VIRGINA WOOLF AND THE UNIVERSITY: AGENT, OBJECT, ICON

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By

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The central concern for this thesis is an interrogation of Virginia Woolf’s endurance as an icon. The work sets up several binaries which are subsequently troubled by the work and persona of Virginia Woolf. The first binary is that of the U/university. The University signifies the neoliberal US university and its formations, and the university signifies any structure of power where knowledge and power interact. The second binary is that of objects and agents. Agents are producers of texts and forces of change within institutional power structures. Objects are objects of study, those texts, people, and ideas that are claimed and studied within the U/university. The third binary is that of creative and critical writing, as they are understood through the category of genre. Working within these binaries, the thesis connects Virginia Woolf with feminist critique, genre-bending, and the evolution of several disciplines, from English to Queer Studies. The thesis argues that Virginia Woolf’s own investment in the U/university and in feminist critique of the power structures which managed knowledge during her lifetime cannot be discounted; reading her work and her persona through this lens offers a distinctive way to understand and reanimate feminist critique in the University through Woolf’s own genre-bended work. I have separated my work into five sections. The first section reviews the evolution of feminist critique in the University and explores the tensions between objects and agents in the University. The second section traces Virginia Woolf’s institutional sites as
an object of study within the University, from the discipline of English to Women’s and Gender Studies and Queer Studies. The third section frames Woolf as an agent and presents genre-bending as a possible strategy for feminist critique, demonstrated by the text of A Room of One’s Own. The fourth section traces Virginia Woolf’s appearances as an object in the university, in creative works from the latter 20th and 21st centuries; it posits that where she appears offers a measure of how her institutional sites in the University are reflected in creative and genre-bent works in the university. The final section culminates in a reading of Woolf’s novel Orlando as an example of genre-bent feminist critique which showcases Woolf’s own investment in challenging the power structures of the U/university as they relate to gender. Ultimately, Virginia Woolf’s work still resonates with our contemporary scholarly subjects, objects, methods, and obsessions through the generative possibilities of genre-bent works.
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INTRODUCTION

On March 14, 2017, the website Book Riot published an article titled “25 Necessary Items for A Room of One’s Own.” The article encourages a conception of feminism as mainstream, but also as literary and consumer-driven.¹ The list’s nerdy houseware items do this by reproducing Virginia Woolf’s face, words, and ideas. Most of the items on the list call upon a specific cache of the enduring power of Virginia Woolf to both define and defend feminism in literary spaces; the most ludicrous of all is a prayer candle with Virginia Woolf on it instead of St. Guadalupe or the Sacred Heart. Her elevation to sainthood is not purely tongue-in-cheek; as a discursive touchstone and icon, Virginia Woolf continues to hold power in the collective imagination about what feminism is and can be. In this political moment, the necessity for women to reclaim a politicized creative space is bolstered by the enduring legacy of Woolf’s argument for such a space in A Room of One’s Own. The article identifies this zeitgeist and capitalizes on Woolf’s legacy to fill the void.

This article’s appearance in my inbox the day following my original submission of this thesis struck me both as uncanny and as proof of the saliency of some of the claims I will make in the following pages. That I did not happen upon this article by accident reveals the literary circles in which I move: popular and politically-conscious; feminist and ironically-aware; literary and lifestyle-driven. It offers a glimpse into the affective stakes that drive this argument for me. Just as the article reveals an enduring attachment to Virginia Woolf and the perception of her specific brand of feminism, my

¹ This does beg a more pointed capitalist critique, but this is somewhat outside of the narrow purview of this argument.
inclusion of this article reveals an enduring desire to find a way for Virginia Woolf to retain and return to relevance.

In the academic circles of literature and feminism, where sites like Book Riot are explicitly excluded, Virginia Woolf’s endurance is both assumed and ignored. She is used and explained by these disciplines to stand in as a signifier for certain kinds of feminism, women’s writing, and queerness. Her status as an icon usually precludes her possible contributions to current scholarly obsessions, methods, and objects; the current predisposition of feminist academic work to assume that progress in knowledge is made by creating and finding new objects to study rather than (re)-examining established objects leaves Virginia Woolf as a seemingly static figure. However, this fact allows several new questions to arise when considering Virginia Woolf and how she appears in popular culture and academia. What power does Virginia Woolf hold for us, and where is it located? How did she come to be a cultural signifier for madness, feminism, queerness? What more is there to learn from a re-examination of her iconicity and her work through new scholarly methods?

The endurance of Virginia Woolf, her work, and her status as an icon both within academia and without is the subject of this project. Her persona and work already have a long life: as both a cultural phenomenon and an object of study in multiple disciplines, Virginia Woolf still weighs heavily upon our work as scholars, writers, and feminists. The invocation of her persona in many creative works echoes through the meanings assigned to her by the scholars who study her. In addition to this echoing, her appearance in these works points towards the intersections of the academic and the creative in her own work which I will trace as a part of the productive nature of creative, genre-bent,
feminist critique. It is the work of this project to reanimate and assert continued affinities between Woolf’s work and our current scholarly obsessions, objects, subjects, and methods through the possibilities of the creative, the affective, and the imaginative rather than (solely) the critical, the rational, and the uninspired. This reanimation primarily appears through an examination of the thematic boundaries of genre—both critical and creative—which Virginia Woolf’s own work blurs and troubles.

In order to unpack the binaries, locations, and tensions I will shortly identify, it is necessary to draw upon the methods and work of several disciplines, some of which are also themselves objects of study in this project. This interdisciplinary approach offers a different perspective of both Virginia Woolf and feminist critique. Two of the disciplines that inform my work here are Women’s and Gender Studies and Queer Studies, which both rely upon feminist critique and seek to interrogate the power structures that define our conceptions of gender, sexuality, and identity. Another discipline that relies upon critique and interrogates power structures, particularly those surrounding knowledge, is that of Critical University Studies, which informs my understanding of the reification of disciplines and how the University is turning itself into an object of study. Additionally, because my project is in some ways a description of the interconnected ways that Virginia Woolf moves through the University (the neoliberal US university and its formations) and its disciplines as well as the university (any power structure in which knowledge and power interact), and what it means for her to be placed as an object or an agent within these realms, I am also using some methods from the discipline of History. The historiography portions of my work serve to ground Virginia Woolf in time when necessary to track how her iconic persona has evolved. Finally, and most importantly, I
will be using methods from the discipline of English to interrogate the generic
distinctions I have begun to outline above and to read and closely analyze Virginia
Woolf’s own work and the creative works in which she appears. It is this last discipline in
which the later parts of the argument will gain their force and through which the
reanimation of Virginia Woolf and feminist critique are possible. Through the field of
English, with its focus on language formations, literary devices, and the craft of writing,
Virginia Woolf’s critiques of the institutions that shaped her world become visible in her
fiction. Identifying these strains of feminist critique within pieces of writing which rely
upon literary techniques and/or are otherwise fictional reveals the ways that feminist
critique can be framed as a productive, imaginative force rather than solely a rational,
theoretical one.

Virginia Woolf’s status as an icon can be traced back to her placement, use, and
influence within the University. She occupies the space of both an agent and an object of
study: she is not only the producer of literature, essays, and scholarly works that are
studied as objects in the University, she is also an object of study herself. Her persona is
claimed and used by different disciplines to frame and further arguments about their own
disciplinary preoccupations. There is a tension between what Woolf’s works argue, say,
and do and what different fields construct as arguments around her persona as an object.
This tension is one compelling reason Virginia Woolf continues to reappear and assert
influence in the University. It is also the tension which best illustrates the distinction I
am making between the rational, theoretical frame of the traditional genre limitations of
academic feminist critique in the University and the productive, imaginative frame of
thematically genre-bent creative critique. Feminist critique has itself become an object of
study within the fields of feminist and literary study; it also inhabits this dual space of agent and object within the University. Identifying and explicating Virginia Woolf’s straddling of this tension allows me to ultimately apply her thematically genre-bent creative critiques to this same tension which plagues the genre of feminist critique in the University.

Studying Virginia Woolf intentionally through an interdisciplinary lens also allows me to create a fuller picture of the ways that the University reifies objects of study and how to begin to reconcile the tension between Virginia Woolf as an object of study and an agent—or a producer of objects of study, someone whose work affects change in the University. As an object, she resists the power dynamics of a single field in the University. Her ability to resist clear disciplining reveals the constructed nature of the University and its attempts to exert power over objects of study. Tracing Virginia Woolf as an object of study in several fields allows me to track the changing disciplines that are concerned with feminism, identity, and language in the disciplines of English, Women’s and Gender Studies, and Queer Studies. Simultaneously studying her work and life as an agent (a writer and scholar herself) allows me to reanimate feminist institutional critique through genre-bending and creative practice.

Virginia Woolf is an example of the tensions between simultaneous objects and agents within the University’s institutional power structure. This tension helps to identify how power both exerts itself over objects of study and is used by agents. Items which exert power themselves within the structures of power/knowledge are not exempt from reification or power’s influence over them. Other items that hold this tension which are important to this project are: critique, disciplines (via critique), and the University itself
How does/will/can the university/University negotiate these manifestations of the tension between objects and agents? The significance of this tension is two-fold. First, the tension between objects and agents reveals how power structures interact with knowledge. Second, this tension reveals the limits of power. Virginia Woolf and her interactions with feminist critique, different disciplines, and the University as opposed to the university offer an avenue for exploring this significance. Virginia Woolf’s own investment in the University and in feminist critique of the power structures which managed knowledge during her lifetime cannot be discounted; reading her work and her persona through this lens offers a distinctive way to understand and reanimate feminist critique in the University through Woolf’s own thematically genre-bent work.

**THEORY: POWER/KNOWLEDGE AND FEMINISM**

*The U/university: Objects and Agents*

The first step in this investigation is to examine the university and the University. As I’ve mentioned previously, in this project, the University means specifically the US neoliberal institutions in which I have studied and worked. The university, in contrast, is more general. I am using it to signify any realms where power and knowledge interact. This sense of the university is heavily influenced by Foucault, and his will to truth: “This will to truth...relies on institutional support: it is both reinforced and accompanied by whole strata of practices such as pedagogy—naturally—the book system, publishing, libraries, such as the learned societies in the past, and laboratories today” (quoted in Ferguson 225). Foucault’s sense of how we encounter knowledge is embedded in any and all institutions we create to manage it, and this understanding of how power and knowledge
interact within multiple institutions is integral for a clear understanding of how Virginia Woolf’s appearances in multiple locations interact with each other as expressions of knowledge management. My reading of Foucault here is mediated by Roderick A. Ferguson’s reading, from his book *The Reorder of Things*. Ferguson’s laser focus on Foucault’s discussions of institutions begins this way: “We might in fact read Foucault’s early theorizations about discourses as theorizations about institutions and their exploitation of discourses” (Ferguson 224). He argues that when Foucault writes about discourses, he is really writing about institutions and how they manage power to control certain discourses, what contemporary scholars would now also call disciplines.

Ferguson’s conflation of discourse with institution is a logical step because of the way that Foucault frames both as markers of power.

Roderick A. Ferguson extrapolates Foucault’s work to extend an argument about how power works through institutions to manage knowledge and difference, and this leads him to the concept of “the will to institutionality” (Ferguson 214). Ferguson’s work is to reorient Foucault’s arguments about discourses of power and sexuality into an argument about institutions, specifically, the neoliberal US university, and how this institution reifies sex and sexuality under the umbrella of the field of Queer Studies. Ferguson’s discussion of Queer Studies and how power normalizes difference within institutions by legitimizing it defines institutionality for his work. I am using both Foucault and Ferguson here to frame my senses of the university and the University, which both order knowledge through and as specific institutional sites of power. This process of ordering knowledge through institutional sites of power is how I am reframing Ferguson’s institutionality to include Foucault’s broader definition of the university.
Institutionality in this project includes both the wider, public sense of the organization of power around knowledge and the specific, reified sense which controls difference through legitimization. Holding both concepts together within this single term allows me to talk about how Virginia Woolf is claimed by difference in the University and how this translates her back into the university as an icon. It also allows me to consider her work and her position in the University through the specific lenses of the disciplines I employ and the conceptions of her which appear in other creative works.

A sense of both the wider regulation of knowledge by power via publishing, libraries, and other public institutions and its regulation via the University and its logic of disciplinary fields, methodologies, and objects of study is integral to how I can frame Virginia Woolf as an agent and as an object. As an icon—which for this project, concerns her combined status as both an object and an agent—she participates in both senses of the university which I have explained here. As an object, she appears in both the university and the University; however, as an agent, she primarily interacts with power and knowledge through her individual writings. This distinction between agent/object and university/University allows me to draw attention to the complicated ways that power and knowledge interact around Virginia Woolf as an icon. Her straddling of these different categories makes her an excellent case study for how the University makes objects and how it regulates its power in relation to the wider structures of power over knowledge.

Where Virginia Woolf appears often marks a change in the power structures in the University. Her status as an object of study in multiple fields supports and reveal the workings of power as described by Ferguson in his definition of the institutionality of the
University, and it reveals how other items also become entrenched as objects in the University. Considering Virginia Woolf and feminist critique as objects together can reanimate each and return them some agency in the University through the combination of Woolf's use of feminist critique as a method and genre within her creative work.

**Feminist Critique**

When we, as scholars, consider feminist critique, we necessarily consider the methods it uses, as an intellectual practice, to reveal the power structures which control our society. Its function is to help us articulate the relationships between power, institutions, knowledge, and identity. The hierarchies and intersections among these concepts are complicated. However, a sample framework for how they are connected is as follows:

Power is structured by our institutions and those institutions structure and disseminate knowledge, which defines different identities. Feminist critique enters this framework at several points and offers different lenses through which to analyze our objects of study; one prominent method in this project is deconstruction. Feminist critique, specifically, aligns itself with female identity, women, gender, and sexuality (in its many iterations from heteronormative to queer), and analyzes power and institutions with the aim to deconstruct the power structures that disadvantage women and other non-heteronormatively gender conforming people. As such, the history of feminist critique is embedded in 20th-century identity politics of women’s rights and feminism and their relationship to the Universities in which we work. Feminist critique from its nascence to the present has evolved to include the idea of the critique of critique—metacritique. Feminist critique itself—our primary method of analyzing society—has become its own object of study. As a genre of writing, this metacritique is generally identified by its
explication of concepts, its reliance on documented scholarly evidence, its close analysis, its use of theoretical frames, and its critical stance toward other critiques.

In “The Present and Our Past: Simone de Beauvoir, Descartes, and Presentism in the Historiography of Feminism,” Jane Newman identifies the genealogy of feminist critique as a genre of writing within the paradigms of rational, Enlightenment thought: feminist critique and metacritique rely upon, she argues, male-dominated epistemological paradigms and historical progressivism. In their introduction to Between Woman and Nation: Nationalisms, Transnational Feminisms, and the State, Alarcón et al. frame the genre similarly. By contrast, two more recent works, Sara Ahmed’s Living a Feminist Life and Patricia J. Williams’s Open House: Of Family, Friends, Food, Piano Lessons, and the Search for a Room of My Own, offer demonstrations of a breakdown of this traditional definition of the genre. These works offer a more personal, less rational generic approach to feminist critique, one which aligns more closely with the thematically genre-bent work of other feminist scholars of color such as Gloria Anzaldúa. These creative critiques change the generic expectations of feminist critique from the rational and impersonal to the imaginative and the personal, and it is this tradition that I see Virginia Woolf’s work entering with her fictive, feminist critiques that engage the imagination and empathy through the literary.

Interrogating power structures is one of the disciplinary goals of Women’s and Gender Studies. In one of the most recent publications in that field, Living a Feminist Life, Sara Ahmed explains the aims of feminist work this way: “To build feminist dwellings, we need to dismantle what has already been assembled; we need to ask what it is we are against, what it is we are for, knowing full well that this we is not a foundation
but what we are working towards (Ahmed 2; emphasis in original). Feminism, she argues, is about dismantling the institutions where power is housed to rebuild new institutions which support different, more equal sites of power. She writes: “In this book I want to think of feminist theory too as homework, as a way of rethinking how feminist theory originates and where it ends up. What is this thing called feminist theory? We might first assume that feminist theory is what feminists working within the academy generate. I want to suggest that feminist theory is something we do at home” (Ahmed 7). Her use of the term feminist theory here carries the weight of the University within it.

She recognizes that the work of feminism is circumscribed by the University because it is a specific institutional site of power, much like Ferguson recognizes, and indeed, defines, the University as a specific institutional site of power which circumscribes the work of queer theory into the field of Queer Studies. Naming feminist theory in this way also tracks its evolution as an object of study within the field of Women’s and Gender Studies.

The primary methodology Women’s and Gender Studies, along with Queer Studies, uses to define and interrogate itself is critique, variously named in this project as critique, feminist critique, metacritique, and self-critique. Ahmed’s interrogation, “What is this thing called feminist theory?,” is an adaption of one of the primary questions in Women’s and Gender Studies and Queer Studies (Ahmed 7). As a part of the University, these fields are intertwined and grow out from one another through feminist critique. The fields’ evolutions are described carefully by Robyn Wiegman in her 2012 book, Object Lessons. Unlike Ahmed’s book, which seeks to move feminism from the University to the university, Wiegman’s book is fully entrenched in the metacritique of the University. Object Lessons relies on the methodology of feminist critique and the systems of citation
and analysis that undergird it. Wiegman writes that the book “is not an argument against critique as much as an encounter with its excessive reach” (35). Wiegman’s reproduction of the generic hallmarks of feminist critique does bring us closer to feminist critique’s problems as a methodology and genre which has, as she writes, “excessive reach.” Her question in *Object Lessons* is how to curtail the reach of feminist critique, but she does not fully explicate how this excessive reach may be altered. As a project which seeks to describe feminist critique, Wiegman simply reproduces the conditions which make it less and less useful as a methodology because of the overproduction of itself as an object of study. Wiegman does not offer an alternative mode for feminist critique to continue to do the productive work of interrogating power structures and dismantling them. Examining how feminist critique may be found within Virginia Woolf’s genre-bent work is the primary way I will address this shortcoming. For feminist critique to break the cycle of objectification in the University, it must more fully engage with the possibilities of fiction, literary devices, and the imaginative and affective power of both the personal and the story. Virginia Woolf’s genre-bent work, as I will show throughout the course of the argument, does this in both *A Room of One’s Own* and *Orlando*.²

In her description of how feminist critique has come to function in the fields of identity knowledges, and for my purposes here, specifically Women’s and Gender Studies and Queer Studies, Wiegman links critical practice with the political aims of feminism. She writes, “[E]ach chapter grapples in one way or another with the core assumption that critique has taught me: that critical practice is a political counter to

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² As works which are both endowed with particularly heavy cultural capital due to their prevalence in Woolf scholarship, these examples are a particularly useful starting point for this argument. Other more obviously genre-bent and experimental works may (and should) be considered through the framework I will set up here.
normalizing agencies of every kind” (Wiegman 33). This can be read two ways. The first is that critique is a political response to the legitimizing forces against difference that Ferguson identifies in his conception of institutionality. The second way to read this is to understand that feminist critique is a methodology in the University which also was meant to have function and traction in the university. This is not a surprise: feminism originally entered the University from the sphere of the university.

Feminism’s political project entered the University because it would allow the movement a space of power from which to disseminate its message of equality for the sexes. Bonnie Zimmerman, in her article “The Activist Project of Women’s Studies” from Wiegman’s 2002 collection Women’s Studies on Its Own, tells us as much in her review of her 1972 co-authored article, “Women’s Studies: A Case in Point.” She writes, “[T]he idea that a feminist education should primarily raise consciousness was, and continues to be, a prominent note in discussions of Women’s Studies” (Zimmerman 184). She quotes her 1972 article to drive the point home: “Part of our program is involved in outreach and orientation toward the movement and our courses do serve a consciousness-raising function” (Zimmerman 184). Zimmerman also engages a question similar to Ahmed’s about the definition and place of feminist theory, explaining, “Although the article does not directly engage the question of what theory is, it implies that theory is the explanatory grounding for political practice” (Zimmerman 184). Her assumption is that the power and influence of the University could and should intercede into political movements; the joining of this specific space of power over knowledge to the political aims of women places the university and the University in conjunction in Women’s and Gender Studies, and by extension, in feminist critique. Both feminist critique and
Virginia Woolf as objects and agents straddle the spaces of the University and the university; this fact of parallelism allows me to argue for their joint re-animation through creative critique.

The characterization of feminist critique as a method of deconstruction is based upon its institutional history. This institutional history begins with the feminist political movement in the United States in the late 20th century. From the 1970s onward, with the creation of the academic field of Women’s and Gender Studies, the blending of political activism and intellectual inquiry has steered the field toward different ways to frame identities: politically, socially, sociologically, nationally, linguistically, and theoretically. One way of framing identity theoretically in the 1970s and 1980s relied on poststructuralist theory, which favored the deconstruction of the binaries between subject and object and the collapse of the idea of individuality and individual agency. This shift is identified most clearly by Gayatri Spivak, in her 1985 article, “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism.” In this article, she analyzes *Jane Eyre*, and in so doing, remarks:

I need hardly mention that the object of my investigation is the printed book, not its ‘author.’ To make such a distinction is, of course, to ignore the lessons of deconstruction. A deconstructive critical approach would loosen the binding of the book, undo the opposition between verbal text and the biography of the named subject ‘Charlotte Bronte,’ and see the two as each other's ‘scene of writing.’

(Spivak 244)

Her critical tone toward this deconstructive approach notwithstanding, her ability to critique it comes directly from it. Without this formation of author-as-subject-as-object,
feminist critique as a methodology would be distinctly different. Spivak’s argument in this article is further of note because it seeks, instead of deconstructing the identity of Brontë, to deconstruct another of feminist criticism’s main methods up to that point: the acceptance of the historical determinism of feminist individualism. The belief in the individual and the forward, linear progress of history is inherited directly from masculine individualism that founds Enlightenment-era liberalism. The neoliberal University gains power from its roots in this individualism, liberalism, and historical determinism, despite the work of feminist critique (Spivak 244).

The work of feminist critique which I am identifying as clearly articulated and demonstrated by Spivak in this article is only one of many examples. In Between Woman and Nation, edited by Caren Kaplan, Minoo Moallem, and Norma Alarcón in 1999, also articulates the work of feminist critique along similar lines in its introduction. They write, first, that, “[i]t is commonplace of our time to note that nation-state formations are influenced, underpinned, and even founded by ideas rooted in the Enlightenment and liberalism of the West” (Alarcón, et al. 1). Their focus on global feminism and the direct identification of the system of power they are critiquing demonstrates the progression of the methods of feminist critique within the University. They continue: “Moreover, at the core of the modern nation-state, a contradiction is set in motion insofar as there is denial of sexual or racial difference or both, and simultaneous universalization of difference” (Alarcón, et al. 2). Here, they explain the way that the nation-state—as another site of institutional power—both frees and constrains difference. Alarcón, et al. call upon feminist critique to continue to identify and interrogate these power structures. This idea that institutional sites of power conflictingly free and constrain difference reappears in
other, contemporary iterations of feminist critique. Suffice to say here: the method of feminist critique in these examples becomes codified as it continues to interact as a part of an academic discipline. This codification reflects Ferguson’s institutionality and marks feminist critique as a method which participates in the reification of objects of study.

Finally, Alarcón, et al note: “Rather, our tasks as critics must revolve around a constant critique of the construction of all methods and disciplines as ideological constructions within the context of the relationship between transnational capitalism, corporate cultures, and the state [Rouse 1995]” (Alarcón, et al. 3). Here, they explicitly name feminist critique as their method as contemporary, feminist, academic critics; they also explain that the goal of feminist critique is to expose the relationships between institutions and “ideological constructions.” Their direct identification of this signals the evolution of feminist critique; it becomes both the method—explained by Alarcón, et al. here—and the object of itself in feminist discourse. In this way, feminist critique, as an institutional process and articulation of power and its limits, again reveals the agent/object dichotomy I have already identified with Virginia Woolf. The trajectories and evolutions of feminist critique, Women’s and Gender Studies, and Queer Studies as disciplines whose methods become objects of study within the University can be traced like Virginia Woolf, who was an agent and became an object of study through the process of institutionality. Linking the evolution of feminist critique to Virginia Woolf in this way draws attention to how the University intersects objects and agents to assert different levels of control and power through disciplines and methods. Often, the tensions between objects and agents reveal themselves at this point of transformation between being a part of the workings of institutionality and being solely an object of study within
institutionality. Once the former agent of power (even if granted a limited amount of power) is fully reified as an object of study (that is, it is more object than agent) it becomes unstable. In the case of feminist critique, this calls for an intervention into its generic conventions in order to reanimate its productive potential as an interrogator of power. In the case of Virginia Woolf, this calls for an examination of the ways she is emptied out and reassigned as a signifier in order to better identify the stakes of her own work in relation to the U/university. This project does both: re-identifying Virginia Woolf’s own investment in feminist critique of these institutions through thematically genre-bent, creative feminist critique leads to a re-investment in the productive potential in feminist critique.

In *Object Lessons*, Wiegman tracks this tension between agents and objects at the site of feminist critique in the way that I want to track the tension between agents and objects at the site of Virginia Woolf. Wiegman’s project in *Object Lessons* consistently treats feminist critique as an object of study, which is what joins Ferguson’s project and her own: both articulate the workings of the University through different means. Ferguson focuses on the reification of a discipline; Wiegman reveals the transition of feminist critique from a methodology and genre into an object of study and how the University changes agents into objects. Wiegman even reveals how feminist critique was an integral part of the University’s power structure that contributed to the discipline which Ferguson chooses as his example: “Queer theory, unlike feminism, is not the inaugurating political discourse for an academic movement but *a powerful critique* of the ways in which identity, as political project and academic domain, came to be situated in both public politics and the U.S. university” (Wiegman 117; my emphasis). Ferguson
argues that the will to institutionality within the University resulted in the creation of the discipline of Queer Studies; Wiegman reveals that feminist critique—the methods of analysis and institutional interrogation that are a part of feminism—is one of the working parts of that will to institutionality. Feminist critique is an agent of institutionality in this explanation; feminist critique as a methodology is a force that uses power and alters the institution. However, Wiegman’s description of the history of feminist critique within these disciplines—between Women’s and Gender Studies and Queer Studies—identifies the change of feminist critique as a methodology and an agent into an object of study.

This shift in feminist critique from an agent as a methodology into an object of study and the tensions that result from feminist critique being turned to study itself—metacritique—is evident in one of the primary journals in Women’s and Gender Studies. Between roughly 2011 and 2016, evidence of this tension can be found in the journal Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society. This evidence includes a change in the types of articles that are published by the journal: one of the most popular topics is metacritique, a self-conscious analysis of the discipline, with increasing attention to other gender and sexual identities and how to fit these identities into the political and institutional aims of feminism.

In Signs, the shifts toward self-critique seem to happen instantaneously and with little dissent, with special editions that address changes in the discipline. For example, in the Autumn 2010 issue, most articles concern the politics and economics of feminism and the societal factors which continue to limit women’s mobility and agency on a generally global scale. Then, in the Spring 2011 issue, an editorial specifically identifies the journal’s aims to better represent the goals of feminist scholarship to “[render] the
politics of difference and the politics of knowledge intelligible and actionable” (Hawkesworth 511). This editorial also identifies the broad scope of feminist scholarship and the interdisciplinary nature of the journal itself—indeed, many of the articles are not literary criticism, but sociological, anthropological, or otherwise embedded in the study of society and systems rather than language. Hawkesworth’s specific identification of how the journal meets the goals of feminist criticism functions not only as an explanation of the journal, but as a critique of the discipline of Women’s and Gender Studies. This constant review and articulation of the goals of feminist critique echoes the work Alarcón, et al; Women’s and Gender Studies relies on feminist critique to interrogate not only the political and social power structures oppressing women in the world, but to interrogate itself as a discipline. In the Autumn 2012 issue and the Summer 2013 issue, there are articles dedicated to an analysis of the field: the former boasts an inquiry into dissertations from Women’s and Gender Studies and the latter displays how intersectionality has come to shape the field.

Furthermore, in the Summer 2013 issue of Signs, the discipline of Women’s and Gender Studies itself is under scrutiny concerning two things. The first is the way the discipline approaches race, gender, class, and sexuality in its scholarship. The second is about how the discipline’s own methodologies include, exclude, and enable certain kinds of discussion. The issue asks how Women’s and Gender Studies can continue to work to disable entire oppressional structures, rather than just the structures that oppress women. This feminist critique of itself results in a more balanced representation of the many iterations of difference. Signs returns to its political critiques of the prison system, sex trafficking, and AIDS, and the concerns of the Summer 2013 issue are reflected in the
following issues. From 2014 to the present day, *Signs* continues to increase the number of articles which critique the field, focusing in one issue on the hegemony of English in scholarship. This reveals how feminist critique itself has become an object of study: critiques of the discipline of Women’s and Gender Studies itself are critiques of the field’s previous critiques. This prevalence of critique of critique in Women’s and Gender Studies reveals how feminist critique is an example of the tension between objects and agents in the University because it demonstrates how a methodology (an agent) studying itself makes itself into an object of study. It also highlights how Women’s and Gender Studies attempts to reclaim its roots in political agency outside of the University and assert more influence in the university. Like Virginia Woolf, feminist critique straddles the University and the university as both an object and an agent.

**THE HISTORY OF VIRGINIA WOOLF AS AN OBJECT, OR THE EVOLUTION OF FEMINISM IN THE UNIVERSITY**

*Virginia Woolf: Biography and Modernism*

During Virginia Woolf’s life, she rose to prominence as a writer and scholar. Her associations with Modernism, the Bloomsbury Group, and the Hogarth Press gave her influence within the realms of the university even as she was still limited in her access to the formal universities in England during her lifetime. As a producer and critic of literary texts, Virginia Woolf’s power in the University was originally rooted in her work as an agent. She studied others’ writing and her writing was the main object of study for others, rather than her life and persona. The shift from studying her writing to studying her life and persona is a marker of her status as an object in the University. Her writing—novels, essays, diaries, letters—is still an object of study within the University, but it is framed
within the detailed study of her life and persona. Currently, her work is discussed in terms of its historical origin, theories of labor and class, and language and form, which are all areas of interest within the field of Modernist Studies within the discipline of English. However, *Woolf Studies Annual* is a journal dedicated exclusively to Virginia Woolf, focused upon Woolf’s biography. The journal’s intended subject matter is Virginia Woolf and its audience is Woolf scholars: its *raison d’être* is the historical project of cataloging and documenting Woolf’s education, politics, and aesthetics. This is in some contrast to her appearances in other Modernist journals, like *Modernism/modernity*, where the key topics of interest are the form, style, and modernist aesthetics of her fiction. *Woolf Studies Annual*’s focus upon her biography and her personality all trouble the notion that English scholarship is meant to reify Woolf’s works and writing; instead, the journal’s work seems to be to further reify Woolf’s persona as an object. The journal began in 1995, right before the death of Woolf’s biographer, Quentin Bell, in 1996. Its creation and continuance demonstrates the progression of her reification as an object in the University.

*Virginia Woolf: Feminist and Queer Subject*

Jane Marcus’s *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy*, published in 1987, frames how Marcus herself understood the project of feminist theory to be linked inextricably with Virginia Woolf. She frames the work of other feminist literary critics from the 1970s and 1980s this way: “This is an interesting chapter in American literary history and in the development of feminist criticism and theory over the same decade, for Virginia Woolf was often at the center of the most spirited critical debates” (Marcus xi). This places Virginia Woolf at the center of feminist literary criticism during the 1970s.
and 1980s, a critical position which has since been criticized and questioned. Marcus opens her book with this declaration: “For the past decade I, like most American feminist critics, have been thinking and writing about Virginia Woolf. Seeing her as our role model in *A Room of One’s Own, Three Guineas*, and the volumes of critical essays, we first sought to revive her reputation as a political thinker, then to understand the fiction in feminist terms and to re-think the official biography” (Marcus xi). This project of revival was ultimately successful; Virginia Woolf became a shorthand for feminist writers and scholars through this work, and as such was claimed through the University as an object of study straddling two disciplines: English and Women’s and Gender Studies. The effects of this stay with us today. *A Room of One’s Own* continues to show up on syllabi for courses in Women’s Literature as well as for Introduction to Women’s and Gender Studies courses.

In Jane Marcus’s article from 1982, “Storming the Toolshed,” she writes, “Just as Virginia Woolf predicted both the birth of Shakespeare’s sister and our work for her arrival, so one may also predict the birth of the feminist critic of genius” (626). The article is about the work of feminist scholars to reclaim women writers and to reorient literary theory, a largely male endeavor, to and as the work of women. Marcus’s words here mark Virginia Woolf as both a feminist and a feminist critic; she elides Woolf’s argument about the possibility of women writers of genius with women scholars. It is not the work of this project to contend or challenge Marcus’s reading; instead, what is important is to recognize this move as one which inaugurates Virginia Woolf’s status as an object in the University. Marcus’s argument about Woolf’s feminism is one which is convincing and has incredible staying power, but it is still an argument constructed within
the University and by its logic. Writing in the year of Woolf’s centenary, Marcus’s article identifies the success of Woolf’s reanimation and rising celebrity in feminist criticism with the rise and success of feminism in the University. However, just as the project of feminist critique is constantly under scrutiny, so is Virginia Woolf’s place as a feminist icon.

Bette London’s “Guerrilla in Petticoats or Sans-Culottes?—Virginia Woolf and the Future of Feminist Criticism” from 1991 is one article which shows how Woolf’s importance as a feminist has been criticized as feminist critics and critique have changed over time. The article is primarily a review of several of Jane Marcus’s books of feminist criticism about Woolf, and frames Marcus’s work very critically. London credits Marcus with almost single-handedly bringing Woolf to the fore in feminist criticism, transforming Woolf from an apolitical modernist into a radical, political feminist. London’s main criticism is that in so doing, Marcus does not subvert masculine, dominant, hetero-patriarchal epistemological paradigms. Instead, in canonizing Woolf, Marcus creates feminist literary history in the shadow of the male canon, which allows feminist work to be subsumed by male structures of power. Marcus’s methods of analyzing Woolf into the darling of feminist literature follows traditional methodology, which London asserts is contrary to the feminist agenda. London questions if using these traditional methods to create a traditional canon only solidifies a single “correct” reading of Woolf: How do we resist institutionalizing allowable readings of Woolf? London also questions, in 1991, if Woolf is a millstone which should be cut from the neck of feminist criticism, revealing the problem of constantly searching for new objects of study once older ones seem to lose critical weight.
Such questioning of Woolf’s usefulness to the larger feminist agenda in multiple disciplines further marks Virginia Woolf’s iconicity and her status as an object within the University. Rather than rooting her argument in the creative and scholarly work of Virginia Woolf, London is responding to her influence as a shorthand for feminism through the canon, an institutional frame and mechanism for power within the University. By critiquing Marcus’s work for elevating Woolf according to the institutional structures that London identifies as opposed to the political aims of feminism in the University, she further reifies Woolf as an object. Additionally, by the time of London’s essay, the site of Woolf’s influence had begun to shift from that of feminist criticism to Queer Studies through the text *Orlando* and its representations of androgyny. This shift further identifies Virginia Woolf as an object within the University because she became a visible part of queer literary criticism during the following two decades. In Patricia Morgne Cramer’s chapter “Woolf and Theories of Sexuality,” in the book *Virginia Woolf in Context*, explains Woolf’s use within queer theory. She writes, “Queer values pervade…assertions regarding Woolf’s sexual ideology as well. Scholars who reject the term ‘lesbian’ as anachronistic or too narrow nevertheless describe Woolf’s sexual ideals in terms of ‘fluidity’ and ‘indeterminacy’ treasured by contemporary queers” (Cramer 132). The tone here is also one of critique similar to the vein of London’s critique about the assumption of Woolf’s feminism: By assigning Woolf’s sexual ideology terms which place her within the paradigms of queer theory, she is assigned signification as a queer subject whether or not her work supports this identification. This continues the process of

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3 See, for example, Karen Kaivola’s “Revisiting Woolf’s Representations of Androgyny: Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Nation” (1999), which reviews the history of the term “androgyny” in the University and links it to Woolf.
objectification of Virginia Woolf I have been tracing within the University.

Other readings of Woolf within queer studies attempt to reanimate Woolf. In Madelyn Detloff’s chapter “Woolf and Lesbian Culture: Queering Woolf Queering,” she posits, “[W]e can read Woolf as an astute observer…of sexual complexity who chafed at heteronormative imperatives…Woolf was someone who queered heterosexual norms in her life and work” (Detloff 345). Detloff goes on to outline the many readings of Woolf from a Queer Studies perspective which frame Woolf’s work in terms of a verb rather than an adjective: “Brenda S. Helt, for example, suggests that Woolf… ‘proliferates the imaginative and creative possibilities associated with the gender-non-exclusionary polymorphous mutability of desire’” (Detloff 347). This reading attempts to reassign the intentions and actions embedded in Woolf’s texts. Detloff also states, “Moving away from questions of identity or even gender, other scholars examine Woolf’s queering of history, narrative, memory, and temporality” (Detloff 347). Again, the focus is on the verb rather than the adjective: Woolf queers these elements; she is not queer. This acknowledgement of what Woolf’s work does is an attempt to resist the kind of assumptive queer identification of Woolf that I’ve identified through Cramer’s work above; however, the process of Woolf’s reification even within Queer Studies is continuous and pervasive.

The tensions among the disciplines within the University and their different approaches, values, and aims that I identify here continue to center around Virginia Woolf as an icon and object rather than an agent. This happens particularly at the

4 Erica Gene Delsandro’s “In the Classroom: Virginia Woolf and the Possibilities of Queer History” (2012) and Melanie Micir’s “The Queer Timing of Orlando: A Biography” (2012) are both good examples of this.
intersections of queer and feminist theory with literary theory, where scholarly
interrogation of her writing reproduces her as either a feminist or as a representative for
queer subjectivity. In studies of women’s literature, Virginia Woolf still appears as a
signifier for feminism and women writers, even as this section of the discipline of
English tries to meet the new demands of critical inquiry. During the last five years,
between 2011 and 2016, *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* has published articles and
reviews of books which are increasingly about transnationalism, intersectionality, alterity,
and self-critique. This trend mirrors the changes in feminist critique, Women’s and
Gender Studies, and Queer Studies in general. However, the increase in these topics in
*TSWL* is not steady, nor is it wholly embraced: the journal defends its function as a place
to analyze women’s literature and re-write female literary history, almost to the denial (or
at the very least the marginalization) of the questions of otherness, queer identity, and
institutionality.

By tracing Virginia Woolf through *TSWL*, it is possible to see the persistence of
the arguments put forward by the feminist critics in the 1970s and 1980s. As feminist
theory and critique gained more institutional power with the growth of Women’s and
Gender Studies within the University, Virginia Woolf came to embody the arguments put
forward about her. Beginning with Vol. 30, no. 1, *TSWL*’s articles and reviews at first
appear to be American and Euro-centric, with articles about Jane Austen, Elizabeth
Barrett Browning, and others from the 17th- and 18th-century cannons, which reveals the
journal’s investment in the institutional frames that are constantly under interrogation in
feminist critique. Although the journal attempts to account for the proliferation of
difference in contemporary women’s literature and scholarship, it often returns to figures
like Virginia Woolf and Jane Austen as icons in women’s literature. The next issue for 2011 is a special issue about the rise of periodical studies and its contributions to a revised literary history. As such, the issue returns to the 18th century in an effort of recovery of women authors, and reiterates some of the goals of feminist literary scholarship as an effort to engage with “questions of authority, canonicity, [and] the means of textual production” (Stevens 241). The next volume, from 2012, follows in a similar pattern: it is a special issue about 18th-century women and English Catholicism. Only in the space of the reviews is there evidence of the expanding scope of the field; the reviews cover the gamut of new modes of inquiry: global fiction, eco-criticism, race theory. Volume 32 (2013) signals another investment in iconic female authors. Many of the articles in this volume recapitulate or reframe Virginia Woolf’s feminism from different angles: first, instead of a proponent of global feminism, she is an anarchist; next, *A Room of One’s Own* is not a manifesto, but pure speculation; finally, Woolf’s feminist thought is not her own, but the Strachey sisters’. Though her feminism is analyzed in this journal from different points of view, the essential claim of her feminism is assumed. This re-iterates her status as an object of study because her work is circumscribed within the assumption of her feminism, an argument created and disseminated by Marcus from within the University. Virginia Woolf’s prominence in this issue is not surprising—she is often mentioned in various book reviews. Her status as a member of the female canon is not under scrutiny, but rather *TSWL* seeks to retain her status as a feminist writer and reanimate her work to keep it relevant within the University through a reiteration of this argument. As a journal about women’s literature specifically, *TSWL* wants to retain and further its institutional influence though Virginia Woolf and others in the female canon.
that was created around the time of Jane Marcus’s work. Virginia Woolf seems to be claimed completely as an object by the University in *TSWL*. Even the journal’s most striking turn toward self-critique in the most recent issue (Vol. 35, no. 1) defends the journal against seeming attack for its focus on “women writers.” The editor cites Woolf as a well-known author (MLA results at 6,110 articles as of April 2016), arching at the argument that such recognition means that she should be studied instead as an integrated part of the whole literary canon. This interest in continuing to claim Virginia Woolf for a specific purpose—namely, as an iconic woman writer—also reveals how Virginia Woolf continues to be an object of study in the University.

Virginia Woolf’s invocation by the editor of *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* in 2016 only re-enforces the fact that the University uses her within its institutional structure as an object and signifier. Instead of an interest in her work and her life as an active part of the work of scholars, her function has become one of historical importance for the evolution of feminism and other identity knowledges in the University. Calling upon the ideas she has come to stand for through the work of scholars like Jane Marcus, Karen Kiavola, and others forces her persona to stand in for entire arguments as well as entire fields. Virginia Woolf is an object in the University which straddles multiple critical positions at all times and embeds these positions into one another. Claims for Virginia Woolf’s expertise in Modernism are interlinked with claims for her feminism, which are interlinked with claims for her queer identity and how she contributes to queer theory. Even when the active subjects, objects, and methods of these fields do not include her, her name and persona may be invoked to argue for a specific positionality that she has been made to embody, just as the editor of *TSWL* has done. This signals that interest
in Virginia Woolf is circumscribed to the very specific meanings the University has already assigned her, but this need not be the case. Her own work aligns itself with the project of feminist critique, specifically through the use of literary devices and imagination, and a recognition of this can open new avenues of study for her as an agent.

**Virginia Woolf as an Agent, or A Room of One’s Own and the University**

*Genre-bending*

The impulse to challenge and blur the generic boundaries which are created and maintained between the university and the University aligns with the larger projects of the disciplines I have identified here which interrogate, dismantle, and rebuild the power structures that are at work in institutionality. Genre-bending in writing is a prevalent, pervasive, and subtle signal of resistance; it also has the added benefit of putting the rhetorical strategies of several genres in conversation to further disrupt institutionality by linking different methodologies of argument, understanding, and dissemination of knowledge in a single text.

In the University, genre is understood to be a necessary component to understanding a piece of writing and its purpose. Genre as a term signals the myriad ways of classifying texts according to their “content, form, or technique,” and these classifications distinguish fiction from nonfiction and academic critique from creative work (Murfin 202). In the university, these distinctions seem to simply separate types of written work. In the University, these distinctions also denote different disciplines. This specific purpose for the categories that genre creates and its justification in the University is evidence of the University’s structural frame and the workings of institutionality that I
have been outlining within this project. Generic boundaries in writing are maintained by both the university and the University with the intent to make knowledge easier to access; however, these boundaries are not always useful, as my examples of queer memoir and Virginia Woolf’s own work, both Orlando and A Room of One’s Own, will demonstrate.

The analytical, theoretical nature of feminist critique and scholarly work as we know it today as a genre in the University, with variations among all disciplines from anthropology to zoology, evolved from the Enlightenment era and solidified in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. The emphasis placed on reasoned argument and evidence as proof came from the Enlightenment’s love affair with Pure Reason and cataloguing all knowledge.\textsuperscript{5} The organization of the University and its values, including its exclusion of women well into the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, was built from these Enlightenment ideals. Through the 18\textsuperscript{th} century and into the long 19\textsuperscript{th} century, with the advent of Romanticism, reasoned argument also met with artistic endeavor, melding some of the first modern scholarly critique into art. One example of the tension between critique and artistic creation from the Victorian era is “The Critic as Artist,” by Oscar Wilde. He writes, “Why should the artist be troubled by the shrill clamour of criticism? Why should those who cannot create take upon themselves to estimate the value of creative work? What can they know about it? If a man's work is easy to understand, an explanation is unnecessary…” Wilde’s parody seems pointed at public art critics, those published during that era in newspapers, rather

\textsuperscript{5} For more on this history and how it has been framed by feminist critics, see: Jane O. Newman’s “The Present and Our Past: Simone de Beauvoir, Descartes, and Presentism in the Historiography of Feminism” (2002); Bette London’s “Guerrilla in Petticoats or Sans-Culotte? Virginia Woolf and the Future of Feminist Criticism” (1991); and Norma Alarcón, Caren Kaplan, and Minoo Moallem’s “Introduction” to Between Woman and Nation: Nationalisms, Transnational Feminisms, and the State (1999).
than the scholarly study and critique of art and literature; however, it is apparent that the methods we use now to frame our discourses are quite different than those used in the Victorian era and the early 20th century. Before the 20th century, scholarly work may be characterized as much closer to artistic work. Indeed, until the advent of critical theory and its proliferation of the abstract, the methods of interpretation in the discipline of English were different than they are today.

Virginia Woolf’s own critical essays can serve as evidence of the evolution of scholarly feminist critique as a genre. Her methods of feminist critique are a general mixture of history, opinion, interpretation, and art. Her essay “Modern Fiction” emphasizes the philosophy of fiction as a part of artistic creation in general rather than as a distinct set of methods and strategies, as our contemporary feminist critique might do. She writes:

But any deductions that we may draw from the comparison of two fictions so immeasurably far apart are futile save indeed as they flood us with a view of the infinite possibilities of the art and remind us that there is no limit to the horizon, and that nothing—no ‘method,’ no experiments, even of the wildest—is forbidden, but only falsity and pretence. (Woolf, Common Reader 163-164)

Her point here is about the methods of writing fiction, rather than textual interpretation and analysis, but it echoes Wilde’s judgment of critique and places value on artistic production over analysis of art. The essay demonstrates the change in the methods and values in scholarly feminist critique, but it also demonstrates the possibility of reclaiming “the infinite possibilities of art” as they apply to methods of scholarly feminist critique.
Woolf’s statements here reveal what is obvious in her other work: experimentation is the key to opening new avenues of thought in fiction. Why should this idea fail to extend to the scholarly work of feminist critique?

Experimentation within this genre, blending the experimentation that is allowed in fiction into the scholarly work of feminist critics, allows new perspectives and new avenues of thought. It challenges the institutional frames—within both the University and the university—that constitute which written works are creative and critical. Experimentation through genre-bending, thematically or formally, precludes feminist critique as always a process of negation and instead allows feminist critique to be framed as productive.

These changing values and the ways that genre orders knowledge as an institutional frame in the U/university also reflects Virginia Woolf’s status as an agent and her involvement in the Bloomsbury Group and its relation to the concept of genre-bending as I will continue to frame it throughout the rest of this project. It is possible to trace a curious similarity among the work of the Bloomsbury Group: it resists clear genre categorization, and as such their work reflects how genre-bending can come up against the institutional hegemony of genre. As Judith Scherer Herz argues in her entry about the Bloomsbury Group for the *Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*:

> In Bloomsbury writing, the letter, the lecture, the essay, the story all turn into each other; they are all textualizations of voice. But Bloomsbury not only wrote conversation as an art; it practiced it as well. Virginia Woolf not only talked about painting but she composed a dinner party...This crossing of generic boundaries is also related to the problematizing of gender—in biographical writing in Strachey’s Elizabeth and Essex, for example, and, in the mode of fantasy, in
Forster’s short fiction and Woolf’s Orlando. In Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own and Three Guineas, this generic revisionism is part of a feminist challenge to traditional modes of writing and their implicit ideology.

Herz here follows the argument of feminist criticism from the 1980s and following that Virginia Woolf’s writing reflects an explicit “feminist challenge” to male writing. Herz further suggests that Woolf deliberately uses “generic revisionism” to put forward this ideological challenge, as do the Bloomsbury Group in general. This kind of challenge is like what feminist critique in the University engages in today. Specifically, Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own aligns this genre-bending practice with feminist ideological challenge to the power structures of the U/university.

A Room of One’s Own

Famously, the argument in Woolf’s essay A Room of One’s Own is that women need monetary and material freedom to write, and write well. But what is often overlooked for its analytical potential is that this essay was originally given as a lecture to the women’s colleges at Cambridge University, where until 1948 (after Virginia Woolf’s death) women could not graduate with degrees, though they were welcome to complete courses. The essay is an argument for women to enter the both the university, through writing their own novels and publishing them, becoming writers whose work gains economic potential, and the University. Reading A Room of One’s Own in a way that interrogates the structure of the University and women’s place in it is surprisingly uncommon. There are few articles which focus on how A Room of One’s Own relates to the entrance and

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6 For this framing of Woolf’s argument that women’s writing must also result in economic gain through publishing, I am thankful to Margaret J.M. Ezell’s article, “The Myth of Judith Shakespeare: Creating the Cannon of Women’s Literature” (1990).
placement of women into and within the University. In her 2004 article “No Room of
One’s Own: Women’s Studies in English Departments in Germany,” Ina Schabert uses
the play on Woolf’s title to lead into her discussion of how the evolution of Women’s
Studies in Germany differs radically from the evolution of the discipline in the United
States. Zoya Hasan’s 2008 article “A College of One’s Own” similarly uses a play on
Woolf’s title to lead into her discussion of women’s colleges in India and around the
world. When feminist critics invoke Virginia Woolf’s essay about women in the
University, therefore, they use her as a shortcut to women’s education advocacy.
Feminist critics’ focus is more about Woolf’s political argument than how she makes that
argument. Many readings that are interested in the style of A Room of One’s Own prefer
instead to focus on Woolf’s prescriptions for women’s writing, her concept of the
androgynous author, and the functions of the personal in women’s writing. 7

One work of criticism identifies the genre-bending present in A Room of One’s
Own and Orlando. In her article “Fact, Fiction, and Metafiction: Blurred Gen(d)res in
Orlando and A Room of One’s Own,” Beth A. Boehm writes, “[A]s Woolf deconstructs
the impervious boundary between the sexes in both works, she also deconstructs the
boundary between fact and fiction…[both works are] not only thematically similar…but
also stylistically similar” (192). Boehm’s observation is key to understanding how I also
understand these two texts to intersect with one another: both written and published in
1928, they reflect Woolf’s thinking about gender and genre and how breaking down the

7 See, for example, Anne Fernald’s “A Room of One’s Own, Personal Criticism, and the
Essay” (1994); Peggy Kamuf’s “Penelope at Work: Interruptions in A Room of One’s
Own” (1982) Frances L. Restuccia’s “‘Untying the Mother Tongue’: Female Difference
in Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own” (1985); and John Burt’s “Irreconcilable
Habits of Thought in A Room of One’s Own and To the Lighthouse” (1982).
boundaries of each can be reflected in a single work. Where I depart from Boehm is that I understand Woolf’s genre-bending in both works to be a part of the history of feminist critique I have outlined. Woolf’s project in *A Room of One’s Own* to advocate for women’s writing and women’s education is one of the initial sites for the conflation of the political women’s movement and the University. Acknowledging this alongside Wiegman’s explanation of the use and aims of feminist critique allows us to see *A Room of One’s Own* not just as an essay advocating for economic and intellectual freedom for women, but also as a critique of the University through a feminist lens.

The circumstances of the original writing and delivery of *A Room of One’s Own* as lectures to University students make this a prime way to examine the relationships among women, the University, and art. Woolf enters the University with specific aims presented in a specific way. She argues out right for women to claim their education and their ability to write; she argues for women to fight for their economic independence to allow them the freedom of thought to write fiction. But she also creates Judith Shakespeare, and reanimates her day and her thinking on the page. She convinces us by way of vivid description and personal attestation; her lecture is a call to action which blends the features of feminist critique as a genre with the features of fiction as a genre.

In the latter part of *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf asserts: “…it is fatal for any one who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or a woman pure and simple: one must be woman-manly or man-womanly. It is fatal for a woman to lay the least stress on any grievance; to plead even with justice any cause; in any way to speak consciously as a woman” (Woolf 104). It may seem here that Woolf’s desire is to discount the feminist movement altogether, but instead she is doing two things. The first is to draw attention to
the harsh reality of writing as a woman in 1928. The second aspect of work she asks her essay to do is to draw attention to the goal of the feminist movement in the abstract: to do away with the distinctions between men and women as superior or inferior. Her attachment to the idea of the androgynous author is here an iteration of a sincere wish to transcend gender. Woolf’s vision of the androgynous author is perhaps meant as a nod to the eventual abandonment of gender as a category which holds power, which reflects the political aims of both Women’s and Gender Studies and Queer Studies in the University.

Woolf’s genre-bending allows the rhetorical modes of fiction to layer and nuance her argument: while she makes her points about the needs of women and outlines a feminist agenda for women in the University, she uses the literary devices of fiction to make these points visible and accessible. From within the University, her model of how a woman might come to write literary criticism is what is finally at stake. Rather than the logical, step-by-step explication of what is literary and what is not, or how to—step-by-step—write fiction, when Woolf speaks about writing, she creates fictions. Her analytical style is self-reflexive as well as imaginative in a way that is uncommon even now. But by the recent explorations and definitions of both Terry Eagleton and Jean-Marie Schaeffer, Woolf’s short essay expressing the wish for economic independence for women to write genius fiction which transcends the limits of gender and sexuality, is indeed, in part, fiction. It can thus, and indeed should be, analyzed within the University as such. Indeed, Schaeffer’s discussion of “[t]he goal of fictional process” and its ability to “give us access to: fictional universes” is just the goal and process Woolf is calling on

8 Or especially now with our dependence upon the hyper-referential style that characterizes Wiegman’s Object Lessons and her rhetorical gymnastics to avoid criticizing this circumstance outright.
when she writes (again, famously) about her lunch at the University of Cambridge (Schaeffer 278). She describes it lusciously:

Here, however, I shall take the liberty to defy that convention and to tell you that the lunch on this occasion began with soles, sunk in a deep dish, over which the college cook had spread a counter-pane of the whitest cream, save that it was branded here and there with brown spots like the spots on the flanks of a doe. After that came the partridges, but if this suggests a couple bald, brown birds on a plate, you are mistaken. (Woolf, A Room of One’s Own 10)

This attention to detail and the way this description asks Woolf’s readers to be drawn into the pleasure of the meal by its sensory components is just one example of Woolf’s use of fictional universes to further her point about the conditions of women and why they need to change those conditions. The meal is a small moment, but Woolf uses the rhetorical mode of fiction and the literary device of description to give her audience the experience of the meal while at the same time acknowledging that she “def[ies]…convention.” More than that, Woolf is using the fictional process to entice her audience with the lavish and comfortable lives led by male scholars. She means for us, for the female college students who were her first audience, to desire the comfort that they have. Her gambit is to convince women to pursue education and become writers by feeding us! The powers of fiction and our shared process of imagining help her to make her argument compelling.

More examples of this type of persuasion through the literary devices of fiction, blending the genres of the feminist critique of the University and the fiction of the University, are found throughout A Room of One’s Own. She begins by describing her own stroll in the October morning along the grounds of the University of Cambridge: “To
the right and left bushes of some sort, golden and crimson, glowed with the colour, even it seemed burnt with the heat, of fire” (Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* 5). This may seem simply a nice way to give context, but the creation of this scene reveals how fictional modes of description work in Woolf’s essay to further her argument. There is a confluence of place and feeling which can be ascertained here. Woolf is, soon after this moment, disturbed in her walk across the lawn, and so in the retelling, she is already angry. She already has something to say about Cambridge itself and its exclusionary policies for women. If Cambridge’s bushes are on fire here, it is description, yes, but it is also a way to transmit the feeling of anger towards the University subtly to her audience.

Another example of how Woolf uses literary devices to further her feminist critique of the University in *A Room of One’s Own* is her description of her experience researching women in fiction in the British Museum. She writes: “I should need to be a herd of elephants, I thought, and a wilderness of spiders, desperately referring to the animals that are reputed longest lived and most multitudinously eyed, to cope with all of this” (Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* 26-27). Her reference here is to her ability to access, read, and make sense of all the books available on the topic of women at the British Museum. Here, the literary description, the metaphor at work, is much more transparent. Prior to this description, Woolf asks the reader: “Are you aware that you are, perhaps, the most discussed animal in the universe?” (26). Since her first audience was women, this metaphor about elephants and spiders has quite a sharp edge. Woolf calls attention to the fact that by men’s organizing standards, women are animals, and then goes on to show the immense amount written about women by men in such a way that it cannot be ignored. The effectiveness of her observation is heightened by her use of the literary
devices metaphor and personification. Woolf dramatizes the amount of writing by men about women through her desire to turn herself into a herd of elephants. This reverse-personification—the transformation of women into animals and her own transformation into an elephant which cannot be ignored—is an image which makes her point about the place of women and their need to fight for their rights in the U/university.

Woolf draws us into experiences of delight as well as frustration, anger, righteousness, and beauty as she makes her argument for how important it is for women to have rooms of their own to write fiction. She considers these questions about women and writing with the sensibility in Ezell’s words, of “an inspired analyst of the process of literary creation” (587). She can both analyze the process of writing and to use it create a call to action: this is one aim of feminist literary criticism and critique. Even though she does not give much practical advice about the act of writing fiction, she is demonstrating the power and method of fiction while she speaks about women and their political aims concerning education, the university and the University. The thematic genre-bending present in *A Room of One’s Own*, a work more often classified as a work of scholarship than a work of literature, draws attention to how Virginia Woolf’s status as an object and an agent in the University intersect. As an object, she is claimed by feminism and used in the disciplines of Women’s and Gender Studies and Queer Studies as a part of their arguments about gender identity, politics, and representation. As an agent, she herself participates in these political arguments and specifically engages with contemporary questions about gender and the power structures of the University through the genre-bent *A Room of One’s Own*. Considering her placement as an object in the university, as a separate but extended institutional site from the University, also follows genre-bending.
The creative works in which Woolf appear which I will shortly analyze are all in some way thematically genre-bent to varying degrees, either as little as my example of Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, or as much as Woolf’s *Orlando*.

**Virginia Woolf as an Object II, or The Cultural Capital of Virginia Woolf in the University**

*Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

Often, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is explained as a meditation on the failures of the American Dream, a common theme in Edward Albee’s absurdist theater from the latter 20th century. The title of the work is deceptive: little about the plot deals with Virginia Woolf at all. But Woolf’s fictive persona takes on meanings of its own throughout the work; Virginia Woolf is a signifier for several concepts in Albee’s play more than she is a person, character, or writer. One of the first and most enduring incidences of Woolf’s persona as an icon and cultural signifier, Albee’s question as title, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, holds cultural capital that helps us to understand how her presence in the university is an extension of her place, fame, and creation as an object of study in the University. In the play, the question “Who’s afraid of Virginia Woolf?” is repeated often by Martha, the daughter of a University president and wife to a University professor. She and her husband, George, enter their home after a University party, late, and drunk. Their relationship is quickly established as a rocky one, full of bitterness, blame, and disagreement. Martha’s insistence on entertaining a new professor and his wife, even at the late hour of 2AM sets her directly in opposition to George. The repeated, sung, refrain of “Who’s afraid of Virginia Woolf?” colors her meandering conversation and further divides them. After she sings it the first time in the audience’s hearing, Martha remarks to
George: “What’s the matter…didn’t you think that was funny? Hunh? (Defiantly) I thought it was a scream…a real scream” (Albee 12). Virginia Woolf here stands in between Martha and George; it is implied that Martha is not an acceptable wife, by 1960s standards. She is brash and contrary, defiant. Furthermore, the relationship between these two and their relations with the University are always in conjunction with each other. Many of the failures of their marriage are placed upon George by Martha because of his failure in his profession. Virginia Woolf, therefore, also is placed in relation to the University in the play; the power Martha has as the daughter of the University president and the power she seemingly takes within her marriage are all embedded in her repeated refrain, “Who’s afraid of Virginia Woolf?”

The drama of the play goes forward with the arrival of the new professor and his wife, and it seems to abandon the importance of Virginia Woolf as a signifier. The audience learns over the course of the wild night that George and Martha are often violent with each other and are fond of mind games. The increasing absurdity of the situations created by George and Martha in relation to the seriousness of the topics they discuss—from infidelity to genetic engineering—all serve to make the audience take on the emotional brunt of George and Martha’s abusive relationship. As the night wears on, Martha reveals to the new professor’s wife that she and George have a son, who is coming home for his birthday in the morning. This fact is unexpected and ominous: George’s reaction is surprised and then inscrutable: “Yes Martha…since you had the bad taste to bring the matter up in the first place…when is the little bugger coming home?” (Albee 70; emphasis in original). This question guides the rest of George’s actions. The audience receives pointed clues about Martha through his dialogue: “Actually, I’m rather
worried about you. About your mind,” he says, in a play where madness is ever more apparent and every character’s mind begins to seem warped (Albee 156).

The very end of the play returns us to Virginia Woolf. George completes his exorcism of Martha (indeed, the last act is titled “The Exorcism”), tooling out the story of their son, only to reveal he does not exist: “I have the right Martha…I could kill him any time I wanted to…You broke our rule, baby. You mentioned him…you mentioned him to someone else” (Albee 236). Martha’s madness and their lack of a child are tethered to Martha’s refrain; as she recovers from the trauma of George’s story about their imaginary son, she responds to the question. “GEORGE: Who’s afraid of Virginia Woolf...MARTHA: I…am…George…I…am…” (Albee 242). This revelation of Martha’s madness and its connection to her fear centers around Virginia Woolf. Embedded in the name itself are several ideas that relate to feminism and the fear it invoked in the early 1960s: Virginia Woolf made to signify madness through the idea of an unfit wife and mother, the idea of the failure of the American Dream as it is tethered to the family and reproductive futurism, and the idea of the dangers of feminism and feminists.

Brenda Silver also begins her study by connecting Albee’s play and Virginia Woolf with fear and feminism. She is another scholar who has recognized Woolf’s status as a cultural icon and signifier in the university, in her book, *Virginia Woolf: Icon*. Silver’s work identifies and follows Woolf’s fame and its growth, beginning within Woolf’s lifetime, and extending into the present. One of Silver’s main points is that Woolf’s status as an icon and touchstone makes her an object in the public imagination,

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which allows Virginia Woolf’s name to carry meaning of its own accord, despite Woolf’s personal ideas or her work. Silver’s first example of how Woolf carries assigned meanings relies on the cultural capital of the title, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* as it is linked with the index of Virginia Woolf’s image. She relates the publication of an article in the *New York Times Magazine* from 1994 about Lani Guinier. She writes, “[Guinier’s] face, in profile, bears an uncanny resemblance to Woolf’s profile in one of the lesser-known Man Ray photographs taken of the writer in 1934….Given this cover and the controversy surrounding Guinier’s views and persona, I was not surprised to find that the piece was called ‘*Who’s Afraid of Lani Guinier?*’” (Silver 1). Silver’s discussion of this image and the title of the piece emphasize that Woolf’s image and name are made to represent resistance to intellectual women gaining power. “Here was a formidable intellectual woman speaking out in public about ways to restructure our system of political representation, and that proved scary indeed” (Silver 2-3). Silver’s implication here is that the fear Albee’s title refers to is the fear of intellectual women and their ability to change power structures. What Silver does not address is how Woolf’s cultural capital is complicit in a strange white-washing of Lani Guinier: she assumed by Silver to be powerful in this image because of her alignment with Virginia Woolf as a white, intellectual woman. Silver also does not address more than a passing identification of how fear is placed in relation to Virginia Woolf through Albee’s title; she does not investigate exactly how Albee’s play demonstrates fear in relation to Woolf and feminism. As I’ve already shown, fear in Albee’s play is tied to Virginia Woolf through the domestic sphere and represented through literary creation; tracing this fear out into the public—not just into the university through creative work as I am doing, but as a
marker in politics—reaches to not only identify but expand Woolf’s reach as a touchstone.

From the Lani Guinier image, Silver returns to explicate the power of Woolf’s persona to include, in many senses, the way that I am using the term university in this project. She writes: “[T]he proliferation of Virginia Woolf’s has transformed the writer into a powerful and powerfully contested cultural icon, whose name, face, and authority are persistently claimed or disclaimed in debates about art, politics, sexuality, gender, class, the ‘canon,’ fashion, feminism, race, and anger” (Silver 3). To this list, I add genre-bending, female scholarship, and feminist critique. These debates, and Woolf’s status as a cultural icon for those with not much more than a passing familiarity with her work and life, Silver argues, “[link] Virginia Woolf to fear: the fears she is said to have experienced in her own life…the fears she evokes in others” (Silver 3). This is also an extrapolation from Albee’s play title; Virginia Woolf’s appearances in the university signal the tensions between the different meanings her persona is assigned. Silver grounds Woolf’s influence in this fear: “By looking more closely at the who and exploring the contexts in which she is presented as or perceived to be frightening, we can begin to understand how Virginia Woolf has become the site of conflicts about cultural boundaries and legitimacy that continue to rage today” (3). Silver credits the collective cultural fear she identifies through Woolf’s persona, name, and iconicity to the creative production of Edward Albee. Though the play does indeed use Virginia Woolf as a signifier for fear, Albee’s use of Woolf signals her already powerful influence and its relationship to a collective imagination from her use in the University which made her visible to Albee. As Patricia J. Williams writes in her book *Open House*: 
“Sometimes…imagination is much more powerful than our rational knowledge” (Williams 105). The endurance of fear in relation to Woolf is exacerbated by Albee’s use of her as a touchstone in his own creative work. In this way, Woolf’s influence as an object in the university is rooted in the power of creative work and its relationship to the imaginative and literary.

Albee’s play reflects a reaction to the feminism of the time it was published, and each of the following cultural examples of Virginia Woolf as an object in the university reflect the accumulation of understandings, arguments, and terms that have come to be attached to her persona through the decades. From the 1960s forward, Woolf’s appearances in the creative work of the university reflect the interactions between the mainstream culture surrounding women, feminism, sex, sexuality, and power and the arguments put forward about these topics within the University that I have already explicated in relation to Virginia Woolf. One of the most prevalent examples of Virginia Woolf’s persona in cultural, creative work is Michael Cunningham’s 1998 book, *The Hours*, and the 2002 movie of the same name. The novel and the movie both span the most important shifts and arguments that have been attached to Virginia Woolf by the University, from her biography and her importance as a Modernist, through her feminism, and including her queer identifications. As such, this cultural work serves as the bridge in this project for understanding the implications in the realm of the university of the many layers and meanings that Virginia Woolf has been assigned as an object of study by the University. *The Hours* clearly delineates different eras of Woolf’s influence in its own story structure. Though not a formally genre-bent work (just as Albee’s play is not a formally genre-bent work), *The Hours* is thematically genre-bent in its depictions of
Virginia Woolf through the 20th century and into the 21st century. Time in the novel is clearly split along three timelines, but these timelines intersect thematically around the claims to Woolf’s power as a Modernist, feminist, and queer subject. The novel demonstrates how these ideas about Woolf from the University are disseminated by the university through creative texts of multiple genres and which reflect genre-bending in some way.

*The Hours*

Both the novel and the movie, *The Hours*, open with the moment of Virginia Woolf’s death. Embedded in this opening is a preoccupation with Virginia Woolf’s life, and an assumption about her genius, the nature of mental illness, and her fame. But the book’s preoccupations do not stay centered upon Virginia Woolf’s life—her biography—even though the book does recount a fictive version of her life based upon posthumously published diaries, memoirs, and biographies written by her family members—famously, Quentin Bell, who is a child during the events related by the book. The other storylines within the book all coalesce around the persona of Virginia Woolf. These stories seem to attempt to answer the question: What does Virginia Woolf authorize when she appears? *The Hours* serves as a useful fictive foil for the work of this project and its questions about the status, workings, and creation of Virginia Woolf as an object of study because it attempts to answer these questions creatively.

One story in Cunningham’s novel is a fictive representation of Virginia Woolf’s life—between 1923 and her death, mostly centered on her writing of *Mrs. Dalloway.* Another thread in the novel follows Mrs. Brown, an unhappy or uncomfortable housewife married to an Army veteran in post-World War II California. She reads *Mrs. Dalloway,*
alone one day with the shadow of suicide on a hotel bedside table. The final thread takes place in the novel’s present, 1998, where a lauded writer is dying of AIDS, and his favorite person and keeper’s life follows the plot of *Mrs. Dalloway* closely and intentionally. The novel’s threads build different eras of feminism and feminist scholarship into the story of *Mrs. Dalloway*: each woman, in her way, expresses a deep need for freedom and how to attain it in relation to Woolf’s classic. Each character’s preoccupations also align them with their era of feminism and its foil in the University, according to the fields being studied in this project.

Woolf’s fictive biography as told by Cunningham focuses on her brief forays into independence despite her illness. Woolf wrote *Mrs. Dalloway* after a period of enforced rest and removal from London. In the novel, this chafes Virginia: it prompts her to tell the story of Carissa’s internal realization of independent subjectivity. Woolf’s life stands in for first wave feminism and aligns her with the field of English and Virginia Woolf’s relation to Modernist Studies as an object of study. Virginia’s concerns are for material independence and artistic freedom in her work as a writer. The story of Mrs. Brown adds in concerns specific to second wave feminism. Mrs. Brown longs for social freedom and grapples with her identity as a mother, even her identity as a heterosexual woman. Ultimately, Mrs. Brown leaves her “perfect” life for the freedoms of self-identification and self-actualization. This aligns her also with the field of Women’s and Gender Studies. The third story, the one which foils the original character of Mrs. Dalloway to our modern-day Clarissa—a book agent—tells the story of a woman who is taking care of a brilliant author who is dying from AIDS. The many ways that the original plot of *Mrs. Dalloway* is altered or shifted to create a more modern world aligns it with the field of
Queer Studies. Not only is the famous author driven to take his own life as Septimus Warren Smith does—aligning the identity crises following World War I with the identity crises following the AIDS epidemic—but our Clarissa also grapples with fluid sexuality and gender norms.

The many ways that the book invokes the prevailing concerns of the academic disciplines of English, Women’s and Gender Studies, and Queer Studies is important because Cunningham identifies Virginia Woolf, as I do, as a figure who can trace the evolutions and changes among these disciplines within the wider university. What Virginia Woolf’s persona signifies and carries with it through this fiction into the university is mirrored in the capital the University has given her as a cultural icon through its use of her as an object of study. The different ways that the disciplines of English, Women’s and Gender Studies, and Queer Studies interact around the figure of Virginia Woolf and how they imbue meaning into her via arguments about her status as a writer, feminist, and queer subject are all enacted through *The Hours*.

Both *The Hours* and *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* are creative texts of different forms that reflect how Virginia Woolf is represented as an object in the university which aligns with Virginia Woolf as an object in the University. Both the novel and the play reveal Virginia Woolf’s cultural capital in relation to feminism and feminist terms. Though Albee’s play certainly vilifies feminism while Cunningham’s work supports it, both deal with Virginia Woolf as a signifier in the university who is connected to feminism and the rights of women. *The Hours* includes Virginia Woolf’s cultural capital as a writer and in queer terms. The implications of this crossover from the University to the university reveals two specific ways that power relates to its objects and
its agents. The first power relation these works draw attention to is that between the University and the university: as institutions that order knowledge, both hold power over objects that exist in the other. The University and the university exist on a continuum of power, and Virginia Woolf’s status as an icon within each reflects this. The ideas she has come to signify independent of her own work bleed into the creative works of others in the university. The second power relation these works reveal is the limit of the power of the University and its methods. Even though Virginia Woolf is claimed by multiple disciplines, the creative works in the university continue to interrogate, represent, and proliferate her in new and varying forms which can both reinforce and challenge the accepted ideas about her which are put forward by the structures of the University. This becomes even more clear in the next two, more thematically genre-bent, works I will analyze, Bechdel’s *Are You My Mother?* and Tea’s *Black Wave*.

**Bechdel and Tea: Virginia Woolf as a Queer Icon**

The next two works which I will use to track Virginia Woolf as an object in the university are memoirs; however, their genres are not fixed. Both Alison Bechdel’s *Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama* and Michelle Tea’s *Black Wave* are memoirs that actively blend memoir with fiction and with the graphic novel; the authors employ genre-bending in relation to and as a reflection of Virginia Woolf. Like *The Hours*, which blends Virginia Woolf’s fictive biography into an otherwise entirely fictive work—or an adaption of Woolf’s own fiction—these next two creative works blend genres and disrupt the expected boundaries of generic classification as it functions in the University and the university. This reflects the memoirs’ participation in queer theory and the ways that, as queer subjects, their authors interact with their works as constructions that reflect the
fluid nature of gender identification and sexuality. These works reflect the ways that Virginia Woolf as an object is claimed by queer theory in the realm of the University, which focuses upon Woolf’s own fluid sexuality, her treatment of gender as a non-discrete category, and her treatment of time, especially in *Orlando*\(^{10}\). Genre-bending is often used in queer texts to signal and unpack these fluidities in identity, by joining categories—like memoir and auto/biography with fiction that trouble our understanding of these categories as fixed.

In her chapter “Writing Queer Lives: Autobiography and Memoir,” Julie Avril Minich cites two feminist autobiography scholars: Bella Brodski and Celeste Schenck. Minich writes that they
critique the notion that ‘autobiography is a transparency through which we perceive the life, unmediated and undistorted,’ an illusion rooted in ‘the Western ideal of an essential and inviolable self’ from which women are left out: they conclude that life writing by those who are excluded from ‘the masculine representative self’ exposes *in its very form* the meditated, subjective nature of life writing and foregrounds ‘the problematic status of the self.’ (Minich 60; emphasis in original).

In relation to the project of Queer Studies, Minich argues that this line of argument resists the idea that “queer life writing [can be mined] for representative lives or achievements” (Minich 60). Unlike ‘woman writer’ before it, Minich argues that ‘queer writer’ resists universalization and the token status of representation. Importantly, when Minich, Brodski, and Schenck are read in relation to Woolf, this transition from the ‘woman

\(^{10}\) See, for example: Erica Gene Delsandro’s “In the Classroom: Virginia Woolf and the Possibilities of Queer History” (2012); Melanie Micir’s “The Queer Timing of *Orlando: A Biography*” (2012); and Madelyn Detloff’s “Camp Orlando (Or) *Orlando*” (2016).
writer’ to the ‘queer writer’ is elided. As an object of study in the University, Woolf is always both and; she is made to stand in for the idea of the woman writer when the University needs her to and the idea of the queer writer when required.

However, Minich also implies that form and genre denote a piece of writing’s resistance to the collective narrative of progress, the universal self, and representative representation—the token woman, queer, person of color writer. In her argument, queer memoir, which resists and blends genres of writing, reveals many ways to represent a self which cannot be universalized and made to speak for anyone, everyone. There is a tension here which Virginia Woolf exposes from the University: how can queer memoir achieve this resistance to universal representation when, as an object subsumed by Queer Studies, her persona becomes a signifier for queer subjectivity? As she is represented as an object in these queer texts in the university—both Bechdel’s and Tea’s—Virginia Woolf’s persona cannot quite resist universalization, which Minich says is the purpose of queer texts.

Virginia Woolf’s relation to these questions about how different genres represent truth and fiction in queer texts speaks to her influence on our conceptions of the ability of women and queer writers to represent lived experience and themselves as subjects and as agents in the U/university. Virginia Woolf’s relation to these questions also speaks to her own grappling with questions about facts and fiction, representations of life and lived experience as an agent, a writer, thinker, and scholar. Bechdel’s work, surprisingly, is one of the few works which attempts to represent Virginia Woolf as an agent in this project, even as she is made into an object as a drawing in the graphic memoir. As an object, Virginia Woolf still stands in for the arguments about queer subjectivity that surround her
within the University and in Bechdel’s own work; however, Bechdel also brings Virginia Woolf’s own opinions and words into the work. How Woolf’s words stand alone within the creative work of Bechdel, speaking along with and in tandem with Bechdel’s own words, give Woolf a measure of agency because this leaves Woolf’s words up to each individual reader’s interpretation. Bechdel does not force Virginia Woolf to represent a specific point of view according to what is accepted or approved by the University, but allows Woolf space within the university to be open to new interpretations.

Near the beginning of Alison Bechdel’s second graphic memoir, *Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama*, Virginia Woolf makes an unexpected appearance. Bechdel introduces Woolf this way: “How I envy the involuntary torrent of words and images that came to Virginia Woolf that day in Tavistock Square” (Bechdel 23). Woolf’s appearance is synonymous with artistic production: it appears after Bechdel relates her experience with writer’s block in the process of writing the graphic memoir we are currently reading. Virginia Woolf is recognizably drawn in Tavistock Square, and Bechdel quotes from Woolf’s diary from the time. “Let the biographer print fully, completely, accurately, the known facts without comment; then let him write the life as a fiction” (Bechdel 28). In Bechdel’s work, this line between truth and fiction in biography—or memoir—seems to be clear and distinct. Bechdel insists upon telling her reader that her adherence to the truth is deliberate and ensures her authenticity: “But I am not ultimately interested in writing fiction,” she writes (Bechdel 28). The story of her relationship with her mother, her self-realization, and her writing process feels genuine. However, she continues: “I can’t make things up. Or rather, I can only make things up about things that have already happened” (Bechdel 28). The contradiction between these two statements attempts to
uncover the inherent contradiction in memoir, biography, and autobiography: the facts are only represented in all of these forms, just as they are in fiction. Bechdel’s voice, paired with her choice of graphic narrative and her meta-relation of her own writing process presents us with a version of her lived experience. Bechdel continues to layer in Woolf’s thoughts about the relations between biography and fiction. She writes, quoting from *To the Lighthouse*, “This ‘symbolic’ quality that transcends mere ‘real figures’ seems to be what fiction achieves for Woolf—a deeper truth than facts” (Bechdel 29). As I have already shown with my explication of *A Room of One’s Own*, there is an ongoing tension in Woolf’s work between the truth of feminist critique and scholarly work and the work of fiction. Bechdel is here transitioning Woolf’s conception of truth in fiction to queer subjectivity and her project of representing her own.

Bechdel’s work does not draw on Virginia Woolf further—this single invocation before the end of the first chapter echoes through the rest of her memoir. Woolf’s persona serves to uphold myriad layers: the authority of the woman writer; the (blurred) method behind biography, memoir, and fiction; writing as a mode of self-actualization, self-differentiation; the constitution of the female/queer subject; cynicism toward psychoanalysis. The manifestation of these layers with a single invocation of Virginia Woolf again reiterates the ways that the University’s use of her persona as an object are represented in the creative work of the university. Virginia Woolf herself becomes a form and object within Bechdel’s writing as much as she is an agent: she is a symbol which transcends her identity as a ‘real figure,’ historically (Bechdel 28). In addition to her words being offered up for open interpretation, Virginia Woolf is still constituted as a signifier outside of herself, given more meanings and layers by her cultural capital than
she offers through Bechdel’s inclusion of her words. This reiterates the tensions I have been outlining throughout this project, between object and agent and the university and the University. As an object, Virginia Woolf is emptied out and filled by Bechdel’s placement of her within a self-reflexive queer text: she signifies the possibility of a queer subject aware of itself in the way that Bechdel seeks to portray herself as a queer subject aware of herself through writing. As an agent, Virginia Woolf’s words, as quoted by Bechdel, offer a new perspective on the methods of biography as blended with fiction. Placed as her observations are in relation to the genre-bending that Bechdel herself is creating between memoir, fiction, and the form of the graphic novel, Woolf’s writing serves to support genre-bending. This tension reveals how the power which Virginia Woolf’s name and persona invoke is rooted in her relations with and to both the University and the university. In order for Bechdel to make the claims she does through Woolf’s appearance in her text, a knowledge of Woolf’s long history and placement within the University is necessary; that Woolf appears in this creative text within the university and outside the University reiterates how power and knowledge shift into the university from the University. These sites of institutional power regulate and disseminate Virginia Woolf as an object in relation to feminism and queer identity by the theories and disciplines that define her in the University which are in turn taken up by creative works in the university.

My final example of Virginia Woolf as an object within the creative projects of the university is from Michelle Tea’s 2016, thematically genre-bent, fictive memoir, *Black Wave*, which relates the events of the author’s youth through a highly mediated and constructed text, which calls attention to its own construction as a blend of memoir and
fiction. The invocation of Virginia Woolf in this text places her as the pinnacle of queer writers, one whose presence makes way for experimentation. About halfway into Michelle’s wild, drug-fueled, lesbian life in 1990s San Francisco, soon before she moves to Los Angeles and kicks her burgeoning heroin addiction, she meets someone who is originally introduced as “an androgynous person” so alluring Michelle must meet them (Tea 92). Their meeting is built up to be perfect because of the person’s androgyny: “[S]he could talk to this person who she was thinking of as a being, whose gender, come to think of it, she had no desire to know, why should she care” (Tea 92-93). When Michelle finally speaks to them, the person is excited that Michelle cannot ascertain their gender, and they—the two of them—return to Michelle’s rented room to do heroin together. Michelle narrates “the being” as they watch the heroin being prepared, describing them: “They had an intelligent face, something Virginia-Woolfish about it, perhaps the nose” (Tea 93-94). This sustained suspension of the being’s gender and the reliance on the pronoun “they” connected to this invocation of Virginia Woolf reveals another way that Woolf is made to represent the concerns and arguments of Queer Studies. Soon after Woolf’s persona is invoked, it is revealed that the being, named Quinn, is also a poet: “Of course Quinn was a poet, wrote by hand in a notebook forever tucked into a messenger bag” (Tea 94). This fact becomes structurally important to Tea’s memoir later, as Quinn becomes a kind of second narrator, an interlocutor with the text as it reveals itself to be a text. But in the first scenes of their meeting, Quinn’s gender is ultimately revealed, seemingly by accident: “‘I’m married, ’ said the being…You’re Married to a Man? Michelle asked, and Quinn nodded before realizing she had revealed her gender.” (Tea 95; emphasis in original). This too, speaks to the identification
Michelle makes between Quinn and Virginia Woolf—there is an embedded history of Woolf’s lived experience as a woman, wife, and feminist that is called up by this: Quinn is both a woman and androgynous, a lesbian and married, they and she. All of Woolf’s critical institutional sites as an object appear in relation to Quinn.

Later in the memoir, as the narrative begins to draw attention itself as a narrative, a text, a material book, Quinn returns.

Wait, I’m really confused. Quinn felt a rising panic as she sat there on the carpet of Michelle’s studio apartment. What do you mean we haven’t met? An existential chill ran through the girl. It felt true…This Is A Story, Michelle gestured at the studio apartment…This, Michelle told Quinn, Is My Memoir (Tea 145; emphasis in original).

Quinn is revealed to be a character within Tea’s narrative. Quinn is the figure which allows the book to flip from memoir to fiction and back. In response to Michelle’s announcement, Quinn states: “Memoirs are true, Quinn, also a writer, pointed out.” (Tea 145; emphasis in original). Quinn’s answer to Michelle is credible because she is also a poet, a writer. Michelle’s next answer queers our expectations and understanding of memoir: “This One Is Part True And Part False.” Because of Quinn, we are allowed into the inner workings of the text as a creation. I propose here that it is no accident that Quinn both looks “Virginia Woolfish” and serves this role in Tea’s fictive memoir. Tea’s narrative continues: “You Know How A Story Needs To Get Told? Quinn did. It was one of the reasons Michelle brought her into the book. Quinn was a poet and knew the feeling of writing bubbling up inside her” (Tea 146; emphasis in original). Quinn’s knowledge about writing itself is the reason for her inclusion, or creation, in the narrative: as an
androgynous, wise, poet, Quinn embodies the spirit of Virginia Woolf. This invocation, like the other before it, calls upon all the manifestations of meaning that Virginia Woolf has been given as an object in the University. Finding these many meanings in the university and in creative work that is genre-bent connects Virginia Woolf’s meanings as an object to her work and writing as an agent: the effectiveness her own genre-bending between feminist critique and fiction are affirmed in these elisions of the university and the University with Virginia Woolf as the site of connection. As her foil, Quinn stands in as lover and mother-figure, as someone who can encourage the brave creative leap that needs to happen for the memoir to continue and as the vanguard of the history of Michelle’s life. Virginia Woolf as an object and an agent holds this power as well, especially as her persona is claimed and used in contemporary discourses both in the university and the University.

**VIRGINIA WOOLF AS AN AGENT II, OR ORLANDO: FICTION AND FEMINIST CRITIQUE**

As an object in the university that invokes (as in Michelle Tea’s *Black Wave*) the span of her University institutional sites, Virginia Woolf’s status as an icon negotiates the tensions between her use as an object and her work as an agent across these institutions which manage knowledge. The overwhelming prevalence of feminist critique in Women’s and Gender Studies and the University in general signals fewer instances where Virginia Woolf is included in critical conversations in the University except as a signifier for those ideas she has already been assigned: as a women writer, for feminism, and for queer subjectivity. In this final section, I challenge this notion that her persona should only continue to serve as an object which can travel through multiple disciplines in the U/university. Instead, I identify in *Orlando* a similar strain of feminist critique as I have
earlier with my analysis of *A Room of One’s Own*. Virginia Woolf can still claim agency and relevance in the University because of her engagement with feminist institutional critique through the fictional biography of *Orlando*.

The implication of engaging both feminist institutional critique and fiction together builds upon the other thematically genre-bent work in which I have located Virginia Woolf as an object in the university. There is a parallel between Woolf’s appearances in genre-bent work and the effectiveness of her own genre-bent work. Where she appears recalls not only the arguments from the University under scrutiny; as in *The Hours*, it also recalls, in its genre-bent-ness, Woolf’s own work and her dedication to experimentation in creative work. Woolf’s *Orlando* embeds feminist critique in fiction in order to push the boundaries of both: how do the devices and methods of fiction alter our understanding of feminist critique? How, in addition, do the claims and necessary theoretical assumptions of feminist critique alter fiction? Woolf’s integration of the two genres, as in *A Room of One’s Own*, leads to a productive interrogation of the power structures which bind gender, identities, and bodies. Instead of the kind of feminist critique which simply reproduces itself as an act of intellectual negation, like Wiegman’s *Object Lessons*, *Orlando* offers a feminist critique which allows the audience into a particular subjective experience. Much more like Bechdel’s framing of her own subjective experience in *Are You My Mother?*, *Orlando* invites the audience to experience feminist critique through their imagination and with the companionship of the character of Orlando. The work showcases how genre-bending can reanimate feminist critique through fiction and how Virginia Woolf can be reanimated through the lens of the U/university by this identification of feminist critique in her creative work.
Virginia Woolf’s 1928 novel *Orlando* is an example of another kind of feminist critique which blends fiction and the academic genres of feminist critique and biography. The narrator of her work performs a similar critique to those scholars working with contemporary feminist critique, which is surprising because her work pre-dates contemporary conceptions of feminist critique. The narrator is the voice of feminist critique in the novel and stands in for the contemporary feminist critic who gives an analysis of the institutions of power that form the society of the novel and enforce the main character’s gender identities. In this fiction, Woolf offers a glimpse of the kind of scholarly work to come from women’s entrance into universities and the evolution of feminist critique to the present day. Identifying a form of feminist critique embedded in Woolf’s fiction, *Orlando*, changes how we can understand the generic boundaries of feminist critique within the U/university. Feminist critique can benefit from blending the rhetorical techniques of the genre of feminist critique which has some basis in deconstruction with those that govern the genre of fiction because it allows the tensions between agent and object and between the university and the University to be exposed in one text.

To read *Orlando* as part of the tradition of feminist critique, it is imperative to link the feminist critique of the University to the genre-bending that is increasingly found in the queer texts that claim Virginia Woolf in the university. *Orlando* is a site of feminist critique which operates within the genre of fiction rather than the specifically academic genre of feminist critique that I have explained as a part of feminist discourse. As a
genre-bent work, it is usually identified as both fiction and an academic biography,\textsuperscript{11} but in favor of further demonstrating how genre-bending reveals the tensions between object and agent and the university/University, I add that \textit{Orlando} is a genre-bent work of fiction, biography, and feminist critique. Virginia Woolf’s \textit{Orlando} does work like the contemporary field of Women’s and Gender Studies (namely critiques of gender, power, and knowledge) through the object of study of the field of English—the novel. As such, her novel is a rich site for unpacking and understanding the possibilities of feminist critique as a creative, productive method rooted in the rhetorical techniques of fiction and genre-bending. Genre-bending the academic, University-centered genres of feminist critique and biography with the creative, university-centered genre of fiction also reveals how the power structures of the University and the university may blend productively through the work of Virginia Woolf, who guides so many disciplines as an object. My intervention here also restores Woolf’s identification as an agent in the U/university: instead of taking her place as a signifier for certain arguments, this work with \textit{Orlando} places her as a creator of a feminist critique which can challenge and change the expectations of feminist critique.

Feminist critique as a creative and productive practice, as demonstrated shortly by the text of \textit{Orlando}, relies on close interpretation of language. As a method from the discipline of English, this kind of analysis reveals the structures of feminist critique that are embedded in \textit{Orlando}’s fictive world. In \textit{Orlando}, what is at stake is rich and varied,

\textsuperscript{11} Even though its status as a biography is usually identified as a joke: “The subtitle of \textit{Orlando}, ‘A Biography,’ is a joke. \textit{Orlando} is not, of course, a biography, and that, precisely, is the point: only by not writing a biography did Woolf believe that she could achieve what a biography seeks, and necessarily fails, to achieve” (Monk, “This Fictitious Life” 29).
but most of all, its modes of rhetorical address call our attention to the facile and socially acceptable categories of gender and reveals them as ridiculous. This all depends on nuance and tone: Language’s shades of meaning allow the writer and reader to build a multi-faceted, shared understanding of what is said to be acceptable and what should be acceptable. *Orlando* does not only reveal our categories of gender to be ridiculous; the novel also reveals as ridiculous the many institutions (the university) which bind our lives as well. Woolf’s through analysis of institutions comes from a close reading of her culture, translated into art communicated by language. She creates an interwoven critique of gender and institutions which mirrors contemporary feminist critiques in its placement of power in institutionality; her creative critique reanimates the expected genre rules for feminist institutional critique from the University.

In *Orlando*, which critiques gender, as well as institutions themselves, I define institutions as any structure of power: the law, marriage, gender norms—that which I have been calling the university throughout this project. Orlando’s education happens outside of a formal campus setting, outside the University. The title character’s education is experiential and focused upon artistic creation—their movement through the world as a man and a woman instead brings to the fore their interactions with institutions generally. These varied senses of institutions—the university—as the mechanism by which power is governed in the world become an important part of how *Orlando* delineates power and how the novel asks us to consider Orlando’s relationships to power and institutions.

Woolf’s construction of the narrator’s voice in *Orlando* separates the narrator as a biographer, a *curator* of knowledge, from Orlando, a *creator* of knowledge, an artist. In the language of this project the narrator is also an agent, a scholar, who creates objects of
study in the University and Orlando is an agent, a writer, who creates objects of study in the university. The narrator’s voice is often ironic, sarcastic, and tongue-in-cheek. The narrator filters our perception of Orlando and their world through their interactions with the world. Multiple rhetorical techniques (asides, parentheticals, tonal shifts, irony, and metafiction/meta-writing) create and maintain the distance between the narrator (at times an overwhelming and intrusive presence) and Orlando. Orlando rarely offers clear commentary on their life for themselves. The value of their life and their poetry is dictated by the narrator through the logic of feminist critique. The importance of this is that in Orlando we have a particularly feminist/queer/trans example which aligns itself with the political agendas of these fields. Essentially, the narrator is the voice of the institutions which bind Orlando, and as such, is also ultimately the voice of challenge to the powers that delineate those institutions.

Curiously, the narrator’s access to describing the structures of these institutions seems to be approached from the standpoint of their necessity: the narrator, like Orlando, is indifferent to them but must explain them because of its role in the narrative. The narrator stands askance from the actual functions of the institutions described. As a biographer, the narrator must record and explain the structures which create the societies Orlando is a member of, but the narrator does not approve of these structures wholesale. The narrator’s periodic acknowledgement of the codes and rules which dictate its own work strengthens its position as the voice of feminist critique because feminist critique always works within the logic of institutions to measure and identify the relations between power and knowledge;¹² the institutions of society must encroach because they

¹² Here, I mean in Foucault’s sense that there is no outside of institutionality.
do exist, even if Orlando largely ignores them, and they do hold power over the narrator. “Up to this point in the telling of Orlando’s life,” the narrator admits, “documents, both private and historical, have made it possible to fulfill the first duty of a biographer, which is to plod…in the indelible footprints of truth” (Woolf, Orlando 65). That the narrator is also required to submit to some structures of power also further brings into relief how feminist critique is made an object of knowledge by way of its use as a practice within the U/university as an institutional site of power.

Just because the narrator is the voice of critique does not mean that it is exempt from the exercise of power, nor is it entirely exempt from the frameworks which organize power. Like contemporary feminist critics, the narrator is bound by certain requirements of the institutions it describes and critiques. This is perhaps a double bind—the narrator, like the critics who make their livings as academics within the neoliberal University of Ferguson’s and Wiegman’s work, must be a part of the institutions it critiques. Virginia Woolf’s method of feminist critique, then, reanimates the ways that feminist critics can negotiate the tensions that accompany this double-bind by using a creative avenue for expressing her critique and metacritique of institutions, gender, and the power that unites them. Genre-bending is the mark of this kind of creative feminist critique. Orlando, as fiction which also claims its genre as non-fiction—a biography—dismantles more than just the gender expectations for our protagonist or the societal and institutional structures that frame their life

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13 Indeed, as only they can, born into privilege and money and status as they are.
For example, the very opening of the book invites the reader to view Orlando as a dreamy poet from the era of Elizabeth I. From the outset, the voice of the narrator identifies itself as a biographer, following the rules for writing a biography:

Orlando’s face, as he threw the window open, was lit solely by the sun itself. A more candid, sullen face it would be impossible to find. Happy the mother who bears, happier still the biographer who records the life of such a one! Never need she vex herself, nor he invoke the help of novelist or poet. From deed to deed, from glory to glory, from office to office, he must go, his scribe following after, till they reach what ever seat it may be that is the height of their desire. (Woolf, *Orlando* 14; my emphasis)

The narrator’s glib description identifies the biographer’s job—to describe its subject—and simultaneously makes fun of it—the tedium of following such a dewy-eyed young man as Orlando around to record his every whim is apparent. One institution which binds both Orlando and the narrator here are the generic conventions of biography. Orlando’s life must be recorded favorably and according to a formula which captures Orlando’s exceptional youth. The narrator continues with a description of Orlando’s youthful beauty which ends: “Directly we glance at eyes and forehead, thus do we rhapsodise. Directly we glance at eyes and forehead, we have to admit a thousand disagreeables which it is the aim of every good biographer to ignore” (Woolf, *Orlando* 15). Again, Orlando’s beauty is caught within the institutional expectations of biography; the narrator’s critique is held within that final, chiding line, “which it is the aim of every good biographer to ignore.” The narrator does ignore those disagreeable features of Orlando—by not listing them as explicitly as the rest of the description, the narrator technically has followed the
expectations of the institution. However, by drawing attention to the omission with a critique about the biographer’s method, the narrator has at once fulfilled and resisted the institution. The narrator identifies how the genre of biography traps Orlando (and the narrator) in a type of institutional expectation.

Without the narrator’s pointed attention to the generic conventions of biography, it is less clear where and how the academic genres of feminist critique and biography are blended with fiction. This is how the narrator’s commentary draws attention to the work Woolf is doing in blending her feminist critique of institutions—including the generic expectations of academic genres like biography—with fiction. In writing a fictive biography, like Tea’s fictive memoir, Woolf’s novel in and of itself defies generic classification and serves as an example of how feminist critique can work in fiction. The conventions of biography which Orlando’s narrator makes fun of are in fact ones which were in flux during the time that Woolf was writing the novel. Ray Monk’s history of the scholarship about biography outlines that Woolf’s own essay about biography as a genre, “The New Biography,” was written in response to the different ways scholars and writers in the 1920s understood the academic project of biography. Monk begins with the Enlightenment and the work of Samuel Johnson, his biography written by James Boswell, and the Victorians (“Life without Theory” 529-531). A central question for Samuel Johnson, Monk explains, is if “it is possible to know with certainty the inner life of another, to which Johnson’s answer is ‘no’” (530). Woolf takes up this question in her essay “The New Biography,” to which her answer is that fiction is the only way to accurately represent inner life. She writes, “Thus, the biographer’s imagination is always being stimulated to use the novelist’s art of arrangement, suggestion, dramatic effect to
expound the private life” (Woolf 155). Her statement is also in response to Lytton Strachey, one of the Bloomsbury Group, who “had argued for brevity, style, irreverence and an interest in character” (Monk, “The Fictitious Life” 3). Woolf’s challenge to Strachey as part of the Bloomsbury Group herself also highlights her feminist critique of genre and institutional/University conventions. Ray Monk, a prominent contemporary scholar of biography, argues that Woolf’s inclusion in discussion about biography as a genre are misguided at best because of how he sees Woolf’s extension of her theories of fiction into biography. As a response to Strachey, Woolf insistence on fiction, Monk argues, is incorrect; “[Strachey] had not argued for fiction in biography” (3). In contrast to Monk’s problems with Woolf’s coupling of the genres of fiction and biography, I argue that it is exactly this genre-bending which allows us to see Woolf’s feminist institutional critique in response to the requirements of writing during her lifetime.

The narrator’s incursions into the progression of the plot of Orlando draw attention to the structures of the world—the institutions, the university—which touch and direct Orlando’s life, but those of which they are almost never directly aware. It is the narrator who reminds us of the function of Queen Elizabeth I’s court; it is the narrator who explains upon Orlando’s return from Constantinople the legal messes which tie up their land, their gender, their very identity; it is the narrator who makes us aware of the commercialization of the publishing industry upon the advent of the 20th century (Woolf, Orlando 24-26; 168; 279-283). The status of these structures as institutions is legitimized firstly by their relations to and shaping of power and secondly by the narrator’s treatment of them because how they are represented reveals Woolf’s feminist critique of the university through genre-bending: “Thus it was in a highly ambiguous condition,
uncertain whether she was alive or dead, man or woman, Duke or nonentity, that she posted down to her county seat, where, pending the legal judgment, she had the Law’s permission to reside in a state of incognito or incognita as the case might turn out to be” (Woolf, Orlando 168). Here the narrator conjures the inanity of the Law as an institution in the university which is an arbiter of identity: Orlando is left as always already both and, obviously existing as a woman, but not officially either a woman or a man according to the institutional logic of definitions within the law. Through this farcical listing of binaries which are instantly observable and confirmable (with the possible exception of Orlando’s retention of the title of Duke), the narrator identifies the conditions of the law and the problems it encounters when trying to adjudicate Orlando’s existence. The law must decide if Orlando is a man or a woman, alive or dead, and yet it cannot. Orlando is left in a legal limbo which has no conceivable time limit and which drains their wealth for the necessity of a judgment of power over them. The narrator’s ability to at once outline the functions and concerns of the Law and to undercut its authority by drawing attention to its limitations places the narrator within the liminal field of feminist critique. The narrator, unlike Orlando, occupies and is aware of the space between knowledge and power, which is one of the markers of feminist critique as a genre.

In contrast, Orlando abstractly accepts the institutions which guide their life and the power which each institution has over them. They are enamored with Queen Elizabeth I more than interested in politics. They are agitated and vexed, but ultimately independent of and indifferent to, the legal battles that rage for decades of their life: they

14 For another insightful reading of Woolf’s use of pronouns and gender in Orlando, see the beginning of Celia R Caputi Daileader’s “Othello’s Sister: Racial Hermaphroditism and Appropriation in Virginia Woolf’s Orlando” (2013).
ignore them until their resolution, pouring money unknown into them. They are awestruck and full of wonderment upon their entry into a modern bookstore. The narrator lets the reader know the import of this technologically and structurally, but Orlando simply buys the volumes and begins reading. Orlando’s experience of the world is visceral, inclusionary, and immediate; though it works in their favor throughout their life, it is the narrator who makes the reader aware of the unusualness of this. Orlando’s personal experience of their interactions with institutions is unexpected or otherwise at odds with general institutional structures. The narrator’s commentary draws attention to how Orlando’s disposition is at odds with society’s power structures and its expectations for knowledge. It is the narrator who makes us aware that Orlando’s easy disregard for institutions is neither complete nor entirely because of their approach to life. As time progresses, Orlando becomes entrapped in the pace and expectations of modern life: they enter publication with the help of Greene, they are required to enter the discourse of academic criticism, they marry Shelmerdine. Orlando cannot escape the institutions of the university any more than the narrator as a feminist critic can escape the institution of the University; Woolf’s feminist critique through this fictive narrator and its description of Orlando’s life makes these power structures visible.

These self-aware entrances into institutions by Orlando further delineate the space created between Orlando and the narrator, the voice of the feminist critic, and the space created between the narrator and Virginia Woolf, the author, an agent—the creator of this feminist critique embedded in fiction. Just as the evolution of the discipline of Women’s and Gender Studies moved from feminist critique to the metacritiques of Wiegman and Ferguson, these spaces offer a way to re-see why those evolutions happened. As Orlando
moves into the space of institutions, fully aware that they are choosing to enter those institutions, the stakes for those engaged in critiquing those institutions get higher because their direct interaction with institutions brings the structures of those institutions into greater relief. Constantly identifying power and how it is being molded, structured, and codified by institutions is one of the requirements for feminist critique to be useful. Constant critique has been named the task of feminist critics and scholars. Virginia Woolf and the narrator must account for Orlando’s movement into institutions in their critiques, and move their frame of analysis outward.

This movement in the frame of the feminist critique of institutions shows how fiction allows feminist critique to access more layers of meaning than the traditional academic genre of feminist critique. Each of the different levels of feminist critique that are delineated by the spaces between the character, the narrator, and the author offer a different perspective of the stakes and implications of Woolf’s feminist critique. From the level of Orlando, the feminist critique is personal and embodied: as a person who experiences both genders without a change in selfhood, Orlando challenges the notion that gender is inextricably tied to selfhood for everyone. From the level of the narrator, the feminist critique is formal and structural: as an agent of power assigned with recording Orlando’s lived experience, the narrator challenges the institutions and codes that enforce both the concept of gender and the separations between institutions and codes. From the level of the author, Virginia Woolf, the feminist critique is theoretical and imaginative: as an observer of power structures and a creator of fiction, she challenges all of the notions of gender, power, and language which she sets forth as stable in the other two levels of feminist critique.
If we continue our reading of *Orlando* with an eye towards how the narrator can and does speak from the place of institutions, the university—that is, the narrator speaks with knowledge about how institutions work and what institutions expect from us—the novel’s use of rhetorical techniques like irony becomes legible. The narrator’s feminist critique is also dictated by the fact that it is generically a fiction, which allows Woolf to use different rhetorical techniques than the genre of academic feminist critique. The novel is a rich example of how these strategies of fiction allow feminist critique to expand its reach through genre-bending.—here we see the fields of English and Women’s and Gender Studies collide. Feminist critique, as I’ve already shown, is revealed in part by the ironic tone of the narrator’s interruptions. In traditional feminist critique, the aim of the writer is to deconstruct and destabilize established meanings (even when the conclusions reached from these deconstructions ultimately follow well established institutionally-supported arguments). In fiction, this ironic tone serves a similar function: it is crafted to break down our expectations and to re-frame the imaginary world it presents as ridiculous, topsy-turvy, or unexpected. In *Orlando*, this irony has several levels, from the comments about genre by the narrator to Woolf’s comments herself about gender within the structure of institutions to which the narrator draws our attention.

Woolf’s use of irony on this second level is the primary way to see her metacritique as the author, separate from the narrator. Woolf’s acute sense of irony reveals itself as she bends the expected forms of the novel, narrator, and characters: this irony is expressed in the novel through short instances of a very dry wit. For example, about mid-way through the book, when Orlando changes from a man to a woman, the narrator pauses to make direct statements to the reader about this incontrovertible fact.
The tone of this pause is what I am calling Woolf’s metacritique through irony. It reads: “We may take advantage of this pause in the narrative to make certain statements” (Woolf, *Orlando* 138). This seems to be the voice of the narrator, but it is not. Subtly, Woolf as added the royal “we” to this statement: the narrator and Woolf herself are speaking here. To avoid any confusion about the challenge to gender norms and expectations being made, Woolf takes on the mask of the narrator simply interceding into its own narrative—as it is wont to do—to collapse her critique and metacritique into one. The narrator/Woolf voice continues, blithely: “His memory—but in future we must, for convention’s sake, say ‘her’ for ‘his’ and ‘she’ for ‘he’—her memory then, went back through all the events of her past life without encountering any obstacle” (Woolf, *Orlando* 138; emphasis mine). I have italicized my point here: Woolf herself reveals the pure conventionality of language in assigning gender through this ironic tone. Gender and language themselves are the objects of Woolf’s critique here, along with the narrator’s critique of writing convention and the genre of biography.

The genre-bending between fiction, biography, and feminist critique makes clearer the space between the narrator and power: though knowledgeable enough about institutions to critique them, the narrator itself is restricted by them. It cannot escape the logic of institutionality. The narrator’s voice is ironic to place distance between itself and the institutions it describes. “The biographer is now faced with a difficulty which it is better perhaps to confess than to gloss over,” the narrator blithely comments near the beginning of the novel (Woolf, *Orlando* 65). By admitting its own difficulty, the narrator introduces the instability in its own position and aims, which makes light of the difficulties to come between Orlando, institutions, and the institutions the narrator made
to speak for. These distances—between institutions and the narrator and between the narrator and Orlando—widen the reader’s field of vision to include the absurdity of the strictures which institutions require the narrator to report. This is in addition to the reader’s awareness of the absurdity of Orlando’s movement within and against their world. These distances alert us to how Woolf allows fiction to interact with feminist critique because it gives Woolf the ability to layer reactions and understanding of institutions according to the different levels of reader, character, narrator, and author. At once and already, we become aware of just how absurd it is to be a dreamy poet of Orlando’s inclination in a world of biographers, publishers, land disputes, government, and legal battles over identity. This is because we recognize that it is impossible to live outside of institutions and yet improving them is necessary; understanding this to be one of the arguments in Orlando links Woolf’s fiction with the goals of the contemporary feminist critiques of institutionality with which I began this project. This link reanimates Woolf as an agent in the University because her work—Orlando—is the object of study which demonstrates the productive potential of genre-bending feminist critique with fiction.

CONCLUSION

Finding and re-animating the generative potential of feminist critique in Virginia Woolf’s fiction aligns her with other feminist critics, like Sara Ahmed and Gloria Anzaldúa, who have turned to genre-bending to further their own work, work which often straddles the University and the university as Woolf’s persona does, and as I’ve shown that both Orlando and A Room Of One’s Own do. One recent example of these genre-bent works which explicitly calls upon Virginia Woolf’s place in this genealogy is Patricia J.
Williams’s book *Open House: Of Family, Friends, Food, Piano Lessons, and the Search for a Room of My Own*. The tone and tenor of her book reflect the productive, affective power of the imagination, the personal, and the literary in relation to feminist critique. It is a book full of personal anecdotes which outline Williams’s own negotiations of race and gender inequality, but it does not shy away from the theoretical, the political, or the rigors of academic feminist critique. Examining the intersections of the identity categories of race and class, she recounts a conversation with a white friend who assumes that race is not a problem because the two women met in law school, within the confines of the University. Williams ends the exchange by commenting, “I felt compelled to remind her that affirmative action is how both of us ended up in the formerly all-male bastions whose walls we have transgressed” (Williams 125). This comment is powerful because it engages in feminist, political critique of the University through not only personal relationships, but also through William’s personal reaction to her friend’s opinion. Williams’s reaction reveals the ways that the political and its relations to feminist critique are embedded into her personal feelings and her subjective relations to the world. It is Williams’s personal reaction to her friend’s opinion, but it also accounts for the political, feminist reality which made their entry into the University possible.

Williams’s book blends the aims of the university and the University; her book is thematically genre-bent to include the methods and potential of both to interrogate power structures. As her title suggests, Williams is another feminist scholar who invokes Virginia Woolf as a discursive touchstone, but she also differentiates her lived experience from that of the aims of Woolf’s essay, *A Room of One’s Own*. The book is not strictly a feminist critique which gives over its power to its invocation of Virginia Woolf, or
attempts, like Alison Bechdel, to align the author’s subjectivity with a certain, set subjectivity which has been assigned to Woolf. No, instead, Williams’s book is an imaginative, original tribute to her own subjectivity and her own struggle as an African American feminist scholar of law, literature, and race. The power of her work is in its insistence upon the influence and importance of the personal story and its ability to invoke an affective response. In addition to the persistent use of personal anecdotes as frames for her discussions of race, class, and gender throughout the book, Williams also adds fictionalized stories to drive home her theoretical points. These appear in the text as italicized sections; this visually offsets them from the rest of the text and emphasizes the theoretical power she assigns to these stories. In one example, she retells the story of Cinderella. She imaginatively inserts racial markers into the story which pointedly critique the structures of American law, education, and healthcare systems as they relate to the black female body (Williams 119-123). Like Woolf’s *Orlando*, Williams blends feminist and racial critique into the structure of an imagined story to make these critiques visible, visceral, and inescapable. Williams’s work is an impeccable, contemporary example of a thematically genre-bent feminist critique; as a blend of fiction, personal anecdote, critical and theoretical frames, direct and precise history, and legal frameworks, *Open House* reflects the productive potential of creative critique I am advocating for in my argument to reanimate feminist critique.

That Williams’s book recalls Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* further bolsters the idea that Woolf is a part of this genealogy of feminist critics; it reasserts and connects Woolf as an agent to the project of feminist critique. Like others before her and certainly many others following, Williams wants to embed the history and power of
Woolf as a discursive touchstone and icon into her work. The striking difference between this invocation of Woolf by others and Williams’s invocation is that Williams expertly produces her work as an example of the farthest extension of the possibilities of creative critique which Woolf offers in *A Room of One’s Own*, and as I have explicated, in *Orlando*. Williams’s book captures the essence of creative, productive feminist critique, and it implicitly acknowledges Woolf’s influence and adapts Woolf’s methods to accomplish it. Williams's book follows closely in the tradition of Virginia Woolf’s combination of fiction and feminist critique in both *Orlando* and *A Room of One’s Own*, and it exemplifies the ways that the University and the university can be productively bridged in this genre-bent work across time, from Woolf’s contemporary moment to our own.

Woolf’s methods of feminist critique through fiction reflect her own education and interactions with the formal universities, publishing industry, and literary culture during her lifetime. As a member of the Bloomsbury Group, a partial owner of the Hogarth Press, and a scholar, lecturer, and writer, her concerns with the place of women in relation to knowledge and to power are essential ones to continue to unpack and identify to further push the limits of feminist critique and its power as a force of change in the U/University. The creative and the critical together can be seen as an effective feminist strategy which requires both the academic and the public audience of feminist critique to engage with feminist critiques of power not only on an intellectual and theoretical level, but on a personal, affective, imaginative level that produces empathy and imbibes a renewed sense of purpose into the politicized, creative spaces where change happens. Acknowledging Virginia Woolf’s inclusion into the history of creative feminist
critique that spans a long genealogy of feminist scholars and critics across many times, spaces, races, and classes, unites us further in our aims to change the institutions which bind us.

Additionally, understanding the ways that the University claims agents—writers like Virginia Woolf whose interests included scrutinizing the University—and transforms them into objects of study for its own aims is paramount to the continued work of feminist critics as they are increasingly asked to exit the University and enter spaces where prayer candles, Book Riot, and Virginia Woolf hold sway in the university. The University’s claims upon Virginia Woolf reflect its own preoccupations and its own claims upon different groups which identify with her and her work; the meanings gleaned, assigned, and spread through the University’s work also inform Virginia Woolf’s reception, use, and recognition outside of the University. Her life, her illness, and her death add to the cultural capital her works invoke, but her appearances as a signifier for feminist scholars, woman writers, queer scholars, and queer writers hold the most weight in contemporary discourses. These appearances in the university and in creative works by other agents are tied to the places she is studied, defined, and interpreted in the University. Virginia Woolf’s iconic status need not only rely on the preconceived and institutionally-accepted ideas which are tethered to her like keywords; instead, her own work to challenge institutional rules and expectations should be continually sought out and remembered.

Recognizing Virginia Woolf as both a source of institutional feminist critique and a result of it is necessary to understanding how knowledge and power interact to prevent change. Through this recognition and a renewed effort to break down the assumed
structures that undergird genre, feminist critique, disciplines, and U/university structures, it is possible to continue to produce change that has demonstrable consequences through feminist critique. As feminist scholars, we do not have to continually create critiques that only reproduce themselves. We may yet follow Virginia Woolf’s, Gloria Anzaldúa’s, Sara Ahmed’s, and Patricia J. Williams’s lead and engage the creative, productive potential of the imagination, the fictive, and the personal to bring the feminist critique of the University successfully into the university.
WORKS CITED AND CONSULTED


