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The Climate of *Orlando*: Woolf, Braidotti and the Anthropocene

Dr Peter Adkins

What do you call that haunting feeling of ecological memories of the landscapes of your youth, now transfigured by violent developments: Eco-nostalgia? Remembrance of trees past? Geo-physical semiotics? Portrait of a young wasteland? Colonial transfigurations? Scar wars?’

- Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*¹

In recent years, Rosi Braidotti has turned her attention to the question of the Anthropocene, the increasingly popular name for our current moment that recognises how, for the first time in the history of the Earth, a single species will have marked the planet so profoundly that its influence will remain observable millions of years into the future. Often attributed to the Nobel laureate geochemist Paul Crutzen, who, during a discussion of anthropogenic influence on geophysical systems at an Earth Science conference in Mexico in 1999, is said to have exclaimed that “‘We’re not in the Holocene anymore. We’re in the ... the... the Anthropocene!’”², the concept provides a forcible corrective to the view that geological history and human history run on separate tracks.³ Instead, the concept insists that since at least the industrial revolution, human actions have shaped planetary phenomena, with climate change, ocean acidity and large-scale deforestation offering three of the clearest measurable examples. Within the field of geology and the Earth Sciences more broadly, the concept has been both influential and controversial, with an international coalition of researchers who go under the name of the Anthropocene Working Group currently amassing the empirical evidence that the Anthropocene should be officially ratified as a

geological epoch by the International Commission on Stratigraphy.⁴ The term, however, has also gained traction within the humanities under the auspices of what Claire Colebrook has called 'Anthropocene studies'.⁵ A transdisciplinary field that brings together ecocriticism, critical theory, environmental history, and science studies, to give a far from exhaustive list of its disciplinary strands, Anthropocene studies aims to make sense of the implications of our new planetary epoch. Seeing the Anthropocene not in terms of humankind's predominance over the planet, but as a turning point in how we think about the relationship between the human, the nonhuman and the planetary, it is a field that attends to the way in which human actions are always entangled with nonhuman processes and provides a non-hierarchical account of geological history that more broadly distributes who or what is recognised as having agency.⁶ Like many associated with this field, Braidotti approaches the term with a decided ambivalence, derived not least from a dislike of the term 'Anthropos' which she associates with a long tradition of Eurocentric and androcentric biological norms and social values. As she writes, 'the "human" [...] never was a universal or neutral term to begin with', instead having always functioned as 'a normative category that indexes access to privilege and entitlements' and which has historically excluded entire populations of people on the basis of sex, race, geographical location, disability, religion or age.⁷ It is unsurprising, then, that Braidotti believes that 'neither universalistic notions of "Man" nor exceptional claims for "Anthropos" are sufficient to explain how we are supposed to cope' with the challenges of the Anthropocene, and remains suspicious of the way in which 'much Anthropocene scholarship manifests a state of emergency and a sort of "white" panic about the dire state of the planet and the chances of survival.'⁸ This is not to downplay the material risks that the Anthropocene poses, but rather to warn that the concept, with its appeal to a universalised idea of the human subject, 'runs the risk of remaining confined

within the parameters of hegemonic whiteness and Eurocentric hubris'.⁹ For Braidotti, building on the material ontology of Spinoza, by way of Deleuze and Guattari, the Anthropocene instead requires a 'monistic neomaterialist philosophy' that 'assumes all matter is one and that it is intelligent and self-organizing (autopoietic)' and which recognises that the human is but one vector of becoming, embedded and embodied within broader material processes.¹⁰

Yet, as my epigraph from Braidotti suggests, ecological decline and the alienation that attend such decline nonetheless need to be taken seriously and require their own forms of expression. What is more, as Braidotti's playful list of puns suggests, the Anthropocene and its affects can be traced back through the cultural history of the twentieth century. That many of the puns refer to European modernism should not come as a surprise. As Colebrook has argued, texts such as T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) and James Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914) 'anticipate twenty-first-century post-apocalyptic narratives: humans become the walking dead in their own world, not because of any external accident but because the very relation to nature that generated wonder tipped over into blind mastery and reification.'¹¹ Throughout Braidotti's body of work we can find reference to innovative literary works from the early twentieth century, approached as materials to think with and to draw on in the production of new concepts and insights adequate to our contemporary moment.¹² Within this constellation of writers, Virginia Woolf emerges as a figure to whom Braidotti has repeatedly returned to as a writer whose 'extensive corpus constitutes a singular example of an intensive genre that cuts transversally across a number of established literary forms to constitute a qualitative mode of its own.'¹³ Moreover, Woolf's mode of her own includes a heightened attention to the nonhuman world and the ecological changes that were taking place in the early twentieth century.¹⁴ Climate, in

particular, was of interest to Woolf from a young age. In Woolf's earliest journals observations about the weather were an almost daily feature. In 1899, at the age of 17, for instance, she reflects on her interest in the 'thermometer rivalry' of the Victorian age, the ever-burgeoning number of amateurs and professional scientists recording meteorological data, explaining, 'if I lived in the country, I should become a weather prophet or something of the kind'.¹⁵ It was an interest that did not diminish with time. As Paula Maggio has shown, observations about weather encompass the breadth of Woolf's oeuvre.¹⁶ From the 'fine yellow fog' that cloaks London in the opening pages of *The Voyage Out* (1915) to the sudden downpour that disrupts the pageant towards the end of *Between the Acts* (1941), Woolf's writing is highly attuned to the atmospheric events that shape the moments from which life is composed.¹⁷

The work in which Woolf most thoroughly explored climate and its intermediary role in the entanglement of human and geological history is, however, *Orlando: A Biography* (1928). While ostensibly a mock-biography of an English aristocrat set over the course of 400-years, as well as a portrait of her lover at the time, Vita Sackville-West, *Orlando* also documents the vicissitudes of the English climate from the fifteenth to the early twentieth century. As the novel archly states in its first chapter:

The age was the Elizabethan; their morals were not ours; nor their poets; nor their climate; nor their vegetables even. Everything was different. The weather itself, the heat and cold of summer and winter, was, we may believe, of another temper altogether.¹⁸

From the Little Ice Age, reimagined as a 'carnival of the utmost brilliancy' (p.32) on the frozen Thames, to the 'irregular moving darkness' (p.206) that covers the sky during the

industrial nineteenth century and the arid 'sky ... made of metal' (p.270) that accompanies the modernist era of flight and automation, Woolf's novel is, on one level, premised on showing how one cannot 'pretend that the climate was the same' over the course of centuries (p.211). Jesse Oak Taylor has argued that *Orlando* is in this respect a novel that entwines 'historical and climatic change' and 'a formative example of what has come to be called climate fiction (or "cli-fi"), novels that seek to dramatize the effects of climate change.'¹⁹ And while Woolf obviously did not have our contemporary knowledge of global warming, theories of anthropogenic influence on climate were well developed by the early twentieth century. The Victorian scientist John Tyndall, building on earlier nineteenth-century discoveries that mapped the relationship between atmosphere and climate, discovered in 1859 that coal gas was more opaque than other gases, thereby trapping heat and suggesting the possibility that, on a large scale, emissions of such gases could warm up the planet.²⁰ Woolf, whose father, Leslie Stephen, knew Tyndall and from whom she inherited a number of Tyndall's books, would have likely had some knowledge of the way in which climate systems were increasingly coming to be known as dynamic and liable to human influence.²¹ What is more, in Woolf's letters we find clear indication that she was thinking about the changeability of climate while composing *Orlando*. Writing to Vita Sackville-West, exactly one year after the book's publication, Woolf wryly suggested that she might employ Henry James's former secretary Theodora Bosanquet to respond to the correspondence she was receiving about the novel. Bosanquet might use several stock responses, Woolf writes, including that in *Orlando* 'the climate changes in sympathy with the age'.²² As this article will go on to argue, the climate changing in *sympathy* with the age does not translate into straightforward cause and effect, but rather structures of reciprocity that derive from the entanglement of human actions and nonhuman systems.

For Braidotti, writing in *Transpositions* (2006), *Orlando* is a novel where '[t]here is a sort of geometry, a geology and a meteorology of forces that gather around the actors (V&V), but do not fully coincide with them.'²³ Reading the novel as not only reflecting but enacting Woolf's love for Sackville-West, Braidotti suggests that we should read *Orlando* in terms of an 'an exercise [in] an ethology of affects' in which desire never wholly coincides with the human subject but operates as an excessive 'assemblage of forces' producing 'an ontological layer of affinity and *sympathy* between different en fleshed subjects'.²⁴ Building on this reading, Derek Ryan has suggested that the novel presents desire as entangling 'human bodies and nonhuman environments', expressing a sexuality that not only escapes the confines of heteronormativity, but anthropocentrism also.²⁵ These readings, which focus on how the novel's expression of sexual desire and feminist agency exceed the boundaries of the human, resonate with Braidotti's recent assertions that 'feminism is *not* a humanism' since any account of contemporary sexual politics necessarily needs to reject the humanist idea of "'Man" as the universal humanistic measure of all things'.²⁶ For Braidotti, such an insight is the starting point for a posthumanist feminism no longer constrained by a humanist conception of the subject, implicitly andro- and anthropocentric.²⁷ This article further develops these readings but argues for the previously overlooked centrality of climate and climate change to the presentation of subjectivity, desire and agency in Woolf's novel. Placing Braidotti and Woolf side-by-side and allowing their works to speak each other afresh, this article will suggest that in taking a monistic neomaterialist approach to *Orlando* we find the materials for re-thinking what it means to be embodied and embedded in the Anthropocene.

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Orlando's intertwining of 400-years of human and nonhuman history demonstrates what Bruno Latour has described as fiction's ability to 'disseminate the source of actions in a way that the official philosophy at their time is unable to follow'.²⁸ Woolf's decision to have Orlando live through four centuries of history means that although she does not witness different geological epochs (which occur over the course of thousands of years), Orlando nonetheless witnesses first-hand climatic transitions that would remain beyond the purview of a typical human life. The first clear instance of such a transition occurs at the end of the first chapter, which largely takes place during the Little Ice Age, a period of exceptionally cold weather in Northern Europe that began in the fourteenth-century and, as Taylor states, is now 'one of the most studied epochs in the relationship between climatic change and human history'.²⁹ Indeed, such historical studies were already numerous by the time Woolf was writing *Orlando*, with the narrator deferring to their authority: 'The Great Frost was, historians tell us, the most severe that has ever visited these islands', with some of its reported consequence including birds who 'froze in mid-air and fell like stones to the ground' and a 'whole herd of swine frozen immovable' while being driven along a country road (p.31). The freezing of the Thames, however, is a cause for celebration as a makeshift 'carnival of the utmost brilliancy' is erected on the frozen river at the King's command, a 'pleasure ground, with arbours, mazes, alleys, drinking booths, etc., [built] at his expense' (p.32). As Taylor writes, while aspects of Woolf's depiction of climate are overtly imaginary and self-consciously ironic, other 'apparently fantastic climatic events [in the novel] are drawn straight from the historical record'.³⁰ These include the fairs on the Thames, which were influenced, as Julia Briggs has shown, by first-hand historical accounts that Woolf encountered in her reading, such as Thomas Dekker's description of the extreme winter of 1607-8.³¹

The end of the first chapter sees Orlando watch from the banks of the Thames as the Great Thaw arrives, apocalyptically transforming the 'whole gay city' into 'a race of turbulent yellow waters' (p.57). The first ostensible climate change event in the novel, it is a moment that signals not only the end of the Little Ice Age but early modern England more broadly, a rupture that is at once material and cultural, starkly signalling the transition from one age to the next. Like her earlier figuring of life in the Little Ice Age, which blended historicity and exaggeration, Woolf's imagining of the Thames suddenly thawing and sweeping into the sea all that had stood on it metonymically condenses what were in reality incremental changes in seasonal average temperatures into a fantastical *mise-en-scène*. It is a moment that explicitly signals Woolf's aesthetic strategy: instead of representing the history of English climate through a realism that is usually associated with the historical novel, *Orlando* will make climate change visible through stark moments of 'suddenness and severity' (p.31). If, as Timothy Clark has argued, fiction often struggles to represent climate change, since it occurs at temporal and spatial scales that defy the typical aesthetic units of realism, Woolf circumvents such problems by taking an approach that refuses to limit itself to verisimilitude, precisely so as it can present (as opposed to *represent*) processes which would otherwise remain largely invisible.³² The same technique is also used to show England's growing reliance on the systematic exploitation of natural resources. Orlando's country home (based on the Sackville-West seat at Knole House in Kent) is presented to the reader in the first chapter as a bucolic sixteenth-century residence surrounded by parkland, where only the peaceful sound of 'wood chopping' suggests the resources needed to keep its fires burning (p.15). As a synecdoche for pre-industrial England, it is knowingly naïve and romantic. Such synecdochic correspondences continue into the second chapter, set in the seventeenth century, where the expansion of Orlando's house means that now every night

‘a whole oak tree, with its million leaves and its nests of rook and wren, [is] burnt to ashes’ in ‘vast fireplaces of wrought Italian marble’ (p.78). Thus, when Orlando later admits that her ‘ancestors had accumulated field after field’ (p.137), the implication is not only of expansion but deforestation and accelerating carbon emissions, with Woolf inviting the reader to see the process in terms of national, as well as personal, ascendancy. What is more, over the course of the novel, extractivism becomes democratised. When Orlando imagines her imminent return to England from Turkey in the eighteenth century, she envisions that she will see ‘heavy carts coming along the roads, laden with tree trunks’ destined for ‘a thousand chimneys’ (p.139) and on her return to London she discovers that, indeed, the ‘canopy of the sky’ is now dominated by chimneys (p.197).

Woolf’s entangling of human and nonhuman histories through the compression of gradual processes of climate change and national development into sudden and stark events reaches an apotheosis in the description of the nineteenth century. At the stroke of midnight on the last day of the eighteenth century, Woolf describes how Orlando

for the first time noticed a small cloud gathered behind the dome of St Paul’s. As the strokes sounded, the cloud increased, and she saw it darken and spread with extraordinary speed. At the same time a light breeze rose and by the time the sixth stroke of midnight had struck the whole of the eastern sky was covered with an irregular moving darkness, though the sky to the west and north stayed clear as ever. Then the cloud spread north. Height upon height above the city was engulfed by it. [...] As the ninth, tenth, and eleventh strokes struck, a huge blackness sprawled over the whole of London. With the twelfth stroke of midnight, the darkness was complete. A turbulent welter of cloud covered the city. All was darkness; all was

doubt; all was confusion. The Eighteenth century was over; the Nineteenth century had begun. (p.205)

This passage, which brings chapter four to a close, perhaps most clearly reflects Woolf's intention that the climate should change in sympathy with the age. Arriving at the stroke of midnight, the new climate emerges as an overdetermined site of darkness, doubt, and confusion that will characterise the Victorian age in contrast to the crisp airiness of the mannered and rational eighteenth century. Chapter five continues to focus on the change in climate, opening with a description of how the

great cloud which hung, not only over London, but over the whole of the British Isles on the first day of the nineteenth century stayed, or rather, did not stay, for it was buffeted about constantly by blustering gales, long enough to have extraordinary consequences upon those who lived beneath its shadow. (p.207)

Those living in the shadow of this new climate must co-exist with a new 'silent, imperceptible, ubiquitous' dampness, an atmospheric change that influences a shift in the material fabric of English society. Architecture and domesticity adapt to the new dampness, with houses 'that had been of bare stone [now] smothered in greenery' and rooms becoming so 'muffled' with furniture that 'nothing was left bare' (p.207). Such changes extend to clothing and diet, with the sudden popularity of muffins, coffee, and beards all attributed to the new conditions. Moreover, 'change did not stop at outward things' but seeps into mind and body: 'Men felt the chill in their hearts; the damp in their minds' and the 'sexes drew further and further apart'. The result is a deepening of patriarchy, as the 'life of the average woman' becomes a 'succession of childbirths' (p.209). It also eventually influences literary style itself, as the damp 'gets into the inkpot as it gets into the woodwork'

and ‘sentences swelled, adjectives multiplied, lyrics became epics and little trifles that had been essays a column long were now encyclopaedias in ten or twenty volumes’ (p.209). Ironically dispensing with the idea of the autonomous genius writer who is the master of her or his own craft, the effects of the new climate foreground the agency of climate on the act of writing. Literature, so presented, is only partially human, shaped by forces outside of and beyond the individual.

Woolf’s portrait of the Victorian climate is, as Gillian Beer has suggested, an exercise in hyperbole.³³ However, it is also a stylised portrait of what Braidotti describes as the way in which life is a ‘symbiotic and material system of codependence’.³⁴ If, as Braidotti suggests, the Anthropocene demands a ‘monistic conceptual framework’ within which the human is understood as one subject-in-becoming among many, then Woolf’s presentation of the human as both affected by, and in response, affecting, the material and immaterial structures around it, offers an image of irreducible material complexity in which the human is located within a broader material ontology.³⁵ The result is a sense of immanence and diffuseness, reflected in the long sentences that describe changes in bodies, objects, buildings and social customs but which often lack agentive nouns. Take, for example, the following:

Coffee supplanted the after-dinner port, and, as coffee led to a drawing-room in which to drink it, and a drawing-room to glass cases, and glass cases to artificial flowers, and artificial flowers to mantelpieces, and mantelpieces to pianofortes, and pianofortes to drawing-room ballads, and drawing-room ballads (skipping a stage or two) to innumerable little dogs, mats, and china ornaments, the home—which had become extremely important—was completely altered (p.208).

As Elsa Högberg and Amy Bromley have observed, *Orlando* is a novel in which Woolf is highly attuned to the syntactic unit of the sentence and its aesthetic potential, and, here, grammar is central to conveying Woolf's presentation of materiality.³⁶ Consisting of eleven clauses and sub-clauses, and proceeding via a structure of anadiplosis, in which the repetition of nouns connected by the same conjunction gives rise to a sense of accretive change, by the time the reader has arrived at the apparently straightforward concluding assertion (albeit, even here, split in two by a final subclause) that the 'home' was 'completely altered', the origin of that alteration is far from clear. Instead, agency appears to arise from the way in which the damp has become hybridised with other entities and processes that have, in turn, become hybridised and so forth. It is an image of a material ontology in which 'all matter is one [...] intelligent and self-organizing', in which human actions are not diminished, but recognised as being embedded within broader systems.³⁷ The damp becomes a figure not only of invisibility but impersonality as what appear to be personal attributes—bodily hair, taste, reproductive practices—are resituated within an inhuman continuum where human agency is no longer autonomous. As with the 'Time Passes' section of Woolf's previous novel, *To the Lighthouse* (1927), which begins with a description of air that is said to have 'crept round corners and ventured indoors' as the Ramsay family sleep, establishing the damp conditions that will slowly transform the house from a human space to a nonhuman one, the climate in *Orlando* puts anthropocentric distinctions under pressure.³⁸

Unlike *To the Lighthouse*, however, the new climate of *Orlando* is explicitly linked to the rise of industrialism. Moreover, Woolf's ironic portrayal of the Victorian climate not only alludes to the obvious fact that the period really did see anthropogenic changes in climate, or what can now be seen as the Victorian acceleration of the Anthropocene, but also to the century's heightened attention to the phenomena of climate itself. As already discussed, the

nineteenth century saw developments in scientific understandings of climate and, beyond the sciences, cultural critics such as John Ruskin were turning their attention to the darkened skies to decry moral as well as environmental degradation. Ruskin's essay 'The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century' (1884), often now read as an outlier of social criticism on climate change, links a new 'cloud phenomena' in the skies to an incipient 'moral gloom' in society.³⁹ Woolf was reading and thinking about Ruskin while writing *Orlando*, reviewing his autobiography *Praeterita* in December 1927 for *T.P.'s Weekly* and, as several critics have suggested, the description in *Orlando* of a 'great cloud' rising over England and the introduction of an atmosphere that 'chill[s]' the heart of men appears to have Ruskin's essay in mind.⁴⁰ The hazy light of the Victorian age seems also to have in mind in nineteenth-century English watercolour painting, or what Woolf later described in her biography of Roger Fry as the way the 'English climate' with its 'light [...] full of vapour' informed a national aesthetic within the visual arts.⁴¹ And as the skies appear to literally take the form of a Turner watercolour, there is also perhaps a deeper buried allusion to Oscar Wilde's famous argument in 'The Decay of Lying' (1889) that art does not reflect nature, but rather that nature reflects art in the sense that it conditions how we see the world around us. Yet, in contrast to Wilde, Woolf resolutely refuses to establish a dividing line between nature and culture. Rather it is the reciprocal, or sympathetic, relationship between humans and nonhuman entities and processes that comes to the fore. For Woolf, the very categories that would look to definitively separate the human from the nonhuman come undone as the damp seeps into the 'constitution of England' in such a way that the human and the nonhuman cannot be disentangled (p.208). Indeed, the damp in the Victorian inkpot presents itself as a near direct refutation of Wilde's idea that culture precedes nature, or even that the two can be safely separated, as Wilde's own writing is

implicitly situated within the body of rich and verdant Victorian prose produced by the new climate.

For Braidotti, understanding life to be immanent to a vital materiality does not mean we have to accept a flat ontology in which all actions and events can be considered as holding the same value, nor does it entail a disavowal of the idea of the subject. 'The emphasis on immanence,' Braidotti writes, 'does not constitute a form of undifferentiated [...] ontology', instead it 'foregrounds the unity of matter [...] as a differential principle'.⁴² This is a monistic ontology in which life is immanent to a materiality which binds us all, but differs in the process of becoming, and in which, therefore, life is embodied and embedded, specific to its location and accountable for its actions. The self is no longer the disembodied and transcendental *cogito* of European humanism, master over the material that it believes itself to be fundamentally divorced from. Instead, Braidotti, for whom the subject remains 'a crucial term of reference', argues that the self is an 'ecological entity [...] environmentally bound'.⁴³ Insisting on the importance of personhood, but outside of a philosophical framework which would equate this with sovereignty or autonomy, '[t]he subject is a spatio-temporal compound that frames the boundaries of processes of becoming'.⁴⁴ There are two important ethical and political implications to Braidotti's insistence on a posthuman subjecthood. Firstly, it enables her to acknowledge that the human is continuous with the vital materiality that subtends it, while also retaining a way of conceptualising subjectivity in terms of a degree of unity and coherence, or the ability to both affect and be affected. Secondly, in recognising life as embedded and embodied, it is an ontology that insists on a 'politics of location, or situated and accountable knowledge practices'.⁴⁵ Although the human is no longer sovereign, the ethical and political implications of who does what and

where remain just as much at stake, if not more so, since Braidotti's most widely distributed notion of agency and affect insists that responsibility does not stop at the human subject.

In the same way that for Braidotti vital materialism is emphatically 'neither a form of determinism, nor a manifestation of pietistic holism and hence of un-differentiation', Woolf was also wary of attempts to rethink ontology without attending to ethics and politics.⁴⁶ In her 1926 essay on the Victorian artist Thomas James Cobden-Sanderson entitled 'The Cosmos', for instance, Woolf recounts Cobden-Sanderson's vision of outer space as an 'extraordinary ring of harmony within harmony that encircles us', in which 'human destiny' lies in 'the ultimate coalescence of the human intellect [...] with its other self, the Universe'.⁴⁷ It is an idea that Woolf sees as the vision of a singular imagination in sympathy with her own non-anthropocentric idea of the human as immanent to a nonhuman world. Yet Woolf is also critical of the depoliticising Romantic thrust that comes with Cobden-Sanderson's flavour of materialism. As she explains, his sentiment of feeling 'more related to the hills and the streams [...] than to men and women' produces a worldview in which the 'ideal [has] the upper hand' and the political realities of events such as the Boer War or the Coronation of Edward VII have no place.⁴⁸ For Woolf, as for Braidotti, seeing the human as entangled with the nonhuman opens on to a politics of location that intensifies, rather than abnegates, social and ethical ties. It is unsurprising, then, that in *Orlando* Woolf's depiction of climate stresses the points of continuity between a vital materiality and social or political responsibility. This is expressed, at least in part, through *Orlando's* use of irony: the description of the 'essential' change of diet and household furnishings for the country gentleman, in contrast to the imposed changes in reproductive expectations for young wives implicitly foregrounds how material adaptations and alterations are always influenced in advance of time by class and gender (p.208). This, too, is the case in the description of how

changes in reproductive practices bring ‘the British Empire [...] into existence’, with an expanding population providing the bodies to be sent to manage Britain’s colonies (p.209). Woolf’s sharpened satirical intent was even clearer in her initial draft of the novel, where in her description of the Great Thaw at the end of the Little Ice Age, she detailed how amidst the chaos and mass drowning ‘[n]obody of very high birth seemed to be included [...] which seemed to show that the upper sort had received warning & [sic] made for safety’.⁴⁹ In the same way that political commentators have emphasised the fact that climate change is not a great leveller, since ‘there *will* be lifeboats for the rich and privileged’⁵⁰, Woolf is cognisant of the way in which, although nature and culture cannot be disentangled, it is nonetheless also the case that environmental conditions have the ability to consolidate and deepen class, gender and sexual inequalities within human society. As such, Woolf, like Braidotti, not only avoids the depoliticising thrust of determinism but engages with the difficult question of how to talk about socio-political matters without pretending that humans are autonomous agents working against the backdrop of an inert nature. Instead, the lives of humans and political agency remains foregrounded amidst a vision of the planetary at which they are neither at the centre nor the only actors.

Yet while, akin to Braidotti’s vital materialism, Woolf’s distribution of agency intensifies rather than elides politics, critics have often read the novel’s presentation of weather as a satire of climatic determinism.⁵¹ The idea that climate shaped and influenced the development of national characteristics was a mainstay of modern European thought from the seventeenth through to the twentieth century, with scientific knowledge of climate increasingly marshalled to explain the supposed superiority of cultural characteristics in the temperate global north.⁵² For some critics, Woolf’s portrayal of ‘[l]ove, birth, and death’ influenced by changes in the weather is a satire of such accounts (p.208). To be sure, it is

likely that Woolf would have thought climatic determinism laughable, but if this was the aim of Woolf's description, it is notable that nowhere in the opening pages of the chapter is the word 'determine' or its synonyms used. Instead, the verbs used, such as 'changed', 'appeared', 'invented', 'supplanted' and 'altered', suggest conditionality and transformation, rather than fixity or finality. Indeed, the only place in the entire novel where the word 'determine' is used to mean 'to decide', 'limit', or 'pronounce, declare, state' occurs immediately after Orlando's transformation, when, equivocating over whether 'a change of sex is against nature' or whether, on some level, Orlando 'had always been a woman', the narrator archly states: 'Let biologists and psychologists determine. It is enough for us to state the simple fact; Orlando was a man till the age of thirty; when he became a woman and has remained so ever since' (p.128-29). Invoking a rhetoric of determinism only to disavow it, it is suggested that biological or psychological accounts look to determine Orlando's sex impose categories *after* the fact, operating as a way of naturalising her transformation according to a dominant post-Enlightenment understanding of human identity (including sex and gender) as essential and immutable. In contrast, Woolf's presentation of the Victorian acceleration of the Anthropocene shows how identity is neither timeless and essential nor the product of a mechanistic idea of climate determinism. Instead, we are presented with an understanding of materiality in which agency is dispersed and diffuse, hybridising culture and nature in such a way so as neither term can claim priority. Sex, gender and sexuality are particularly important in this regard for both Woolf and Braidotti. In *Orlando*, climate influences the emergence of reproductive practices and gender identity, while for Braidotti, although human life is immanent to nonhuman forces this fact 'does not in itself resolve or improve the power differences' that shape sexual politics.⁵³ Instead, for Braidotti, it is precisely for this reason that we need a posthumanist

feminism that insists on seeing life as relational and immanent to a monistic ontology, since such a position afford a more powerful critique of andro- and anthropocentrism. *Orlando* not only adds ballast to such an assertion but suggests that such a critique is itself immanent to life, or, put more plainly, its feminist potential is already present and at work in the nonhuman world ahead of time. Take, for instance, the description of a queer nature that we find in the second chapter of the novel:

Nature, who has played so many queer tricks upon us, making us so unequally of clay and diamonds, of rainbow and granite, and stuffed them into a case, often of the most incongruous, for the poet has a butcher's face and the butcher a poet's; nature who delights in muddle and mystery, so that even now (the first of November 1927) we know not why we go upstairs, or why we come down again [...] nature, who has so much to answer for beside the perhaps unwieldly length of this sentence, has further complicated her task and added to our confusion by providing not only a perfect rag-bag of odds and ends within us [...] but has contrived that the whole assortment shall be lightly stitched together by a single thread. (p.72-73)⁵⁴

In another example of the novel's self-reflexive attention to the unit of the sentence, an apparently denaturalised and playful nature is responsible for the observable queerness that we find in human life, where appearances confound fixed identities and causality (even in actions as quotidian as going upstairs) is not *determined* but subject to 'muddle'. Bearing in mind Suzanne Raitt and Ian Blyth's assertion in the Cambridge Edition of *Orlando* that the word queer had taken on currency as a 'coded reference to dissident sexualities' by the 1920s, nature's queer tricks present themselves as a mischievous unweaving of the social and sexual categories imposed on bodies and beings.⁵⁵ The queerness of this ironically

framed nature is further suggested in the extended metaphor of life as a single materiality 'lightly stitched' together into a 'rag bag of odds and ends' from a 'single thread'. It is a description which, on the one hand, looks back to the famous first sentence of the novel where the narrator asserts that there can 'be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it' (p.13). And, on the other, it foreshadows the moment later in the text when, after Orlando's transformation, the suggestion is raised that clothes merely stand as an outward expression of the 'vacillation from one to sex the other' within each 'human being' (p.173), contributing to a rhetorical circularity in which, as Christy Burns argues, 'what is essential ... is to be *without* essence'.⁵⁶

If elsewhere in the novel clothes are held up as symbols of cultural identity (gender) that stand in opposition to one's biological identity (sex), Woolf's queering of nature undermines such a binary by personifying nature as an artificer. As nature's queer tricks bring into crisis whether meaning is located on the surface (in someone's face or clothes) or below the surface (their personality or concealed body), the question of what is fundamentally *natural* remains unclear. In this light, Orlando's self-fashioning of identity after her transformation is no different to the 'perfect rag bag of odds and ends' that comprise everyone, and which are as natural (or unnatural) as nature's habit of 'stuff[ing]' people into the wrong 'case'. This queer nature, then, is central to Woolf's presentation of Orlando's transformation, enabling her to escape a binary of biological essence versus cultural difference as, instead, Orlando's transformation becomes part of a more-than-human materiality that is self-fashioning, and in which meaning and matter co-produce one another. Moreover, this queered nature is in sympathy with the climatic qualities of immanence and transformation within which Woolf couches the narrative. The broader climatic processes which Woolf shows to have clear ontological implications are always

already queer: they transform bodies and undo static and heteronormative categories of identity. Woolf's queer nature, as such, presents itself not in terms of essence but hybridity, with Orlando's identity necessarily entangled within a continuum of 'incessant' changes that produces the 'strangest alliances' (p.295). Queerness thus presented becomes not a form of identity but resembles Braidotti's configuration of sexuality as a 'generative ontological force [...] capable of deterritorializing gender identity and institutions'.⁵⁷ Indeed, Woolf alludes to this at the very start of the novel. The reader first meets Orlando in an attic 'so vast that there seemed trapped in it the wind itself, blowing this way, blowing that way, winter and summer'; a room where 'bars of darkness' compete with 'yellow pools [...] made by the sun falling through the stained glass'. A moment later when Orlando 'put his hand on the window-sill to push the window open', he watches as it is 'instantly coloured red, blue, and yellow like a butterfly's wing' (p.14). Presented in terms of alien gusts of wind, bars of darkness, and prismatic sunbeams, as the external climate shapes the interior human world, Orlando witnesses his body undergo a change in front of his eyes, momentarily taking on an affinity with another species. The subsequent 400-years continue in this vein, presenting a sequence of transformations shaped by and through the changing materiality of the climates. Although Orlando's change of sex might present itself as perhaps the most striking of these changes, and certainly has the largest influence on Orlando's identity, it is, the novel shows us, one only instance within an ongoing climate of transformations. *Orlando*, in this light, becomes a novel not of a single transformation but singular transformations.

Unlike Woolf, nature as always already queer is not a formula that Braidotti would likely endorse. Her views about queer theory are ambivalent at best, seeing it as too closely aligned with identity politics and suspicious of its critical manoeuvres, since 'subverting, displacing, deterritorializing any identity at all [is also] the logic of advanced capitalism'.⁵⁸

Instead, for Braidotti, sexuality is a 'life force' that produces 'a nonessentialist ontological structure for the *organization* of human affectivity and desire'.⁵⁹ It is precisely this question of organisation that counts for Braidotti: any critique of heteronormativity must necessarily be accompanied by a critique of andro- and anthropocentrism. What we desire as gendered, embodied, and embedded subjects *matters*, in more sense than one. As Woolf's novel shows, to be a desiring subject is to have the capacity to affect and be affected by forces that exceed human life. Climate, then, is not incidental to the designs and ambitions of *Orlando*, its queering of desire and bodies, but is central to Woolf's reimagining of life. Alert to the dangers that come with essentialism—whether that be the climatic determinism that would look to align a national essence with geographic location or the kind of gender essentialism that the novel so clearly rejects—Woolf fulfils her ambition of becoming a 'weather prophet' by reimagining the ontological relationship between humans and nonhumans, climate and history. For Braidotti, a work of literature has the potential to operate as 'an experiment in sustainable models of change [...] grounded in accurate knowledge and subjected to the same rigorous rules of verification as science or philosophy'.⁶⁰ In *Orlando* we find precisely one such experiment in sustainability, tracing the transformation of bodies and environments across 400-years of English history. If for Braidotti all identity markers, including gender, class, and race, must be recognised as 'historically contingent mechanism[s] of capture of the multiple potentialities of the body', then Woolf gives depth to such a claim as she traces this transformative materiality through transpositions that always exceed human history.⁶¹ Yet, *Orlando* is also a novel alert to the fact that recognising ontological entanglement is not sufficient in and of itself, but must be accompanied by ethical and political accountability. When Orlando, spurned by the patrician writers of the eighteenth century because of her sex, asks, 'What's an "age", indeed? What

are “we”?’ (p.188) we find her posing the same questions that continue to preoccupy theorists in the Anthropocene. For Braidotti, the collective pronoun “we” is also interrogated, seen as the product of a praxis, not a given: the ‘dwellers of this planet at this point in time are interconnected but also internally fractured by the classical axes of negative differentiation: class, race, gender and sexual orientations, and age and ablebodiedness continue to index access to normal humanity.’⁶² Bringing Braidotti and Woolf into dialogue in the Anthropocene becomes a means of deepening our understanding of the causes and consequences of emergent planetary conditions. An epoch in which the classical or humanist figure of *Anthropos* is undone rather than entrenched, the Anthropocene intensifies the necessity of a posthumanist feminist critique. It becomes clear from both Woolf and Braidotti that attending to the climate in which we are all entangled means recognising the material conditions that bring us together without flattening the social, political and historical differences that matter.

¹ Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press), p. 80.

² Quoted in Jeremy Davies, *The Birth of the Anthropocene* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), p. 42.

³ Eugene Stoermer, a University of Michigan ecologist, had been using the word informally since the 1980s and the first scientific paper on the Anthropocene was co-authored by Stoermer and Crutzen. I show how the idea of the Anthropocene can be traced back much earlier in the twentieth century in my monograph *The Modernist Anthropocene: Nonhuman Life and Planetary Change in James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Djuna Barnes* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022).

⁴ Colin Waters, et al, 'The Anthropocene is functionally and stratigraphically distinct from the Holocene', *Science* 351.6269, aad2622 (2018): n.p.. For a countering view from within the Earth Sciences see Stanley C Finney and Lucy E Edwards, 'The "Anthropocene" Epoch: Scientific Decision or Political Statement?', *GSA Today*, 26.3-4 (2016): pp. 4-10.

⁵ Claire Colebrook, Peter Adkins, and Wendy Parkins, 'Victorian Studies in the Anthropocene: An Interview with Claire Colebrook', *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 26 (2018): n.p.

⁶ Dipesh Chakrabarty's 2009 article 'The Climate of History' can be seen as the field's watershed moment, his argument that climate change scrambles the divide between human and natural histories having been further developed by figures such as Timothy Clark, Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour. Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The Climate of History: Four Theses', *Critical Inquiry*, 35.2 (2009): pp.197-222. For a detailed overview of the field see Peter Adkins and Wendy Parkins, 'Introduction: Victorian Ecology and the Anthropocene', *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 26 (2018): n.p.

⁷ Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*, pp. 84-85.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3; p. 157.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

¹⁰ Rosi Braidotti, 'Critical Posthuman Knowledges', *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 116.1 (2017), pp. 83–96 (pp. 83–84).

¹¹ Claire Colebrook, 'The Future in the Anthropocene: Extinction and the Imagination', in *Climate and Literature*, ed. by Adeline Johns-Putra (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 263–80 (p. 273).

¹² In this respect, we can detect a further Deleuzian influence, for whom works of European modernism, including Woolf, were often the materials from which he would forge new concepts. For the relationship between modernist literature and poststructuralist philosophy see Stephen Ross, ed., *Modernism and Theory: A Critical Debate* (2009).

¹³ Braidotti, 'Intensive Genre and the Demise of Gender', *Angelaki* 13.2 (2008): pp. 45–57 (p. 45).

¹⁴ A wealth of recent scholarship has shown the extent to which Woolf's literary innovations was attuned to changes in the natural world, including Christina Alt's *Virginia Woolf and the Study of Nature* (2009), Bonnie Kime Scott's *In the Hollow of the Wave: Virginia Woolf and Modernist Uses of Nature* (2012), Derek Ryan's *Virginia Woolf and the Materiality of Theory: Sex, Animal Life* (2013) and Kelly Sultzbach's *Ecocriticism in the Modernist Imagination: Forster, Woolf, and Auden* (2016).

¹⁵ Virginia Woolf, *A Passionate Apprentice: The Early Journals 1897–1909*, ed. by Mitchell A Leaska (London: The Hogarth Press, 1990), p. 137.

¹⁶ Paula Maggio, *Reading the Skies in Virginia Woolf: Woolf on Weather in Her Essays, Diaries and Three of Her Novels* (London: Cecil Woolf Publishers, 2009).

¹⁷ Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, ed. by Lorna Sage (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 7; Woolf, *Between the Acts*, ed. by Mark Hussey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 162.

¹⁸ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography*, eds. Suzanne Raitt and Ian Blyth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 25. Subsequent references to this work will be given in the main body of the article.

¹⁹ Jesse Oak Taylor, *The Sky of Our Manufacture: The London Fog in British Fiction from Dickens to Woolf* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016), p. 207; p. 201. More recently, Christina Alt has shown how works of literature responded to early scientific theories of anthropogenic climate change at the start of the twentieth century. Christina Alt, “‘Restore to Us the Necessary BLIZZARDS’”: Early Twentieth-Century Visions of Climatic Change’, *Modernist Cultures*, 16.1 (2021), 37–61.

²⁰ Tyndall was building on Joseph Fourier’s study of solar radiation in the early nineteenth century, which looked to answer the question of why heat from the sun does not continuously warm the planet. Going against the widely held notion that gases were transparent, Tyndall conducted experiments testing the transparency of various gases and discovered that coal gas was opaque to infrared radiation, thereby, trapping heat. His work has been seen as laying the foundations for modern climate science and Britain’s leading centre for climate change research, the Tyndall Centre, bears his name. See Spencer R. Weart, *The Discovery of Global Warming* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 1-3.

²¹ It is also notable that Clarissa Dalloway in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) describes ‘Huxley and Tyndall’ as her favourite childhood reading. Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, ed. by David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 66. Gillian Beer has suggested that Woolf demonstrates her knowledge of Tyndall’s scientific advances in the use of colour in her novels. See Beer, *Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), pp. 105-108.

²² Virginia Woolf, *A Reflection of the Other Person: The Letters of Virginia Woolf Volume IV: 1929-1931*, ed. by Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (London: The Hogarth Press, 1978), p. 100.

²³ Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), p. 191.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 190-91.

²⁵ Derek Ryan, *Virginia Woolf and the Materiality of Theory: Sex, Animal, Life* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 123.

²⁶ Rosi Braidotti, 'Four Theses On Posthuman Feminism', in *Anthropocene Feminism*, ed. by Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), pp. 21–48 (p. 21; p. 26).

²⁷ Braidotti's next book, *Posthuman Feminism* (still in press at the time of writing) focuses on precisely this subject.

²⁸ Bruno Latour, 'Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene', *New Literary History*, 45.1 (2014): pp.1–18 (p. 9).

²⁹ Its onset has been linked, as Taylor writes, to the 'decline of Norse settlement in Greenland and exploration into North America'. Taylor, *Sky of our Manufacture*, p. 208.

³⁰ Taylor, *Sky of our Manufacture*, p. 208.

³¹ Julia Briggs, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), pp. 194-95. Also see Alice Fox, *Virginia Woolf and the Literature of the English Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 159-62.

³² Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp.190-91.

³³ Beer, *Virginia Woolf*, 58

³⁴ Braidotti, 'Anthropos Redux: A Defence of Monism in the Anthropocene Epoch', *Frame*, 29.2 (2016): pp.29–48 (p.34).

³⁵ Braidotti, 'Anthropos Redux', p.43.

³⁶ Elsa Högberg and Amy Bromley, 'Introduction: Sentencing Orlando', in *Sentencing Orlando: Virginia Woolf and the Morphology of the Modernist Sentence*, ed. by Elsa Högberg and Amy Bromley (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), pp. 1–12 (pp.1-2).

³⁷ Braidotti, 'Critical Posthuman Knowledge', p.83-84.

³⁸ Virginia Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, ed. by David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.103.

³⁹ Ruskin, John, 'The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century', in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Dinah Birch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 267–78 (p.267; p.277). For ecocritical analysis of the importance of Ruskin's essay see Jesse Oak Taylor, 'Storm-Clouds on the Horizon: John Ruskin and the Emergence of Anthropogenic Climate Change', *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 26. February (2018): n.p.

⁴⁰ See Beer, *Virginia Woolf*, 98-99, and Webb, Caroline, "'All Was Dark; All Was Doubt; All Was Confusion": Nature, Culture, and Orlando's Ruskinian Storm-Cloud', in *Virginia Woolf Out of Bounds: Selected Papers from the Tenth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Jessica Berman and Jane Goldman (New York: Pace University Press, 2001), pp. 243–48.

⁴¹ Woolf, *Roger Fry: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1940), p.164.

⁴² Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*, p.50.

⁴³ Braidotti, *Transpositions*, p.137; p.41.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.163.

⁴⁵ Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), p.51.

⁴⁶ Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*, p.50.

⁴⁷ Virginia Woolf, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, volume 4, ed. by Andrew McNeillie (London: Harcourt, 2008), pp.370-71.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 372. Woolf makes a similar criticism of Henry David Thoreau in her essay 'Thoreau' (1917).

⁴⁹ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: The Holograph Draft*, ed. by Stuart N Clarke (London: SN Clarke, 1993), p.46

⁵⁰ Andreas Malm, and Alf Hornborg, 'The Geology of Mankind? A Critique of the Anthropocene Narrative', *The Anthropocene Review* 1.1 (2014), pp.62–69 (p.66).

⁵¹ Taylor, *Sky of our Manufacture*, p. 209; and Angeliki Spiropoulou, *Virginia Woolf, Modernity and History: Constellations with Walter Benjamin* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), p. 87.

⁵² Jan Golinski, 'Weather and Climate in the Age of Enlightenment', in *Climate and Literature*, ed. by Adeline Johns-Putra (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 111–27 (pp. 119-20).

⁵³ Braidotti, 'Four Theses', p.34.

⁵⁴ Woolf, *Orlando*, pp.72-73.

⁵⁵ Suzanne Raitt and Ian Blyth, 'Explanatory Notes', *Orlando: A Biography*, eds. Suzanne Raitt and Ian Blyth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 304-543 (p. 371). Jane Goldman has shown that the earliest use of queer in its contemporary sense can be traced back to a 1915 diary entry by Arnold Bennett, where he describes attending a party of 'art students, painters and queer people' whose numbers included Woolf's sister Vanessa Bell as well as others in her social circle. See Goldman, 'Queer Bloomsbury', *Woolf Studies Annual* 23 (2017), pp. 161–71 (pp. 162-63).

⁵⁶ Christy L. Burns, 'Re-Dressing Feminist Identities: Tensions between Essential and Constructed Selves in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*', *Twentieth-Century Literature* 40.3 (1994), pp. 342–64 (p. 350).

⁵⁷ Braidotti, 'Four Theses', p. 38.

⁵⁸ Rosi Braidotti and Pascale LaFountain, 'Deleuze, Feminism, and the New European Union: An Interview with Rosi Braidotti', *Transit: A Journal of Travel, Migration, and Multiculturalism in the German-speaking World* 4.1 (2008) <<https://transit.berkeley.edu/2008/lafountain/>> Accessed 18 January 2021. As Ryan writes, Braidotti's work is suspicious of 'queer' as a noun but more receptive to

it as a verb, in the sense of a critical *queering* of heteronormative structures. Ryan, *Virginia Woolf*, p. 129.

⁵⁹ Braidotti, 'Four Theses', p. 36, emphasis added.

⁶⁰ Braidotti, 'Intensive Genre', p. 48.

⁶¹ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, p. 98.

⁶² Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*, p. 93.