.

Hite proposes that "visionary" is the best term to describe bodily representation in Woolf's literature and how the body responds to social norms, whereas I propose a metaphor of "eruption" to describe the body's response to various limitations. With various pressures or constraints, such as linguistic constraints or sociocultural constraints, the body is "pressurized" and thus eruption is inevitable. A metaphor of eruption also indicates an active response. While literary subjects frequently encounter limits and simply stop at them, *Orlando's* diegetic and discursive responses to such limitations are what exceeds them (part of what allows for the creation of what Hite calls the "visionary body"). Additionally, an eruption is characterized by a reversal of exteriority and interiority, where the inside becomes the outside, such as the lava and ash that spill out of a volcano. This exteriority and interiority reversal is a theme explored in *Orlando* as the tension between mind and body. In further explaining this metaphor, it is important to look at the relationship between discursive presentation and eruption. While large, story-driven eruptions occur, the profusion of smaller discursive metaphorical eruptions represent the larger metaphor of eruption by showing a cascading effect. The last part of this eruption metaphor is the concept of convergence, which is the colliding of two tectonic plates to create a volcanic formation. In *Orlando*, however, there are various spheres colliding, such as the mind and body or the gender

binary, which give rise to eruptions. The thematic convergence of contrasting spheres, as well as the body's response to limitations, are thus important facets of this metaphor.

The idea of an erupting body has its roots in Freud's theory of hysteria. Freud believed that the body spoke through symptoms in response to repressed trauma, and this seduction theory hypothesized that the repressed memory of childhood sexual abuse led to hysteria. Freud later revised his theory to blame internal forces rather than external forces as the cause of hysteria, pointing to difficulty in distinguishing abuse from fantasy. Thus, he concluded that hysterical symptoms arose from repressed sexual desire, as mentioned in his Dora case study. My study on limitations inducing somatic eruption is closer to Freud's first theory of hysteria, as I suggest somatic eruptions are a response to the psychosocial trauma of limitations, blaming external forces for causing bodily eruptions. Additionally, Orlando is not solely a repressed figure, as the overt ways she plays with gender suggests she may be both unconscious and overwhelmingly conscious of the trauma limitations bring.

My analysis borrows the idea of an erupting body from Freud to propose an erupting body that is distinctly Woolfian. Somatic eruption in *Orlando* provides a different way of understanding the insights of Freud's original theory—mainly, that the problem is in the world. We see this most clearly through the lack of hysteria Orlando presents as a confident and in control character, but somatic eruptions occur despite this lack of hysteria to indicate that Orlando's external environment is still too limiting. Thus, the erupting Woolfian body shifts blame from the individual to the external world.

Freud also connects story and discourse and somatic eruption. Freud brings forward the notion that one does not have direct access to what has happened (story) and suggests that signs are interpreted to try to piece together this story. Therefore, one accesses story through discursive mediation that frequently complicates "truth." This relationship between story and discourse informs my desire to look at Orlando's bodily eruption on both textual levels and highlights how discourse in *Orlando* often complicates what "truth" is, such as whether or not the sociocultural forces in *Orlando* are an essentialized or constructed "truth." The relationship between story and discourse, however, is mostly discussed in terms of Orlando's inability to transcend diegetic limitations, and therefore, self-conception is best demonstrated through discursive presentation that is able to challenge social constructions and gender expectations.

While there are similarities between the Orlando's erupting body and Freud's hysterical body, moving away from a strictly psychoanalytic approach when observing Orlando's eruption allows me to dive into this narratological study without getting sidetracked by the controversies of Freud's theories. Beyond how this might distract me from investigating Woolf's craft, *Orlando*'s distance from reality due to its semi-fictional genre also persuades me that a narratological approach to representing trauma and somatic eruption shifts the focus from a pathologized subject and onto a world in need of reform. Of course, despite *Orlando*'s semi-fictional structure and a shift to the external world, if we want to think about the way unconscious desire and anxieties inform one's expression, it is interesting to consider how Woolf's own voice informs

the body of this text, introducing a new question: how is *Orlando* a projection of Woolf's psyche?

This relationship between a text and its author is what motivated the second half of this thesis, which uses the personal narrative form to explore my own bodily eruptions. This personal study stems from an interest in how lived experiences and the experiences of the body shaped Woolf's literature, as well as an interest in the difficulty Woolf faced when trying to represent the self, the body, the other, truth, and reality. While reading and engaging with *Orlando*, I found myself considering my trials of becoming a woman, how my body has erupted, and how, and if, writing can convey these things. In many ways, this personal study reflects a more traditional idea of hysteria**,** where the body begins to speak through symptoms in response to repressed trauma. This, in turn, raises new questions about the relationship between story and discursive mediation, such as what occurs when one attempts to access their trauma through language and storytelling.

In addition, the topic of limitations on women's bodies challenged me to ask myself: what erupts out of the academic limit? This limit is observable through inaccessible, objective, masculine modes of knowledge that dominate academic discourse, highlighting the need for subjective, traditionally feminine, forms of storytelling that are accessible, engaging, conversation-oriented, synergistic, and interdisciplinary. The personal essay also brings in my journalistic background—a background that emphasizes accessible modes of storytelling and has shaped how I convey information.

I want to also suggest that the self always erupts of the academic, much like how I erupted out of *Orlando*. As a result, failing to tell our own stories and link the personal and academic shuts down a way of thinking that can provide critical insight. For example, *Orlando*'s indirect way of discussing the self, the body and identity provoked me to want to tell a similar story in a more direct and personal way to continue a conversation of women's lived experiences and bring this conversation into the present, where there is less of a need to hide behind a semi-fictional filter as Woolf did.

I have decided to approach this personal essay through the genre of autotheory as a way to conflate the critical and creative and transcend the limits of the scholarly, as autotheory brings embodied lived experiences into dialogue with theoretical writings to reject dependence on traditional, masculine, objective modes of knowledge (Zwartjes). Doing so also allows me to continue to thematically engage with *Orlando* while bringing in newer and older texts and theories that compliment her writing and my own writing. Lastly, autotheory possesses a discursive quality that fits into an argument about discourse's transformative power, bringing forward new questions about discourse's complex relationship to the body, gender, memory, trauma, and selfhood. In sum, this exploration of *Orlando* suggests that multimedia scholarship has an important place within academia, as well as that there is instrumental power in storytelling, a power that must not be overlooked.

Somatic Eruption in *Orlando*

The Limits of Gender

A Single Social Gender Existence

Throughout *Orlando*, one of the primary themes is the difficulty in expressing an ambiguous gender identity. As a result, a limitation that places stress on Orlando's body is the restrictive nature of a single-gendered existence. One of the novel's most notable story-driven eruptions, Orlando's spontaneous sex change, highlights this. There are discursive clues in the first half of the novel that serve as evidence for why the sex change occurs. For example, the androgynous complication of Orlando with feminine descriptions of "eyes like drenched violets" (Orlando 15) and "The red of the cheeks was covered with peach down" (15) undercut traditional masculine presentations. These metaphoric discursive comments act as micro-eruptions that put pressure on Orlando and lead to his larger, diegetic eruption from a socially perceived man to a woman. Additionally, even when the text refers explicitly to Orlando's masculinity, such as by opening with the line "He— for there could be no doubt of his sex" (13), the reader questions the soundness of Orlando's male gender identity as the phrase "no doubt" conveys a sense of irony that raises readerly doubt about Orlando's sex. From the beginning of the text, Orlando's ambiguous interiority is made clear through discursive eruptions on his physicality. Therefore, these minor discursive eruptions that occur in response to a single-gendered identity put pressure on Orlando's body to instigate the story-driven sex change, suggesting that the sex change from a

man to a woman is an attempt to resolve Orlando's ambiguous gender interiority by moving Orlando beyond a solely male existence.

Orlando's diegetic sex change responds to the desire to live a multi-gendered existence and demonstrates his attempt to surpass the restrictive nature of only having male experiences. Shortly after Orlando's diegetic sex change, she is offered food by the captain of the ship she travels on. As the captain offers her food, she reflects on her previous relationship with Sasha, and the narrator states, "It recalled the feeling of indescribable pleasure with which she had first seen Sasha, hundreds of years ago. Then she had pursued, now she fled. Which is the greater ecstasy? The man's or the woman's?" (155). Then, Orlando ponders the ecstasy of refusing meat from the sailor only to agree and have the smallest sliver. In doing so she states that nothing is more heavenly "than to resist and to yield; to yield and to resist" (155). These reflections on the experiences granted to each gender demonstrate the necessity of a diegetic sex change to surpass the single-gender existence as Orlando's ability to engage with this existence is contingent upon her ability to participate in different gender performances. Therefore, the physical sex change grants Orlando the ability to engage in another gendered experience that reflects her ambiguous gender interiority and moves her beyond a limited gender existence.

Orlando's diegetic sex change attempts to resolve her gender ambiguous interiority, yet the cross-dressing Orlando participates in suggests that a single sex change does not do enough to resolve this ambiguity. After the physical sex change, Orlando changes clothes as she sees fit for specific activities. The narrator states that

> her sex changed far more frequently than those who have worn only one set of clothing can conceive; nor can there be any doubt that she reaped a

> twofold harvest by this device; the pleasures of life were increased and its experiences multiplied. From the probity of breeches she turned to the seductiveness of petticoats and enjoyed the love of both sexes equally (221).

A single body transformation is therefore too limiting for Orlando, suggesting that Orlando is neither man nor woman but both genders at once. Therefore, Orlando's oscillation between different dress allows Orlando to engage in two gendered experiences and demonstrates a diegetic eruption that continues to try and solve the limiting nature of a single-gendered experience.

What Orlando's cross-dressing also suggests, however, is that Orlando can only sustain a single gendered social performance at a time, and two gendered experiences in total, switching between a feminine and then masculine performance without achieving true gender ambiguity or androgyny. As a result, story-driven eruptions seem to fail at fully surpassing the limiting nature of social gender expectations as they continue to position Orlando within a diegesis bursting with the socio-cultural limitation of the gender binary and its expectations. As a result, discursive eruptions must occur to successfully portray Orlando's androgyny.

We see these androgynous discursive injections at the beginning of the text, as explored before, with statements like, "he had eyes like drenched violets" (15). Such androgynous depictions of Orlando continue when the queen observes him, stating, "The long, curled hair, the dark head bent so reverently, so innocently before her, implied a pair of the finest legs that a young nobleman has ever stood upright upon; and violet eyes; and a heart of gold; and loyalty and manly charm" (23). Here, there is a tension between traditionally male and female qualities through masculine observations of reverence, dark hair, and manly charm versus traditionally feminine traits like

innocence, fine legs, violet eyes, and a heart of gold. As a result, Orlando represents both genders at once without having to oscillate from one to the other. Masculine and feminine qualities simultaneously constituting Orlando thus represent an androgyny that can only be achieved through discourse and reveal the unsatisfying nature of a sex change that socially confines Orlando to a single gender performance at a time. At the same time, relying on feminine and masculine stereotypes to characterize Orlando's perpetuates the limitation of the gender binary, and thus, Orlando's ambiguous self-conception is not resolved.

Gender as a Social Construct

The diegetic sex eruption proves to be an insignificant reflection of Orlando's interiority, as the text frequently suggests it is clothing that marks Orlando as a woman after the sex change. More specifically noting that "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" (Orlando 189). Woolf's statement thus suggests that gender is arbitrary and is socially and culturally constructed, and therefore calls into question whether or not Orlando is truly, or only, a woman. We see this direct sentiment expressed when Orlando first enters the social world after changing sexes, where the narrator states, "up to this moment she Orlando had scarcely given her sex a thought" (Orlando 153). It is therefore society that adds meaning to the sex change, and it is this social construction of gender that forces Orlando to adhere to a binarized existence and therefore demonstrates another limitation that puts pressure on her body.

Once the gender change does occur, Orlando's identity is shown to be composed of masculine and feminine stereotypes, further reflecting that society is the entity that

tries to limit Orlando's gendered existence. For example, the text states, "if Orlando was a woman, how did she never take more than ten minutes to dress?" and "she could drink with the best and liked games of hazard" (133). This discursive discussion flags a personality that is made up of stereotypical feminine and masculine traits, suggesting that Orlando's identity can only be defined when it is made up of beliefs that are culturally constructed. Woolf, thus, seems to demonstrate how after changing sexes, Orlando is still limited to a binarized existence. Talia Schaffer notes that "Woolf's novel generates the fantasy of an original speech and body, only to discover that they are fossilized remains of older performances" (38). Thus, when Orlando changes sex to try to reflect her interiority and move beyond a limited existence, she continues to be limited by rigid stereotypes. It is only once Orlando's identity moves beyond stereotypes at the end of the novel that we see a more faithful articulation of Orlando's self-conception.

Woolf highlights the absurdity of constructed gender binaries through her ironic commentary, encouraging the reader to think about what "truth" is. This is most directly stated while Orlando transforms into the other sex and the text states, "He stood upright in complete nakedness before us, and while the trumpets pealed Truth! Truth! Truth! We have no choice left but confess—he was a woman" (137). "Truth" is repeated three times with exclamation points, and it is told by farcical trumpets, forcing us to question if this is the truth. The farce of this statement suggests that Woolf is poking fun at what an honest gendered existence might look like for Orlando. Thus, this discursive commentary additionally raises the question of whether or not the sex change resolves Orlando's ambiguous gender identity. The idea that a female identity would be the true

identity of Orlando is counteracted through various textual clues explored earlier, and here, Woolf directly flags that Orlando might not truly, and only, be a woman. It is through this discourse that Woolf's opinions come through that gender is perhaps a construction, a construction can never be "true" nor satisfying for Orlando.

While Orlando can only exist as either a man or woman within the physical, diegetic world, discursive commentary in response to Orlando's sex change rejects categorizing Orlando as either a man or a woman to surpass the limitation of constructed gender boundaries. After Orlando's sex change occurs, the narrator states, "Whether, then, Orlando was most man or woman, it is difficult to say and cannot now be decided" (190). Rather than being either a man or a woman, the narrator's voice comes through to clearly state that Orlando is neither one gender nor the other and that this uncertainty is perfectly permissible.

We see this Woolfian voice additionally revealed immediately following the sex change when the narrator states that the sex change "did nothing whatever to alter their identity" (138). The use of the pronoun "their" is significant in its accommodation of a single identity that combines various genders to signify ambiguity. This sentence, however, is the only time that Woolf uses the pronoun "their," the passage going on to state that "In future we must, for convention's sake, say 'her' for 'his,' and 'she' for 'he' (138). Therefore, even the narrator notes that the self is socially limited to either a male or female identity, and once Orlando enters the social world, she must confine herself to a feminine pronoun. Additionally, when Woolf uses the pronoun "their," Orlando is naked, as the narrator states, "He stood upright in complete nakedness" (137). As previously explored, clothing is a tool of Orlando's gender expression.

Without constructed signifiers, like clothing, to represent his change to a woman, Orlando can momentarily carry an ambiguous gender identity. Once dressed, though, the "her" pronoun is used. Through these discursive eruptions of Orlando's identity, Woolf is able to successfully suggest that Orlando is gender ambiguous.

Sociocultural Expectations

One of the main sociocultural expectations that limits Orlando is the Victorian enforcement of marriage. Eventually, the pressure of these conventions compels Orlando to get married (although to a man whose gender is as suspect as Orlando's). Right before Orlando meets her husband, Shelmerdine, though, the text states that

> Meanwhile, she became conscious, as she stood at the window, of an extraordinary tingling and vibration all over her, as if she were made of a thousand wires upon which some breeze or errant fingers were playing scales. Now her toes tingled; now her marrow. She had the queerest sensations about the thigh bones. Her hairs seemed to erect themselves. Her arms sang and twanged as the telegraph wires would be singing and twanging in twenty years or so. But all this agitation seemed at length to concentrate in her hands; and then in one hand, and then in one finger of that hand, and then finally to contract itself so that it made a ring of quivering sensibility about the second finger of the left hand. And when she raised it to see what caused this agitation, she saw nothing—nothing but the vast solitary emerald which Queen Elizabeth had given her. And was that not enough? she asked (239-40).

The diegetic corporeal eruptions here, such as tingling and vibrating, indicate a bodily response to the Victorian pressure of marriage. It is her ring finger quivering, however, that most directly suggests this. Orlando's questioning of why no ring is not enough demonstrates her own feelings about this limitation in a more indirect way that coincides with her bodily response. This bodily eruption further shows the limitation of the Victorian belief that marriage needed to be between a husband and wife, which is partially why Orlando's body quivers and erupts at the thought of needing to marry. It is

not until she meets Shelmerdine, and the interaction "'You're a woman, Shel! She cried.' 'You're a man, Orlando!' He cried" (252) ensues that Orlando can surpass this limitation. Thus, through subverting expectations, Orlando is able to transcend Victorian mores.

The Biological Body

The necessity of presenting Orlando on a discursive level to surpass rigid gender categorization suggests that the body is a limitation when it comes to presenting Orlando's androgyny and provides reason for why story-driven eruptions ultimately do not succeed at breaching this limitation. When Orlando changes into a woman, she exhibits no reaction. Instead, Orlando "looked himself up and down in a long looking-glass, without showing any signs of discomposure, and went, presumably, to his bath" (138). An extraordinary physical transformation would likely warrant a reaction, but Orlando remains unmoved. This reaction instead suggests that Orlando's identity is already outside, or perhaps, beyond the body, establishing a tension between interiority and exteriority, as well as how she has neither thought of herself as only a man nor a woman. This is further suggested by an explicit statement made by the narrator 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" (138). While Orlando's mind is gender-ambiguous, the body is constrained by biological sex, as Orlando cannot physically be both a man and woman.

The diegetic sex change limits Orlando to one biological body that undermines her androgynous mind but viewing herself in a mirror challenges this. After Orlando's

sex change, she looks herself up and down in a “long looking-glass” (138). A mirror presents two bodies: the body in reality and the body in reflection. The idea of a double body alludes to the limitation of a single body explored earlier, suggesting that despite this limitation, Orlando actually carries two, if not more, bodies. It is through the biologically limiting nature of the physical body that Orlando cannot externally exist as both male and female, and instead, this sense of self must be reflected through symbolic discourse like the mirror. As an archetype, looking glasses/mirrors frequently symbolize seeing the soul and the truth. Taken in conjunction with Orlando’s lack of reaction to her sex change, the double-body that the looking glass reveals is that her perception of self as having more than one body is stable and internally accurate despite the eruptive external change.

Lacan’s mirror stage can be applied to Orlando's self-perception in the looking glass. Lacan proposes that during infant development, one identifies with a mirrored image of the self that is perceived as a whole, stable, and autonomous self, called the “ideal I” that contrasts the fragmented feelings of self that exist in reality. This “ideal I” is the self that the infant strives toward, but perpetually fails to obtain due to its unattainable perfection. This failure is what can lead to neuroses, or in Orlando’s case, eruptions.

Lacan’s theory can be applied to Orlando’s sex change eruption and how it fails to solve Orlando’s internal gender ambiguity. Through the lens of Lacan’s mirror stage, what Orlando sees in the mirror a more ideal self or an androgynous/gender-ambiguous gestalt, that reflects two bodies. The text points to the reflected self as gender-ambiguous through its use of male pronouns—“himself” and “his” (138) when looking

in the mirror—despite Orlando's female corporeality in this scene, indicating the conflation of both sexes. Additionally, when looking in the mirror, Orlando's composed reaction to the sex change further indicates the viewing of an ideal self who is reflective of Orlando's interiority, which, as explored earlier, is a gender-ambiguous interiority. While Orlando seems to strive toward this self through actions like frequently changing clothes to experience two oscillating gendered experiences, Lacan would state that the unified self seen in the mirror is a fantasy that always conflicts with reality. In Orlando's case, this unattainability stems from the limitation of the biological body. As a result, Orlando's self-conception can only be achieved through discourse and shows why the diegetic sex change is ultimately unable to surpass the limitations that come with a single body and a single-gendered experience. This points to Lacan's theory that neuroses stem from the desire but failure to achieve this unified self, however, in Orlando, such neuroses are shown through eruptions that aim to better represent Orlando's self-conception.

While Orlando is limited by the biological body that binds her to a single-gendered existence at a time, by the end of the novel, discursive eruptions more faithfully articulate Orlando's multifaceted self-conception. For over two pages, Orlando goes into a stream of consciousness monologue stating things like "Thirty-six; in a motor-car; a woman. Yes, but a million other things as well. A snob am I? The garter in the hall? The leopards? My ancestors? Proud of them?" (310). After this, Orlando mentions the discovery of a single self. By stating that her identity is made up of various, unrelated things, she presents a multifarious self. Thus, her perception of herself is able to exceed her physical components, marking her transcendence beyond

the physical, biological self. This "single self" moment will be additionally explored in the next section and makes a moment a good spot to transition into the next limitation that builds pressure on Orlando's body: language.

The Limits of Language

Capturing an Ambiguous Identity

The text demonstrates language's inability to capture the complicated ambiguity of Orlando's gender identity. Orlando's pronouns resist a single category. "He," "She," "They," and even an alternating "Milord! Milady!" (Orlando 169) are all used to describe Orlando throughout various points of the text. Part of the lack of a cohesive pronoun may arise from a lack of queer language during the period Woolf wrote *Orlando* (the term androgyny was not popularized until the 1970s through pop culture, and the term non-binary was not popularized until the 1990s through queer activism). However, even if a greater gender vocabulary existed in Woolf's period, it is easy to question if Orlando's identity can be reduced to a single term, even if that term is representative of a multifaceted identity. Instead, metaphorical and abstract language is used to define Orlando. This ambiguous and even contradictory way of defining Orlando is far more successful at capturing her complexity.

Part of the modernist struggle was figuring out how to capture internal, subjective, and ambiguous states of existence. As a result, playing with language as abstract, fragmented, and metaphorical became an important discursive technique in the expression of self. In *Orlando*, we see these techniques used to construct an ambiguous state of being that defies binary categorization, attempting to move beyond the

limitations imposed by both culture and language. Woolf delineates the necessity of modernist abstraction, subjectivity, impression, etc. in her essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," which argues the necessity of abandoning the realism of the Edwardian era, and instead embracing cultural and social flux. In her essay, Woolf depicts Mrs. Brown through a subjective portrayal, where a myriad of impressions unfold that stress inner forms of existence, as opposed to solely externalities. By stressing inner forms of existence in *Orlando*, Woolf is able to present a more faithful rendering of Orlando's ambiguous selfhood. Therefore, while eruptions occur on a story level, these eruptions don't completely resolve the tension between Orlando's mind, which resists categorization, and body, which adheres to a binary, and thus, language becomes a vital tool in representing the self.

In looking at the necessity of discursive characterizations of Orlando, it is important to recognize metaphorical language's ability to capture a multifaceted self. For example, the narrator states Orlando "was like a fire, a burning bush, and the candle flames about her head were silver leaves; or again, the glass was green water, and she a mermaid, slung with pearls, a siren in a cave, singing so that oarsmen leapt from their boats and fell down" (Orlando 185). Scholar Shoshana Felman notes that androgyny is "Constituted in ambiguity, it signifies itself in the uncanny space between two signs, between the institutions of masculinity and femininity" (32). The quote above, for example, reflects oppositions, fire and water, but also the space between these oppositions, mermaids, sirens, bushes, and glass, reflecting the multifaceted nature of Orlando's identity. Woolf demonstrates how language can be used to communicate something beyond direct representation, as "mermaids" and "siren" connote femininity,

while “oarsmen” connotes masculinity. The significance of these terms thus situates Orlando between two gendered poles without favoring one over. However, mermaids and sirens are mythical creatures, and therefore, they also represent a fantasy, perhaps alluding to the fantasy of trying to present Orlando as an individual who also exists between binary spaces. Therefore, the discursive language used to define Orlando represents both the binary and the spaces between binaries to welcome a more faithful articulation of self-conception, while also calling to the difficulty, or fantasy, of articulating a multifaceted existence that resists rigid categorization.

Beyond metaphorical language, Woolf also uses a stream of consciousness technique to represent Orlando’s fragmented and multifarious identity. Toward the end of the novel, Orlando breaks out into the stream of consciousness style when thinking about who she is and calling out to herself. She states,

> 'What then? Who then?' she said. 'Thirty-six; in a motor-car; a woman. Yes, but a million other things as well. A snob am I? The garter in the hall? The leopards? My ancestors? Proud of them? Yes! Greedy, luxurious, vicious? Am I? (here a new self came in). Don't care a damn if I am. Truthful? I think so. Generous? Oh, but that don't count (here a new self came in). Lying in bed of a morning listening to the pigeons on fine linen; silver dishes; wine; maids; footmen. Spoilt? Perhaps. Too many things for nothing (Orlando 310-11).

Here, Orlando characterizes herself as various things that have no relationship and do not adhere to any sort of binary. As a result, the content of her speech depicts a self that rejects any sort of categorizable definition. This is notable when contrasted with Woolf’s discursive meditation at the beginning of the text that must align violets with femininity (as noted on page 15) and violence with masculinity (as noted on page 13 as Orlando slices the head of a Moor). This categorization adheres to a binary, though. Thus, the language that moves beyond this binary at the end of the novel is more

faithful to Orlando's self-conception. The stream of consciousness style also gives access to Orlando's interiority and shows how she doesn't fall into a single category, even if her body has to. The monologue goes on for over two pages and ends with an ellipse to suggest that this list is infinite. Therefore, the self identified here exceeds what is physically possible and points to an attempt to more faithfully denote a multifarious identity through discourse.

The stream of consciousness monologue characterizes Orlando's identity as composed of an infinite number of possibilities, and it is through this discursive eruption that Orlando's self-conception is most faithfully articulated as elusive. After the monologue, the text states, "So she was now darkened, stilled, and become, with the addition of this Orlando, what is called, rightly or wrongly, a single self, a real self. And she fell silent" (Orlando 314). Here, the text suggests that this identity of endless selves is the most faithful to Orlando's identity and demonstrates why any prior attempts to solve Orlando's ambiguous interiority have failed. At the same time, the irony of a "single and real self" points to how Orlando's self-conception is most honest when it resists rigid categorization and is not a single identity. The silence that falls after this realization leaves open the possibility for endless articulations of the self to reflect Orlando's evasive identity while also calling to language's inability to ever fully capture this sense of self. Thus, this moment reflects how discursive mediation and linguistic manipulation are the closest ways to articulate Orlando's self-conception, but that even language can never truly capture Orlando's complexity.

This moment as the most faithful articulation of Orlando's complexity is further indicated through the text's symbolism. The symbol that suggests this is the goose, as

birds are a motif repeated throughout the story. This goose is seen at times of discovery for Orlando, such as when Orlando discovers the beauty of the birds and peacocks on pages 15 and 16, or when a thousand vultures pick the gypsy landscape bare on page 151. Right before Orlando declares the discovery of a single, real self in the text, she states, "Haunted! Ever since I was a child. There flies the wild goose. It flies past the window out to sea. Up I jumped…and stretched after it. But the goose flies too fast…Always it flies fast out to sea and always I fling after it words like nets" (Orlando 313). Orlando being haunted by the goose since childhood suggests that there has always been tension within Orlando's identity. On the other hand, birds often symbolize self-discovery in the novel. Therefore, by the end of the text, the goose suggests that Orlando has discovered that elusiveness is what constitutes her self-conception. This is further emphasized by her inability to capture the goose, which suggests Orlando will never have a true, single identity. Therefore, the goose demonstrates Orlando's identity can never be truly captured through language.

One of the last sentences of the novel confirms that the arrival of the goose symbolizes Orlando's awareness of self as multifarious, infinite, and uncategorizable and language's inability to capture this complexity. Orlando states, "'It is the goose!' Orlando cried. 'The wild goose….'" (Orlando 329). The sentence ending with an ellipsis suggests that there is more to be said and reflects how language will never be able to capture the wholeness of self. Therefore, the goose is the final symbol that marks the identification of Orlando as complex, as well as the inability for language's elusiveness to capture an elusive identity. Despite this failure, it is through discourse

that the text comes closest to conveying Orlando's complexity, doing so via alternative linguistic techniques like metaphor and stream of consciousness.

The Male Literary Tradition

The goose can simultaneously be read as a symbol of women's struggle to write, pointing to the limitation of the male literary tradition, something which puts pressure on Orlando's body throughout the novel. At the beginning of the text, when Orlando is still physically a man, the narrator states, "Orlando…took out a writing book labelled 'Aethelbert: A Tragedy in Five Acts,' and dipped an old stained goose quill in the ink" (Orlando 16). Here, the goose is flagged as a symbol for writing without limitations, because as a man, Orlando is able to write with ease**.** Although he can write with ease, he is a failed writing. This suggests that the Edwardian era, where the novel begins, is an era conducive to male writers but ineffective writing. This is further flagged through Orlando's sex change, as after changing sexes, she struggles to write. Throughout the text, we see Orlando's struggle to write and the bodily eruptions that accompany her journey as a writer.

The text alludes to the relationship between language and the body. At one point, the text states, "For it would seem—her case provided it— that we write, not with the fingers, but with the whole person" (Orlando 243). Woolf here flags a type of women's writing that emphasizes the embodied self—a writing that contradicts the unembodied male writing of the Edwardian era. This feminine style of writing, in part, reflects Orlando's multifaceted identity that rejects only masculine characterization. This feminine style of writing is further acknowledged by Orlando's metaphoric and impressionistic literary gestures. This dependence between corporeality and a feminine

style of writing in conjunction with the limitation of the male literary tradition explains why Orlando's body erupts when trying to write.

The difficulty Orlando faces when trying to write expresses a limitation that puts pressure on her body to incite eruption. At one moment when Orlando struggles to write, the text states that "by an abrupt movement she spilt the ink over the page and blotted it from human sight she hoped for ever. She was all of a quiver, all of a stew" (Orlando 239). The quivering here suggests a bodily eruption that reflects a response to the male literary tradition and the imperfections of language as a way to convey meaning. Her inability to verbalize/write herself enables her body to speak instead and shows how the Edwardian/male literary tradition adds pressure to Orlando's body.

Throughout the text, Orlando struggles to find the words to express what is around her, pointing to the limiting nature of Edwardian writing. For example, Orlando describes his first lover, Sasha, as "a fox, or an olive tree; like the waves of the sea when you look down upon them from a height; like an emerald; like the sun on a green hill which is yet clouded—like nothing he had seen or known in England. Ransack the language as he might, words failed him" (Orlando 47). Orlando here relies on figural language to represent Sasha, inviting an alternative linguistic technique of representation, and ever more directly mentions language's failure. Thus, throughout the novel, Orlando also attempts to reject the Edwardian writing conventions through impressionistic characterization.

The use of alternative and ambiguous literary techniques is also seen on a discursive level, reflecting Woolf's desire to reject the masculine, Edwardian literary tradition like Orlando while also reflecting themes from the text. As expressed earlier,

Woolf uses modernist techniques like stream of consciousness, impressionism, and figurative speech, indicating a feminine style of writing. On an even deeper textual level, though, her prose invites oscillatory, endless, and nonlinear readings that attempt to surpass the limitation of the male literary tradition and reject the rigid boundaries of self and text. For example, one sentence reads, "Grass, the power seemed to say, going back with a ruler such as governesses use to the beginning, is all right; the hanging cups of fritillaries—admirable; the snaky flower—a thought, strong from a lady's pen, perhaps, but Wordsworth no doubt, sanctions it; but—girls?" (Orlando 265). The frequent disruptions in this syntax due to the heavy use of commas, semicolons, and hyphens, encourages the re-reading of this sentence. Additionally, the reader is encouraged to move around and remove words to make sense of this sentence. The non-linearity this evokes suggests a feminine style of writing while also mirroring themes of identity and gender in the text. For example, Scholar Jane de Gay states that "The prose explorations of *Orlando* reveal a body which contains its own alterity, loosening the boundaries between self and other" (42). This disruption in boundaries through discursive language thus marks Woolf's transgression of the male literary tradition and how this transgression can reveal Woolf's authorial messages.

By the end of the novel, we see that the style of women's writing is successfully achieved by Orlando. As Orlando begins to finish her poem (notably during the Victorian Era rather than the Edwardian era), the text states, "she plunged her pen neck deep into the ink. To her enormous surprise, there was no explosion" (Orlando 264). Pens are phallic objects (and pen is the first part of the word penis), reflecting Orlando's possession of a male dominated language and the reclaiming of this language through

women's experiences. This lack of eruption coinciding with her ability to finish her poem demonstrates Orlando's ability to surpass the limitation of the male literary tradition. Again, "The wild goose….'" (Orlando 329) at the end of the novel alludes to this new style of writing that emphasizes the elusiveness of language, which is exemplified through the use of an ellipsis that implies there is always more that could be said. It is Orlando's ability to understand this elusiveness that allows her to move beyond the male literary tradition.

The goose hovering between discourse and story (where it is unclear if the goose is within the diegetic world or solely a figurative entity) also suggests that Woolf successfully surpasses the limitation of the male literary tradition. This is emphasized not only by the goose's symbolism previously explored but also by Woolf's heavy use of stream of consciousness in the last chapter of the text. This dependence on interiority and a more fragmented, impressionistic style of writing thus brings forward a text that challenges traditional literary techniques. The gaining of the feminine literary voice, for both Orlando and Woolf, is further symbolized by the novel ending in 1928, the year women in England gained suffrage. Thus, *Orlando* ends on a note of women's liberation—both in terms of political freedom and linguistic freedom.

Writing the Embodied Self

> "Something beautiful fills the mind yet invites the search for something beyond itself, something larger or something of the same scale with which it needs to be brought into relation" (21).
>
> —Elaine Scarry*, On Beauty and Being Just*

In her book *On Beauty and Being Just*, Elaine Scarry suggests that beauty incites, and often requires, replication, further stating that beauty "makes us draw it, take photographs of it, or describe it to other people. Sometimes it gives rise to exact replication and other times to resemblances and still other times to things whose connection to the original site of inspiration is unrecognizable" (3). In reading *Orlando*, working with it, and being present with it, I found myself having an aesthetic, emotional experience that demanded a new work in response. Beyond Woolf's piercing metaphorical expression and Orlando's inspiring efforts as a poet, I was mostly drawn in by the way Orlando's body speaks—both in response to internal desire and external limitations. For example, her sex change demonstrates a certain freedom I often find myself craving. One that grants her an escape from only having a single-gendered experience. Despite this change, sociopolitical expectations continue to limit Orlando. It is Orlando's trials of womanhood that most propelled me to think about my relationship to my gender and its cultural power. Thus, within me there is a compulsion to respond and delineate the various limitations I have faced, explore the ways my body has erupted, and modernize and personalize issues of womanhood. Of course, my work deviates from *Orlando* a great deal in terms of voice, style, and content, but in it, there is still a shadow of *Orlando*, an echo of Woolf.

Woolf took up life writing in an experimental way. She rejected the traditional biography in works like *Orlando*, while still drawing inspiration from real subjects, like Vita Sackville-West, and placing such subjects in the zeitgeist of the time. Additionally, she included herself in her own literature in variable degrees, her own life often shaping her essays, novels, and short stories (Mesquita). As scholar Hermione Lee has suggested, "Virginia Woolf was an autobiographer who never published an autobiography." By subtly including herself in her works, Woolf created connections between the public and private and the social and the sexual, while also blurring the boundaries of fact and fiction. Despite the ways Woolf concealed herself (and others like Sackville-West) within her work, her fidelity to fictional and impersonal life writing reflected her frustration with the autobiographical and biographical genre of her period.

This dissatisfaction with these genres is evidenced in works like her 1929 essay, *A Room of One's Own*. In the essay, Woolf imaginatively reconstructs the untold lives of fictional women and points to social expectations as a primary limit on women's free expression. Despite the hesitancy she shows regarding the "modern" autobiography within the work, her incessant push for women to write, and how she conveys this message, reflects an interest in experimental life writing. Her complex relationship to the autobiographical form is best conveyed in a letter to a friend, where she states, "Very few women yet have written truthful autobiographies. It is my favorite form of reading" (Lee). Thus, works like *Orlando* allude to the complexity she felt in representing the self and other, truth and reality.

The desire for embodied writing was a rallying cry for second-wave feminists. Helen Cixous's 1975 seminal essay "The Laugh of Medusa" links corporeality with a feminist style of writing that deviates from traditional phallocentric rhetoric, calling this style of writing *écriture féminine*. Cixous argues that writing is a tool of female advocacy and that women must use their bodies as a medium of communication to bridge the gap between the physical self and authorship and to "explode" the discourse of man (Cixous 887). Despite being written decades earlier, Woolf echoes similar sentiments in *Orlando*. The text suggests a type of corporeal writing when stating, "For it would seem—her case provided it—that we write, not with the fingers, but with the whole person" (Orlando 243). Through an analysis of the diegetic and discursive eruptions in *Orlando*, it is easy to notice the emphasis Woolf placed on corporeality.

Woolf's interest, but complicated relationship, with corporeality and life writing is further expressed in her unfinished autobiographical essay "A Sketch of the Past." The essay brings up the shame she associated with her body. She directly calls to this stating, "I must have been ashamed or afraid of my own body" (Sketch 69), while also reflecting her distance from it, when stating, "Yet this did not prevent me from feeling ecstasies and raptures spontaneously and intensely and without any shame or the least sense of guilt, so long as they were disconnected with my own body" (Sketch 68). Her ambivalence about women's writing, is thus, in part, a response to the shame linked to her own body, as well as her awareness that a woman within a public space was made available for denigration (Hite). As a result, there is an expressed challenge within "A Sketch of the Past," concerning Woolf recovering her body, perhaps alluding to her propensity to generate a particular kind of corporeality in her female characters

(Mesquita), such as that observed in *Orlando*, characters who could safely represent female eroticism without facing social repercussions (Hite). Despite the corporeal tension in Woolf's writings, Scholar Teresa Fulker states that "critics who – with good reason – have foregrounded Woolf's anxiety about and distance from the corporeal have neglected ways in which she shows, both in her fiction and non-fiction, the experience of the body to be crucial to the construction of consciousness" (5). Therefore, there is no doubt that the body was an integral mode of communication in Woolf's work.

During the 1970s, the U.S. feminist art movement brought focus to women's bodies as active and conceptual, while French feminists simultaneously pursued ways of expressing women's bodies and subjectivity through writing (Fournier 11). The multifaceted expression of womanhood and selfhood has since been refined and can best be revealed through the contemporary term "autotheory," which reflects the second-wave feminist mantra "the personal is political." While autotheory began emerging at the beginning of the twenty-first century to describe writing that blended autobiography with theory and philosophy, the term was popularized by Maggie Nelson's 2015 book *The Argonauts (*Fournier 7). The multivalent genre of autotheory is the framework for this creative piece, as it expresses the need to bring lived experiences into the academic and theoretical by conflating the creative and critical. As autotheory writer Arianne Zwartjes states, "Autotheory steps in and intentionally contaminates all that theoretical purity with the messy, the wet, the dank of the hidden: of sex and of body."

Scholar Lauren Fournier defines the genre as "the integration of the auto or "self" with philosophy or theory, often in ways that are direct, performative, or self-

aware" (6). Autotheory is a way to address theory in conjunction with subjective embodiment and lived experiences, something that Fournier notes as especially relevant in spaces that "live on the edges of art and academia" (7), like feminist, queer, and BIPOC spaces. Zwartjes suggests that autotheory "offers both subversion and transcendence of the boundaries around identity, around genre, around discipline and ways of knowing," making space for more complex conversations about the authority of theory, the scholarly, and objectivity and our desire to hierarchize these traditionally masculine modes of knowledge.

Beyond autotheory's relationship to both autobiography and theory, an important facet of the genre is an emphasis on the body, more specifically, bringing embodied experience in dialogue with academic writings and reflections. Part of this is a reclaiming of bodies and identities that have been silenced and oppressed. Another facet of it is the continued push against the male-dominated literary and academic fields. Both Fournier and Zwartjes note Descartes' dualism, or a mind-body split, and how women's bodies have thus been at odds with the rational brain. Autotheory's stress on the body rejects this separated mind and body, and therefore a masculine mode of knowledge, instead, seeking the mind and body's integration.

Part of what makes autotheory relevant within my general narratological frame is its emphasis on discourse as a way to bring out deeply personal experiences, perspectives, and emotions. As demonstrated by *Orlando*, the discursive carries an ability to surpass various limitations (one to note concerning autotheory is memory). The unique quality of rending experience through description, emotion, and things that possess a subjective power provides, in a sense, a more holistic truth, one that strips

away the supposed objectivity of traditional theory—a type of writing that seems to again relate to Woolf's modernism. Writer Jen Soriano coins the term "intersectional form," which is approximate to autotheory, and a type of writing filled with layers and gaps, that "breaks away from the confines of traditional narrative arc and instead moves through fragments and strands and strips, conveying multiple viewpoints to reject homogenous truth in favor of a more complex reality." Thus, in many ways, the manipulated nature of discourse, the things added to our stories, promote accuracy and prove to be necessary.

The final argument for integrating autotheory into a more traditional academic work is its political and subversive power. In her 2022 book *Body Work: The Radical Power of Personal Narrative*, Melissa Febos declares that "The resistance to memoirs about trauma is always in part—and often nothing but—a resistance to movements for social justice" (18). Writing the self is inherently redemptive both for the self and the larger society. It wields a tool of personal power while also revealing inequalities and the emotions rooted in unequal relationships and systems. Febos continues to state that

> It is not gauche to write about trauma. It is subversive. The stigma of victimhood is a timeworn tool of the oppressive powers to gaslight the people they subjugate into believing that by naming their disempowerment they are being dramatic, whining, attention-grabbing, or else beating a dead horse. By convincing us to police our own and one another's stories, they have enlisted us in the project of our own continued disempowerment (20-21).

The concept of trauma can additionally be explored with Freud in mind. Freud proposed that the body speaks through hysterical symptoms in response to repressed trauma. While psychoanalytic conversations only hang in the background of my academic essay, my personal essay brings Freud's earliest ideas of hysteria into

conversation with my own experiences more directly. The idea of both Freud's eruptive body and Orlando's eruptive body creates an interesting bridge between trauma and narratology, as it brings about questions on how discursive mediation impacts the way one tells stories of trauma and how personal perceptions, experiences, and feelings become part of a past story to complicate truth. Therefore, both narratology and Freudian psychology creep into this personal study.

In her book *The Newly Born Woman*, Hélène Cixous asks "What woman is not Dora?" (47), referencing Freud's canonical case study on hysteria. I want to follow this up with a new question: What woman is not Orlando? What woman is not torn between the cultural expectations of their assigned gender category and a desire to free themselves from such hampering roles? What woman has not erupted? These are just a few questions I urge you to ponder, so we may collectively think about how the body communicates and why it erupts.

Autotheoretical Reflections: Sick to Death

> "'I am growing up,' she thought, taking her taper. 'I am losing my illusions, perhaps to acquire new ones'" (175).
>
> -–Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*

A Quick Sick Fuck

> "'If this is love,' said Orlando to herself, looking at the Archduke on the other side of the fender, and now from the woman's point of view, 'there is something highly ridiculous about it'" (Orlando 179).

There is a sour taste in my mouth. I feel it fermenting my throat, slithering down and filling my stomach, tainting my intestines, my tendons, my toes. My tongue is so tart. Everything gets bit by the burn. It feels foreign and wrong. It's all I can focus on. Wiggling, wet, vinegary tongue meeting tongue. He removes his from mine and looks at my eyes. "You have such a nice ass," he says. I feel kind of sick. "Thanks," I respond, accidentally saying the least sexy thing in the world.

My mind wanders again—did I turn the stove off? No, I didn't, I think. My nose can smell something burning, like carcinogenic toast. Maybe it's not a smell I'm registering but some other disturbance taking charge of my body. Maybe I'm having a stroke, I think. Maybe it's his tongue pushing the acid deeper and deeper down my throat.

He thrusts himself into my docile body. I imagine myself as him. What it must feel like to want to be inside something—so powerful and free. Driven by the pleasure of rhythm and pulsation. Every fiber of his being exploding with excitement while sickness shackles me to the bed. "Your body is mine," he says, coming. Finally, I can go check on the stove.

I run, naked, swift as a gazelle. Bounding to the burner. When I arrive, the dial is turned to zero; its knob is straight and narrow. This brings me sweet, sweet relief. Semen drips down my leg. “Fuck,” is my first thought. “Gross,” is my second.

In the bathroom mirror, this naked woman in front of me has just committed a sin, stolen a life, dodged a stroke, and ensured the house doesn’t burn down. She is only 17. She has a big future ahead of her.

At this age, my legs are long, lean, and lady-like. They will never look this nice again, but at 17, I don’t think like that. I have big eyes—I call them bug eyes. The boys in my eighth-grade class called them blow job eyes. Now, they are puffy like nipples.

My eyes are puffy because I spent last night crying about a Facebook request I never answered. A boy in my class had sent it three months ago. A week from last night he died. His heart stopped working in the middle of the night. No one knows why it happened—probably unlucky genetics—but it just did. We never talked, but I know him because he spent a lot of time dancing. He would do it in front of the whole school. Through the hallways, at big assemblies, during lunch. People would laugh, but he didn’t seem to care. They all called him dancin’ Zach because all he did was dance. Until he died.

Before fucking, I spent my morning at work, setting up tables and unlocking doors so that old people could drink their coffee after church. Every Sunday I go there at 8 a.m. I open the same doors and unfold the same tables while the old people ask me the same questions, like “Do you know where the piano key is?” and “Can you clean up our grandson's vomit in the pews?” When I put up the tables, I often like to wonder if the old people are happy or not, especially the couples who come in early to make the

coffee so they can rest assured God is saving their souls. I often think they aren't happy, just repressed, numb. Then I sit in the office while the word of God booms on the loudspeaker, shaking my body, filling my throat.

I work so that I can save money for college because my mom can't afford to save that money for me. When I get home from work, she is off somewhere, probably walking someone's dog to make extra money—she often does so a few times a week. That's why I can spend the whole afternoon fucking.

But now I just feel off and my stomach is curdling and there is still semen on my leg. I think of Zach again—not because of the semen—but because I feel off and his heart randomly stopped, which reminds me of my own heart.

Back in the bathroom, I curl my fingers around my neck and hold still so I can feel my pulse. *Thump thump thump*. My heart beats fast and hard. Maybe it's the four cookies I ate during the church's coffee hour. A sugar-rush induced heart attack or perhaps a diabatic coma. But I eat too many cookies every Sunday, and I never feel this sick. Unless this is the week to push me, my blood sugar, and my arteries over the edge. It's hard to not think about these things when my mother has poorly managed diabetes and my father crippling hypertension. Their destiny has always felt like my own.

I try to squeeze my thoughts into a ball that can be bounced away, but the stirring is lingering more than I would like it to. I rack my brain to remember everything that could have made me feel this way. What I ate, who I saw, what I touched. Maybe it was the alcoholic man I walked past on the way to work who vomited behind a trash can. Maybe he tainted the air I breathed in and now his sickness dominates me, slimming my throat.

Breath in for four seconds, hold for four, breathe out for four. I remember what my therapist has told me. Focus on your breathing, I keep repeating to myself.

But dear God I am having a heart attack or something right now. And how long have I been in the bathroom for now? He must think I'm crazy or taking a shit. Which would be more embarrassing? Both feel like failures of my femininity. I pinch my skin. For a second all I can feel is the pain of the pinch and not my ever-increasing heart rate or the bile burning my throat.

I take another breath. When I look down at my hands, they are garish, they are not mine. Move your hand, my mind tells me. Watch your hand move, my mind continues. The hand in front of me floats up and down in slow motion. I command it, but I don't feel as though I am the one controlling it, like some god up in the sky is moving my parts for me. This is it. I am joining dancin' Zach in the heavens. I breathe fast. Really fast, until I can't feel my hands at all.

I hope it's a curable illness, at least, I think. I am reminded of a book about a woman whose brain-attacking autoimmune disease mimicked psychosis. No one could figure it out for months. Maybe I'm next. Maybe my brain is getting eaten alive. Can I be saved? I try to manually breathe in and out.

When I finally stand up to look in the mirror, I don't recognize myself at all. I can't keep it in. Hot tears burn my blow job eyes. I let out a little noise, almost like a cat begging for milk.

A knock on the door.

"You okay in there," he says.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I respond. Not because I am, but because I don’t have the words or knowledge to say anything else.

“Almost that time of the month again, huh?” he says, having noticed my sobs.

“Must be.” I force a smile at the stranger in the mirror. Happy girls are the prettiest girls. My hands are still without feeling.

“You almost ready for round two?” he asks.

The Dissociated Feminist

“I'm sick to death of this particular self. I want another” (Orlando 308).

I was pretty dissociated at that point in my life and a majority of my high school years blurred together. As *Orlando* mentions, “Memory is the seamstress, and a capricious one at that” (78). I often find myself unsure about what happened or when it happened—it is mainly uncomfortable fragments that remain.

Explosive cries, like the one in the bathroom, were infrequent. When they came, they came with a mutinous, unraveling power and in the most inappropriate places, like classrooms and bathrooms.

At 17, dissociation felt, and in many ways continues to feel, like resistance. I lacked the knowledge to recognize that it made me a gelatinous being ready for submission, ready to bend and contort for the pleasure of others, something which I at least realize five year later.

While I believe this dissociation is, in part, a response to personal trauma, I think it also stems from a wider social trauma that all women unwillingly face. But our

awareness of oppression seems to have failed to provide collective awakening; instead, it is limply driving us to complacency.

In her 2019 essay "The Smartest Women I Know Are All Dissociating," writer Emmeline Clein coins the term "dissociative feminism," defining it as an "interiorizing our existential aches and angst, smirking knowingly at them, and numbing ourselves to maintain our nonchalance." This feminist is too tired for self-improvement. She is jaded. The nihilistic protagonist is her role model; the one who leaves her body at the story's climax. Her nonchalance is a virtue. She is the inverse of the girlboss. Both self-destructive and elegant. She jokes about how she needs a lobotomy. She is tortured—enough to be interesting but not enough to be unappealing. Her femininity, in many ways, defines her, but only externally.

Of course, I know this is an ineffective mode of opposition. We are all just sleepwalking away from the revolution and leaving those in positions of lesser privilege behind. But I would be lying if I didn't admit that leaving one's body provides an addictive semblance of freedom. And even more captivating is the belief that jaded femininity can conquer and replace the eternal trope of the female hysteric. A trope, I deeply fear.

Becoming a Woman Part I

> "Orlando had become a woman. In every other aspect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity" (Orlando 138).

I am eight years old and staying at my grandfather's in Arizona with my dad and sister. It's Monday—well Tuesday—when I wake up at 3 a.m. to find my father dancing

around the pool. He oscillates between danger and safety, moving toward the slippery tile-lined edges before retreating to vaster slabs of concrete that bring him closer to the house. At any moment, it seems as though he will fall into the water for his christening to begin.

My sister and I congregate near the glass door, close enough to watch without our presence being realized. Whiskey and beer bottles sit on the bar next to us, and the air curdles with the scent of dark liquor.

"Is dad okay?" I ask my sister. "Should we go outside and ask him if he needs help?" She doesn't respond and we cannot bring ourselves to transgress the glass door. In the beginning of her essay "The White Album," Joan Didion begins with the line, "We tell ourselves stories in order to live." My sister and I tell ourselves that my father is cleaning the pool at 3 a.m. We continue to digest this story until he falls into the warm concrete, fast asleep or dead—but we do not dare to check which.

Without knowing what to do next, we huddle in the dining room, crying together, tears creeping into the corners of our mouths like a final taste of childhood. We call our mother over 50 times with no answer, hoping she can confirm our story. Forced to self-soothe, we eventually fall asleep in my dead grandmother's room of dolls and matches—three things that made me feel even less safe. It becomes harder to maintain our story of sleepwalking after we see the bruises speckled on my father's back. It becomes nearly impossible to believe it after we sleep at my aunt's house for the rest of the week, we stop living with my dad, my mother never keeps her phone on silent, and I never go back to Arizona.

Two days later, on Thursday, I vomit so hard that the week's pain—whether it is the expired juice I drank fermenting in my stomach or my father's drunk sleepwalking––finally erupts out of me. What is in the toilet is a mixture of pool water, one of my grandfather's Booster drinks, orange juice and bile. To me, it looks like a bowl of liquidized highlighter. I cry in the bathroom, adding salty tears to the soup-like mess sitting in the toilet. When I walk out, I say nothing.

I tend to reflect on this moment in my literary experiments. It starts with a slam poem that I read to my Adult Children of Alcoholics Support Group in high school (God, grant me the serenity to accept that poem sucks, the courage to have read it anyway, and the wisdom to never read slam poetry again). It continues at the start of college as I press my pen hard into paper and write metaphorical verse and cathartic unsent letters to my estranged father, and it drags on now with this personal essay. It will likely travel with me for the rest of my literary life because it is my first moment of true womanhood, my wellspring of feminine anger, my fruitless search for meaning.

At the age of eight, I wear a Bobby Jack t-shirt and Old Navy capris in my very own working-class debutante coming out under the stifling Arizona sun. I can no longer afford to cry in her grandfather's dining room over an answered phone call or in the bathroom over unfamiliar vomit. I am transported into a new reality where I live and breathe as a woman. This new air I begin to breathe matches my duties—by this age, I am folding my own laundry, making my own breakfast, and huddling at the street corner to hop onto a bus and take myself to school. "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," Simone de Beauvoir famously proclaimed. Here, I believe, I really started to become that woman.

There is a little fragment of me left in Arizona that I frequently visit. She is waiting to come home but has yet to figure out how to move through space and time. *Orlando* notes that time "makes animals and vegetables bloom and fade with amazing punctuality, has no such simple effect upon the mind of man" (98). This discrepancy between time of the mind and time of the clock meant Orlando "would go out after breakfast a man of thirty and come home to dinner a man of fifty-five at least" (99). I can walk into my apartment as a 22-year-old, but when my roommate stumbles into the house with boozy breath and my stomach begins to ache, I return to the age of eight and I lock my bedroom door.

After my week in Arizona, I begin to spend a strange amount of time examining where the trashcan nests in a new room in case a soupy highlighter explosion happens again. I read too much shitty fiction in an earnest effort to escape—this phantom for reality acts as a lovely compliment to my deadly case of denial. I fall in love with praise from my fourth-grade male teacher—spending my free time learning how to spell words like "antidisestablishmentarianism" and writing purple prose to impress him. I judge the kids in class who I spot picking their nose during independent study time. I judge the kids who still shit their pants—sorry Regina—even harder. I am the mature child adults tell secrets to and fellow classmates talk about blowjobs with.

Becoming a Woman Part II

> "'THE TRUTH! at which Orlando woke. 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 confess– –he was a woman" (Orlando 137).

Three year after I left Arizona, I wake up to find myself transforming into a woman again. It comes on with the force of 1,000 paper lanterns—delicate and ablaze. I lack the knowledge to know it is beginning, which later feels disappointing considering my underlying belief that some intrinsic awareness would have erupted out of my deepest parts the moment it began. If only Barbie had gotten her period. Instead, I change my bloody underwear every hour and shoved their mystery into the back of my closet in a secretive—and almost ritualistic—fashion. As blood drips down my leg, I insist this novel brownness is an apathetic, accidental, and relentless shitting-of-the-pants. That is, until reconnaissance follows two days later, where I realize that the mess is, in fact, coming from my vagina. The discovery parallels that of peeking into the metal boxes hanging in the women's bathroom. It is a kind of disgusting intrigue.

"You're a woman now," my mother delights after I tell her. She hands me a cumbersome sanitary napkin to be worn like a badge of femininity. Yes, I think. I *am* a woman now. I didn't feel any more like a woman, though. All I feel is my abdomen sitting heavy in me, my uterus crawling around, trying to gnaw its way out. I also feel dirty. Why is the blood brown? I wonder. Had I failed at my coming of age? Later on, the feelings of pain and disgust seemed to only intensify, which, in turn, made me feel like less of a woman.

The first year of having a period is like chewing a pack of fruit gum. The first piece is exciting, its sweet exoticism almost arousing. You welcome the next piece, its sugary memory compelling you, only to recognize you now know the flavor, which renders it slightly more disappointing. After a few more, its novelty is lost on you, you are now monotonously chewing flavorless rubber. The rest of the pieces end up sitting

in your purse for too long—they practically disintegrate in your mouth, without wanting anyone to see the yellow goo melting between your teeth, you swallow it down. And by the end, you are shitting yourself from all the sorbitol and you never want to buy a damn pack of fruit gum again. After the first year of having my period, I was sick of it.

Before long, I had learned that the world of menstruation is a world of burdens. You miss events and school because of pain. You submit to the unwieldy weight of a cotton body taking up space inside you. You remember to carry a quarter in your backpack at all times, because, for some stupid reason, menstrual products are still not at all accessible, so if you forget that quarter, you are likely screwed. You endure the tiresome concealment of pain, terrible, evil, pain, along with the concealment of the blood itself. I quickly learned that it was a faux pas to wear white pants on a day of menstruation. I learned that changing your tampon an hour late opened the door for toxic shock syndrome after reading it on the bag of a menstrual product box—the hypochondriac in me loved to mull over this possibility. And the worst of all, it is used as an excuse for emotional and physical discomfort—not only by me—but by others.

Last year, I was abroad when I developed monstrous abdominal pain, so getting gynecological help was nearly impossible unless I wanted to pay a pretty penny, which, of course, I didn't have. "I don't want to assume, but are you sure it's not your time of the month?" My partner's father asked after I had been unable to leave my bed for several days. I nodded in agreement with him. "It probably is." Upon returning home, I found out it was a ruptured ovarian cyst.

Once I started having sex, my period was an even greater burden because all I could think about was how I could get pregnant. I took my birth control with meticulous

care. I bought pregnancy tests and would take them if I was one day late. My mother's words, "I had dreams I gave up so I could be there for you," continuously rang in the back of my head.

And despite the ways my period has burdened and disgusted me, I am a willing captive to it, and I was from the start. Perhaps because it seemingly affirmed my maturity or maybe because it provided an explanation for why my body was a spectacle as it swelled and developed into an algal display.

A Flawless Performance

> "No passion is stronger in the breast of a man than the desire to make others believe as he believes" (Orlando 149).

I have been a woman and I have been many other things.

Before the age of eight, I was an animal sitting in the grass, ripping calloused hands into backyard fruit and shoving its ripe flesh into a mouth full of pulpy, crooked teeth. I worshiped the damp ground while searching for worms and beetles (and avoiding snakes—one of my main fears at the time), only to domesticate them in asphyxiating glass jars. I created concoctions of cornstarch and water to be squeezed between sticky fingers like a sensory scientist. I was a purveyor of the finest goods, picking daffodils and daisies and selling them for 10 cents to lucky neighbors. I was a dancer, liberated like the worms and beetles, where my studio, too, was my backyard. I played dress-up and video games and basketball.

Before I was 8, I knew messiness and curiosity and little about beauty. I felt freedom deep within my bones; it was the constituents of my parts. I knew who I was—

not in a philosophical sense—but in the simplest, most enriching sense, where I defined myself on my own terms. I was both a maker of meaning and a bearer of it.

I cannot pinpoint the exact moment when I began to suffocate. I think the process was rather slow, rather subtle. At first, I didn't even feel it happening. I do, however, remember being told I talked too much and too loudly. I remember being hugged too long by my friend's father. I remember being spied on by the neighbor's son—who was 10 years older than me—as I nakedly pretended to be a mermaid in my plastic backyard pool. I remember how my friends and I would get together after school and dance like the women we had seen in movies. How I froze the first time someone grabbed my ass. How my sister's friend told me I looked like a man with my unibrow, and for whatever reason, his words catalyzed a deep sense of shame, so I rewarded him and plucked my unibrow until my follicles were bloody. I remember the first time I looked up how much a boob job cost—something I planned to save for.

By the time I turned 13, I didn't know my body at all, but I had others telling me what I should do with it. I had boys asking me for nude photos, and a middle school boyfriend demanding I write him sex stories about us to masturbate to. I hadn't even had sex. I had an old male teacher telling me I needed to make my Instagram private because I had posted an innocuous photo of myself in jeans and bra, and there were "creeps on the internet." My older sister's guy friends threw questions at me like "It's so gross if a girl doesn't shave her pubes. You shave your pubes, right?" and "When you get turned on, do you get so wet it drips down your leg?"

I had to constantly step out of my body and imagine how others were perceiving me. How men were perceiving me. Their words a gospel I followed as I had nothing to tether me to a saner reality.

Among the persuasive sneers of boys and men, I was learning about the Christian martyrs of the Crusades, and I was learning how to be 13. I would wake up at 7 a.m. to curl my hair and coat my face in makeup. I would put on the tightest pair of jeans and the thinnest sweater that revealed where my bra lay. I would look into the mirror and make my eyebrows even thinner. I would pop the pimples on my chin, pick the crust on my lips, pare off my body hair, and push up my sensitive breasts. I was a nauseating beast getting ready for a runway show. It felt like a nasty disguise.

Of course, no one was happy at this time. I later found out a quarter of my friends had eating disorders, another quarter had some other mental disorder, and half had both. We were just following each other, a herd of wild girls upholding a cult of conventional feminine beauty led by a bunch of boys telling us we must shave our pubes.

I have tried to leave this cult of conventional feminine beauty in my more recent years. I no longer wear makeup or shave my body or curl my hair. My jeans are loose and my shirts baggy, as I try to stuff away some of the evidence that I am a woman. I let the laundry pile up, I pay for the dates, and I fantasize about being my partner when he penetrates me. But it is hard to feel loveable once you fully commit to the act of gender dissolution, especially after being force-fed rules about what I must do with my body for my entire life. So, it feels easier to lose a pound when I gain one than to be fat, as I worry that leaving every part of my gendered performance will open up another world

of social abuse and ostracization. *Orlando* says that "At one and the same time therefore, society is everything and society is nothing. Society is the most powerful concoction in the world and society has no existence whatsoever" (193-4). I constantly find myself stuck between these two poles of thought—unsure whether or not I am enslaved by my gender performance or freed by it.

I believe that part of my failure in reaching a feminist driven self-actualization is that I continue to put on an (un)emotional performance. When I meet new people and our conversations take a deeper turn, I usually disclose that I have a lot of mental health issues. "But you are so put together," they will usually say (or some variation of this). I usually am. I exert all my energy keeping those the most human parts of myself stuffed away in public so that my audience believes I have better control over myself than most women. Plus, it means I can also be tortured—enough to be interesting, but not enough to be unappealing.

In her book *Everybody* Olivia Laing describes freedom as "finding ways to live without being hampered, hobbled, damaged or actively destroyed by a constant reinforcement of ideas about what is permitted for the category of body to which you've been assigned." While emotional eruptions from women seem to be far more socially permissible than such eruptions from men, feminine hyperemotionality leads to a procedure of othering. When I cry it seems to reaffirm that I am in some way different from a man, and thus, inherently lesser. So, I tend to tuck away my tears and try to straddle the masculine.

The Hysterical, Erupting Self

> "Meanwhile, she became conscious, as she stood at the window, of an extraordinary tingling and vibration all over her, as if she were made of a thousand wires upon which some breeze or errand fingers were playing scales. Now her toes tingled; now her marrow. She had the queerest sensations about the thigh bones. Her hairs seemed to erect themselves. Her arms sang and twanged as the telegraph wires would be singing and twanging in twenty years or so" (Orlando 239).

In May 2012, almost a year after it had started, my period didn't come. Instead, I awoke at 6 a.m. and began throwing up and shitting blood. I had a nasty case of food poisoning, but it was over in a day. In August 2012, I woke up to a familiar pain, and two hours later, I was praying over a toilet. Unfortunately, this time I was camping, which is not the ideal environment to be puking your guts out in. Twenty-four hours later, I was healthy again. By this time, my period still hadn't come, but I chalked it up to being a normal ebb and flow of transitioning to womanhood.

In November 2012, I woke up with the same feeling and prepared for the storm that lay on the horizon. I took every pill I could get my hands on to suppress it: Pepto Bismuth, Tums, my mother's naturopathic antibiotic, Tylenol, and swallowed it all down while thinking of how bad my luck was when it came to eating expired things. Twenty-four hours later I was still sick, and after deliberating with her psychic (who scammed us for thousands of dollars, I later learned), my mother decided it was time to take me to the hospital.

"How bad is your pain on a scale of one to ten," they asked me upon arrival. My stomach felt as though an animal had dug its claws into the lining or an arsonist had doused it in gasoline and lit it on fire. I knew it was a ten because nothing had even

come close to the pain I felt. I gritted my teeth and said it was an eight. I was diagnosed with an E. coli infection that had been harboring in my body for nine months. “If you hadn’t brought her in sooner, it would have gone septic,” the doctor said to my mom. “She could have died.” Hallelujah for psychics, I thought. The next month my period came again with more force than before.

My body started doing weird things after the E. coli infection. I could hardly eat or sleep. I developed hives that lasted for months with no known cause. I went through a full week of feeling like ants were crawling under my skin. I had to run to the bathroom every class period because of the revolt in my intestines—its unspeakable nature producing painful humiliation. The never-ending acid reflux started here too. I was bursting out of every orifice.

In *Studies on Hysteria* Freud says, “Hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences.” It was clear I was unable to move beyond what had happened. I convinced myself I had infections of every organ, parasites, appendicitis, mononucleosis, cirrhosis, various tumors, and every autoimmune disease. I was obsessed with every somatic sensation, and often went to the ER over these sensations, even calling an ambulance once because I believed I had gone crazy. Every time I went to the doctor, they told me the same thing: I had an anxiety disorder. So, I spent the majority of my down time typing my symptoms into google. I became obsessed with a label, a diagnosis, a way to assign meaning to my suffering.

And when no one would listen to or help me, I experimented with ways to control the explosion.

My first solution was to drown it out. This began on a 12-hour journey to Canada. I sat in the backseat of my family's minivan and nothing felt right. Thinking this feeling could be dehydration, I took a sip of water, and after 30 minutes, I had nursed a 20-ounce bottle of water dry, quickly after that, my sister's and my mother's were also gone. So we stopped for more water at a gas station, and we stopped to pee a lot, but the thirst didn't go away. By the time we reached Canada, I had consumed almost 25 glasses of water. I was an animal, a marathon runner, a castaway: I wanted more. This thirst followed me for the next few years, and while I did worry about water intoxication, I felt if I didn't keep drinking water, I would die first of thirst.

My second solution was starvation. I thought this could control both my intestinal explosions and anxiety explosions. It felt instinctual and easy. My appetite was already low and what I did eat, I was hardly digesting. My sick brain craved a sick body. Often, I would go to school and snack on a cookie or apple from the cafeteria around mid-morning, then I would walk home drunk from hunger and finally eat a proper meal around 4 p.m. Not eating came to me so naturally. Everything I ate tasted flat and like plastic. I had dreams of being a young bird whose mother forced regurgitated food down its throat, a photosynthesizing plant, a rock on the beach. I ate to survive. I did not eat for pleasure. By the time I was in high school, I had withered away like a delicate flower. I went to the doctor, and they continued to tell me I had an anxiety disorder, that seemed to have only gotten worse, but they also pumped me full of high-calorie protein drinks.

And at last, I tried bloodletting. I wanted to expel everything before it could explode. Toward the end of middle school, I popped the blade of my cheap razor and

tried cutting different parts of my body—my wrists, hips, thighs, places I could both hide and reveal. It was a release I could be in control of and a lame attempt at romanticizing pain. No one ever said anything about it, except for one girl I hardly knew. “At least I don’t cut myself,” she said to me after I had called her a bitch for outing my gay friend. After that, I felt sort of embarrassed about it, so I just stopped. The scars only rise to the surface when my arms get hot.

When none of my solutions worked, they decided to dump psychiatric medication into me. When Lexapro didn’t work, it became Prozac and then Zoloft and then Celexa and Klonopin and Neurontin and so on. Prozac triggered another bout of hives, the Klonopin a manic episode, and the Zoloft took me to the E.R. with a terrible panic attack. All the sensations I felt continued, and in many cases, became worse, which I guess made sense as they had prescribed me things to suppress my feelings, not my sensations.

Around this time, I stopped writing for fun. I tried to draw pictures and discovered it was not my forte. When I did write it would be lists of things—like what I enjoyed, what made me happy, what made me sad. I made lists so I wouldn’t forget parts of myself. But I didn’t have the words beyond that to express my discomfort, so I stopped writing anything cohesive until late high school.

Freud hypothesized that hysterics suffer from reminiscences.He also said that hysterical symptoms disappeared when the memory of the event which provoked the symptoms was brought to light. After “the patient had described that event in the greatest possible detail and had put the affect into words,” he said. Around the age of 16 or 17, I saw a specialist who confirmed that there was nothing new to diagnose me with

but affirmed that I was clearly in pain and that my E. coli infection had been traumatic. She promised me that she was still there to help—to give me medication if I wanted it and to refer me to other specialists.

After that, something clicked. I felt less crazy. (It probably was all in my head if being listened to and validated was part of the cure.) I started to spend more time writing about what had happened, rather than typing an endless list of symptoms into Google. As I started to draw a narrative from it—in my creative writing class, in my free time, in therapy, much like I have here—I slowly saw myself getting better.

I think putting trauma into words can be helpful, and it helped me, but only so far. At times, my body still acts out in distressing ways, which brings back the memory of sickness and childhood helplessness. Writing and talking about these memories helps lessen their power within my mind, but the memory continues to exist in my body; thus, in some ways, verbalizing is an inefficacious cure. What cemented my recovery turned out to be movement. I have had to teach my body that it can do more than exist in a sick state. It sounds cheesy, but it's true, that great empowerment sprang from using my body to run, climb, dance, play, fuck.

In late high school, once the worst of my sickness was over, I felt a drive to figure out why it had happened. I worried that if I couldn't figure out why, I might have actually been insane or maybe it would happen again. I would sit in the church working and wondering if it had all materialized because of a transcendental reason. If perhaps God, or some other higher power, was testing me and teaching me about myself—I wondered if it would somehow influence my career or make me a better lover or mother.

My mother liked to tell me that it had happened for a reason. “Everything happens for a reason, Mariah,” she would often say when I expressed my pain. My mother also frequently apologized for not having more money or parenting us very well. “I did the best I could,” she always tells me. I respond that I am happy everything happened the way it did. “It made me stronger,” I say. Do I actually believe this? Is it just a cleverer way to dissociate?

In many ways, I continue to be a hysterical woman, but I know it has not erupted out of an existential nothingness nor has it erupted out of something profound and meaningful. My body seems to be more rational than my brain—when it communicates in sensations, there is generally a reason why it is doing so—one that isn’t linked to destiny, and one that I cannot blame only myself for. Of course, I sometimes worry it will all come back with a vengeance if I don’t keep talking, writing, and most importantly, moving.

Frantically Feeling

> “Indeed, as the days passed, Orlando took less and less care to hide his feelings” (Orlando 43).

Audre Lorde’s 1978 essay “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” seeks to disentangle women’s eroticism from its cultural locus as a “plasticized sensation,” instead, calling upon erotic knowledge as a source of power. As Lorde writes, “The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this

depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honour and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves."

The refusal of myself has come from a refusal of feeling. It meant faking my orgasms in my teens to make men more comfortable. While I have stopped doing that now, I still sometimes utter doughy no's when I am not in the mood for sex, something I am not proud of. But sometimes it is easier to bend than to project antipathy.

Over my lifetime, I have learned that my body is one of my most valuable resources. It is something I can weaponize—for example, withholding sex in anger and giving it in praise—but like any resource, it is, of course, exploited.

I am forever being nursed by a tale of pseudo-agency, trying to find a power that does not exist. These tales of a fabricated feminine power come from the media, debasing pornography, most, if not all, men, and the dissociated feminists. They tell us that we like to push our tits up high, augment our bodies, and sell ourselves for sex because it gives us control over our bodies. They say, "you like it at the bottom," so loudly it is hard to hear anything else, and we almost start to believe them. They want us to learn to take it—the jokes and the gropes—and to respond becomes a testament to our dramatics. They have capitalized on our fatigue and rebranded it as empowering nonchalance convincing us that the less we feel, the happier, and freer, we will be.

The pervasive nature of these messages has seeped into my pores and lungs, becoming a part of me until I unconsciously, and narrowly, see myself through the male gaze and dogma. Even my yeses never feel like my own, as I make myself a side character within my own pleasure, my own existence.

There is also my fear of experiencing men's anger in response to a firm no. An anger that makes me feel unlovable to the most excruciating degree, which was taught to me the moment I began to learn about sex in the media and further confirmed by my own experiences. I have rationally determined it is best to navigate the world around me in terms of anger avoidance, or rather, in terms of adhering to safety, and if most women have learned anything by the age of 22, it is that refusal seems to be the antithesis of safety as turning a man down can lead to coercion, force, violence, abuse—the things that cause total disempowerment and take a woman's body away from her. But Lorde reminds us that there "is a grave responsibility, projected from within each of us, not to settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe."

It is a radical thing to accept danger. It feels even more radical for me to accept the feelings that come with this. In therapy sessions this often means sobbing for 15 seconds and then dissociating so I can forget why I am crying—or more accurately, so I can forget what I am feeling. In relationships it has meant going to bed with a resentment-filled heart ache only to explode the next day. My therapist's favorite thing to ask is "what emotion did that bring up for you?" because it is far too easy to suppress my own depth. I don't think I am alone in this sentiment, however. My social media feeds are filled with images of women posting photos with a sexy, boring pout—as if to deny their own emotion and prove to their audience they don't feel anything.

Which leads to another reason for needing to feel. I think I have made it clear that the dissociated feminism breeds a more general emotional numbness. For most of my life, suffering has come out as solely sensations. Between stomach aches, nervous

fidgets, skin eruptions, etc. my bodily alarms have blared like a tsunami warning. I hid from my body like I was playing a game of hide and go seek with no one but myself. I frequently would google "Why do I feel like I am watching a movie of my own life?" because disconnect was a reigning force.

I now know how I wanted to feel at 17. The self-tranquilizing has been cut by anger; my sole goal is to make up for lost time. I spend Sunday afternoons screaming sobs into my pillow. I write stories and essays that reflect my discomfort and allow me to grieve–both the neglect of myself and the world which fostered such neglect. I rarely show them to anyone. I no longer believe that the only way to be whole is to allow someone inside of me or that my value stems from my ability to "put out" so the men around me can climax. Put simply, I have accepted that I do care.

Undoing the behaviors that have made me complacent is still a work in process, and more importantly, a process I will embark on for the rest of my life. But it is also a requirement. To exist as a woman in the 21st century means recovering exiled feelings and unweaving the patriarchal thread that ties down my docile body.

This essay invites many questions, but I think the main one is why does the body erupt? I wanted to understand why Orlando's body erupts, and why mine has too. Perhaps the body will always face limitations and trauma that increasingly add more pressure on the body until it has no choice but to explode. But I want to suggest that learning how to embody and feel what has been repressed can allow for smaller, more controlled explosions—eruptions that propel one forward rather than backward, that don't leave the body fragmented with pieces left throughout space and time. I have

noticed that the more I feel, the less I erupt, leaving my body more whole so that I may return to a truer version of myself.

I think, mostly, that truer version of myself is someone who feels pleasure—the thing I have been turned away from the most. Once I became a woman, I believed that I had to neglect my own needs and desires and only care for others. This turned me into someone who could only feel pleasure vicariously. Of course, I was wrong. These things only limited, suppressed, and pressurized my body.

I have learned that I reap pleasure from lots of activities, especially by returning to things I loved to do in my childhood. Many of these things, however, I still only do in secret. For example, I love to dance naked when I am alone in my bedroom. I draw the blinds. I lock my door. I put on headphones. I find the one spot in my room where the floor doesn't squeak while I move up and down. Then I let myself go. My hips move. My hands aggressively flail upward and slam downward like a dog tossing a dead bird around. I mouth the lyrics with silent courage, my wet tongue flicking the back of my teeth creating a pool of sweet saliva. I close my eyes; it is almost as if the song and I are making love. I move and I think: my body is mine, I take it. I think it so frantically it shakes the house.

Conclusion

The first part of this thesis looks at the body within the story and discourse of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* to propose a metaphor of eruption. Throughout the text, I suggest that story and discourse aim to represent Orlando's ambiguous interiority (doing so in both subtle and overt ways), but that this interiority is limited, adding pressure to Orlando's body and causing it to erupt on both textual levels.

The proposal of an eruptive body has its roots in Freud, but I want to suggest that this diegetic and discursive eruptive body is distinctly Woolfian as it moves away from placing blame on the individual and instead suggests that eruption is a sign that something is wrong with the world. The tension between story and discourse and external and internal reveal the hampering nature of many limitations and the body's desire to break away from such limitations. While the body often attempts to move beyond these limitations, it is frequently met with more. Thus, it is through discourse that the body can best transcend limits.

This erupting body can be found in Woolf's works beyond *Orlando*. Therefore, I don't believe an examination of this Woolfian body has been exhausted, as there is great room to study the body from a narratological approach in Woolf's other texts, especially her shorter stories that lack scholarly investigation, such as "Lappin and Lappinova" or "Street Haunting."

Beyond an eruptive body that is narratively based, Orlando also makes room for the study of eruptive corporeality with a phenomenological or psychoanalytic lens. Both, I believe, would complement a narratological reading. Importantly, any increased

awareness and discussion of the body in Woolf's work can create a more conscious reader who is aware of Woolf's authorial messages.

Lastly, my approach to the body in *Orlando* focused on linguistic ways of presenting the body. As a result, there is need for scholarship that looks at the narratological significance of the visual part of the text—mainly the photographs of Vita Sackville-West—that bring forward new questions about reality versus fictionality while also complicating, or maybe even surpassing, language's power in the text.

The second half of this thesis draws inspiration from *Orlando* to produce a personal essay that examines sociocultural and personal limitations, such as the limits of ssociocultural norms, gender expectations, the biological body, and trauma. It also reflects my body's eruptive responses and alludes to how discursive mediation shapes how one accesses stories on social and personal trauma.

The importance of personal work in conjunction with traditional scholarship brings into question a conventional approach to analytical study. Through my personal essay, I demonstrate that there is always room for autotheoretical responses in the academic domain and that these responses not only allow for active engagement with texts and theories but also help to destabilize traditional, heteronormative, and masculine approaches to academic discourse.

What greatly differentiates my personal study and Woolf's work is their genres. Orlando relies on a more fictive form, while I directly discuss my own lived experiences. I believe both can equally demonstrate the limits women—or those with other marginalized identities—encounter but that each genre transmits this message somewhat differently. As a result, there is room for further study comparing the

eruptive body in the fiction versus nonfiction genre, as well as a need to look at how this might introduce two different relationships with narratology.

In many ways, my study seeks to question and rewrite the ways we essentialize women's bodies, as Woolf did with *Orlando*. Throughout history, somatic eruptions have frequently been attributed to hysteria, casting women as the makers of their symptoms. This study instead views somatic eruption as a response to various limitations—as well as trauma and cruelty—that put pressure on women and cause them to symptomatically erupt.

Lastly, as I wrapped up writing this thesis, news broke of Roe v. Wade being overturned, marking a new limitation on women's corporeality. This regressive decision reminds us why discussions of the body are so important. More specifically, it reiterates that women's bodies have long been politicized to subjugate our autonomy. Neither *Orlando* nor my personal essay can be separated from their history. Orlando's somatic eruptions are a direct response to the history that surrounded Woolf, and my narrative similarly responds to contemporary issues. This responsiveness to history begins by writing from the inside out, penning the bodies and psyches of those oppressed to show society's influence on lived experiences. Writing through the body seems to be a way to regain some autonomy, to multiple the self and body beyond a single physicality and story, to enter feminist spaces through the self and one's experiences, as well as to allow the world to enter into this space through the body and its writings.

I urge others to explore the body in Woolf's work and to use it as a frame for their own life writing, as doing so can show the universality of our experiences and our somatic eruptions and continue a critical conversation.

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