

INSINUATED BODIES, CORPOREAL RESIGNIFICATION  
AND DISEMBODIED DESIRE IN NOVELS BY JEANETTE WINTERSON

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## ABSTRACT

My dissertation examines the various ways in which the following novels written by Jeanette Winterson — *Written on the Body* (1992), *Gut Symmetries* (1997), *The PowerBook* (2000), and *The Stone Gods* (2007) — interrogate and denaturalize preexisting power structures by disentangling the body from the discursively inscribed identity categories of gender and sex. Dominant conceptions concerning desire, commonly thought to be an innate byproduct of a wholly “natural” body, are likewise disrupted in the unraveling of gender and sex from corporeality. Desire is thus opened up to possibilities that exist beyond the limited purview of gendered, heterosexist ideologies.

Much like the field of queer theory, this dissertation draws together different branches of knowledge — poststructuralism and resignification, psychoanalysis, nomadism, posthumanism, cyborg narratives — in order to closely analyze what Winterson’s works do to bodies, to language, to gender, to sexuality. The novels studied here offer a way of re-insinuating bodies to desire in ways that are much more inclusive and much less prohibitive.

Although my consideration of these novels critically engages with many theorists throughout, there are four key thinkers that helped to shape each chapter: Judith Butler, Elizabeth Grosz, Katherine N. Hayles and Donna Haraway. My first chapter examines the parallels between Butler’s theory of the sex/gender/desire matrix and *Written on the Body*, assessing the novel’s twofold operation of resignification: the body is first extricated from its naturalization before becoming reformulated in ways that move outside of the framework of the current grand narratives on desire. My second chapter surveys the relationship between Grosz and the Deleuzian “Bodies without Organs”

(BwOs) in *Gut Symmetries*, while my third chapter explores Hayles's version of posthumanism alongside Haraway's figure of the cyborg, in relation to *The PowerBook* and *The Stone Gods*, respectively. These novels widen the cracks in the signifying system, shifting conceptions of materiality and desire elsewhere. If we are to acknowledge that desire does indeed come from outside rather than from within the subject, then sexuality can be dissociated from the subject's body — subsequently endangering gender's impact on how we conceive of our desire.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .....	ii
Acknowledgments .....	iv
Table of Contents .....	vi
 Prologue .....	 1
I.    Bodies Insinuated to Desire .....	1
II.   Changing the Script: Moving Beyond the Legible Body.....	5
III.  Challenging the Concept of “Inner Nature”: Theoretical Perspectives on Disembodied Desire .....	12
IV.  Resignifying the Identity Categories of Gender and Sex .....	18
V.    Conclusion .....	24
 Chapter One: Moving Beyond the Skin in <i>Written on the Body</i> : Language, Gender, and Productive Ruptures of Signification .....	 26
I.    Introduction .....	26
II.   Reading the Body into Recognition: Butler’s Preexisting Grids of Cultural Intelligibility .....	29
III.  “It’s the clichés that cause the trouble”: The Impossible Language of Desire .....	50
IV.  Rewritten on the Body: Author(izing) the Other .....	61
V.    The Skin We’re In and the Measure of Loss .....	68
VI.  Producing Desire: Psychotic, Melancholic Fantasy .....	80
VII.  Conclusion .....	90
 Chapter Two: Space-time, Energy, and the Virtual Star-dust Body: Exploding the Myths of Materiality in <i>Gut Symmetries</i> .....	 92
I.    Introduction .....	92
II.   Riverrun Narratives and Einstein’s Space-time .....	96
III.  The Spatio-Temporal Cordoning of the Body .....	105
IV.  “As above, so below”: Star-dust Bodies, Grosz’s Pre-personal Forces and the Deleuzian BwO .....	121
V.    Gendering the Matter of “energy precedes matter”: .....	133
VI.  Stratifying, Destratifying, and the Flows of Desire .....	143
VII.  Conclusion .....	151

Chapter Three: Collapsing the Real/Virtual Binary: Desiring Beyond Bodies in <i>The PowerBook</i> and <i>The Stone Gods</i> .....	154
I. Introduction and Overview of Posthumanism .....	154
II. <i>The PowerBook</i> 's Thin Partitions: Breaking Down the Divide between Reality and the Screen .....	164
III. Posthuman Hybrid Bodies (or, a terrible thing to do to a flower?) .....	175
IV. <i>The Stone Gods</i> : Cautionary Cyborg Sci-fi .....	190
V. A Meaning Sacrificed: What's Sex Got to Do With It? .....	194
VI. The Both-And of "All <i>and</i> Nothing" .....	204
VII. Beyond the Origin Myth: Cyborg Narratives .....	210
VIII. Conclusion .....	216
 Conclusion .....	 219
 Bibliography .....	 232

## PROLOGUE

*“To worm into the heart and mind until what one truly desires has been encased in dark walls of what one ought to desire, is the success of the serpent. Serpents of state, serpents of religion, serpent in the service of education, monied serpents, mythic serpents, weaving their lies backwards into history.” — Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery**

### I. Bodies Insinuated to Desire

In recent years, critical perspectives on the relationship between the human body and sexuality have been shifting. Rather than viewing corporeality as wholly biological, theorists from many different schools of thought are instead conceptualizing the body as an intermediary: between the physicality of flesh-and-blood arousal and the signifying systems through which the subject understands and experiences sensations of desire.<sup>1</sup> What is troubling here is that these signifying systems, and particularly the discursively constructed category of gender through which the subject comes to know its own body, are embedded in heteronormative ideologies. Throughout her thirty year long career, British novelist Jeanette Winterson has expressed an interest in disentangling the

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<sup>1</sup> In their introduction to *The Body: A Reader* (2005), Mariam Fraser and Monica Greco make the observation that “it is commonplace now not to refer to *the* body but to *bodies* in the plural, to recognize also that there is no body as such which is given and fixed for all time and to recognize also that experiences rooted in different forms of embodiment may be radically incommensurable” (3). I incorporate this definition into my own treatment of the body — so although I will often refer to the body in the singular, my version of the body is plural, shifting, and multiple.



relations among the body, gender, discourse, and desire. In “The Semiotics of Sex,” from her 1995 non-fiction volume *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery*, she cautions her readers to “be wary of bodies insinuated to desire what they do not desire” (115).<sup>2</sup> The notion that bodies are insinuated to desire anything at all suggests the intervention of *outside* forces infiltrating the corporeal boundary, which serves to undercut essentialist beliefs about desire as originating from some innate location *within* the body. In the same essay, Winterson identifies the primary objective of writing and art-making, as: “prising away old dead structures that have rusted almost unnoticed into our flesh” (116). This passage suggests that discourse works to inscribe ideologies not just *onto* the epidermal border, but also *into our flesh*; the subject unconsciously legitimizes preexisting discourses concerning gender, sex and sexuality by forming its psychic identity in relation to the signifiers imprinted upon the surface of its skin — signifiers that are informed by the very same discourses.

My dissertation explores the ways in which Winterson’s work not only interrogates the complex interweaving of the discourses that regulate the subject’s sense of self, but also endeavours to extricate identity categories from one another. Such disentangling is problematic, for any attempt to extract desire from discursive constructions is complicated by the very body that processes it, a body that has already been shaped through the subject’s interpellation of its cultural conditions. In her essay

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<sup>2</sup> According to Winterson’s personal website ([www.jeanettewinterson.com](http://www.jeanettewinterson.com)), in the title *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery*, the word “objects” is not meant to be parsed as a noun, but as a verb; art is *objecting* to the various ways in which language has been channeled into culturally sanctioned discourses.

“Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Interpretation,” Teresa de Lauretis offers insight with her prescription: that before desire can be removed from indissoluble knowledges of gender, sexuality and reproduction, the body must be rewritten in ways that move “beyond its pre-coded, conventional representations” (de Lauretis 149-50) in order to open up desire to possibilities that move beyond the categories of gender and sex, as they currently operate.

In this work, I perform close reading analyses of four novels selected from Winterson’s canon: *Written on the Body* (1992), *Gut Symmetries* (1997), *The PowerBook* (2000), and *The Stone Gods* (2007): novels which have all been published in close proximity, and novels which I view as engaging in conversation with one another. Examining these novels in correspondence with a number of theoretical schools, such as queer theory, psychoanalysis, Deleuzian philosophy, new materialism, posthumanism, and cyborg theory, I explore what much of the current criticism on Winterson’s work fails to examine: the body itself — how bodies are perceived on a cultural level, and what bodies are capable of doing. Although my consideration of these novels critically interlocks with many theorists throughout, my analysis is most influenced by four key thinkers — Judith Butler, Elizabeth Grosz, Katherine N. Hayles, and Donna Haraway — all of whom fall somewhere in the paradigm of queer theory with their focus on the indeterminacy and instability of sexual identities. Beginning with an analysis of the relationship between Butler’s theory of the sex/gender/desire matrix and *Written on the Body*, I assess how Winterson’s work takes up the Butlerian strategy of resignification: the body is first extrapolated from discourses of naturalization before becoming reformulated in ways that might allow it to move outside of the framework of the current

grand narratives concerning desire.<sup>3</sup> Grosz is paired with the new-age narrative of *Gut Symmetries* in my second chapter, while my third chapter explores Hayles's version of posthumanism alongside Haraway's figure of the cyborg, in relation to *The PowerBook* and *The Stone Gods*, respectively. I have chosen to study these particular novels mainly because I find them so provocative in terms of the way they deconstruct the sex/gender/desire matrix; their specific re-workings of the discursively inscribed boundaries of corporeality inspires ways of conceiving desire liberated from heteronormativity and the various binaries — culture/nature, subject/object, inside/outside, real/artificial — that heteronormativity requires. Such reconfigurations are important, for in undermining both the validity and concreteness of the seemingly-solid material body, Winterson's writing undoes the gendered, heteronormative doctrines imprinted upon, and absorbed into, the subject's skin.

On a larger, cultural scale, the political implications of such un-doings are potentially vast, as they threaten to displace the long-reigning regimes of power which have been instrumental in authoring not only the body, but also the ways in which embodied subjects come to process desire: through the constructs of sex and gender, and the conflating of subjectivity with sexual identity. When these novels unravel the body

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<sup>3</sup> In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Butler describes the sex/gender/desire matrix as such: "The institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire. The act of differentiating the two oppositional moments of the binary results in a consolidation of each term, the respective internal coherence of sex, gender, and desire" (22-3). I explore the sex/gender/desire matrix further in my first chapter.

from sex and gender, they simultaneously free up desire from the corrals of sexual categorization; while the subject still remains a body, the identity category of sexuality becomes troubled when the body is no longer conceived as the source of desire — and as Butler notes, troubling one pillar of the sex/gender/desire structure troubles the entire foundation.<sup>4</sup> In the novels studied here, desire may run its course in and through the sensuous, feeling body but it is never rooted somewhere deep within the body's chromosomal makeup: desire always comes from elsewhere. It is this de-naturalization and consequent disembodiment of desire that I find so compelling, as it serves to uproot and destabilize the heterosexist sex/gender/desire matrix.

## **II. Changing the Script: Moving Beyond the Legible Body**

Winterson's work has always expressed an interest in subverting identity categories. Both *The Passion* (1987) and *Sexing the Cherry* (1989) boast powerful female characters with bodies that undermine patriarchal and heterosexist discourses by defying the inscriptions associated with femininity; the webbed feet belonging to *The Passion's* Villanelle render her androgynous, while *Sexing the Cherry's* Dog-Woman is monstrously large with cavernous man-swallowing genitalia.<sup>5</sup> These bodies both exceed and defect from the norms associated with their sex. In *The Female Grotesque: Risk,*

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<sup>4</sup> See Chapter One, "Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire" from Butler's *Gender Trouble*, pages iv-vi.

<sup>5</sup> In *The Passion's* version of Venice, all boatmen are male with webbing between their toes. That Villanelle is born female but also has this webbing is viewed as an aberration of her sex; in an allusion to both circumcision and castration anxiety, a midwife labours to sever the webbing but to no avail. Villanelle's webbed feet remains intact.

*Excess and Modernity* (1994), Mary Russo affirms that the “image of the uncanny, grotesque body as doubled, monstrous, deformed [...] might be used affirmatively to destabilize the idealizations of the female body or to realign the mechanisms of desire” (221). As Paulina Palmer observes, Villanelle’s ambiguous body carries signifiers that exist in surplus of the feminine (Palmer 87). Lisa Moore views the Dog-Woman as similarly excessive, her body hosting a profusion of qualities that “ironizes normative femininity”; the Dog-Woman’s mammoth size transforms the inscriptions associated with biologically female body, ultimately pointing to the potential of the body to deconstruct itself (Moore 120). Both Palmer and Moore perceive Winterson’s exaltation of the grotesque body as explicitly political; to briefly appropriate Julia Kristeva’s vernacular, the “abject” bodies of Villanelle and the Dog-Woman thwart idealizations of femininity, while simultaneously revealing the extent to which institutionalized heterosexism both requires and relies upon these morphological idealizations.<sup>6</sup>

What Villanelle and the Dog-Woman do is expose the instability of sex: that they can exist in excess of its gendered norms speaks to the impossibility of a universal, self-identical woman. This is not insignificant. However, I argue that while glorifying the so-called abnormalities of the female body is certainly a worthwhile project, Winterson’s following works go much further in terms of destabilizing what it means to have a body at all. We still read the bodies of Villanelle and the Dog-Woman as female, despite their abject qualities, and thus they are still subsumed by the sex/gender/desire matrix.

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<sup>6</sup> In *The Powers of Horror* (1982), Kristeva defines abjection as that which troubles the boundaries of the body, and the self/other distinction that such boundaries enable.

Moreover, it remains unclear how “mechanisms of desire,” as suggested by Russo, are realigned by an approbation of the grotesque.

In her essay “The Erupting Lesbian Body,” Cath Stowers notes that Winterson’s earlier novels appear interested “in portraying a celebratory ‘tattoo’ of the female body, but the only other tattoo is inner [...] that interiority of meaning which can only be reached by a re-mapping of that which is usually left invisible, and a reciprocity of Self and Other, writer and reader” (96). By *re-mapping* the various established discourses that determine how the body has been culturally constituted, Winterson’s more recent work has progressed from an emphasis on the messy realities of the body to a rethinking of these realities altogether: in other words, transitioning from a project devoted to writing the body to a strategy that revises the normalizing discourses that have been inscribed upon its surface and subsumed within — collapsing the inside/outside binary. Moving away from a definitively feminist project of valorizing the female body, the novels that are the subject of this dissertation instead focus on how the corporeal inscriptions associated with sexual difference are responsible for this “inner tattoo,” what insinuates bodies to desire what they do not desire. These works are representative of a more concerted effort to tackle this issue of insinuated corporeality; in both undermining and then reconfiguring the dominant discourses that impact how the body is materialized as a cultural product, the characters in these novels simultaneously come to process their desires in ways that go beyond the legible surface of the skin. As Haraway muses, “why should bodies end at the skin?” (Haraway 178).

For her critics, however, the work Winterson performs in *The Passion* and *Sexing the Cherry* was unobjectionable, even pleasurable; it can be sexy to be subversive, and

Winterson does it well. When her writing became increasingly transgressive, moving the body too far beyond the limits of what is familiar and recognizable, the reaction became negative and even spiteful. For instance, reviews of *Written on the Body* accused Winterson of intellectual aggrandizement and “high-pitched rhapsodies” (Kemp 71a); as Joan Smith argues in *The Guardian*, Winterson employs “a language drunk on its own richness, unable to distinguish between the sublime and mere showing off” (Smith 26). Of *Gut Symmetries*, Adam Mar-Jones writes: “Winterson seems hypnotised by her own performance, radioactive with self-belief” (Mars-Jones 15) while Lucy Grealy similarly admonishes Winterson for “simply listening to herself speak” (Grealy 55). In her review of *The PowerBook*, E. Jane Dickson suggests that “Winterson’s grunting and straining after greatness is downright distressing to the reader” (Dickson “Dot.com”). And although many critics saw *The Stone Gods* as a return to her previous form (as she here abandons the conceit of the bisexual love triangle that anchors the plot of *Written on the Body*, *Gut Symmetries* and *The PowerBook*), she was still reproved by Tim Adams for disrupting the narrative flow with “sudden personal interventions” (Adams “Stranger”).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that the reviews that I have selected here are not simply criticizing the novels; they demonstrate a real sense of dislike for Winterson as a person. Many Winterson scholars have noted that this hostility coincides with Winterson’s increasingly public persona as the *enfant terrible* of contemporary fiction in the United Kingdom. Not only did she select her own novel for Telegraph’s 1993 Book of the Year list, she also gave her own name when *The Sunday Times* invited her to nominate the greatest living writer, stating that “no one working in the English language now comes close to my exuberance, my passion, and my fidelity to words” (Freely “God’s Gift”). Then there was the infamous incident in 1994 when, after reading an unfavourable review by Nicci Gerrard, Winterson broke down the fundamental boundary between reviewer and reviewed by going to Gerrard’s house and interrupting her dinner party with verbally

As Brian Finney observes in his appraisal of Winterson's critical reception, a wide array of reviews and essays appear to agree upon one thing: from *Written on the Body* on, Winterson's career trajectory experienced "a catastrophic decline from its earlier promise" (Finney 24).

Several reviewers also expressed feelings of alienation as a result of the subject matter of her more recent novels, the majority of which revolve around a love affair between two women at the expense of a jilted husband. In his review of *Art & Lies* (1995), William Pritchard is made to feel apprehensive by her apparent "contempt for hearth and home, the family [...] and especially for men" (Pritchard 14-15). Peter Kemp likewise criticizes Winterson's "propensity for scrawling gender-spite across her pages," arguing in his review of *Written on the Body* that the novel demonstrates a flagrant contempt for heterosexual marriage and the husbands within them (Kemp 71a). David Sexton's assessment of *Gut Symmetries* notes that while Winterson "writes deplorably about heterosexual sex [...] she can celebrate lesbianism with almost persuasive fervour" (Sexton 27). And then, later: "Winterson has indulged herself hugely" (30).

What is so baffling about such critiques is that prior to the publication of *Written on the Body*, Winterson had produced novels with explicitly lesbian, anti-marriage themes. Not only that, she had received accolades for them. For instance, she was the recipient of the John Llewellyn Rhys prize and the EM Forster award, for *The Passion* and *Sexing the Cherry* respectively, novels that could also be perceived as threatening the

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abusive demands for an explanation. Winterson was quick to earn a reputation as an all-too-willing transgressor of propriety (Westman "Legacy").



sanctity of marriage with their portrait of female same-sex relationships. And her first novel *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit* (1985), a semi-autobiographical and often comedic lesbian *Künstlerroman*, won the prestigious Whitbread award for first novel — despite its outright challenge to the same heteronormative institutions that Pritchard, Kemp and Sexton all seem so keen to uphold. There is *something else* surfacing here in these negative critiques. To me, it appears as though these reviewers are feeling antagonized by what these texts are producing: disruptive new ways of thinking about the body and desire. The general sense of both suspicion and uneasiness that these novels instigate is encapsulated by Brian Bouldrey’s review of *The PowerBook* for the *San Francisco Gate*: “Certainly, it’s Winterson’s intention to pull the rug out from under the reader, to reawaken jaded senses. But with so much power taken away, where can a reader find his footing?” (Bouldrey “Your Own Way”).

Bouldrey here has touched upon the one crucial aspect that succeeds in dividing her canon, a feature that first emerges with the publication of *Written on the Body*: by destabilizing normative conceptions of what it means to have a body, Winterson takes away the ground upon which identities are constructed, causing readers to lose their subjective footing. Although Bouldrey never mentions the body (demonstrating once again that the body is so naturalized, it often goes without saying), there are three other key words in his testimony: *power*, *reader* and *his*. My first chapter on *Written on the Body* explores the ways in which the body is read into being, into actualization; however, the novel also acknowledges that these readings draw from ideologies that are permeated with patriarchal power dynamics concerning what it means to possess a body at all and what readings get to be invested with privilege. As Patricia Duncker notes in her review

of *Written on the Body*, Winterson's work overturns the "settled order of men's power over meanings, language and texts" (Duncker 82). What Duncker does not note, however, is that this overturning is accomplished by undermining what we think we know about our bodies and the ways that they experience and express desire.

Undoing dominant conceptions of the body does threaten the very basis through which our sense of selfhood is established. The colour of our skin, the sex of our bodies, possible disabilities we may have, the clothes we wear — without a body, how can we read who we, and others, are? *The PowerBook* acknowledges the cultural anxieties that underlie the destabilization of materiality through a character known only by the name of her online avatar, Tulip. Despite her engagement with cybernetic technologies, Tulip is averse to the notion of giving up her "real" body in favour of a virtual identity. However, as we will see in my third chapter, Tulip's "real" body contains her within a time and space that has been orchestrated by patriarchal, heteronormative regimes. The identity that comes packaged alongside Tulip's body is one that reduces her to the domesticated constraints of her role as wife. Although this role makes Tulip feel that she can recognize herself, her entire identity has been determined by forces designed to entrap her into a life of passive servitude.

In "The Semiotics of Sex," Winterson observes that the categories of gender and sexuality have long coexisted in order to both contain and reduce fear — fear of the unknown, of that which exceeds language and exposes its limitations, threatening to undo the subject's ego (117). However, the subject's "I" or, rather, the identity it clings to, is always first and foremost a product of discourse and therefore requires on-going, intensive interrogation; the power dynamics moving through discourse are ingrained in

all of us, “rusted almost unnoticed into the flesh” (116). Butler raises an important question in her 1990 work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* when she asks: “If ‘identity’ is an effect of discursive practices, to what extent is gender identity, constructed as a relationship among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire, the effect of a regulatory practice that can be identified as compulsory heterosexuality?” (24). As an identity category, gender as it currently operates cannot be extrapolated from heteronormativity; thus, Winterson’s recent novels attempt to weaken the preexisting scripts on desire, which she designates as “clichéd” and restrictive, by attacking gender and its frequent companion, sexual identity, from the very base of their legitimation: the body.

### **III. Challenging the Concept of “Inner Nature”: Theoretical Perspectives on Disembodied Desire**

Although the body as an object of critical study spans across many disciplines (such as biology, psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, posthumanism), many of them are brought together, in some form, within the extensive scope of queer theory. Winterson’s preoccupation with the body is one that is mirrored by this field of thought, with its centralizing focus on the production, dissemination and internalization of normalizing discourses concerning gender and sex, as imprinted onto the body/product. I admit that I hesitate to position Winterson’s work in alignment with anything at all, particularly as she herself rejects all forms of labeling when it comes to her writing, even from within marginalized categories; whenever she is called a “lesbian” writer, she is quick to rebuke the consolidation of her personal sexual preference with her art (*Art Objects* 104).

However, Winterson's resistance to definition is also a fundamental characteristic of queer theory. In her introduction to the field, Annamarie Jagose attests that the word "queer" is purposeful, as it includes but is not limited to homosexual desire, suggesting definitional indeterminacy and elasticity (Jagose 1). Unlike gay and lesbian studies, then, queer theory is not interested in further sedimenting identity categories, but rather adopts a range of theoretical material in its examination of the various contexts (historical, political, psychic, linguistic) in which all things "queer" emerge.

Moreover, Winterson's concern with how one's body and desires become shaped by outside ideologies is one that is paralleled in queer theory; according to Jagose, queer theory explores the ways in which "our understanding of ourselves as coherent, unified, and self-determining subjects is an effect of those representational codes commonly used to describe the self and through which, consequently, identity come to be understood" (78). However, as Jagose affirms, it is difficult to rupture heteronormativity, as its "very claim to naturalization is intimately connected with an individual sense of self, with the way in which each of us imagines our own sexuality to be primary, elemental and private" (17).

This argument is an extension of one held by David M. Halperin. In *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality: And Other Essays on Greek Love* (1990), he states that it is the conventions of the sexual system that procure the very "self-confirming inner truth of 'nature'" that gives the entire structure a sense of legitimacy (18). Halperin's own argument finds its origins in Michel Foucault's groundbreaking *History of Sexuality; Volume 1* (1979); as Halperin later attests in his 1995 work *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*, Foucault "politicizes both truth and the body: he reconstitutes

knowledge and sexuality as sites of contestation, thereby opening up new opportunities for both scholarly and political intervention” (42). Truth and the body — it is a tenacious little coupling, one that can be difficult to break apart. For Foucault, they were united in the Victorian period, through two modes: the production of confession procedures, and the production and proliferation of scientific discourses. These two modes acted in tandem to turn sex into an object of knowledge and to crystallize the “truth” of one’s sex, which now is perceived to come from the interior of the body, the “inner nature” to which Halperin refers.<sup>8</sup>

However, this inner nature does not originate from the body’s interiority at all, but rather is constituted from discourses that exist outside of the body — to be subsumed by the subject through the process of interpellation, below the levels of consciousness.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Queer theory is indebted to Foucault in a number of ways, despite his own insistence that his work had little to do with gay liberation (Halperin *Saint Foucault* 31). Even if he did not see the connection, Foucault viewed homosexuality as a “historic opportunity to open up new relational and affective potentialities” (67). Speaking about bathhouses, for instance, Foucault writes that they “afford an exceptional possibility of desubjectivization, of desubjection... It’s not the affirmation of identity that’s important, it’s the affirmation of non-identity” (94). It is specifically his recognition of the affirmation of non-identity that makes Foucault the “father of queer theory” — despite his own objection to the title.

<sup>9</sup> Many disenfranchised minority groups, such as members of the LGBTQ community, have found it necessary to politically mobilize around the identity category of sexuality. For instance, take American singer and pop culture phenomenon Lady Gaga’s 2011 hit “Born This Way.” The song became an anthem for gay and lesbian activists, who argued that sexuality is not a choice, but rather an innate characteristic of whatever body (regardless of sex) that one is born into: they had no choice, they were born homosexual. However, as it stands today, there is still no proven link between one’s sexual preference and one’s biological constitution. What is even more reductive about this stance is its reliance on essentialist determinism: the “Born This Way” rally cry denies the impact of discourse on the subject — an impact that, by the way, does not offer the subject much choice either. What this example demonstrates is the ways in which discourse shapes the

Many queer theorists (see, for example: Butler, Michael Warner, Elizabeth Freeman, Lee Edelman) have taken up with Pierre Bourdieu's theory of power and practice, from his 1980 work *The Logic of Practice*:

All the schemes of perception and appreciation in which a group deposits its fundamental structures, and the schemes of expression through which it provides them with the beginnings of an objectification and therefore reinforcement, intervene between the individual and his/her body. Application of the fundamental schemes to one's body, and more especially to those parts of the body that are most pertinent in terms of these schemes, is doubtless of the privileged occasions for the incorporation of the schemes, because of the heavy investments placed in the body. (73)

In response to Bourdieu, Butler writes that these heavy investments are based upon a "regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence, [which] disguises itself as a developmental law regulating the sexual field that it purports to describe" (*Gender Trouble* 136). Winterson's work rescripts these "heavy investments placed in the body" in ways that aim to transform the insinuations that drive subjects to desire what they desire.<sup>10</sup>

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subject to the extent that its identity comes to viewed as a natural extension of the body, whether that particular identity is a privileged one or not.

<sup>10</sup> In her essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980), Adrienne Rich points out that knowledge about sexual practices outside of heterosexuality have been withheld. Instead, heterosexuality has been propagandized as the *only* option. Her essay is concerned with "how and why women's choice of women as passionate

In addition to queer theory, Lacanian psychoanalysis proves valuable to my readings, and comes into play in some form in each of my chapters. In *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (1994), Elizabeth Grosz underlines the usefulness of psychoanalytic theory in reconceiving the body:

What psychoanalytic theory makes clear is that the body is literally written on, inscribed, by desire and signification, at the anatomical, physiological, and neurological levels. The body is in no sense naturally or innately psychical, sexual, or sexed. It is indeterminate and indeterminable outside its social constitution as a body of a particular type. This implies that the body which it presumes and helps to explain is an open-ended, pliable set of significations, capable of being rewritten, reconstituted, in quite other terms than those which mark it, and consequently capable of reinscribing the forms of sexed identity and psychical subjectivity at work today. (60)

In his work *Beyond Sexuality* (2000), Tim Dean develops a connection between the psychoanalytic framework and queer theory, arguing that both fields work to disentangle normative ideologies from desire through the process of denaturalization and indeed, psychoanalysis is most productive in its understanding of the relationship between discourse and corporeality. Lacanian psychoanalysis, in particular, is also responsible for

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comrades, life partners, co-workers, lovers, community has been crushed, invalidated, forced into hiding and disguise; and second, the virtual or total neglect of lesbian existence in a wide range of writings, including feminist scholarship” (227).

the definition of desire that my dissertation largely engages. According to Lacan, desire stems from the subject's desire for recognition from the other; however, this recognition is mitigated by what the subject believes the other to desire, a belief which is, in turn, driven by the subject's desire to be recognized. How one experiences desire is informed by what the subject perceives as the other's objects and what the other appears to be lacking. "Man's desire is the desire of the Other," states Lacan (*Écrits* 28).<sup>11</sup> Thus, he concludes that desire is not something innate to the body, nor does desire ever really belong to the subject's body; rather, desire is always located in the orbit of the other. As Lacan claims: "Man's very desire is constituted, [Hegel] tells us, under the sign of mediation: it is the desire to have one's desire recognized. Its object is a desire, that of other people, in the sense that man has no object that is constituted for his desire without some mediation" (182). It is this mediation by the Other that Winterson finds so restrictive: the concept that something from the outside — i.e.; the discursively constructed identity categories of gender, sex, and sexuality, as inscribed on the body to be recognized by the other — could be mediating the subject's desiring process to a large degree.

However, although psychoanalysis proves a useful ally in some aspects of my analysis, the field does not go far enough in probing the means through which these prevailing systems of mediation might be capable of transformation, as Butler, Grosz,

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<sup>11</sup> Lacan distinguishes between the little "o" other and big "O" Other as such: the other is the one who mirrors back the subject's desire for recognition and also what the subject thinks the other desires, at the level of the imaginary through the act of transference. The Other operates at the level of the Symbolic, representing the authoritative, Oedipalizing "Name-of-the-Father" that regulates the whole of culture and language.



Hayles, Haraway and certainly Winterson's fiction suggest that they are. Thus, this dissertation also bridges psychoanalytic perspectives with Deleuzian nomadism as I trace Winterson's movement away a focus on textual bodies towards the indeterminate borders that the virtual dimension, with its inherent lack of visible or graspable materiality, incites. *Written on the Body*, *Gut Symmetries*, *The PowerBook* and *The Stone Gods* all engage on some level with nomadic thought, which Deleuzian philosopher and new materialist Rosi Braidotti describes as a process that "aims at decolonizing the thinking subject from the dualistic grip [of] established normative heterosexual modes of thought" (*Nomadic Theory* 21-22). The novels explore what happens to desire in the absence of concrete, knowable materiality, when the body becomes viewed as what Braidotti calls an incorporeal but not disembodied "complex assemblage of virtualities" ("Affirming the Affirmative" 32). The novels studied here systematically destabilize the identity categories that rely on corporeal inscriptions for sustenance, thus divesting bodies of the meaning long attributed to them. The next section of this introduction explains how I assess the various textual possibilities that emerge in Winterson's radical critique of the link between identity categories and the body, as her novels search for the momentary ruptures in the Symbolic, the very field of intelligibility and recognition that governs subjectivity.

#### **IV. Resignifying the Identity Categories of Gender and Sex**

My first chapter explores the ways in which the bodies in *Written on the Body* are literally written on, inscribed with signification. Lucie Armitt calls *Written on the Body* "the watershed novel in Winterson's oeuvre," when everything changes (Armitt 20).

Although Armitage does not pinpoint what changes, exactly, I contend that it is with this novel that Winterson begins the work of undoing notions of the natural body by highlighting its textuality, its palimpsestic quality. If the body can be written upon, then surely it can be open to revision — but as we have seen with Winterson’s earlier work, revision is not entirely enough. Bodies need to be resignified. According to Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, resignification involves “a thoroughgoing appropriation and redeployment of the categories of identity themselves, not merely to contest ‘sex’ but to articulate the convergence of multiple sexual discourses at the site of identity in order to render that category permanently problematic” (128).

Winterson’s own textual resignifications begin with denaturalization, practicing what Toril Moi calls a “non-essentialist form of writing” in order to undermine the normalizing discourses implicated in the authoring of the body (Moi 10). This non-essentialism is first made evident in *Written on the Body*, with the decision to employ a self-admittedly unreliable narrator that has no name and no gender, and a host of contradictory clues that keep readers guessing. The trick is a neat one, for not only do the narrator’s multiple positions foreground the performativity of gender, but these positions also highlight the extent to which we read the other’s body for signs of his, her, but truly *its* identity; in effect, we mobilize the other into recognition using preexisting, inherited scripts. The first section of this chapter assesses how we read indeterminacy and

disidentification, when the narrator's body exists outside the scope of what Butler calls the preexisting domain of cultural intelligibility (*Gender Trouble* 23).<sup>12</sup>

This chapter also examines the varied ways in which *Written on the Body's* narrator attempts to write a new script, one that refuses to adhere to the clichés that have long dictated how desire is processed. "I don't want to reproduce, but to make something completely new," the narrator states (108). And yet, the narrator is constantly ensnared by his/her reliance on materiality, on the lover's body as concrete, perceivable, and thus knowable. S/he requires a mode of representation to convey desire for his/her married beloved, a woman named Louise, but the modes of representation that currently exist only serve to transform Louise into an object. Desire always exceeds the narrator's attempts to contain it, observe it, transform it into discourse, however arch and inventive these attempts may be. The narrator fares better, in terms of expressing his/her desire, when s/he forsakes his/her attempts to control Louise's representation; in the third and final section of the novel, his/her reality disintegrates into fantasy as the plot breaks apart, becoming increasingly spatially and temporally fragmented and disorienting. Here, it is virtuality that brings the other closer as the distinction between subject/object subsides.

My second chapter addresses *Gut Symmetries* and what Winterson, in *Art Objects*, calls the "tyranny of matter," as the novel assesses the ways in which a focus on the mostly unseeable pre-personal forces (energy, time, space) that precondition and actualize matter (and are matter themselves) might disrupt the heteronormative ideologies

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<sup>12</sup> Although Butler uses several versions of this phrase often throughout her substantial body of work, the concept first appears in *Gender Trouble*.

that both mobilize and foreclose our perceptions of corporeality (59). Like other works in Winterson's oeuvre, the novel is thematically bound to the relationship between corporeality and desire; however, it is more concerned with what is happening on the *other* side of the skin, considering the exterior forces of time and space that not only encircle the body but actually serve to make up its matter. *Gut Symmetries* takes up with the discourse of theoretical physics in its description of the extramarital affair between quantum physicist Alice and her colleague Jove, an infidelity that becomes triangulated when Alice and Jove's poet wife Stella fall in love. While Jove insists upon the concreteness of his matter and the corporeal boundaries that his matter institutes, Alice and Stella's union represents the interrelationship between energy and matter: radically open, they are connected through a constant exchange of the energies that comprise them, running through one and into the other.

As Ruth Holliday and John Hassard argue in their introduction to *Contested Bodies* (2001), thinking "about specific bodies and the spaces through which they flow can tell us important things about the ways in which the same bodies are regulated differently in different spaces" (8). While Alice affirms that space is indeed curved, that it curves through the body, she nonetheless makes the claim that before meeting Stella, her brain had been "cordoned by habit to grow in a straight line" (*GS* 11). Such "cordoning" reflects Grosz's arguments: that socially accepted norms, which amass legitimation and authority with the passage of time, extensively impact how bodies respond to their exterior surroundings — both spatially and temporally. In a collection of essays called *Space, Time and Perversions* (1995), Grosz states that "if bodies are to be re-conceived, not only must their *matter and form* be rethought, but so too must their environment and

*spatio-temporal location* [...] the possibility of further alternatives must be explored” (84, 98, emphases in original). The materiality of the body allows the subject to perceive its spatio-temporal location, but the body itself is still a socially mediated product — and the subject’s understanding of space and time is likewise mediated. However, things change when the body’s properties, the reality of its various intangible virtualities, are acknowledged. This chapter explores Winterson’s shift in focus from bodily inscriptions, as in *Written on the Body*, to a body without boundaries. Alice and Stella’s bodies, in particular, are not just surrounded by time, space, and energy, but play an active role in all of it.

Although virtuality comes into play in both *Written on the Body* and *Gut Symmetries*, it is positioned as the central site of resignification in *The.PowerBook* and *The Stone Gods*, the subjects of my third chapter. The majority of *The.PowerBook* ostensibly takes place in the hyperreal dimension of the internet, and explores the means through which cyberspace re-codes the pre-coded body, rearranging the lines of what is now our “laptop DNA”; *The.PowerBook* also addresses how desire might become simultaneously altered by such re-codings (4). The online domain tends to be considered in terms of a Cartesian mind/body split, in which the “virtual” mind is free to travel from one avatar to the next, while the “real” body remains passively seated behind the computer screen. Winterson’s protagonist Ali/x, who also makes her living re-writing old stories and e-mailing them to her clients, describes the experience as “disappear[ing] into a web of co-ordinates” (94).

However, as the work of Hayles demonstrates, cybernetic experience does not mean disembodiment; the body still exists, and is undoubtedly impacted by these virtual

happenings projected onto the screen. There is a perceived chasm between what Hayles, in *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (1999), calls the enacted body and the represented body, but the two are always threaded together “through the technology that connects them,” “mutating and flexible machine interfaces” that synthesize this fragmented body into a posthuman body (xiii). It must be noted that this technology is heavily influenced by the preexisting domain of cultural intelligibility; nonetheless, this chapter investigates the positive ways in which the effects of internet technologies have transformed how bodies (now posthuman) negotiate their desires in *The PowerBook*. The novel’s use of cyberspace problematizes prominent conceptions about materiality. Bodies can indeed be resignified — or in this case, re-coded — into something that moves beyond the sex/gender categories that have long sustained the heteronormative paradigm.

This chapter continues along the posthuman vein with my discussion of cyborg bodies in *The Stone Gods*; in the novel’s futuristic, apocalyptic world, bodies have become physically fused with technology. Heterosexual copulation is not necessary for reproduction, and in many ways, technology has supplanted biology. According to Haraway’s *A Manifesto for Cyborgs* (1991), with this new technological capacity, posthuman bodies can no longer be envisaged as “sacred within themselves”; as evidenced in *The Stone Gods*, devoid of the anchoring point of the natural, the cyborg is henceforth disengaged from the prevailing binary oppositions that support the sex/gender/desire matrix (196). Winterson utilizes the figure of the cyborg to imagine an identity that would exist beyond the supposed “real” or “natural” body, ultimately giving rise to “quite different political possibilities from those proposed by the mundane fiction

of Man and Woman” (222). One of *The Stone God*’s characters, a state-of-the-art Robo *sapiens*, makes a pointed observation, and one that Winterson’s novels, particularly the ones studied here, generally seem keen to highlight: “Gender is a human concept, [...] and not interesting” (63).

The work Winterson begins in *Written in the Body*, with its focus on corporeality, text, time, space, and virtuality, reverberates through the rest of the novels in my study and closes with *The Stone Gods*, set in a future realm where boundaries between what is “real” and what has been constructed are becoming increasingly unclear. Importantly, these novels destabilize the conception of wholly embodied desire by undercutting dominant conceptualizations of what bodies are — all without undermining or dismissing the reality of embodiment and lived, felt, sensuous experience. What this means, and what makes these particular novels so volatile (and subsequently, so troubling for so many members of her audience), is that desire can become unhinged from the various heteronormative discourses that regulate it, discourses which have gained legitimation through their own naturalization of the body.

## **V. Conclusion**

I read the novels examined in this project as an active response to Foucault’s postulation: that the articulation of “*other* forms of pleasures, of relationships, coexistences, attachments, [and] love intensities” will lead to the eventual sedimentation of “a different economy of bodies and desires” (interview in Lévy 674, emphasis in original; *History of Sexuality* 159). Her texts challenge the dominant normalizing discourses that have been imposed upon the body, while providing a number of

alternative and fertile frameworks for rethinking not only the body, but the ways in which desire is something that is disembodied: coming into the body from elsewhere. These novels break down that boundary between the interior self and the body's exterior surroundings, demonstrating how a body that desires is not only impacted but also *shaped* by what is happening on the outside — and that desire is *always* on the outside, divorcing desire from essentialist and potentially pathological notions of sexuality. As long as we remain speaking subjects of the Symbolic, the body will forever undergo some form of insinuation; that fact is inescapable. However, the discourses that are doing the insinuating can be altered in ways that potentiate and actualize pleasures rather than foreclose them.

In “The Semiotics of Sex,” Winterson states that her work is always “pushing at the boundaries we thought were fixed” (116). Pushing at these ostensibly fixed boundaries allows us to imagine the possibility of a life that can be lived otherwise, as Winterson does in *Written on the Body*, *Gut Symmetries*, *The PowerBook* and *The Stone Gods*. This is a political move, and a very meaningful one: for fantasy, immateriality, energy, virtuality are all very “real” facets of human experience — allowing them into our discourses will open up new possibilities for desire and desiring practices, beyond the constraints of heteronormativity.



## CHAPTER ONE

### Moving Beyond the Skin in *Written on the Body*: Language, Gender, and Productive Ruptures of Signification

*“The lover knows what it is to be the beloved. The beloved knows in her own body the power of the lover.” — Jeanette Winterson, Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery*

#### I. Introduction

*Written on the Body* (1992) is a contemporary love story, one that departs from the fantastical historical fiction narratives that distinguished Winterson’s two preceding works, *The Passion* (1987) and *Sexing the Cherry* (1989). However, *Written on the Body* does employ one unusual structural element that is characteristic of Winterson’s tongue-in-cheek style: the novel’s contents are recounted almost entirely in the first person, by an unnamed narrator whose gender is never revealed to the readers. Such an omission transforms what would otherwise be a traditional heteronormative boy-meets-girl narrative into a game of hermeneutics: the narrator’s primary love object is female, so is s/he heterosexual? Or is this a same-sex romance? The narrator’s gender remains unconfirmed, and subsequently the question of his/her sexual identity cannot be resolved. Nonetheless, the greater part of *Written on the Body*’s scholarship appears devoted to unraveling the mystery instigated by the narrator’s ambiguity. This chapter appraises the critical response to the novel, as most have come to variations of the same conclusion: that the narrator is a woman and therefore lesbian or, more prevalently, that s/he is a lesbian and therefore a woman. However, as I attest, this preoccupation with the trope of the indecipherable narrator results in a failure to give due consideration to how a

narrative performs in the absence of the narrator's gender, and the means through which his/her imagined corporeal surface actualizes according to culturally constructed signifiers of gender which have arrived before the body itself. This chapter explores how these signifiers also impact how desire is negotiated, recalling Winterson's supposition from her work *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* (1995), that bodies are "insinuated to desire what they do not desire" (115), taking into account how normative discourses might become unsettled by a closer examination of the ways in which language sometimes fails to signify.

I read the narrator's continued deferral of gender as representative of Judith Butler's poststructuralist project, to "denaturalize and resignify bodily categories" (*Gender Trouble* xii). While I am not the first to draw a parallel between *Written on the Body* and Butler's work, my argument focuses predominantly on how Butler's analysis of the preexisting domain of cultural intelligibility aligns with Winterson's ambiguously sexed narrator; my review of the novel's current criticism serves to demonstrate the extent to which the "other" does not just read about the narrator, but actually writes upon and thus constitutes his/her body, drawing upon normalizing discourses of the sex/gender/desire matrix that precedes it. As Butler indicates, the body is not wholly natural but rather a politically invested template upon which these normalizing discourses are imprinted. For instance, despite the narrator's illegible status, the language used to describe him/her is always already implicitly gendered: that I am compelled by force of habit to refer to the narrator using the conflated pronouns *s/he*, *him/her*, and *his/her* speaks to the current limitation of possibilities outside of this category in the English language. Even the plural pronoun "they," which can be used in the singular forms to

treat gender ambiguous situations, would still implicitly refer to both men and women (and is also grammatically difficult to invoke). That said, it is true that the narrator could be addressed in a multitude of ways, such as by the initial “N” for narrator; no one is ever forced to use the prevailing language and certainly gender neutral pronouns could also be taken up to describe the narrator.<sup>13</sup> However, while this strategy would thwart the sexing of discourse, such an approach ultimately denies what the novel is attempting to demonstrate: the inescapability of gender’s impact on how we read *and* write bodies. Our gaze genders the other according to their sex, which is already gendered.

Expressions of desire are channeled through this heavily gendered Symbolic order, indicated here by the narrator’s struggle to relate the rapture of his/her passion for Louise in ways that surpass (and therefore trouble) what already exists. In my discussion of the novel, I return to Teresa de Lauretis’s essay “Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation,” in which she makes the contention that before desire can be removed “from discourse of gender, with its indissoluble knowledge of sexuality and reproduction,” the body must first be rewritten “beyond its pre-coded, conventional representations” (149-50). Borrowing from Tim Dean’s *Beyond Sexuality* (2000), I also explore how *Written on the Body* not only exposes corporeality as a textually inscribed product rather than purely biological, but actually re-conceives the body altogether through the destabilization of the skin ego, the primordial boundary between self and

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<sup>13</sup> Although there is an abundance of gender neutral pronouns — including, but not limited to, “zie/hir/hir,” “ey/em/eir,” and “jee/jeir/jem” — none of them have been adopted into common speech, outside of LGBTQ communities (which also, it should be noted, are often unable to agree upon which pronoun to implement).

other. Although grounded in a psychotic-melancholic fantasy, the narrator's incorporation of the other is ultimately one that resignifies the body by undoing the perception of a stable, concrete surface upon which inscriptions can become permanently imprinted. While the narrator's impossible gender remains central to most readings of *Written on the Body*, I am more interested in the ways in which his/her body becomes reconstituted within an erotic economy that is also nomadic and virtual rather than purely grounded in materiality: an erotic economy that can move beyond the binary of sexual difference written onto the body.

## **II. Reading the Body into Recognition: Butler's Preexisting Grids of Cultural Intelligibility**

Structurally arranged into three distinctive sections, the plot of *Written on the Body* takes place in London and surrounding areas. At first, the novel bears resemblance to a more conventional love story, as the narrator recounts his/her previous romantic entanglements and eventual affair with a married woman named Louise Rosenthal (née Fox), the "you" to whom the narrator's "I" addresses the majority of the novel. Louise eventually chooses to leave her marriage, but it is not the happily-ever-after the narrator was after — soon afterwards, s/he discovers that Louise had been diagnosed with chronic lymphocytic leukemia. Louise's now-estranged husband Elgin, who happens to be a prominent oncology specialist, informs the narrator that he will only grant Louise access to the best treatment on one condition: the narrator must leave London immediately, and renounce all ties to Elgin's wife. In the physical absence of Louise's body, the narrator develops a frenzied obsession with anatomical textbooks, a fixation that comprises the

novel's second stage — one that, as we will see, pays significant homage to Monique Wittig's *The Lesbian Body* (1973). The third and final section marks a return to the earlier story, but is far less linear; the difference between chronological and narrative time is often not clarified. Related in what appears to be the present day, from which the novel's first portion has been recounted, the narrator is now working as a bartender in Yorkshire and still mourning his/her lost Louise. After receiving encouragement from a new but unwanted love interest in the form of a colleague named Gail Right, the narrator embarks upon a disorienting and ultimately futile quest to recover Louise, who has all but disappeared. In the final pages of the novel, our dejected and heartbroken narrator returns to the pastoral cottage, where his/her beloved suddenly surfaces: "From the kitchen door, Louise's face. Paler, thinner, but her hair still mane-wide and the colour of blood. I put out my hand and felt her fingers, she took my fingers and put them to her mouth. The scar under the lip burned me. Am I stark mad? She's warm" (Winterson 190).<sup>14</sup> The scene is a cryptic one, as it remains unclear whether Louise's appearance is real ("She's warm"), or a mere figment of a crazed narrator's phantasmagoric imaginings ("Am I stark mad?").

Despite *Written on the Body's* many obfuscations and experimental qualities, the majority of its criticism focuses on the mutually incompatible signifiers of both masculinity and femininity that pervade the narrator's characterization. To cite just a few examples, the narrator compares him/herself to Alice in Wonderland and Lauren Bacall, an Adam, Christopher Robin, a "cheap thug" and a "private dick" (86, 95). S/he urinates

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<sup>14</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all references to Winterson in this chapter are from *Written on the Body* (1992).

while sitting down, but also standing up. S/he reads *Playboy*, but has admitted to flipping through women's magazines in the waiting room out of boredom. S/he has worn stockings to work. In the early stages of his/her relationship with Louise, the narrator enacts both passive and active characteristics, by encompassing the swooning submission of a woman being romanced and the seductive prowess of a philandering Casanova all at once. For instance, the narrator confesses that Louise causes him/her to "quiver like a schoolgirl" and feel "like a convent virgin" (82, 94). But in the pages between, s/he is described as a womanizer in possession of "Mercutio's swagger" (86). Not only are the narrator's own descriptions of him/herself the subject of interrogation, but his/her interactions with others are similarly scrutinized for clues that might disclose his/her gender.

For this reason, Louise is perhaps the novel's most frustrating character. As the narrator's central love object, she is the most likely candidate to reveal his/her gender to us, and yet her treatment of the narrator is blatantly evasive. She tells the narrator about the first time she had ever glimpsed him/her, from across a park: "I thought you were the most beautiful creature male or female that I had ever seen" (84). This might seem careless on Winterson's part, to call attention to the narrator's ambiguity so explicitly. However, the scene also performs another important function: in classifying the narrator as either "male or female," Louise's observation serves to highlight the limitation of possibilities outside of these two categories. The narrator is not just a beautiful creature, but also a beautiful creature that is male or female, and nothing else. The novel never attempts to escape the sexing of bodies but rather, indicates the lack of an outside to it, particularly in the Western binary model of identity as represented here in the early

1990s. In order to reconcile the narrator's neutrality, the other characters appear almost hyper-gendered; as we will see, Louise is unequivocally femme, while Elgin is typecast as the calculated, unsympathetic male doctor. The narrator's ex-lovers likewise fit the mold of various recognizable stereotypes (most evident in Inge, the radical — and therefore ostensibly lesbian — feminist). The use of already standardized and thus easily recognizable personas makes it easier for readers to form opinions about the narrator's identity, for we can read how the narrator responds to the gendered actions of the other characters in order to determine what kind of body s/he inhabits. Is his/her gaze male or female? Once again, the novel refuses to present an outside to gender.

Most of *Written on the Body*'s characters and scenes are riddled with far subtler incongruities than Louise's "male or female" comment. Take for instance a moment that transpires near the end of the novel, when the narrator confronts Elgin. Here, the ways in which Elgin and his "hot date" react to the narrator's exploits incites confusion (169). Upon catching sight of Elgin, the narrator lunges at him; Elgin retaliates by punching him/her in the stomach. When the narrator slides to the floor, Elgin proceeds to repeatedly kick him/her in the shins. If the narrator is a man, then Elgin would be acting in self-defense and the case would be tidily closed. If the narrator is a woman, on the other hand, then Elgin's violence is cast in a far more questionable light. His actions throughout the text are deplorable, so it is not unfathomable that he would physically harm a woman. Elgin's girlfriend, however, accuses the narrator of being "disgusting"; this reaction is perplexing only if the narrator is female (171). Readers who have assumed the narrator to be female throughout the text might find the girlfriend's reaction to be a challenging one, if she has just witnessed her new lover assaulting a woman and I admit

this was the scene that finally convinced me that the narrator must be female. Nonetheless, my presuppositions about how Elgin's girlfriend *should* react to his aggressive behaviour are similarly subjected to the demands of gender, demonstrating the extent to which socially constructed representations have infiltrated every facet of my perception.

The narrator's varied representations of his/her former lovers are also laid open to the reader's scrutiny; however, his/her various episodic reflections on past sexual escapades only further serve to obscure his/her gender identity. One recollection in particular has instigated a good deal of critical consideration, as it contains a steady succession of gender-bending signifiers. In the passage, the narrator reminisces about Inge, a Dutch anarchy-feminist whose favoured pastimes include detonating symbols of phallic oppression; her preferred target, for this reason, were urinals. In his/her own musings on their significance, the narrator reveals an intimate knowledge of men's toilets when s/he depicts them as "fairly liberal places," appearing well acquainted with the social dynamics of this private male space (22). However, s/he also claims to have no idea "why men like doing everything together," simultaneously admitting that the behaviour of men often confounds him/her (22). The scene's next puzzling moment manifests in Inge's insistence that the narrator is not "fit to be an assistant in the fight towards a new matriarchy because [s/he] had QUALMS" (22, capitalization in original). The qualms themselves are never made clear: are they a result of the narrator's identification with other members of the male sex? Or perhaps the narrator simply prefers a more peaceful form of protesting?



Despite Inge's obvious reservations concerning the narrator's commitment to the campaign, she nonetheless assigns him/her a mission: s/he is to venture into the urinals and "warn the row of guys that they were in danger of having their balls blown off unless they left at once" (22). Herein lies yet another nebulous occurrence, and again, it is the other's reaction that is canvassed for clues: the men inside respond to the narrator's dramatic entrance with indifference, contemptuously flicking away the drops and swapping tips about racing. In fact, they are provoked to action only when the narrator reveals his/her possession of a gun. On the one hand, the intrusion of a female into this fundamentally masculine space might have been more likely to startle them, which would then suggest that the narrator is male (23). On the other, their scornful behaviour also implies that they are not intimidated, even by the narrator's threat of castration: their inability to take the narrator seriously could mean that s/he is a woman. The emergence of the pistol, a phallic symbol if there ever was one, levels the playing field considerably; the men are finally persuaded to flee the room.

Despite its deliberate ambiguity, critical evaluations of the scene tend to deposit the narrator into a female body by privileging signifiers of femininity and denying or ignoring the presence of masculine possibilities. For example, Ute Kauer's article "Narration and Gender: The Role of the First-Person Narrator in *Written on the Body*" recognizes that the novel works to deconstruct conventions about "gender, and specific male or female behaviour" (45). At the same time, however, she nonetheless contends that the narrator's exhibition of solidarity with the feminist cause ends up disclosing his/her status as a woman: "The narrator cannot withhold her sympathy and thus counteracts the design to keep the own gender undeclared" (49). This line of reasoning

disregards the scene's various discordant details: the narrator's seeming familiarity with male spaces, his/her "qualms" regarding the destruction of these patriarchal structures, the questionably subdued reaction of the men inside. Kauer's assertion is further problematic in that it also relies on stereotypes. With the implication that men are incapable of feeling a sense of political comradeship with their female counterparts, Kauer is leaning on essentialist notions: that masculinity is insensitive and self-serving, which is defined against the feminine predisposition to be emotional, compassionate, and nurturing. In this instance, she falls victim to *Written on the Body's* red herrings, which work to expose the reader's own habitual (and therefore normative) expectations about how gender "should" be performed.

Most critics have been more careful to tiptoe around the opacity of narrator's gender, while nonetheless deeming *Written on the Body* to be a same-sex love story. For instance, in *Other Sexes: Rewriting Difference from Woolf to Winterson* (1986), Andrea L. Harris acknowledges the narrator as "technically ungendered," but still maintains that s/he must be a lesbian, as "it is impossible to imagine Inge as anything but a lesbian" (143). Harris's argument relies on two assumptions: that radical feminists are prone to homosexuality and that heterosexual women are less predisposed to dissident politics. Emma Parker's argument also relies on similarly gendered stereotypes in her discussion of the narrator's probable lesbianism. In her article "Lost in Translation: Gender and the Figure of the Translator in Contemporary Queer Fiction," Parker juxtaposes Louise's delicate prettiness, with her "petticoats, silk clothes, and hair that looks like a swarm of butterflies" against the masculine nature of the narrator's occasionally violent, "whiskey-swilling" demeanour in order to make the claim that the narrator and Louise follow the

distinctive pattern of a lesbian butch/femme coupling (124). Parker's appropriation of the butch/femme model is a replication of the heterosexual rubric, in which the social construct of gender provides the characteristics of "oppositional" masculine/feminine desire that sustains the heteronormative narrative. Thus, her argument serves to solidify the narrator's sexual identity through the sanctioning dynamic of gender, while omitting that which either exceeds or conflates its binary logic.

For instance, Parker's reading favours the narrator's self-representation as a "*parody* of the sporting colonel... fancying a glass of sherry" (Winterson 77, emphasis my own). That s/he is a parody further implies his/her impersonation of masculinity, if we are to follow Parker's rationale. However, in her fixation on the narrator's enacted butchness, she completely disregards his/her self-avowed feminine attributes, such his/her confession that s/he enjoys composing flower arrangements. Even more problematic, Parker overlooks another important quality altogether: although s/he is most often involved with married women, the narrator also confirms several romantic relationships with men (92, 143, 152). As Susan Lanser points out in "Queering Narratology," this information immediately "erases the possibility of a strictly heterosexual male"; however, it also troubles the butch/femme dichotomy, particularly in the narrator's description of his/her ex-boyfriend, amusingly nicknamed Crazy Frank (Lanser 255). Crazy Frank, it turns out, is a failed butch: "[He] had the body of a bull, an image he intensified by wearing great gold hoops through his nipples. Unfortunately he had joined the hoops with a chain of heavy gold links. The effect should have been deeply butch but in fact rather looked like the handle of a Chanel shopping bag" (Winterson 93). That Crazy Frank does

not succeed in performing masculinity, despite his occupation of a male body, further speaks to the tenuousness of the connection between gender and biological sex.

Although the narrator reveals his/her sexual identity as bisexual, the majority of critical perspectives have nonetheless agreed that s/he is most likely a lesbian. In her work *Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Narratives* (1996), Marilyn Farwell recounts an incident which highlights what I believe to be the chief reason that the narrator is by and large regarded as a lesbian character, despite the novel's confirmation of bisexuality: the reader's knowledge of Winterson's own sexual preference. As Farwell remembers it, the judging panel for 1993's Lambda Award for Lesbian Fiction could not agree upon whether or not *Written on the Body* could be classified as a lesbian text, due to the narrator's ambiguity. Ultimately, they came to the decision that since a lesbian wrote the novel, it could be categorized under the bracket of lesbian fiction. Moreover, as Winterson's previous work includes semi-autobiographical elements, a reader familiar with her canon might be more likely to expect a narrator modeled after her own personal experiences. As Carolyn Allen rightly observes, in *Following Djuna: Women Lovers and the Erotics of Loss* (1996): "Winterson's self identification as a lesbian together with her fame as the author of *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985), an explicitly lesbian narrative about the coming out of its protagonist 'Jeanette,' drives the decision to imagine 'I' as Louise's woman lover" (49). *Written on the Body* is frequently referenced as a sequel to her first novel *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit*, and it has been argued that Winterson's own personal history influenced the story. After all, she gained notoriety for her own love affairs: most infamously, she became the subject of scandal when she romanced her one-time literary agent Pat Kavanagh, who was married at the time to

Winterson's contemporary, novelist Julian Barnes. Winterson was so bold as to dedicate *The Passion* to Kavanagh, a novel that would have given the Lambda panel no cause for confusion. Although she claimed otherwise, it was popular opinion that Winterson based the character of Louise on Kavanagh. Certainly, one would be hard-pressed to deny the physical similarities between the two red haired, pre-Raphaelite beauties.

As a result of these self-representational traces, Patricia Duncker accuses Winterson of "closeting" her narrator; as her article "Jeanette Winterson and the Aftermath of Feminism" alleges, "*Written on the Body* is a text full of lost opportunities. Winterson refuses to write an 'out' lesbian novel [...] she is losing more than she gains" (85). For Duncker, *Written on the Body* is politically void as a consequence of Winterson's refusal to speak for the entire marginalized community of women who desire women. Many of the non-fictional essays in Winterson's *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* (1995), published three years following *Written on the Body*, respond to the public's preoccupation with her personal proclivities, as well as the burden of representation foisted upon her. As she declares in "The Semiotics of Sex": "I am a writer who happens to be a lesbian. I am not a lesbian who happens to write" (110).

Her resistance notwithstanding, a good number of critics have developed an argument around Winterson's intrinsically "lesbian" style of writing. Rather than focusing their attention on the narrator's various gendered characteristics or even Winterson's own authorial self-representational tendencies, they instead employ the novel's form and composition as evidence of the narrator's lesbianism. For example, while Patricia Juliana Smith allows for the primary omission of the narrator's sex, she nonetheless insists that the implicit allusions to female genitalia throughout the text

reveal it to be a woman-centric love story. Lisa Moore contends that it is these indirect references to the female sex organ, in combination with the text's insistence "upon a deferral of fixed sexual identities," that renders the novel compatible with the genre of "lesbian postmodernism" (Moore 105). As she articulates, the narrator can be perceived as "a figure constructed of disparate body parts, desire, identities and histories, put together in a postmodern pastiche that nonetheless allows for the grand romantic tradition of lesbian cultural politics" (110). For her part, Cath Stowers concedes that *Written on the Body* promotes "mixed gendered and fluid identities," but like Smith and Moore, she still maintains that the novel "could provide insights into what a distinctly lesbian aesthetic may look like, suggesting potential figurations of an enduring battle with gender binaries" ("Journeying" 153). For Stowers, although the novel begins with a "masculinist" approach, the appearance of Louise at *Written on the Body*'s conclusion suggests an "erupting of lesbian desire," one that "detonates male paradigms, rupturing male models of travel, gender, desire, and fracturing patriarchal systems of signification" ("Erupting" 98).

Moore and Stowers in particular forge a connection between the narratological structure of *Written on the Body* and the work of self-identified "radical lesbian" Monique Wittig, as the second section pays tribute to her novel *The Lesbian Body*: both texts dismember, dissect and catalogue the body's various parts before engaging in the process of resignification, infusing corporeality with an eroticism that exceeds the monolithic purview of science. However, as its title indicates, *The Lesbian Body* is a definitively lesbian novel, and one that puts into practice Wittig's anti-essentialist philosophies. In one of her most oft-quoted postulations, Wittig declares that "the refusal

to become (or to remain) heterosexual always meant to refuse to become a man or a woman, consciously or not” (*Straight Mind* 13). Moore and Stowers both ultimately read the narrator as a logical reversal of this contention: that to refuse to become a man or woman means to refuse to become heterosexual. Wittig further proposes that only the figure of the lesbian can encompass the space of “not-man, not-woman,” as it is the only identity that exists beyond the constraints of heteronormative binaries (13). Appropriating the same reasoning followed by the above analyses, then the narrator, as most emphatically not-man and not-woman, must therefore be a lesbian. Lesbianism becomes positioned a revolutionary signifier, one which has the capacity to move beyond the limits of gender.

I find this a provocative approach, one that recognizes the novel’s fascination with gender without tacitly denying it. However, what remains unclear to me here is the actual feasibility of Wittig’s theorizing: can one extract the lesbian from the category of woman, or are these categories irrevocably bound by the visible femaleness of the body? In his work *Homos* (1995), Leo Bersani describes a lecture given by Wittig at Vassar College. In a moment both “incomparably absurd and poignant” all at once, Bersani bears reluctant witness to a member of the audience asking Wittig whether or not she possessed female genitalia (45). Wittig answered no. According to Bersani, this response “rapidly reinscribed ‘lesbian’ on her body, effectively erasing the cultural sign and stigma of ‘woman’” (45). However, as Bersani points out, the question itself nonetheless performed the work of simultaneously creating her as a woman: although Wittig may refuse the social conventions associated with her sex, she cannot control that the other will perceive her in gendered terms due to the visible markings of her body.

The same issue applies here. According to Leigh Gilmore's article "Without Names: An Anatomy of Absence in Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body*":

Both text itself and the topos of gendered and sexual identity here are 'written on the body' in such a way that the body cannot simply offer a transparently visible or unambiguously legible proof of 'identity,' but that does not remove the problem of identification, of establishing how 'we' know 'one' (a woman, a lesbian, an autobiography) when 'we' see 'one'. The body is usually thought to provide compelling, even irrefutable, proof of sex and gender, and ultimately of unique identity. The body coalesces under the name of sex. (130-131)

As Gilmore asserts, the body itself is a sign that is read. Critics who believe they have "unraveled" the mystery of the narrator's gender have done so by gathering textual evidence (signs of masculinity or femininity) that will serve to create the imagined boundaries of his/her corporeality: the narrator's possession of butch characteristics (positioned in proximity to Louise's femme-ness), Winterson's own self-identification as a lesbian, and the novel's intertextual affiliation with other works in the lesbian canon, are all signifiers of the narrator's female sex. It is the readers, then, who serve to construct, discursively, the narrator's body.

I disagree with readers who claim to have figured out the narrator's gender: to insist that s/he is a woman, or that s/he is a man is an argument that, for me, misses the point — that our reading process depends on *knowing* his/her gender in order to develop



an informed opinion on the relationship between the narrator and Louise, indicating the extent to which gender impacts our understanding of sexuality. And the fact remains: readers do not know what kind of body the narrator inhabits, despite whatever conclusions they may have drawn. However, it would be erroneous to say that *Written on the Body* evades or disregards gender, for the narrator's characterization — including the ways in which s/he desires — cannot be interpreted in ways that exist outside of gender. As Gilmore observes, the text's various gendered clues succeed in rendering the narrator's identity legible only when situated in relation to “a grid of intelligibility *already in place*” (128, emphasis in original). Although Gilmore herself does not make this connection, this grid parallels what Butler calls the “preexisting domain of cultural intelligibility”: a complex infrastructure of competing and colliding cultural knowledges about sex, gender and sexuality that will come to actuate the body's viability in the cultural realm. These discursively established frameworks operate in conjunction to sustain heteronormative ideologies; as Butler states in her 1993 work *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, the “heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical opposition between ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine,’ where these are understood as expressive attributes of ‘male’ and ‘female’” (23). However, Butler also confirms that the category of sex itself is in fact sedimented by the very gendered expressions that are said to be its effects: sex cannot be experienced in ways that go beyond conceptions of gender, and therefore, the body cannot be extricated from the social constructions that have informed our recognition of it. If corporeality can only be perceived through discourse, then these perceptions — of what it

means to possess male or female genitalia, for instance — rely on constitutions that arrive prior to the body's existence.

Although she contests the possibility of a pre-discursive body, Butler does not suggest that materiality itself does not exist; she acknowledges that the body does retain certain biological facts. However, these physical behaviours (eating, sleeping, defecation, etc.) cannot be comprehended by the subject in its organic states because bodies can “only appear, only endure, only live within the productive constraints” of the language that is available to describe them (v). As she confirms, the body can never make “itself known or legible outside of the cultural articulation in which it appears. This does not mean that culture produces the materiality of the body. It only means that the body is always given to us, and to others, in some way” (Breen and Blumenfeld 12). Importantly, the body is given to us through the binary category of gender, as language does not recognize the plurality of possibilities outside of it. From the very moment the infant enters into the world, its corporeal boundaries are materialized in compliance with what Butler calls a “heavily regulatory gendered schema” (*Bodies That Matter* v). This immediacy is demonstrated by the first proclamation of gender made in the birthing room, as the following example depicts:

Consider the medical interpellation which [...] shifts an infant from an ‘it’ to a ‘she’ or ‘he,’ and in that naming, the girl is ‘girled,’ brought into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gendered. But that ‘girling’ of the girl does not end there; on the contrary, that founding

interpellation is reiterated by various authorities and throughout various intervals of time to reenforce or contest this naturalized effect. (xvii)

In order to be recognized by the other and remain a socially viable subject in the Symbolic realm, the female must continue to cite the norm of her gender. The constancy of this “corporeally enacted femininity” allows gender to retain the appearance of naturalness when in fact, this embodiment is the incarnation of historically and culturally specific ideologies (232).

However, as Butler states in her preceding work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), gender is really more of a “doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed” (33). Butler is careful to emphasize that the subject does not “put on” this role like a mask or a costume: for her, it is not possible to arrive *before* the act of performativity itself. In *Bodies That Matter*, she redefines her conceptualization of performativity, in response to the widespread misinterpretation of her discussion in *Gender Trouble* regarding performances by drag queens: as she articulates, performance can be distinguished as a “bounded act” whereas performativity “consists in a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer’s ‘will’ or ‘choice’ (232). Unlike performance, performativity can be defined as *pre*-formativity: it forms the subject in advance of his or her entry into the Symbolic. As she further clarifies: “There is no ‘one’ who takes on a gender norm. On the contrary, this citation of the gender norm is necessary in order to qualify as a ‘one,’ to become viable as a ‘one,’ where subject-formation is dependent on the prior operation of legitimating gender norms” (232).

Even aberrations, like *Written on the Body*'s narrator, are subsumed by this gendered system, as it still corroborates the degree to which these deviating subjects have failed to comply. Butler states that "social constraints, taboos, prohibitions, threats of punishment operate in the ritualized repetition of norms, and this repetition constitutes the temporalized scene of gender construction and destabilization. There is no subject who precedes or enacts this repetition of norms" (21). As such, the narrator cannot circumvent the connotations of gender. This inescapability is demonstrated by Winterson's own response to a question regarding *Written on the Body*'s unspecified protagonist: she admits that she views the narrator as a woman, and on other occasions, as a man — but never as non-gendered (Stewart 74). In her work *The Signs of the Body*, Dorte Marie Søndergaard observes that "[i]ndividuals are read as signs of gender. No matter how confusingly the individual forms its appearance, its co-actors will never give up. They can be apprehensive, but will struggle endlessly to become able to reach a conclusive reading" (Søndergaard 105, note to 91).<sup>15</sup> Feminine/masculine signifiers may become partially immobilized when the body itself is obscured, but even then, gender remains a vigorous, definitive force.

Moreover, it is the *other*'s understanding of preexisting gender norms that frames the body's shape, engendering "a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity and surface we call matter" (*Bodies That Matter* 9). As Butler reaffirms in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997): "That one

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<sup>15</sup>As quoted in Marie Herholdt Jørgensen's *Empty Space and Points of Light: The Self, Time, Sex, and Gender in Selected Works by Jeanette Winterson*.

comes to ‘be’ through a dependency on the Other [...] must be recast in linguistic terms to the extent that the terms by which recognition is regulated, allocated, and refused are part of the larger social rituals of interpretation” (26). *Written on the Body* reveals the means through which the narrator’s identity is *regulated* and *allocated* by the audience, in concord with preexisting discursive categories, while the possibility of a genderless narrator is largely *refused*. Although its form may fluctuate, readers will nonetheless continually affix the narrator into a body that can be recognized. Thus, the body is a kind of writerly text in the Barthesian sense: the reader does not just passively gaze upon the body, but plays an active role in producing it.<sup>16</sup>

Butler borrows from Michel Foucault’s account of nineteenth century hermaphrodite Herculine Barbin’s journals in order to explore the ways in which bodies come to be shaped through the gaze of the other. Despite the ambiguity of her body, Barbin was assigned a female sex at birth. Her eventual desire for women was related — by the British legal system, no less — to the male parts of his/her body; according to the dominant heteronormative logic, Barbin’s libidinal investment in women means that s/he must actually be male and therefore masculine. In this way, his/her body was rendered meaningful, shaped and translated into a legible text relative to preexisting knowledges about sex and gender. Like *Written on the Body*’s narrator, the consolidation of Barbin’s sexual identity with the incoherent sex of his/her body demonstrates the extent to which

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<sup>16</sup> In his 1973 work *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes distinguishes between two types of texts: a readerly text and a writerly text. Readerly texts fix meaning into place, disavowing multiple interpretations. The reader is not given the choice to participate. Writerly texts, on the other hand, enlist the reader to construct the significance of the text — its meaning has not been preordained by the author.

corporeality is “fully textualized”: “the other” draws from “the juridical discourse on univocal sex” in order to assign a gender to the subject’s body (*Gender Trouble* 155).<sup>17</sup> For Butler, although it is not possible to “fully inhabit [...] the name by which one’s social identity is inaugurated and mobilized,” recognition remains a powerful force: it is “not conferred on a subject, but *forms* that subject” (*Bodies That Matter* 226, emphasis my own). Barbin’s struggle to transition successfully from female to male reveals a body in excess of these culturally mandated knowledges; suspended in the unlivable Symbolic space between the two sexes, s/he eventually committed suicide in 1868. As Barbin’s example illustrates, one can only become a viable subject in and through the recognition of these already established frameworks of knowledge. Critical readings which claim to determine the narrator’s gender, thus rendering him/her viable, have missed the mark entirely; although the category of gender cannot be evaded, the novel still works to weaken the normative discourses by exposing the ways in which the body materializes in accordance with the other’s preexisting conceptions.<sup>18</sup>

The narrator’s recollection of yet another former lover serves to undermine authorial power *of readers* by demonstrating the slipperiness of all narrative forms. In the scene, which is again permeated with gendered contradictions, the narrator dreams about

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<sup>17</sup> I would like to clarify that Butler is not adopting Lacan’s version of the gaze. Lacan views the gaze as that which reveals the screen image as coming from an imaginary projection, which in turn produces a *trompe l’oeil*. In Lacanian thought, the ways in which the other perceives the subject will never be fully known by the subject: the subject is all too consumed by its own imaginings of what the other might be seeing.

<sup>18</sup> Butler also suggests that the “ideal” norm of either femininity or masculinity is an oxymoron: it cannot exist because it differs for everyone. There is no one person in charge of the ideal. Therefore, the normalization process can never achieve the essence of the gender norm.

an ex-girlfriend named Amy who had been interested in the art of papier-mâché. Amy had constructed a yellow and green serpent with a red tongue and teeth made out of silver foil that she then positioned inside the letter-box attached to her front door. Significantly, her letter-box was located “crotch-level”; in order to ring the bell, one was forced to aim one’s genitals at the head of the snake (Winterson 41). Upon first encountering the creation, the narrator dismisses it as a joke. However, when Amy appears, dressed in her kaftan and long string of beads, she confesses that she had indeed placed a rat-trap in the jaw for the benefit of a postman that had been bothering her; she then demonstrates its real purpose by using the serpent to slice a leek clean in half. Like the scene in the men’s toilet, the dream also evokes the psychoanalytic framework of castration anxiety; however, its real locus emerges when Amy tells the narrator not to worry, for s/he has “nothing to be frightened of” (42). Amy’s remark could be construed in several ways: if the narrator has nothing to fear from this *vagina dentata* of a letter-box, this could then mean that s/he has nothing to lose and is therefore already “castrated.” On the other hand, it is also entirely possible that unlike Amy’s lewd postman, the narrator is not vulgar enough to put his penis into a letter-box and therefore, should have no need to feel concern; there is evidence throughout the novel to support the narrator’s assertion that despite his/her extensive sexual history, s/he is actually a rather “mild-mannered sort” (22).

There is yet another possibility, one that readers primarily concerned with uncovering the narrator’s gender might have overlooked altogether. It is never made clear whether or not the narrator dreamed about Amy, which prompted the memory of the letter-box incident, or if the entire episode itself comprised the contents of the dream.

After all, the narrator describes the dream as “lurid,” an appropriate word for this macabre spectacle; s/he awakens feeling “sweaty and chilled” (41). The lack of clarity is not surprising: not only is the narrator ambiguous, but s/he is also self-admittedly unreliable. Earlier in the book, s/he becomes confused about the order of events in the story s/he is telling us. S/he claims to have fed Louise “plums the colour of bruises” but then remembers that there are no ripe plums that time of year, thus causing him/her to wonder: “Have I got it wrong this hesitant chronology?” (17). A few pages later, s/he turns his/her attention directly to the reader: “I can tell by now you are wondering whether I can be trusted as a narrator” (24). This statement signals the narrator’s first acknowledgment that s/he is aware of the presence of the readers, interrupting the narrative sequence by temporarily shifting the “you” from Louise to his/her audience.

While the narrator’s self-reflexivity does subvert the authority typically invested in autodiegetic narrators by reminding the reader that this is just a story, it also points back to one of the novel’s most fundamental concerns: the deficiencies of all narratives which lay claim to their own truth effects. And certainly, the reader’s quest to unveil the narrator’s gender relies upon discursively constructed ideologies that have been formulated in much the same way as works of fiction. As Butler verifies: “If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can neither be true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity” (*Gender Trouble* 174). *Written on the Body* appears to respond to Butler’s contention: not only does the novel shine a light on long-held presumptions about gender and sexuality identity categories, but it works to uproot them altogether by emphasizing the ways in



which the body materializes as a product of culture to be both read *and* authored by the other's gendered and gendering gaze.

The critical reception of *Written on the Body* demonstrates the extent to which corporeal surfaces are constructed in relation to the other's recognition, to their citational regard, one that remains entrenched in the preexisting domain of cultural intelligibility — as the example of Herculine Barbin has demonstrated. The capacity to experience desire is produced in a similar way, as the subject's relation to its own body is formed in and through a language that has been thoroughly gendered. Butler conceives of desire as *created* within a language embedded with preexisting — albeit historically and culturally contingent — knowledges about sex and gender: a network of ideologies that “enables certain identifications and forecloses and/or disavows other identifications” (*Bodies That Matter* 3). This dynamic is impelled by “the heterosexual imperative,” an edict which I have already argued simultaneously sustains and is sustained by the corporeally inscribed opposition of masculine/feminine. The body cannot be made legible in the absence of gender; thus, even “abject” sexual practices and behaviours cannot be articulated in ways that move outside of the binaries inherent in sexual difference. As such, the subject's capacity to process desire is shaped by the same kinds of discursively orchestrated operations of gender that are complicit in the materialization of the body.

### **III. “It's the clichés that cause the trouble”: The Impossible Language of Desire**

*Written on the Body* explores the narrator's efforts to account for his/her desires without employing the fundamentally gendered category of sexual identity. The various limitations of discourse are emblemized by the novel's specific articulation of the

cliché. As the narrator discovers, s/he cannot process his/her passion for Louise without relying upon a language that predates it. Throughout the narrative, she repeats again and again that “[i]t is the clichés that cause the trouble” (Winterson 10, 21, 26, 71, 155, 180). Clichés reveal not only how technologies of power/knowledge become naturalized through reiterative accumulation, as Butler has noted, but also the ways in which they come to persuade or even actuate the very effects that they describe — as the narrator him/herself indicates when s/he asks the following question about the phrase “I love you”: “Why is it that the most unoriginal thing we can say to one another is still the thing we long to hear?” (9). In his article, “Bonded by Language: Jeanette Winterson’s *Written on the Body*,” Brian Finney makes an interesting point: that the novel is really about “the language of desire” (23). As he proposes, the crux of the narrative is not the ungendered narrator after all, but the trouble that s/he encounters in attempting to navigate the discourse of love without “falling back on language already made familiar by past use” (25). Although the narrator endeavours to express his/her love for Louise in ways that surpass the banality of convention, s/he continually finds him/herself ensnared by clichés.

The onset of the novel offers a smattering of examples of the most commonplace clichés on desire: “Love makes the world go round. Love is blind. All you need is love. Nobody ever died of a broken heart. You’ll get over it. It’ll be different when you’re married. Think of the children. Time’s a great healer. Still waiting for Mr. Right? Miss Right? and maybe all the little Rights?” (Winterson 10). Clichés cause trouble not just because they trivialize that which is potentially profound: as Sonia Front points out, their constant repetition allows for the appearance of truth or naturalness and therefore, they possess the capacity to regulate and determine how desire is experienced (Front 50).

Indeed, although these ubiquitous and therefore stale expressions or ideas are received as harmless, these prosaicisms are permeated with normative ideologies; expressions of love are saturated with them, so much that the phrase “‘I love you’ is always a quotation,” a citation of a norm already crystallized (Winterson 10). As the narrator explains, tellingly:

I want the diluted version, the sloppy language, the insignificant gestures. The saggy armchair of clichés. It's all right, millions of bottoms have sat here before me. The springs are well worn, the fabric smelly and familiar. I don't have to be frightened, look, my grandma and grandad did it, he in a stiff collar and club tie, she in white muslin straining a little at the life beneath. They did it, my parents did it, now I will do it won't I, arms outstretched, not to hold you, just to keep my balance, sleepwalking to that armchair. How happy we will be. How happy everyone will be. And they all lived happily ever after.

(10)

The conventionalization of these clichés offers a false sense of recognition, one that threatens to lull the subject into somnambulistic complacency with prevailing social expectations.

The narrator's penchant for having affairs with married women also materializes as a tired reiteration of the same melodramatic script, a fragment of which is outlined on pages 14 - 15. The character named Naked Woman tells her Lover that while she has never been sexually satisfied by her husband, she could never be so cruel or so selfish as to tell him the truth of her indiscretion; the scene ends with the Lover crying alone in the

bathroom. As the narrator laments, it is “the same story every time”: the adulterous wife returns to her husband (13). In the next passage, the narrator describes his/her former lover, a cuckolding dentist named Bathsheba. Despite her two-year liaison with the narrator, Bathsheba considered herself to be “a happily married woman” (16). Shortly after returning from a six-week journey to South Africa, she tactlessly informed the narrator that her husband Uriah had contracted a venereal disease on a previous business trip. That her husband was also unfaithful demonstrates the lack of actual commitment in their partnership. And yet, Bathsheba — whose namesake is the Biblical figure, the “daughter of the oath” who was seduced by King David while still married to her own version of Uriah — remained faithful not to Uriah, but to her “perfect public marriage” (45). For the increasingly jaded narrator, marriage is little more than a “shell” that people collect for other people to admire: they need only pledge themselves to their roles as Husband and Wife, even when the marriage itself is hollow (15).

And to the outside observer, Elgin and Louise also appeared the very epitome of the perfect heteronormative union as the accomplished Doctor and his beautiful, culturally cultivated wife; upon first meeting the couple, the narrator believed them to be “happily married and had been so for ten years” (29). Later, in the early stages of Louise’s affair with the narrator, the truth is revealed: Elgin agreed to turn a blind eye to his wife’s betrayal in exchange for her continued silence regarding his various sexual kinks and occasional employment of prostitutes. While the narrator may scorn the institution of marriage for its pretense, s/he also entered into a similar social arrangement: after one too many enactments of the aforementioned script between the Naked Woman and the speechless Lover, the narrator decided to “consider” Jacqueline, a single but dull

zoo-keeper who had fallen in love with the narrator. S/he did not reciprocate the feeling, but was longing for the security provided by the saggy armchair, and the accompanying “[l]ate night TV and snoring side by side into the millennium. Till death us do part. Anniversary darling? What’s wrong with that?” (26). Although bored by the “particular numbness” of this new life, the narrator lived peacefully with Jacqueline for a year, essentially taking advantage of her affection simply because “she had had the right shape to fit for a while” (60, 61).

The narrator’s affairs, while technically more exciting and less structured than monogamous relationships, were also inundated with preexisting ideologies concerning sexual desire, further demonstrating the inescapability of language’s various interventions. As the narrator admits: “I was trapped in a cliché every bit as redundant as my parents’ roses round the door. I was looking for the perfect coupling; the never-sleep non-stop mighty orgasm. Ecstasy without end. I was deep in the slop-bucket of romance” (21). When s/he embarks upon another affair, this time with Louise, s/he promises that things will be different this time. However, despite his/her interest in going beyond the hegemony of traditional scripts, of both the “hearth” and “quest” variety (81), s/he still depicts Louise in conventionalized terms. Early in the novel, the narrator remembers a conversation with Inge the anarcha-feminist, who had asked:

“Don’t you know that Renoir claimed he painted with his penis?”

“Don’t worry [...] He did. When he died they found nothing between his balls but an old brush.”

“You’re making it up.”

## Am I? (22)

The passage is paralleled by a conversation between the narrator and yet another ex-girlfriend named Catherine, in which the narrator declared that when Henry Miller died, he was discovered with “nothing between his legs but a ball point pen” (60). Catherine also accused the narrator of falsifying the story, to which s/he responded, “Am I?” (60). Not only is the narrator once again revealed as a potentially untrustworthy source, but s/he is also guilty of similar modes of idealization: whether s/he is male or female, the ways in which the narrator expresses his/her desire for Louise are comparable to both Renoir and Miller in that his/her representations of Louise serve to objectify her.

For example, the narrator states that if s/he were to paint a portrait of Louise, s/he would:

[...] paint her hair as a swarm of butterflies. A million Red Admirals in a halo of movement and light. There are plenty of legends about women turning into trees but are there any about trees turning into women? Is it odd to say that your lover reminds you of a tree? Well she does, it's the way her hair fills with wind and sweeps out around her head. Very often I expect her to rustle. (28-29)

Throughout the text, the narrator portrays Louise solely in relation to her femininity, a role that she appears to embody effortlessly: according to the narrator, “Louise charmed everyone. She brought [Elgin] attention, contacts, she cooked, she decorated, she was clever and above all, she was beautiful” (35). Even in the narrator's own estimation,

Louise's beauty is privileged "above all." For her part, Louise appears to be aware of her own value as a possession. When speaking to the narrator about Elgin, she states: "He knew I was beautiful, that I was a prize. He wanted something showy but not vulgar. He wanted to go up to the world and say, 'Look what I've got'" (34). Although the narrator strives to differ from Louise's pedantic, controlling husband, s/he also seems just as proud to have Louise on his/her arm as s/he discerns with great interest the ways in which others gaze upon his/her beloved: "During the interval of *The Marriage of Figaro*, I realized how often other people looked at Louise [...] The ties twitched when Louise walked by and the suits pulled themselves in a little" (32).

When the narrator's descriptions of Louise are juxtaposed against recollections of his/her other lovers, the import of her delicate beauty is made all the more apparent. For instance, the narrator's impression of Jacqueline is relayed in straightforward, brusque statements: "She told me all about the problems facing the lemurs in the Zoo. She brought her own mop. She worked nine to five Monday to Friday, drove a Mini and got her reading from book clubs. She exhibited no fetishes, foibles, freak-outs or fuck-ups" (26). The narrator spends little time in communicating Jacqueline's physical appearance, only complaining at one point that she smelled like a zoo (40). When Jacqueline asked if the narrator is seeing Louise, the narrator thinks: "I see her when I look at you. I see her when I don't look at you" (56). Jacqueline is not to be gazed upon with admiration; in fact, that narrator does not see her at all. When the narrator finally ends their relationship, Jacqueline betrays her meek persona with a volatile reaction: she trashes the narrator's flat, smearing excrement on the bathroom door and mirror, and later, physically attacks Louise with a broken shard of glass. The narrator admits, in that moment: "I wanted to

wipe her away. I wanted to blot out her blazing stupid face” (86). For him/her, Jacqueline should cease to exist at all in the presence of Louise’s idealized femininity.

Even worse than Jacqueline’s invisible plainness, perhaps, is Gail’s appearance, which leaves the narrator “horror-struck” (147). S/he describes Gail, the morning after spending the evening together: “She looked like a prime cut of streaky bacon. Her eyes were small and red from the night before. Her hair stuck out like a straw rick” (147). Gail’s unwanted sexual advances, the ways in which she mentioned the narrator’s light and nimble fingers, are enough to send the narrator “to the toilet just ahead of his/her vomit” (148). His/her physical reaction to Gail’s obesity and general unsightliness is reflective of attitudes towards women who fail at being the right amount of feminine; they become abject, socially ostracized, the object of revulsion rather than desire. Both the narrator’s disgust and subsequent guilt about his/her disgust can be attributed to the policing effects of gender’s regulatory norms. Similarly, the reasons for which the narrator admires Louise cannot be disentangled from Butler’s preexisting domain of cultural intelligibility: in contradistinction to both Jacqueline and Gail, Louise was feminine enough to earn her position as object of the narrator’s gaze — of the other’s gaze. Here the narrator participates in a patriarchal economy that, whether or not the narrator is male or female, fetishizes female bodies. Tellingly, when the narrator admits the reason s/he took so long to break up with Inge, despite their frequent clashing over politics and Inge’s various idiosyncrasies: “Why didn’t I dump Inge and head for a Singles bar? The answer is her breasts” (24).

The narrator is often unaware of his/her objectification, and yet, the reader’s impression of Louise is formed entirely though his/her visual consumption of her body;



s/he is always looking at Louise. Take for example, the novel's introduction to Louise, in a memory conveyed by the narrator: s/he was watching Louise swimming naked in a river, oblivious to the presence of a nearby family:

Mum saw you go in and heaved herself off a stripey fold-out camping stool.  
“You ought to be ashamed of yourself. There's families out here.”

You laughed and waved, your body bright beneath the clear green water, its shape fitting your shape, holding to you, faithful to you. You turned on your back and your nipples grazed the surface of the river and the river decorated your hair with beads. You are creamy but for your hair your red hair that flanks you on either side. (11)

For Susann Cockal, this early scene sets the stage for the novel's overall thematic stance: that dominant understandings of corporeality are shaped by the force of discourse, with all of its preexisting cultural trappings. In her article “Expression in a Diffuse Landscape: Contexts for Jeanette Winterson's Lyricism,” Cockal observes that “what we know about [Louise's] body is its impact on its surroundings and on the narrator. Narrative style cups Louise and holds her much as the river holds her, forming around her body” (18). Here, the reader sees Louise's body through two sets of eyes: the conservative Mum, “sagging over the thermos” and the narrator's version, which attains a privileged quality as a result of his/her self-appointed positioning at the centre of his/her own story as the “I” (Winterson 11). The problem that comes to the surface then, is what kind of narrative

styles does the narrator's reading and writerly gaze, as the beloved's "other," draw upon to materialize the borders of Louise's body?

Although the narrator insists that s/he "want[s] to make something entirely new," s/he has few options but to follow the scripts that preexist his/her romantic interest in Louise: the superseding discourses of love are structured in relation to the prevailing hierarchies (108). Intertextual references dominate the narrator's descriptions of Louise, highlighting the pervasiveness of exterior influences. Throughout the novel, the narrator makes both direct and indirect references to such texts as *Madame Bovary*, *Anna Karenina*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Song of Solomon* and *Jane Eyre*, to name just a few. Even the narrator's introduction of Louise, floating in the river with her red hair flanking her pale skin, calls to mind John Everett Millais's painting of *Hamlet's* drowned Ophelia. In addition to the arts, the narrator also integrates different fields of knowledge into his/her recollections of Louise, such as marine biology: "She opens and shuts like a sea anemone. She's refilled each day with fresh tides of longing" (73); meteorology: "Louise, stars in your eyes, my own constellation" (187); and molecular chemistry: "We touch one another, bond and break, drift away on force-fields we don't understand. Docking here inside Louise may heal a damaged heart, on the other hand it may be an expensively ruinous experiment" (62). The narrator attempts to conceive of his/her love for Louise in different ways by adopting discourses that are not usually appropriated to discuss desire; however, s/he is still limited by a language that has arrived before him/her, one that has already transformed "I love you" into a quotation.

As Jennifer Gustar observes in her article, "The Body of Romance: Citation and Mourning in *Written on the Body*," even though the narrator wishes to escape what Butler

calls the “citational legacy” of clichés, this legacy nonetheless “haunts us as we speak” (26). Gustar’s argument borrows from Catherine Belsey’s assertion, that “[l]overs speak, and yet in doing so they are spoken by a language that precedes them, that is not at their disposal, under their control” (Belsey 84). Late in the novel, when s/he is unable to find Louise, the narrator asks Gail if it was possible that s/he had simply invented her, to which his/her similarly lovelorn colleague responds: “No, but you tried to. [...] She wasn’t yours for the making” (Winterson 189). In Gail’s opinion, the problem with the narrator is that s/he wants to live in a novel but as she puts it, in her own succinct terms: “this isn’t *War and Peace*, honey, it’s Yorkshire” (160). Here, Gail turns out to be as “right” as her last name, as she pinpoints the root of the narrator’s problem: his/her comprehension of love had derived from narratives that have long determined what the appropriate (and appropriately gendered) responses to desire might be. Moreover, in seeking recognition from the other, the subject must inevitably mediate its desires in correlation to the domain of cultural intelligibility.

When Louise surprises the narrator with her announcement that she intends to leave her marriage, she succeeds in breaking from the traditional script previously outlined by the narrator in the dialogue between the Naked Woman and the Crying Lover in the Bathroom. Louise begs the narrator to do the same, telling him/her: “I want you to come to me without a past. Those lines you’ve learned, forget them” (54). Instead, the narrator decides to leave, preferring not to think of his/her actions as “running out” on her: “That doesn’t sound like the heroics I’d had in mind. Hadn’t I sacrificed myself for her? Offered my life for her life? [...] I had to leave. She would have died for my sake. Wasn’t it better for me to live a half life for her sake?” (159). Too late does s/he come to

realize that this decision was persuaded by the cliché of the gallant knight in shining amour who rescues the pretty damsel in distress. Indeed, the narrator's resolve to save Louise complies directly with conventional romantic standards — but Louise was never a damsel in distress (159). Here, we return to de Lauretis's statement, that before the gendered dynamics embedded in the language of desire can be overcome, the body must first be reconfigured "beyond its pre-coded, conventional representations" (de Lauretis 150). In the novel's second section, the narrator attempts to rewrite Louise's body, to reclaim it from the annals of phallogentric, heteronormative discourses. However, as s/he discovers, although language can be taken up in ways that undermine its own authority, a paradox remains: in her poem "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children," Adrienne Rich describes it best: "this is the oppressor's language / yet i need it to talk to you" (18).

#### **IV. Rewritten on the Body: Author(izing) the Other**

In her overview of *Written on the Body*, Susana Onega Jaén describes the narrator's battle with Elgin for possession of Louise's body in patriarchal terms: "While Elgin behaves as the senexiratus of Plautinian comedy, the narrator assumes the role of all-enduring and romantic lover, a melancholy Werther, ready to sacrifice himself for the good of his beloved" (Jaén 124). In refusing to permit Louise agency, the narrator further solidifies her as an object. And although the narrator's eventual revisions of Louise attempt to recover her body from the annals of dominant androcentric discourses, s/he only serves to reinstate the beloved as other, as object to be held up by the male gaze. However, the novel's experimental middle section is not without its subversive elements. Here, the linearity of the plot is brusquely interrupted as the narrator begins the project of

dismembering and excavating both the anatomical textbooks and Louise's body into four pieces: The Cells, Tissues, Systems and Cavities; The Skin; The Skeleton; and The Special Senses. A textbook definition of each component is offered in authoritative block letters, and then followed by the narrator's own account of Louise: *her* cells, tissues, systems and cavities; *her* skin; *her* skeleton; *her* special senses. The narrator's deeply personal rewritings challenge the authority invested in the field of medicine, a domain embodied by Elgin's profession as an oncologist.

It is not incidental that the discourse the narrator aims to reinscribe is a scientific one: according to Butler, science works "in the service of other political and social interests" in its production of "ostensibly natural facts of sex" (*Gender Trouble* 7). Elgin also abuses the authority invested in science to serve his own interests, as Gregory Rubinson observes in article "Body Languages: Scientific and Aesthetic Discourses in Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body*":

[Elgin] uses his alliance with and access to medical technology to stake his claim to Louise's body and position himself as the only person authorized to speak for her. It is a measure of the predominance of medical discourse that the promise of Louise's bodily salvation persuades the narrator to cede his/her claim to Louise, his/her assumption being that a diseased body automatically belongs to science. (222)

In terms of treating leukemia, the discourse of medicine is invested with totalizing power/knowledge; the narrator believes that Louise's best chance of survival lies within it

and therefore, complies with Elgin's demands. The institution of medical research is both calculated and impartial all at once, and this sense of detachment is symbolized by Elgin's oft-played computer games in which he is able to strategize and execute simulated surgeries while remaining at a physical remove from the patient. The narrator finds a similar form of disconnection in the anatomical textbooks that s/he devours in Louise's absence; although s/he hopes to rediscover her lost body in them, s/he only finds a discourse that is stark and alienating in its impersonality, a "dispassionate view of the sucking, sweating, greedy, defecating self" (Winterson 111). The narrator's revisions offer a comparatively tender version of the beloved's body, one that exceeds the privileged scientific perspective; s/he promises to dissect the clinical discourse in order to find "a love-poem to Louise" (111).

As the narrator comes to realize, doctors are no better-equipped to write about Louise's body than s/he, as they appear unable to comprehend its constant mutations:

Metastasis is the problem. Cancer has a unique property: it can travel from the site of origin to distant tissues. It is usually metastasis which kills the patient and the biology of metastasis is what doctors don't understand. They are not conditioned to understand it. In doctor-think the body is a series of bits to be isolated and treated as necessary, that the body in its very disease may act as a whole is an upsetting concept. (175)

Louise's body exists in a perpetual state of motion; even Elgin admits that he does not know "why it happens or how to stop it" (105). The cancerous body cannot be so easily

classified by medical partitioning or blazons, and it cannot be contained by scientific definitions. And yet, despite the limitations of their knowledge, “doctor-think” remains the leading authority on the body. For his/her part, the narrator chooses to embrace Louise’s lived reality, by adopting a poetic discourse that is far more representative of her present condition than the medical textbooks: the words here are slippery, evasive, accelerated. Instead of conceiving the scapula as “a flat triangular shaped bone which lies on the posterior wall superficial to the ribs and separated from them by muscle,” for instance, the narrator reinscribes the beloved’s shoulder blades as “great gold wings cut away from the sun” (131); building upon this image, s/he then likens Louise to “the winged horse Pegasus who would not be saddled” (131). His/her substitutive descriptions are not fixed into place, but offer a sense of mobility and continued metamorphosis. Poetry plays up the instability of language, demonstrating the ways in which meaning can slip. Like the cancer in Louise’s blood, the words here have “turned bandit. They don’t obey the rules” (115). These dense, metaphoric revisions provide an alternative viewpoint of Louise’s body, as transformative and fluid; the narrator translates the textbooks into a different kind of language, one that is transfused with a rich sensuality.<sup>19</sup>

These revisions also indicate the contingency of the junction between language and knowledge. For despite their ascertaining of the body’s various functions and operations, what can these men of science possibly claim to know about Louise’s hair,

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<sup>19</sup> This description of a transformative, fluid body is reflective of the Deleuzian “Body without Organs” (BwO). The BwO becomes a central point of focus in my second chapter’s analysis of *Gut Symmetries* (1997), which continues the arc of body-as-text by exploring how deterritorialization impacts how bodies are read.

her eyes, her clavicle? In his/her translation of “The Cells, Tissues, Systems and Cavities of the Body,” the narrator first provides the anatomical textbook’s sparse, impassive definition of the cranial cavity: “For descriptive purposes the human body is separated into cavities. The cranial cavity contains the brain. Its boundaries are formed by the bones of the skull” (119). S/he then offers his/her own comparatively familiar depiction of Louise: “I know how your hair tumbles from its chignon and washes your shoulders in light. I know the calcium of your cheekbones. I know the weapon of your jaw” (120). The repetition of the clause “I know” implies the narrator’s intimate knowledge of Louise’s body, but it also potentially — and problematically — transposes her physical characteristics into factual evidence. Once again, Louise is reduced to an object capable of the narrator’s apprehension. As Rubinson points out, these anatomical revisions attempt to capture and colonize Louise, but in a different way:

Louise’s status as an independent person is increasingly jeopardized as the narrator constructs her in a plethora of metaphoric terms. [...] As the metaphors proliferate, Louise becomes almost grotesque. Furthermore, although invoking Louise complexly, the narrator never construes her as a subject in her own right. Despite, or because of, all the transcendent images she inspires, she is an object for worship, and the narrator inscribes her in such a multitude of discourses and metaphors that Louise seems almost imprisoned in them. (Rubinson 226)



Despite his/her attempts to do otherwise, the narrator fails to subvert the inscriptions written onto Louise's body. Instead, s/he ends up engaging in the same masculine enterprise as both Elgin and the scientific texts that he exploits.

In the same passage on the cranial cavity, the narrator states that s/he is "the archeologists of tombs," asking Louise (though she is not present to give her consent) to allow him/her to penetrate her (Winterson 119):

I would devote my life to marking your passageways, the entrances and exits of that impressive mausoleum, your body. [...] I can't enter you in clothes that won't show the stains, my hands full of tools to record and analyze. If I come to you with a torch and a notebook, a medical diagram and a cloth to wipe up the mess, I'll have you bagged neat and tidy. I'll store you in plastic like chicken livers. Womb, gut, brain, neatly labelled and returned. Is that how to know another human being? (119)

The image of the narrator as an explorer who will devote his/her life to "marking" the other's body evokes the image of the early male settler, eager to register his existence on a newly discovered terrain. However, s/he also questions this need to compartmentalize the body, wondering: "Is that what it takes to know someone?" The final sentence of this passage disrupts the ones that came before it, for even the most thorough investigations of the body's various parts and their functions will always inevitably fail to be completely comprehensive.

The narrator's vocation as a Russian-to-English translator is a fitting one: Russian language is structurally different, and many of its words have no English equivalent. Therefore, like Louise's constantly shifting body, Russian prosody exceeds the signifiers imposed upon it; in order to preserve the essence of the text's meaning, the narrator must rely on his/her own personalized interpretation of its context. This reveals the extent to which the knowledges that comprise these labels are provisional, which can also be perceived in his/her translations of Louise's body; the narrator's version of "what it takes to know someone" enters into competition with the definitions offered by the anatomical textbooks. Here, *Written on the Body* highlights not only the objectivity of knowledge, but also the limitations of its jurisdictions. There is never one all-encompassing account of "truth" upon which a stable identity can be established. Nonetheless, as I have already noted, the narrator unwittingly participates in the same prohibitive dynamics as Elgin — his/her reinscriptions only further inflict his/her version of meaning onto the beloved's body, reifying her status as an object. Although it has been undercut, the dominant language has not been undone.

The narrator does, however, differ from Elgin in the most significant of ways for although s/he does wish to possess Louise, s/he also wants to be possessed by her, subtending the division between subject and object. And when it comes to subverting the hierarchies inherent in the very structuring of the Symbolic, the narrator achieves the most success in his/her revisory descriptions of Louise's skin, as we will soon see. *Written on the Body's* third section, set in the narrator's present time, also focuses more on skin, problematizing the conception of skin as mere surface by reconciling the ways in which skin becomes meaningful through the other's writerly gaze. Although the novel, up

to this point, has succeeded in developing a strategy that forces readers to recognize how performative citations function, the narrator fails to overcome or exceed gender norms — more specifically, the gender norms of 1990s discourse. However, in its final stages, the plot becomes increasingly strange, and this is where identity categories really begin to unravel. Although the text throughout demands that readers acknowledge that culturally determined markings become materialized on and through the surface of the skin, it also presents different ways of thinking about skin as malleable, modifiable, permeable: qualities which call into question the apparent fixity of these inscriptions. The next aspect of my argument considers how *Written on the Body* breaks down materiality as a product of discourse — though never undermining the actuality of the body — by focusing on the virtuality of experience: that which is inexpressible in language and cannot be processed adequately from within the order of the signifier.

## **V. The Skin We're In and the Measure of Loss**

Prior to beginning his/her project of rewriting anatomical textbooks, the narrator describes his/her initial perception of Louise's body, now under the influence of cancer: "You are stretching slowly slowly, getting longer, your joints are slipping away from their usual places. There is no connection between your shoulder and your arm. You will break up bone by bone, fractured from who you are, you are drifting away now, the centre cannot hold" (100-1). Situated in direct relation to Louise, the narrator describes his/her own body as also "slither[ing] away" (101). S/he expresses a sense of disintegration that corresponds in tandem with Louise's experience; even though their circumstances differ radically, the narrator's psychic image of his/her own body is still

impacted by Louise's rapidly transfiguring one. In his/her rewriting of the scientific definition of the epidermis, the narrator muses on his/her memory of the beloved:

There's a doctor's textbook fallen open on the floor. To me it's a book of spells. Skin, it says. Skin.

You were milk-white and fresh to drink. Will your skin discolour, its brightness blurring? Will your neck and spleen distend? Will the rigorous contours of your stomach swell under an infertile load? It may be so and the private drawing I keep of you will be a poor reproduction then. It may be so but if you are broken then so am I. (124-5)

In this passage, Louise's skin is the site upon which trauma is registered, where discoloration and dullness renders her cancer into visibility. At the same time, the disease also perceptibly mutates the body's surface: Louise begins to blur, distend, swell. The centre does not hold; there is nothing to anchor Louise back into herself, to keep her from slipping out. Simultaneously, there is nothing to keep the narrator from slipping in. That his/her own "broken" body reflects Louise's current condition intimates a recognition of the other in the self.

As we have seen, the ambiguity of the narrator draws attention to the ways in which preexisting notions regarding the body and its desires are applied to the corporeal surface by the other, which in the case of *Written on the Body* is a role enacted not only by the characters in the text, but also by the reader. Rather than a biologically determined property, his/her skin becomes envisaged as a writing-pad upon which social codes are

imposed and policed. However, although skin may be the parchment upon which Symbolic regulations are imprinted, these inscriptions are subject to change depending on the “other’s” gaze; therefore, the body is never fixed rigidly into place, but recalibrates continually according to the other. As the narrator’s ultimate other, Louise draws *herself* onto the narrator’s skin. The narrator muses:

Articulacy of fingers, the language of the deaf and dumb, signing on the body body longing. Who taught you to write in blood on my back? Who taught you to use your hands as branding irons? You have scored your name into my shoulders, referenced me with your mark. The pads of your fingers have become printing blocks, you tap a message on to my skin, tap meaning into my body. Your morse code interferes with my heart beat. I had a steady heart before I met you, I relied upon it, it had seen active service and grown strong. Now you alter its pace with your own rhythm, you play upon me, drumming me taut. (89)

Here, the narrator’s flesh is also palimpsestic, and its inscriptions are resignified by the Louise’s touch, which taps not only messages *onto* the skin, but meaning *into* his/her body. Louise transgresses the boundaries of his/her body, becoming internalized. As Louise scores herself both onto and into the narrator, skin is no longer that which serves as the border separating the self from the not-self. In another passage, the narrator states: “Your hand prints are all over my body. Your flesh is my flesh. You deciphered me and now I am plain to read. The message is a simple one; my love for you” (106). Like

*Written on the Body*'s writerly reader, she has translated his/her body. However, she has also been given permission: the narrator invites her to cross his/her boundary so that they can make "one nation" (20). The binary logic of self/other as wholly separate entities is nullified by the dissolution of the border that distinguishes outside from in.

In her article, "'Speculating Carnally' or, Some Reflections on the Modernist Body," Evelyn Ender posits that *Written on the Body*

chooses to articulate the issue of otherness, of the other as body and as subject, in writing about skin and flesh. "SKIN" is one of the novel's most poetic and metaphysical chapters (121-25): a meditation on death, an elegy to the beloved, a lyrical rendering of what it feels like to touch "the shell laid out before her" (123). The attention given to the skin or flesh as what separates the inner from the outer enables an epistemological shift in the understanding of the other. This epistemology determines a new semantics of the subject that undoes the old opposition between outside/inside [... and] self/other. (120)

The body's largest and most visible organ, skin encloses the subject's interior depth, which is comprised of both conscious and unconscious material, within a corporeal container. As Ender notes, skin thus becomes established as the border that keeps the other "out" (120). For the potential intrusion of the other poses a threat to the architecture of what Didier Anzieu has called the subject's "skin ego," following Freud's explicit naming of the ego as "surface" and "bodily" in *The Ego and the Id* (1923): as the psychoanalytic framework testifies, the subject can only exist in the Symbolic realm as an

entirely separate self. This separation is what instigates the narrator to wonder, more than once, why “the is measure of love loss?” (Winterson 9, 39). That the novel begins with this contemplation is significant: throughout the story, the narrator is being haunted by the self/other split that works to sever him/her from the love object Louise.

The ability to perceive oneself as a distinct “I” differentiated from the other’s “you” relies upon the formation of this “skin ego,” in which the epidermis becomes the “sheet or interface” upon which the ego projects psychic material. In the Lacanian framework, the materialization of this ego coincides with the infant’s entry into the Symbolic order of language and culture, and the concurrent alienation that is experienced when the infant first cognizes its imago in the mirror.<sup>20</sup> As Lacan explains, this reflection *is* “the other that the subject first identifies himself and even experiences himself” (*Écrits* 148). Before this initiation transpires, the infant exists in a state of chora: what Julia Kristeva, in her 1985 work *Revolution in Poetic Language*, designates as a non-expressive sense of wholeness, in which the child’s desires are satisfied by its union with

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<sup>20</sup> The subject’s inauguration into the Symbolic occurs by way of what Lacan calls the Mirror Stage: the movement from this Imaginary realm to the order of the Symbolic is marked by the instance that an infant, typically anywhere from the age of six to eighteen months, “assumes” its “imago” in the mirror, a crucial stage in the initial development of the ego (Lacan 76). Although at this point the infant is still “trapped in his motor impotence and nursling dependence,” its “I” is precipitated in its image “in a primordial form, prior to being objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as a subject” (76). In this way, the image works as a *Gestalt*: the infant identifies so strongly whatever seemingly coherent and functioning image it perceives (as the image may be something other than its own reflection), mobilizing an identity organized around this anticipated “maturation of power” (76). It is not really a misrecognition, rather than a “miscognition” as it is the infant’s first cognition. According to Lacan, the specular *I* becomes the social *I* (subject) (79); the original imago is preserved as the “Ideal-I” to which the subject will endlessly, though unconsciously, struggle to embody.

not only the mother but also the space that encircles it (26). As she delineates: “Although our theoretical description of the *chora* is itself part of the discourse of representation that offers it as evidence, the *chora*, as rupture and fruitlessly articulations (rhythm), precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality and temporality” (26, emphasis in original). Although the *chora* remains an unconscious aspect of subjectivity, prior to ego formation the polymorphously perverse infant cannot differentiate between its own skin and the flesh belonging to the object; there is no separation between self/other, or to appropriate *Written on the Body*’s vernacular, I/you. Lacan designates this space the register of the Imaginary, in which the infant perceives its general surroundings as an extension of its own fragmented body — which appears for the infant to be a cacophony of limbs, a body in pieces (*le corps morcelé*) (*Écrits* 78). Therefore, exterior objects are infused with a sense of sameness for the undiscerning infant, most evident in the Freudian conceptualization of the oral phase during which the infant cannot distinguish between its sucking mouth and the mother’s breast (Freud *Three Essays* 65).<sup>21</sup> In order to enter into the Symbolic realm, the infant must come to position itself as separate from the other.

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<sup>21</sup> As Freud further clarifies, in the third edition of his 1906 work *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (translated by Dr. A.A. Brill in 2001), in the oral stage “sexual activity is not yet separated from the taking of nourishment, and the contrasts with the same not yet differentiated. The object of the one activity is also that of the other, the sexual aim consists in the incorporating into one’s own body of the object, it is the prototype of that which later plays such an important psychic role as identification” (65).



Concurrently, to become a speaking subject of the Symbolic (the big “o” Other), the infant has to acquire an identity recognizable within the grid of cultural intelligibility.<sup>22</sup>

To obtain this sense of self, the infant must first believe that it is now a stable and coordinated being; however, this “Ideal-I” that has no lack is a mere compensation for the loss of the unity that the now-subject once perceived with its exterior surroundings. The subject is able to conceal this painful loss through the creation of what Lacan terms its “armor of an alienating identity that will mark his entire mental development its rigid structures” (*Écrits* 78): one of which, of course, is the illusion that the subject’s psychic interiority is bounded by the skin, sealed in and protected. Although Lacan privileges language over the body and although Anzieu favoured the Freudian model, this conception of “armor” nonetheless bears resemblance to the skin ego, which Jay Prosser, in his *Second Skins: the Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (1998), further outlines as taking “the body’s physical skin as the primary organ underlying the formation of the ego, its handling, its touching, its holding — our experience of its feel — individualizing our psychic functioning, quite crucially making us who we are [...] It holds each of us together, quite literally contains us, protects us, keeps us discrete” (65). In the very moment that the boundaries separating interiority from exteriority become established, the binary between self and other is also erected; as the location of exposure and connection, skin is now where the ego meets and converges with the other (Ahmed et al 2). Although the fluid immediacy of the Imaginary is relinquished in favour of mediation

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<sup>22</sup> Although I have here described the mirror stage as a developmental “from-to” process, it is important to note that the relations between the Imaginary and the Symbolic are always interweaving.

by a Symbolic that will now govern and reconcile the child's various experiences, its operations are nonetheless propelled by the Imaginary, for the inexpressible desire for the unity that was once experienced in a space that is now relegated to the "censored chapter" of unconscious drives (*Écrits* 215). It is the haunting of this original loss that instigates and drives our desire for the other, which *Written on the Body*'s narrator acknowledges with his/her reappearing observation, that love is measured by loss (9, 39). Importantly, however, the narrator is not only acknowledging this inclination, but asking "why" this is the case.

Butler makes a provocative claim when she asserts that this repression or "loss" of the primordial desire is "an occasion for the consolidation of juridical structures; desire is manufactured and forbidden as a ritual Symbolic gesture whereby the juridical model exercises and consolidates its own power" (*Gender Trouble* 96). The "ritual" results in the normalization and subsequent concretization of hierarchically gendered orderings, orderings that are imbued with various power dynamics. In his reading of Lacanian psychoanalysis, Dean appears to hold a similar view, as his work *Beyond Sexuality* explores how language impacts not only the body, but also the ways in which the subject will process its desires:

Broadly speaking, when language hits the body its impact produces not merely the subject of the signifier but also the subject of desire. The symbolic order has a ripple-like effect on human subjects. Think of the symbolic order as a net setting over the corporeal form, penetrating the body, [...] and slicing the body into erotogenic zones by drawing bodily jouissance into pools at its corporeal

borders. This process does not happen in a uniform way because there is no single symbolic order that we all inhabit. We move through different, interwoven discourse networks that affect people's bodies unevenly; nevertheless, it should be borne in mind that this process of creating desire begins very early in life, well before anatomical maturation, and usually within familial discourse networks. (197)

Here, Dean conceivably aligns himself with Butler's central argument, that preexisting social frameworks shape the body's materialization in ways that depend upon varying historical and cultural contexts. As he states, "the process of disembodiment that produces the subject and its cause of desire effectively splits (i) the body and subject; (ii) subject and object, thereby constituting desire and the impossibility of satisfaction; (iii) subject against itself as a consequence of the multiple object-causes of desire that support or contingently ground the subject" (201). However, when it comes to the multiple object-causes of desire, Dean departs from Butler with his insistence that it is not quite so "manufactured" as she believes it to be.

In fact, he argues that her theorization of desire is essentially founded upon a misreading of one of Lacan's most important contentions: that "desire is the mark of the iron on the shoulder of the speaking subject" (*Écrits* 265). According to Dean, this statement does not suggest that desire is a mere product or effect of preexisting social mores, as Butler argues. Indeed, while Lacan does affirm that it is impossible for a subject to express or conceptualize desire without language, he did not view desire itself as wholly linguistic. Although its expressions are indeed routed through (and inhibited

by) discursive constructions, as illustrated in *Written on the Body* by the narrator's inability to convey his/her desire for Louise outside of preexisting discourses on desire, desire is actually much more than the language that attempts to describe it: it is also "the excess resulting from the articulation of need in symbolic form" — which is, in other words, the *jouissance* that is drawn into pools at the corporeal surface by the Symbolic (Dean *Beyond Sexuality* 197).

Dean thus takes issue with Butler's articulation of the relationship between bodies, language and desire; as he maintains, the problem that arises as a result of Butler's attempts to merge Foucauldian thought with Lacanian psychoanalysis is that bodies become "so completely rhetoricalized that paradoxically they are devoid of desire" (187). In his opinion, Butler conflates the ego with the formation of subjectivity, and in doing so, misinterprets the crux of Lacan's theorizations, which "recogniz[es] in the ego a dangerously aggressive façade ('the projection of a surface') that obscures the subject of desire and his or her suffering" (31). For Dean, the origins of desire have very little to do with the ego at all, but is instead activated — and simultaneously sustained — by what Lacan calls the *objet petit a* (*a* = *autre*), which is "a term intended to designate the remainder or excess that keeps self-identity forever out of reach, thus maintaining desire" (250).

The *objet petit a* is the result of the first internal cut, which Dean is careful to separate from a theory of castration anxiety that links subject formation to the phallogentric hierarchy of sexed bodies. Rather, *objet petit a* is "produced by cutting something from the subject [...] the 'extraction' of some element from a domain that thereby constitutes that domain and indeed, 'gives it its frame'" (58). *Objet petit a* has no

relation to gender at all, as its impact on the body arrives *before* the foundation of ego and the Symbolic inscriptions of sexual difference: it is the loss that measures love, for the narrator — the loss of unity, the desire to return to oneness. The cause of desire rather than its aim, *objet petit a* is located in the “excess of meaning called the unconscious,” in the jouissance of what remains unspeakable (194, 250). That the subject will come to experience what Dean calls “body mutters” — unsignifiable symptoms that “obliquely indicate desire in the form a failure in the Other’s discourse” — is indicative of a lack, not just in the subject but in the Other as well (202). Body mutters vocalize desire “as something in language but not itself linguistic” (203). As it stands, it is the subject’s inability to negotiate or satisfy these mutters in culturally legible ways that incites and spurs on desire, which means that desire is therefore “*predicated on the incommensurability of the body and subject*” (200, emphasis in original).

Although Butler’s contribution to queer theory cannot be denied, Dean’s appraisal of her work reveals a critical oversight on her part. A distinction needs to be made: signifiable expressions of desire come to be prompted or shaped by the regulatory imperatives of the dominant discourses, through the manufacturing of culturally recognizable forms of *sexual identity*. That said, sexual identity does not fully encompass desire but instead attempts to bracket or corral desire into recognizable or familiar categories. Dean argues that Butler fails to distinguish the other from Other, or the *objet petit a* from the realm of the Symbolic. However, this is where I would like to partly reconcile their diverging arguments: for when desire emerges, it is mediated from within the realm of cultural intelligibility. That is not to say that there are not forms of desire that are not subjectively intelligible; however, once desire achieves a signifier, the subject

recognizes that signifier from their position within the Symbolic. For instance, although *Written on the Body*'s reader is not granted access to the economy of visibility that the self/other binary requires, the narrator's various body mutters still would manifest themselves visibly on the surface of the body: these are, in large part, still processed by the other according to the cultural predicts set in place — which is precisely why the reader is so keen to glean the reaction of other characters to the narrator's appearance. The only way to alter the preexisting normative connotations through which these body mutters are conceived is through the process of *resignification*, a process that Dean will label "psychotic" (206).

To be clear, Lacanian psychoanalysis — and by proxy, Dean himself — does not view psychosis in the same negative or pejorative sense as the mainstream medical discourses on mental health. Rather, psychosis is depicted as the "foreclosure" of the anchoring signifier designated by Lacan as the Name-of-the-Father: either the inability to attach the proper meaning to a sign, or fix the meaning far too stringently.<sup>23</sup> In such an instance, the Symbolic not only loses its grip on the subject but also on the way the subject perceives its materiality: as bounding its ego in a casing of skin.

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<sup>23</sup> Name-of-the-Father translates to *Nom du Père*, which also refers to the "No" of the Father and thus connects entry into language/culture to the Oedipal complex. The infant's initial fantasies for the mother are symbolically castrated, as it must submit to the authority represented by the father's prohibitive function. In this way, the Name-of-the-Father holds at least the functions of Freud's superego.

## VI. Producing Desire: Psychotic, Melancholic Fantasy

As Lacan explains in his seminar “Presentations on Psychological Causality,” in normative cases of ego development, “[h]abit and forgetting are signs of the integration of a psychological relation into the organism; an entire situation, having become both unknown to the subject and as essential as his body to him, is normally manifested in effects that are consistent with the sense he has of his body” (*Écrits* 148-9). In addition to the largely unconscious actions of habit and repression, there are a host of complex defense mechanisms that are designed to protect the subject from psychotic collapse, that function to redeposit the ego back into the body-container. Elgin, for instance, displays masochistic tendencies in the early years of his marriage to Louise, begging her to “scaffold his penis with bulldog clips” (Winterson 34). As Bersani notes, masochists exhibit a “potentially dysfunctional rejection of pain. For pain may be a signal that tells us to flee a stimulus threatening to the body’s or the ego’s integrity — to their coherence as securely delimited, individuating entities. Pain is the organism’s protection against self-dissolution” (Bersani 94). For Elgin, the experience of pain, when situated under his direction and control, presents a safe way to reinsert the ego back into the corporeal envelope of his body. His skin proves a barrier that protects him from the contaminating threat of his wife, a threat that also extends to physical contact with his patients.

Elgin’s masochism extends to other perversities, as he engages in acts that fall outside of the realm of sexually normative behaviour. For instance, Louise tells the narrator of his present hobby: to “fly up to Scotland and be sunk in a bath of porridge while a couple of Celtic geishas rubber-gloved his prick” (Winterson 68). What makes Elgin perverse in the Lacanian sense — and it should be noted here that like psychosis,

the term perversity is not derogatory or pathologized in Lacanian psychoanalysis — is not Elgin’s conduct but rather the ways in which he locates himself in relation to the other’s desire as the object or instrument of their jouissance: for when perverts invent a fantasy to play out, such as Elgin’s elaborate Scottish oatmeal operation, they are actually creating an alternative Symbolic order in which the other pronounces the law of desire for them, thus becoming the *objet petit a* of this law (Miller 213). According to Lacan’s *Seminar XI* (1964), the structure of perversion, “strictly speaking, is an inverted effect of fantasy” (185). What the pervert is really after is the authoritative “no!” of the Name-of-the-Father that initiates the subject’s symbolic castration and consequent severing from the m(other). Elgin’s scenarios recreate castration anxiety in order to re-establish his separation, while at the same time, disavowing the act of castration itself.<sup>24</sup>

As it happens, Elgin is the only character in *Written on the Body* whose past receives significant attention. He is the son of orthodox Jews named Esau and Sarah, who

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<sup>24</sup> In his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), Freud makes the claim that “neuroses are, so to say, the negative of perversions” (165, emphasis in original). Following this logic, Lacan states that perversion is structured much the same way as neurosis, but inverted: unlike the neurotic, the pervert does not feel the need to ask questions about his behaviour, does not feel himself to be lacking, and is therefore unlikely to become an analysand. In his article “The Frozen Countenance of Perversion” (2008), Dean points out that this produces a hitch in the Lacanian discourse on perversion — namely, there weren’t any perverts to be found in analysis. Most of the evidence about perversions was collected from literary sources. Dean criticizes this move away from the clinic: “Applied psychoanalysis, that more or less reductive practice of interpreting writers and their literary characters as if they were patients on the couch, is problematic enough. But when it comes to deriving specifically clinical categories primarily from literary texts, such problems are compounded to the point of epistemological crisis. [...] The absence of perverts in analysis allows one to say whatever s/he wishes about them” (102). While Lacanian psychoanalysis argues that technically, all human desire is perverse in nature, that there is no one “normal” sexual act, there is still a stigma around certain behaviours — such as Elgin’s involvement with rubber-gloved Celtic geishas.



owned their own chemist's shop. The narrator describes his birth, and his lonely, ambitious childhood as recounted to him/her by Louise. When he was still a small boy, Sarah taught Elgin "the world ought to serve him"; her own servitude caused him to believe that she derived her *jouissance* from his existence, which could be responsible for inspiring his future perversions. Esau, on the other hand, told Elgin that he was nothing but dust, that he had to raise himself up "and be a man" (Winterson 33). His masculinity is shaped from an early age by his father's authority, demonstrating once again Butler's depiction of the normative frameworks of cultural intelligibility that enabled Elgin to become recognizable as a legitimate subject. That Elgin surpasses his father in terms of power and prestige is indicated by the now tattered sign on the door of Esau's pharmacy; Rosenthal is still there, in tiny gold letters etched on the glass, but Chemist has lost a letter and now reads "he mist" (65).

While we find traits of perversion in not only Elgin's sexual proclivities but also his overtly masculine reaction to Louise's affair, the narrator exhibits signs of psychosis. Firstly, s/he has no gender. This might not be just a strategy developed for the purposes of confounding readers and forcing them to confront stereotypes: the narrator is the one relaying the story, from the point of his/her breakdown, and s/he might very well be under the impression that s/he does not actually possess a sexed body at all. Notwithstanding that possibility, other hints that the narrator experiences a psychotic break emerge in his/her disrupted sense of bodily boundaries throughout the novel and particularly by its conclusion — in complete contradistinction to his/her romantic foe, Elgin. For instance, when the narrator peers into the mirror, it is Louise that gazes back: "You are still the colour of my blood. You are my blood. When I look in the mirror it's

not my own face I see. Your body is twice. Once you once me. Can I be sure which is which?" (98-99). Although psychoanalysis contemplates "how the outside — an alien alterity — inhabits the subject's most intimate inwardness," the skin ego still separates the subject from its exterior surroundings (Dean *Beyond Sexuality* 53).

However, that the narrator cannot recognize his/her image in the mirror's reflection suggests a disintegration of all surface boundaries; s/he no longer possesses a self that is separate from Louise. In the absence of clearly defined borders, the narrator's skin appears to him/her to be permeable; even when Louise disappears, the narrator is able to locate her in his/her own body. It has become a map of Louise's past imprints: "It was a game, fitting bone on bone. I thought difference was rated to be the largest part of sexual attraction but there are so many things about us that are the same. Bone of my bone. Flesh of my flesh. To remember you it's my own body I touch. There she was, here and here" (Winterson 129-130). Near the end of the novel, the narrator touches again on the lack of boundaries between them: "Skin is waterproof but my skin was not waterproof against Louise. She flooded me and has not drained away. I am still wading through her, she beats upon my doors and threatens my innermost safety" (163).<sup>25</sup>

Dean's discussion of psychosis borrows from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972), which states that "it would never

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<sup>25</sup> The narrator identifies Louise as a threat to his/her skin ego, to his/her bodily boundaries and it is this sense of exigency that accounts for what Dean calls the "tendency to flee in the other direction" — as demonstrated by Elgin's investment in policing and controlling the boundaries of his body (*Beyond Sexuality* 63). Perhaps we have here another incentive, albeit an unconscious one, driving the narrator's decision to leave Louise behind.

occur to a neurotic to grasp the skin erotically as a multiplicity of pores, little spots, little scars or black holes [...] [but] the psychotic can” (27). And certainly, the images of Louise and the narrator recall Lacan’s description of the body as covered in mouths, which Dean views in terms of the body’s various cuts: the multiplicity of points, of bodily openings where inside and outside converge. As Dean wonders, “why not think of the pores in our skin — which also breathe, absorb, and excrete — as mouths?” (*Beyond Sexuality* 256). Although I find this image compelling when situated in relation to *Written on the Body*, the narrator does remain intrinsically separate from Louise: s/he never succeeds in overcoming language, and the binarization of self/other that it both produces and necessitates. As Paul Verhaeghe notes in his article “Phallacies of Binary Reasoning,” the subject cannot fuse with the other and remain a subject, as “the price to be paid for this fusion would be the disappearance of the ‘I’” (63). As a speaking “I” the narrator remains registered in the Symbolic and thus, s/he never escapes its constructed cultural codes and meanings. However, such psychotic ruptures as the ones experienced here by the narrator can nonetheless be productive: they allow the subject’s desires, often left repressed in the register of the Imaginary, to materialize symbolically and in doing so, reconfigure the discourses that form the subject’s sense of self.

Several critics (the aforementioned Gustar and Nunn, for instance) have developed a connection between the narrator’s incorporation of Louise into his/her self and melancholia, focusing particularly on the novel’s emphasis on love as a form of

loss.<sup>26</sup> As Butler observes, melancholy is a response that “refuses to acknowledge loss, and in this sense preserves its lost objects as psychic effects” (*Psychic Life* 183). Melancholic identification is not only the repercussion of a predetermined domain of cultural intelligibility that has already sanctioned the heterosexual matrix, but it actually functions to further facilitate the sex/gender/desire triad:

The disavowed homosexuality at the base of melancholic heterosexuality reemerges as the self-evident anatomical facticity of sex, where “sex” designates the blurred unity of anatomy, “natural identity” and “natural desire.” The loss is denied and incorporated, and the genealogy of that transmutation fully forgotten and repressed. The sexed surface of the body thus emerges as the necessary sign of a natural(ized) identity and desire. The loss of homosexuality is refused and the love sustained or encrypted in the parts of the body itself, literalized in the ostensible anatomical facticity of sex. Here we see the general strategy of literalization as a form of forgetfulness, which in the case of a literalized sexual anatomy, “forgets” the imaginary and, with it, an imaginable homosexuality. (*Gender Trouble* 71)

The socially constructed gendered codes that are written on the body conceal their own origins under the guise of naturalness; however, sex is not a referent but another signifier

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<sup>26</sup> See Jennifer Gustar’s “The Body of Romance: Citation and Mourning in *Written on the Body*,” and Heather Nunn’s “*Written on the Body*: An Anatomy of Horror, Melancholy and Love” for more examples.

of gender that masquerades as its referent. As Butler further predicates, “incorporation *literalizes* the loss [of desire for the same sex parent] *on* or *in* the body and so appears as the facticity of the body, the means by which the body comes to bear ‘sex’ as its literal truth” (68, emphasis in original). In *Second Skins*, Prosser indicates that the interchangeability of the words “*on* or *in* the body” in Butler’s phrasing suggests a crucial parity between corporeal surfaces and psychic interiors: subjects come to (mis)recognize these external power structures, inscribed upon the body through the process of melancholic identification, as interior, or innate properties (38). Butler later proposes in *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (1997) that the “melancholic turn [engenders] a variable boundary between the psychic and the social, a boundary [...] that distributes and regulates the psychic sphere in relationship to prevailing norms of social regulations” (171).

However, although Louise is indeed incorporated into the narrator as a kind of psychic effect, the narrator does repeatedly acknowledge her physical loss: for instance, when s/he wonders why Louise’s sweater “senselessly smell[s]” of her, and keeps her shape even “when [she is] not there to wear it” (Winterson 180). Moreover, Louise manifests as far more than a passive lost object. The narrator does not merely incorporate Louise as Louise has agency in her own right, “flooding” past the borders meant to keep them separated. I do find the arguments concerning melancholia persuasive, for there is certainly a parallel to be made between the narrator’s conduct and Freud’s articulation of the mechanism from “Mourning and Melancholia” (1963), as behaving “like an open wound, drawing to itself cachectic energy from all sides [...] and draining the ego until it is depleted” (116). Freud offers other views of melancholia as never depleting the ego,

but rather, engaged in an unending process of depletion. However, I find myself aligning more with Rosi Braidotti's conception of nomadism, which rejects melancholy "in favour of the politics of affirmation and mutual specification of the self and others in sets of relations or assemblages" (*Nomadic Theory* 6). Here, we begin to see Winterson's movement away from Butler's appropriation of Lacan into a more Deleuzian mode of representation; it is a movement that becomes far more pronounced in *Gut Symmetries* (1997), her next novel.

At the same time, I am nonetheless intrigued by Freud's description of the open wound, which correlates with Lacan's representation of the skin as comprised of open mouths. *Written on the Body*, by the end, also depicts skin as open, rather than sealed and impenetrable. However, rather than psychosis or melancholia, the narrator's relationship with Louise is rooted in *fantasy* — albeit a fantasy which appears to employ elements of both psychosis and melancholia. In *Beyond Sexuality*, Dean provides an interesting summation of fantasy, and the ways in which through the function of the skin ego, the body's surface "loses its permeability, its porosity, and thence its potential for multiplicity" (257). Destabilizing corporeal boundaries through fantasy succeeds in multiplying potential outlets for desire. As he contends, its possibilities "proliferate only when one detotalizes the bodily form on which the ego depends. [...] [F]antasy involves a strategy of de-ego-ization or impersonalization that needn't entail chaos or schizophrenic fragmentation, since it follows a certain logic" (257). In her essay "Fantastic Language: Jeanette Winterson's Recovery of the Postmodern Word," Christy L. Burns argues that "Winterson pushes fantasy to the extreme implication of its use and [...] refuses to turn back from the madness it invokes" (301). The final section of *Written on the Body* in

particular is reflective of a dream-like state. Becoming increasingly disorienting as it circles toward its conclusion, the novel reaches a feverish, phantasmagoric pitch during the narrator's search for Louise in London, a period during which s/he begins to "slide into craziness"; by the time the narrator returns to Yorkshire in the final pages of the text, s/he admits to "becoming less present every day" (Winterson 174, 188).

According to Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis's essay "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality," the fantasizing subject "does not pursue the object or its sign: he appears caught up himself in the sequence of images... [T]he subject, although always present in the fantasy, may be so in a desubjectivized form" (26). As the narrator's grasp on reality begins to deteriorate, s/he becomes increasingly inundated with visions of Louise; in fact, his/her days are filled with them, always positioned in relation to his/her own self. For instance, after visiting a cemetery, the narrator imagines what might happen (or is happening) to Louise's decomposing body, experiencing the process through his/her own body: "The worms that will eat you are first eating me. You won't feel the blunt head burrowing into your collapsing tissue" (Winterson 180). Dean affirms that such fantasies impersonalize the subject, temporarily

decomposing his or her ego in the *mise-en-scene* of desire. Thus it is owing to the subject's mercurial positioning in a sequence of mutating terms that fantasy permits identification across a number of socially regulated boundaries — between active and passive, masculine and feminine, gay and straight, black and white, perhaps even the boundary between the living and the dead. (*Beyond Sexuality* 261)

Fantasy allows for a relatively “safe” space, still located within the bounds of the Symbolic, to think about ways in which the body can be resignified. According to Butler, it is therefore never free from relations of social power; nevertheless, what fantasy “can do, in its various rehearsals of the scenes of social power, is to expose the tenuousness, moments of inversion, and the emotional valence — anxiety, fear, desire — that get occluded in the description of ‘structures’” (Kotz 8-9). While psychosis and melancholia are affixed to narratives of loss, fantasy is very much about producing.

Dean himself actually resists the Butlerian process of resignification; he argues that it is far too simplistic to be politically effective. However, Butler clarifies that resignification is not, in fact, about liberation; for her, it “does not engage the fantasy of transcending power altogether, although it does work within the hope and the practice of replaying power, of restaging it again and again in new ways” (Olson and Worsham 741). The dominant narratives cannot simply become displaced; nonetheless, the body *does* need to be continually restaged, to move beyond the enclosures of conventional knowledge as dictated by the domain of cultural intelligibility. It is here that the novel’s central image of the palimpsest becomes most crucial. In one of the most quoted — and its eponymous — passages, the narrator states: “Written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain lights; the accumulations of a lifetime gather there. In places the palimpsest is so heavily worked that the letters feel like braille” (Winterson 89). Palimpsests are comprised of layers of text upon text, superimposing these mutating terms over the ones that came before in ways that suggest a topography of meaning, rather than an effacement.



In the same passage, the narrator declares: “I didn’t know Louise would have reading hands. She translated me into her own book” (89). Here, we return to the idea of the narrator’s body as textual, a parchment to be interpreted and conceived by the other’s gaze. Conceptions of his/her body are therefore not fixed, but continually open to resignification, and although it is impossible to read the narrator in terms other than through the categories — i.e.; gender, sex, sexual identity — that preexist the body, this does not mean that our ideas of these categories will not eventually change. But no one can be certain about where all of this will lead. This resulting sense of ambivalence is echoed in *Written on the Body*. As the narrator surmises in the final sentence of the novel: “I don’t know if it’s a happy ending but here we are let loose in open fields” (190). The clause “let loose in open fields” signifies the lack of restrictions inherent in the absence of rigid bodily boundaries; and yet, there is also the disquieting sense of the unknown as the narrator admits s/he is uncertain if this narrative ending will bring happiness. Not only does the novel undercut the clichéd “and they all lived happily ever after” denouement of the romance genre, but it also refuses to make any promises to its hopeful reader. This is but a fantasy, after all, related by an ambiguous narrator, a narrator that describes him/herself as untrustworthy, a narrator that has been accused more than once of “telling stories” (60).

## **VII. Conclusion**

Although *Written on the Body* acknowledges the impossibility of fulfilling desire or achieving wholeness from within the Symbolic, it nonetheless creates a space for resignification within the psychotic-melancholic fantasy of collapsing the boundaries of

the body. Ultimately, it does not really matter if the narrator and Louise are reunited in reality or in fantasy in the novel's penultimate scene, as Louise (the outside other/object) has materialized from within the narrator's understanding of his/her self. His/her (skin) ego, formed from within the grid of cultural intelligibility and its heavily gendered regime of subject/object, has been destabilized, leading to productive new encounters with the beloved. When this border is ruptured, there is nothing to keep the self from bleeding into the other/Other — into the beloved, into space, into time. *Written on the Body's* last section places emphasis on the virtual — or more precisely, the relations between the virtual and the material — as the narrator's sense of his/her bodily distinctions begins to unravel.

The novel's open-ended conclusion also marks a new beginning, as Winterson's succeeding novels *Gut Symmetries*, *The PowerBook* (2000), and *The Stone Gods* (2007), all express an interest in the virtual nomadism of human experience instead of continuing the tradition of giving importance to materiality: or rather, what we perceive as the concrete, tangible surfaces upon which we inscribe our gendering gaze.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Space-time, Energy and the Virtual Star-dust Body: Exploding the Myths of Materiality in *Gut Symmetries*

*“It may well be that nothing solid actually exists, but what might exist is energy, space.” — Jeanette Winterson, Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery*

*“As above, so below.” — Paracelsus*

#### I. Introduction

Jeanette Winterson’s 1992 novel, *Written on the Body*, draws the reader’s attention to the textual properties of corporeality, thus unveiling the gendered body as a product of a preexisting cultural realm rather than a purely biological entity. My first chapter surveyed the novel’s phantasmic dissolution of the skin border, exploring what might happen when the surface breaks away, when the subjective “I” and the “other” begin to bleed into one another in ways that are both messy and transformative. Winterson’s next novel, *Gut Symmetries* (1997), shares some narratological similarities with its predecessor, as its plot is also anchored by an extramarital love affair — although unlike *Written on the Body*, this one concerns a relationship that is definitively lesbian. Another concordance emerges in the novel’s interrogation of desire: chiefly, the capacity of desire to collapse bodily boundaries and the self/other dichotomy that such boundaries bring into effect. However, *Gut Symmetries* departs from *Written on the Body* in its much more concerted consideration of another binary implicated in the social construction of the body: inside/outside. The novel explores what is happening on the *other* side of the skin, turning the binary inside out to examine the forces which enfold or encircle human bodies: the sub-atomic *outside* of space and time. Although quantum physics is central to

this consideration, *Gut Symmetries* also appropriates discourses of astronomy, alchemy, poetry, and the Kabbalistic tradition of Jewish mysticism, in order to shift the importance invested in materiality (and the social inscriptions that come with it) to the unperceivable virtual energies that comprise us, that comprise the whole of the universe.

While the novel largely employs scientific discourse in its depiction of the romantic entanglement of its three central characters, that each chapter is named after a Tarot card is suggestive of Winterson's strategic avoidance of master narratives.<sup>27</sup> My reading engages with this multi-faceted composition, as I work to peel back and critically assess each layer ("Time, Universe, Love Affair, New York, Ship of Fools, Jew, Diamond, Dream, Working-Class Boy, Baby, River, Matter") in isolation and in conversation with other textual elements (Winterson 6).<sup>28</sup> I begin with the influence of the Einsteinian model of space-time on the actual structure of the narrative, as indicated by its anti-linear composition and various time-slips. My analysis then unpacks the novel's illustration of the ways in which heteronormative regimes — which operate using the binary of gender — attempt to harness both time and space to sediment corporeal inscriptions. In the process, bodies become "insinuate[d] to desire what they do not desire," to recall, briefly, Winterson's central concern in her essay "The Semiotics of Sex" (115). The following sections of my chapter examine *Gut Symmetries'* consideration of how other various schools of thought might also be re-appropriated in

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<sup>27</sup> For a thorough analysis of Winterson's use of Tarot cards in *Gut Symmetries*, see Susana Onega Jaén's *Jeanette Winterson* (2006), p. 111-5.

<sup>28</sup> Unless indicated otherwise, all references to Winterson's work are from *Gut Symmetries* (1997).

order to disrupt the dominant conceptualization that the borders of the body are stable, fixed and impermeable — a determination which, as we will see, the novel deems (both metaphorically and literally) cannibalistic.

The work of Elizabeth Grosz proves a useful companion in my textual analysis of *Gut Symmetries*. Found early in her canon, both *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (1990) and *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (1994) include a psychoanalytic consideration of space and time as active agents in the shaping of normative — or conversely, abject — sexual subjectivity, which is realized in *Gut Symmetries*' hyper-gendered depiction of heterosexual relations. Sections of *Volatile Bodies*, in addition to *Space, Time, and Perversions* (1995), *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely* (2004), *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature and Power* (2005), and *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (2008) move to a Deleuzian focus on the “pre-personal *forces* at work in the activities of sexed bodies, institutions and social practices” (*Space, Time* 195 emphasis my own). I argue that these pre-personal forces are what appears to be activating the de-centering of heteronormative narratives in *Gut Symmetries*; the novel takes up the early teachings of “physician, magician, alchemist, urge, demiurge, *dues et omnia*” Paracelsus, coupling his assertion that the “galaxa goes through the belly” with the Big Bang Theory in ways that ultimately serve to present an alternative to the dominant binary models of understanding (Winterson 1-2).

Deleuzian nomadism enters into dialogue with the novel's focus on the relationship between pre-personal forces, the body, and desire. However, much like Grosz, who recognizes that Deleuze's oeuvre is far too vast to perform a comprehensive

or entirely faithful reading, I consider only the concepts that I find engage with *Gut Symmetries*' proposed challenge to the imaginary of concrete bodies. Thus, my reading of his work is primarily limited to the BwO (Body without Organs) and the desiring-machines that assemble to make the BwO *become*. I position the BwO in relation to the novel's repeated assertion that "energy precedes matter" (19, 83), a notion that I believe has the potential to overturn normative perceptions of the body. By focusing attention on the often overlooked immaterial forces that precondition (and continue to condition) our existence, the novel works to undermine the legitimizing agents of patriarchal, heterosexist narratives: so-called "concrete" flesh-and-blood bodies.

In many ways, *Gut Symmetries* continues the Butlerian project started in *Written on the Body*, to recast "the matter of bodies as the effect of a dynamic of power, such that the matter of bodies will be indissociable from the regulatory norms that govern their materialization and the signification of those material effects" (Butler *Bodies That Matter* 2). However, as Karen Barad points out in her work *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Meaning of Matter* (2007), Butler's theories are limited to "an account of the materialization of human bodies (or more accurately, to the construction of the surface of the human body, which most certainly is not all there is to human bodies) through the regulatory action of social forces (which are not the only forces relevant to the production of bodies)" (209). Without diminishing the importance of Butler's contribution to the understanding of how bodies come to matter in social, regulatory and exclusionary contexts, I explore the potential (and often overlooked) impact of the unseeable intensities that makes up bodies that matter.

## II. Riverrun Narratives and Einstein's Space-time

In *Space, Time, and Perversion*, Grosz suggests that a thorough reconsideration of space and time is where the work of re-inscribing the materiality of the body really begins, as destabilizing preexisting scripts about how bodies negotiate “their environment and spatio-temporal location” will ultimately serve to disable the very corporeal inscriptions that insinuate bodies to desire what they do not desire (84). Winterson’s explorations into the forces of space and time surface in the final paragraph of *Written on the Body*, which imagines the reunited lovers in a “threadbare room” that has burst wide open: the narrator and Louise are both inside and outside simultaneously, and this is, in fact, “where the story starts” (190). As the narrator explains:

The walls are exploding. The windows have turned into telescopes. Moon and stars are magnified in this room. The sun hangs over the mantelpiece. I stretch out my hand and reach the corners of the world. The world is bundled up in this room. Beyond the door, where the river is, where the roads are, we shall be. We can take the world with us when we go and sling the sun under your arm. (190)

The pervasive river images that recur throughout *Gut Symmetries* recall this passage, which figures the river as part of the beyond: beyond the structure of the room, the door, the enclosed social structures that Louise’s home with Elgin represents. This particular scene accords with one presented earlier in the novel, in which the narrator and Louise make love for the first time. Louise leads the narrator up one flight of stairs after another,

and it seems as though “the house would not end, that the stairs in their twisting shape took us higher and out of the house altogether” (51). They finally arrive in an attic room where the distempered walls are “breathing,” moving under their touch. The narrator observes that here within this space, s/he and Louise “could reach the ceiling and the floor and every side of our loving cell” (51). Here, the novel not only presents a symbolic breakdown of the subject’s body, but also a breakdown of the ways in which the spatio-temporal location that envelops the corporeal surface is conceived. The room breathes, moves, explodes under the presence of an energy that both produces and is produced by desire.

While *Written on the Body* provides the starting point, *Gut Symmetries* offers a more in-depth exploration of the complexities inherent in the relationship between space, time, materiality, and energy. The novel begins with a prologue that outlines the story’s main components stripped down: “Here follows a story of time, universe, love affair and New York. The Ship of Fools, a Jew, a diamond, a dream, a working-class boy, a baby, a river, the subatomic joke of unstable matter” (6). The structurally fragmented, time-jumping plot loosely revolves around a three-way love triangle between New Physicist Alice Fairfax, her successful middle-aged colleague Jove Rossetti, and Jove’s poet-mystic wife Stella. A shifting perspective between the three characters allows them to each impart their own reflections, ultimately providing a collection of differing meditations — although predominantly scientific — on the nature of desire and the “intelligence of the universe” from which this desire springs forth (11).

Alice and Jove meet aboard the cruise ship QE2, where they have both been asked to deliver lectures; Alice speaks about Paracelsus and the Big Bang Theory (a talk which



comprises the basis of the prologue), while an Armani-clad Jove teases the predominantly grey-haired guests with the possibility of time travel. He himself has apparently discovered a way to deceive time, for although Alice is nearly twenty years younger, the two soon embark upon a clandestine affair. After some months pass, Jove arranges for Stella to uncover the infidelity, at which point she asks to meet her much younger rival. To the surprise of everyone involved, the encounter turns sexual and the two women begin an intense affair of their own. Alice describes this triangulation in terms of Euclidian algorithms. However, she is quick to discover that this mathematical equation does not actually function in a space that is curved:

I said there was a love affair. In fact there are two. Male and female God created them and I fell in love with them both. If you want to know how a mistress marriage works, ask a triangle. In Euclidian geometry the angles of a triangle add up to 180 degrees and parallel lines never meet. Everyone knows the score, and the women are held in tension away from one another. The shape is beguiling and it could be understood as a new geometry of family life. Unfortunately, Euclidean theorems only work if space is flat. In curved space, the angles over-add themselves and parallel lines always meet. His wife, his mistress, met. (16-17)

That space is curved rather than straight, and that the parallel lines come to converge together, is symbolic of Alice and Stella's sexual relationship. Like space, their own bodies are made up of curves that over-add and meet: "Pitch of her body under me" (17).

The novel takes the concept of curved space even farther; lesbianism is an identity category for women who desire the same sex, and *Gut Symmetries* is far more interested in the potential connections that lie *beneath* such discursive constructions, ones that could end up disrupting normalized ideas about the ways in which desiring bodies negotiate space and time. In addition to his conception of curved space, Alice also adopts Einstein's conflation of space and time into "space-time." Space-time suggests that the two seemingly separate categories cannot be disentangled from one another, since both are inner conditions of the other and present two different ways of looking at the same thing. Indeed, in Einstein's theory, the speed at which light transmits information to the eye depends entirely upon the amount of space between them; thus, the amount of time that transpires between the subject and the event is caused by the passage of space through which light must travel.<sup>29</sup> In *Gut Symmetries*, this theory is encapsulated by the act of star-gazing, as Alice directs the readers to "[l]ook up at the galaxy. What you see is thousands, sometimes tens of thousands of years past, drama of the nebula only visible when it reaches us, efforts of light. 186,000 miles per second, crossing centuries of history, still dark to us" (200). However, this "darkness" does not necessarily imply that the former event is passive, existing only to be gazed upon but rather, still always present,

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<sup>29</sup> In his Special Theory of Relativity, introduced in his 1905 paper "On the Electrodynamics of Moving Bodies," Einstein makes the claim that the speed of light (moving at approximately 300,000,000 meters per second) in a vacuum is the same for each observer, regardless of both the velocity of the observer and the velocity of the light source. For Einstein, this means that space and time are relative. An object in motion experiences time at a slower rate than an object that is still. As Alice remarks in *Gut Symmetries*, the idea marked "the beginnings of quantum physics and the end of the mechanistic, deterministic, mind/matter of cosmic reality" (11).

still happening somewhere, with its light positioned at a certain distance relative to the perceiving body.

It is this specific version of space-time that Winterson writes into *Gut Symmetries* by weaving in the familial histories of each character, with a narrowed focus on their direct ascendants. As Alice is the novel's primary narrator, her family is given the most attention, largely focusing on her father David — with whom she felt she had the most in common. He was born a “Liverpool limey”; his own family had always worked the docks (52).<sup>30</sup> Under the influence of his eccentric but domineering mother, who chanted in his ear, relentlessly, that he would “be someone, be someone” (147), David rose up the ranks of the shipping company where he had started when he was fifteen as an office boy. He then married Alice's mother, the well-to-do Irish daughter of a partner in his firm. It was no great romance, but a move calculated to further secure his new position at work and amongst upper-class society. Their matrimonial life together was often disrupted by his ambitious career trajectory, which included a hiatus in their first year of marriage that lasted several months, one that saw David traveling to New York City to earn a much-coveted promotion.

Jove's history is given less consideration, although Stella explains that he is the son of Italian immigrants who found success opening Rossetti's diner, “the most famous little trat” in Manhattan (89). The restaurant becomes the site of Jove and Stella's first encounter when she was but an infant; Stella later takes Alice there on the night they first

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<sup>30</sup> “Limey” is a slang word for a person of English descent. The nickname originated in the eighteenth century, when British sailors would suck the juice from limes to prevent scurvy.

meet. Like Jove, Stella's parents were also foreign to New York. Originally from Austria, Ishmael, a holistic Jewish book dealer, fled to America to escape the Nazi regime. Prior to his departure, his German wife Uta had actually been considering leaving their marriage. However, she ended up risking her life to help him, flirting with a high-ranking Nazi officer who allowed her to sell off as much of Ishmael's property as was possible. She smelted the profits into gold ingots, which she then smuggled to New York where Ishmael was awaiting her arrival. Despite the romantic gesture, their story's ending is not a happy one. Even after her safe arrival in New York, pragmatic Uta remained unhappy with Ishmael, growing more and more fed-up with his increasingly strange mystical beliefs, his "mutterings and singing, of prayer and meditation, of jewels and dusty books" (168).

Late in the novel, Alice discovers that Uta had not only worked for David as his secretary during the time that he was in New York, but the two had also enjoyed a brief but meaningful affair; Stella was a young girl at the time; Alice had not yet been conceived. The adulterous couple would rendezvous in the Algonquin hotel, where Alice and Stella would later have their first contact and become unfaithful themselves. Some reviewers have found this particular plot-twist too implausible to succeed, but it is only one of many coincidences incorporated throughout the novel. For instance, Alice and Stella are further connected by Paracelsus, the subject of Alice's cruise ship lecture; he is born on November 10<sup>th</sup> 1493, and Stella on November 10<sup>th</sup>, 1947 (1, 75). On the last page of the novel, reunited with Stella after she is lost at sea, Alice describes the "red digital flash of date and time: November 10 19:47 (Sun in Scorpio. City of New York)" (219). These analogous details are not just happenstance, but rather serve to demonstrate the

complementarities between Alice and Stella that run throughout the novel: both are born under extremely unusual circumstances (Alice on a tugboat, Stella on a sled during a snowstorm in downtown Manhattan), both have strong childhood attachments to their fathers, and most importantly for my purposes, both believe that “energy precedes matter” (19, 83).

In their article “Grand (Dis)Unified Theories?: Dislocated Discourses in *Gut Symmetries*,” Tim Woods and Helena Grice treat the novel’s many coincidences somewhat dismissively: according to them, Winterson is too caught up in her own “conceptual linguistic game[s]” and as a result, *Gut Symmetries* “sometimes loses itself in the trickeries of its playful parallels, and ultimately produces a narrative which falls apart rather than falls together” (118). However, in her chapter, entitled “Multiple Words and Selves” from her book on Winterson’s fiction, Susana Onega Jaén disagrees, stating that it is exactly these kinds of happenstances that pin the lives of the *Gut Symmetries*’ characters not only to each other but also to their ancestors. As Jaén contends, the “whole novel is structured by means of [...] random coincidences into a complex web of ‘symmetries’ comparable to the chaotic arrangement of elements in fractals” (Jaén 156). She arrives at the conclusion that “the individual forms part of a vast system, or huge family, each one constituting a link in a chain reaching back to the beginning and projecting itself into the future” (178). I come to a similar interpretation, but from a different position: Jaén reads the novel through a Jungian lens, while I am more interested in how these various coincidences operate to reveal symmetries as something that move beyond the characters themselves, beyond their past, present, and future, beyond their “thinking guts”: the implications of these ruptures in time and space means

that subjects are also beyond their bodies, as they exist seemingly solid in the seeming present. These symmetries suggest a correspondence that is inherent at a sub-atomic level, within the vast and virtual realm of space-time: predating the categories through which we have come to understand ourselves and others.

*Gut Symmetries* compares Einstein's framework of space-time to a flowing river: "[M]oving forward, forceful, directed but also bowed, curved and sometimes subterranean, not ending but pouring itself into a greater sea. A river cannot flow against its current. The riverrun is maverick, there is a high chance of cross-current, a snag of time that returns us without warning to a place we thought we had sailed through long since" (104). Alice personally views former events as coming "with us, like a drag-net of fishes. We tow it down river, people and things, emotions, time's inhabitants, not left on shore way back, but still swimming close by" (105). Stella holds a similar account of the past, as a "tunnel of energy" (122). The histories of their families, of famous astronomers and physicists, of the expanding universe: it is all here and there simultaneously — and indeed, all of these elements come into play in the novel, overlapping as curved space, still *mattering*. Towards the novel's conclusion, Jove, Stella and Alice agree to take a vacation together, a boating trip; at the last minute, Alice discovers that David is dying and stays behind to make the appropriate arrangements. He passes away, and Jove and Stella's yacht goes missing. It is at this time that Alice discovers her father's affair with Uta. In the half awake, half asleep fluid state of her grief, she notes: "I could not fully distinguish which was my father/myself, Stella/Uta, whether the distance we imagine separates one event from another folded up, leaving the two clock faces to slide together, plates of time, synchronous" (199).

In *The Nick of Time*, Grosz makes the claim that space-time “is in principle outside, before, beyond matter, a precondition of matter’s emergence, and the force that, surprisingly, without predictability, rends life from its more unstable interactions” (245). Alice mirrors this statement with her own observation, in the novel’s final passage: “The universe hangs here, in this narrow strait, infinity and compression caught in the hour. Space and time cannot be separated. History and futurity are now. What you remember. What you invent. The universe curving in your gut” (Winterson 219). This image of “the universe curving in your gut” proves central to the novel’s ultimate revision of bodies. Like *Written on the Body* before it, the novel’s primary focus still lies within the transformative power of resignification; however, it is not limited to the body alone but to the virtual forces that exist beyond and move within the body, not always readily discernible to the senses. Although these forces cannot be contained by language, various discourses have indeed attempted to regulate our understanding of how bodies receive and process spatio-temporality. Indeed, the chaos inherent in the riverrun of space-time — its messiness, its inexhaustibility, and most of all, its boundless and uncontainable energy — necessitates some kind of intervening containment. Alice herself recognizes that the divisions erected between past, present, and future are vital “for safety, for sanity”; if we were to let these distinctions disintegrate, then we can “no longer [be] sure who we are, or perhaps we can no longer pretend to be who we are” (105).

Much of Grosz’s work finds fault with the generally held conception that the spatio-temporal site of subjectivity is little more than an impassive backdrop, serving only the perfunctory role of framing one’s existence; space and time are most often perceived to be, quite simply, “passed” through. However, as with the various bodies in

*Written on the Body*, space-time has also been inscribed with meaning: it has been organized in relation to a heavily gendered, heterosexist paradigm. Indeed, the riverrun of space-time plays an active and even primary role, not only in the formation of subjectivity through its contouring of the body's shape, but also the production of sexual difference — and alongside sexual difference arrives the violent hierarchies of the prevailing social structure. *Gut Symmetries* works to highlight the surreptitiousness of these binaries, for as Grosz maintains, space and time should not be conceived as “neutral or transparent media whose passivity enables the specificity of matter to reveal itself: rather they are active ingredients in the making of matter, and thus the constitution of objects and subjects” (*Time Travels* 173-4).

### **III. The Spatio-Temporal Cordoning of the Body**

Although *Gut Symmetries* hosts multiple speakers, Alice is positioned as the protagonist; with seven chapters, she also narrates the greater part of the novel, although she shares one, aptly named after the Tarot card “The Lovers,” with Stella — again pointing to their interconnection as their voices blend into one narrative voice. Aside from “The Lovers,” Stella narrates three other chapters and Jove only one. It is through Alice's perspective that Jove is introduced. An established peer in the Department of Physics at Princeton University, his theories on “the cosmos, dimensionality of hyperspace, ghost universes symmetrical with ours” represent the “future” of physics, at least in his own opinion (Winterson 15). His erudite, self-assured demeanour is juxtaposed against Alice's ambivalence, as she is constantly questioning the universe and her role in it: “What was the true nature of the world? What was the true nature of myself



in it?” (12). Her acquiescence to his domineering behaviour is demonstrative of the ubiquity of the masculine/feminine gender binary, which as we saw in my first chapter, is not only imprinted upon the corporeal surface, but rather comes to be internalized by the subject both through the passage of time and through the patriarchal taking up of space.<sup>31</sup>

According to Pierre Bourdieu, rather than enacting this gendered performance, subjects are possessed by it, “because it acts within them as the organizing principle of their actions, and because this *modus operandi* informing all thought and action (including thought of action) reveals itself only in the *opus operatum* (practice)” (*Outline* 18). As Bourdieu states in his 1979 work “Classes and Classifications,” time and space are crucial mobilizers in the organizing principle of gender:

Everything takes place as if the social conditionings linked to a social condition tended to inscribe the relation to the social world in a lasting, generalized relation to one’s own body, a way of bearing one’s body, presenting it to others, moving it, making space for it, which gives the body its social physiognomy. Bodily *hexis*, a basic dimension of the sense of social orientation, is a practical way of experiencing and expressing one’s own sense of social value. One’s relationship to the social world and to one’s proper place in it is never more clearly expressed than in the space and time one feels

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<sup>31</sup> In the psychoanalytic framework, this patriarchal “taking up” of space is explained by the primacy invested in male sex organ, which is physically present, taking up space. The female sex organ, on the other hand, is viewed as lacking — it is *negative* space, a hole with nothing there.

entitled to take from others; more precisely, in the space one claims with one's body in physical space, through a bearing and gestures that are self-assured or reserved, expansive or constricted ('presence' or 'insignificance') and with one's speech in time, through the interaction time one appropriates and the self-assured or aggressive, careless or unconscious way one appropriates it.

(477)

In ways that evoke *Written on the Body*'s likening of romantic discourse to a "saggy armchair of clichés," Bourdieu goes on to state that the logic of socialization treats the body as a "memory-jogger": there is a complex of gestures, postures, words, that "only have to be slipped into, like a theatrical costume, to awaken, by the evocative power of bodily mimesis, a universe of ready-made feelings and experiences" (478).

Bourdieu thus establishes a link between gender and what he calls "habitus," a term that Elizabeth Freeman elaborates upon as "individual dispositions and collective modes of belonging sedimented by rituals of timing that accrete over time" in her work *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010) (xx). Freeman relates Bourdieu's conceptualization of habitus to what she calls chrono-normativity: "the interlocking temporal schemes necessary for genealogies of descent and for the mundane workings of domestic life" (xxii). What can be considered normative behaviour is solidified by the subject's submission to social expectations concerning chronology: the flow of time has been pre-mapped before the subject has even arrived on the scene. Acceptance of the standard linear, teleological narrative (birth, childhood/adolescence, marriage, reproduction, death) renders the subject culturally legible, since this particular

temporal order has already been invested with conventionalized meaning; and so the subject inhabits the rhythms of normalized straight time, positioning its experience in relation to what is expected. As Alice herself maintains, her entire life has already been pre-determined by what she calls “well-built trig points”: cultural markings that serve to measure one’s progression through space-time (Winterson 10).

Judith Halberstam’s *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005) is interested in this same concept, but goes one step further by compartmentalizing normative time into three different but mutually interdependent areas: reproductive time (the female biological clock), family time (scheduling the routine of daily life), and generational time (the inheritance of values). According to Halberstam, “hegemonic constructions of time and space are uniquely gendered and sexualized”: every aspect of time in particular coalesces to produce and sustain heteronormative ideologies (*Queer Time* 8). In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), Lee Edelman speaks to the first category of reproductive time, positioning the all-encompassing figure of the Child — and by extension, heterosexual sex and reproduction — as central to the concretization of normative time. As the sustenance of the Child relies wholly on the continued propagation of the species, those who fail to participate in the heterosexist logic are “future-negating” and are therefore abject subjects (Edelman 26). To reject “reproductive futurism” is not only to refuse linear progression, but also to align oneself with the death drive, which seeks to rupture the ego’s imagined sense of cohesion and self-sufficiency. There is a connection then, between reproductive time and the foundation of corporeal boundaries as the subject’s “I” is spatially formulated as bound by the container of its “whole” body. To disengage from reproductive time is to trouble the borders of

subjectivity — which is precisely, as we will see, what *Gut Symmetries* ends up doing in its own inconclusive sort of way, once all of its various layers are realized; however, its early sections are more representative of Halberstam's subsequent category, as they explore the ways in which “family time” was thoroughly gendered in the Liverpool of the 1950s and 60s, the setting of the betrothal of Alice's parents, her lonely childhood, and “anorexic and hollow eyed” adolescence (Winterson 21).

If reproductive time happens at the primordial site of the “I”'s formation, then family time is the place where sexed binaries begin to take root. Halberstam describes “family time” as a “heteronormative time/space construct,” one that is informed entirely by preexisting sexual politics (*Queer Time* 10). And certainly, in *Gut Symmetries*, Alice's own sense of gender dynamics is structured entirely around her father's work schedule and the “demands of his pocketwatch” (22). While he measures his time carefully in quarter-hours, Alice's mother had “never learned to be punctual and always has been vague about any appointment not directly connected” to David (22). As Alice explains, her mother used David as her timepiece, regulating her own life through his. When she brings Alice to the dentist on the wrong date, the dentist, who makes a point of speaking directly to David and not his wife, comments that “women are like that” (22).

Halberstam draws largely upon David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernism* (1989), which asserts that time is “organized according to the logic of capital accumulation” (Harvey 7); however, she finds fault with the general omission of gender and sexuality from his analysis. Taking up the work of Kathleen McHugh and Lisa Duggan, she indicates how feminist historians have claimed that “in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as the European bourgeoisie assumed class dominance over the

aristocracy and proletariat, a separation of spheres graphically represented the gendered logic of the public/private binary and annexed middle-class women to the home, leaving the realm of politics and commerce of white men” (*Queer Time* 8). According to Marx and Engels’s *The Communist Manifesto*, the bourgeois male “sees in his wife a mere instrument of production”: her domestic labour is unpaid and therefore, she must rely on her husband for financial security (1866). David’s pocketwatch is a symbol of patriarchal-capitalist authority, tracking the hours spent at work and the hours spent *not* at work. As the aphorism goes, “time is money”: and the more time he spends making money, the more his social power grows.

His wife, on the other hand, remains powerless outside the domain of domesticity. According to Adrienne Rich’s 1980 essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” women have married in part for economic survival; they are taught how to be passive in order to attract male partners, to be granted the safety of the social contract: a social contract disguised by the representation of heterosexual romance as “the great female adventure, duty, and fulfillment” (242). David’s wife plays her part (for what other choice does she know?), as illustrated by the overlong description of her excessively feminine appearance and attributes:

She was pretty, she was charming, she was clever enough but not too, she smiled at the men and gave the women that quizzical bewildered look, as if to say, ‘What, am I not the only one then?’ Her stockings were straight, her hair was curled, her back was upright, her waist was curved, her legs were long, her breasts round, her stomach was flat, her bottom was not. Black hair, blue eyes,

red mouth, pale skin, and all this packed as neatly as a picnic Tupperware. There was nothing of the whore about her and this my father liked. (Winterson 58)

As newlyweds, David refuses to consummate the marriage until he had obtained the highest position at the shipping company where he was employed, and so he temporarily abandons his new bride to “find gold” (and Uta, as readers will later discover) in New York City (54). He eventually receives a promotion that cannot be surpassed: Director of the Line. With haste, David returns to England, for he “had risen in the world and now he was going to prove it”: by yanking his wife out of the bathtub where she had been soaking, and “spear[ing her] on his manhood” (56). For her part, Alice’s mother continually submits; he acts on her, she is acted upon. Although she is “well educated,” she had also been “taught to conceal it” (23). Her voice is not important, nor evidently is her name: while David’s own alludes to the powerful biblical King, Alice’s mother is labeled only in relation to her role as David’s wife, and bearer of his children.

Although as an infant through to her adolescence Alice identifies far more with her father than her mother, she is nonetheless expected to perform the gender role assigned to her sex. When she wins a much-coveted scholarship to Cambridge to study physics, a field notorious for its lack of female employment, her parents are mostly unsupportive. David would much rather she adopt the traditionally feminine role and get married than pursue a career while her mother hopes she will view her time at the University as an opportunity to procure a suitable husband:

I know that my father feared for me a lonely old age and a lonely young one too. He did not say so, but the words behind the words told that he would rather have launched me into a good marriage than watch me row against the tide of my own work. It remains that a woman with an incomplete emotional life has herself to blame, while a man with no time for his heart just needs a wife.

When I went up to Cambridge, my mother said to me, ‘Alice, when you are at dinner with a man, never look at your watch.’

Like many women of her generation she expected to let time run its course through her without attempting to alter it. (22)

The dating advice Alice receives from her mother further speaks to the naturalization of discourses on time, and while at Cambridge, Alice begins to dream about a gold pocketwatch, similar to the one owned by her father: “[It] is there, ticking time away, and I have often tried to climb inside it and jam the mechanism with my body. If I succeed, I go to sleep within my sleep, only to wake up violently because the watch is no longer ticking but I am” (21). Here we see how generational time ticks in and through Alice’s body, in spite of her own desires — desires which run counter to the social demands of her sex.

Indeed, it is Halberstam’s third category that comes to bear the most significance, as without generational time, conceptualizations of what reproductive and family time contain would fail to become sedimented. For instance, within the category of family time, David’s children also depend on his pocketwatch to provide structure their daily

lives. According to Alice: “[W]e ate, slept, drew, played, world without end, waiting without knowing we were waiting for my father to come home and snap his fingers and whisk us into the golden hour. We became aware, though I can’t say how, that he was giving us four whole quarters of an hour” (23). The authority granted to the father figure shapes how their days are temporally organized; this naturalized regiment becomes reinstated when the children grow up and start their own families, as they take on the roles once enacted by their parents. Social norms are passed down through familial ties; as the psychoanalytic framework insists, children will psychically incorporate the behaviour of their parental figures in the formation of their own identities, through the coercive mechanism of the Oedipal structure that sees young girls pass into adulthood with an acceptance of their socially designated role as inferior or lacking — an enveloping identity which simultaneously establishes space and time for her. It is a course of action that occurs within a certain passage of time, and as Halberstam notes, “because we experience time as some form of natural progression, we fail to realize or notice its construction” (*Queer Time* 7). Alice’s name is short form for Alluvia, which means “the deposits collected and jettied by the river” (Winterson 123); she is formed by riverrun forces that move around her, just as she witnesses time run through her mother.

For her part, Alice grew up admiring her father’s strength, his ambition, his prowess; she even confesses that she loved her father incestuously (126). She fits the mold of what Grosz recognizes as Lacan’s “dutiful daughter,” the “one who submits to the Father’s Law”; although this deference can take many forms, Alice adheres to what Grosz calls the Oedipalization “of desire, to the patriarchal denigration of her corporeality and pleasure, to a femininity defined as passive” (*Volatile Bodies* 150). It



comes as no surprise, then, that Alice chooses a partner so similar to her father: Jove, a man whose own name comes from the opera *Don Giovanni*, featuring the fictional legend of libertine and lothario Don Juan. *Gut Symmetries* further utilizes systems of nomenclature to underscore Jove's patriarchal kinship to David: his mother nicknamed him after the "King of the Gods" and naturally, Jove likes this even more than his given name — for as Alice observes, he has "two reputations he wanted to protect: his primacy and his potency" (Winterson 99, 100). As his beautiful and much younger mistress, Alice-as-object augments Jove's stature. She discerns: "At his side I was access and envy (What a showpiece. Where did you find her?). At my side he was young and sexy (Will you marry him?)" (104).

In both cases, Jove is the only one to benefit from their involvement. Others want what he has, and Alice is defined only by her relation to him. Like the arrangement between her mother and father, the timing of their romance is controlled by Jove: "His interest in me pendulumed from hot intensity to cool indifference. Weeks together would be followed by months apart. Then he would woo me again and each time I was determined to resist" (105). Her continued complicity (each time, she does not end up resisting) testifies to the dominance of the heteronormative narrative: she believes that she is "completed" by Jove, that they are two halves that come together to form a perfect whole. In the early origins of their affair, she admits to being captivated by their reflection in the mirror, for their perfectly matched oppositions made "an elegant pair: dark/fair, older/younger, assured/uncertain" (18). This gender-inscribed binary provides an excellent example of the myth of heterosexuality complementarity. According to Christine Downing, "when the categories 'male' and 'female' are seen as representing an

absolute and complementary division the opposite sex becomes ‘the Other,’ comes to stand mythically and exclusively, for that which brings satisfaction and completion” (Downing 34). However, this notion is a social construction, and in the heterosexist regime, these two opposing halves are not at all balanced, but reflective of a hierarchy in which the passive object is swallowed up by the more dominant partner.

For instance, as Alice herself notes, her mother “manifested [David] at another level. He absorbed her while she failed to absorb him” (Winterson 58). Alice likewise allows herself to be absorbed by Jove. As she explains: “I had found relief with Jove and did not question it [...] Here was a recognized pattern with room in it for my piece. My gaps and angles now fitted somewhere” (106). However, her gaps and angles have not been neatly slotted into Jove’s corresponding gaps and angles, but have merely been consolidated; she herself is “displaced” by this immersion, “as a heavy solid displaces water” (139). As time goes on, Alice becomes conscious of her amenability: “I had been annexed by Jove. What had begun as a comity of sovereign states had ended in invasion” (108). As she comes to recognize, she was never completed by Jove’s accompanying half to her binary, but rather consumed by him. This consumption foreshadows the novel’s gruesome climax when Jove literally “guts” and cannibalizes his wife to ensure his own survival.

That Alice finds herself absorbed by Jove suggests that she has been supplanted spatially, and as Halberstam points out, “all of the time cycles that we have naturalized and internalized (leisure, inertia, recreation, work/industrial, family/domesticity) are also spatial practices”; the construction of such spatial practices are “obscured” by this naturalization (7-8). As a physicist, Alice acknowledges that space is in fact curved;

nonetheless, she feels she has “been cordoned by habit to grow in a straight line” (11-12). To be “cordoned” suggests the imposition of an enclosure that is regulated with military precision, to prevent movement in or out. Alice being cordoned to grow *straight* is indicative of the ways in which the signification of the Oedipalizing binary has formed the corporeal boundaries that mitigate her experience of the outside world, both temporally and spatially. And that her brain is cordoned by *habit* further implies the ways in which dominant ideologies are legitimized by reiterative chains of discursive production, indicated by the “recognized pattern” described by Alice earlier — and recalling, once again, Freeman’s depiction of chrono-normativity. It is a pattern based in dualisms: “Husband and wife. Man and rib. What could be more normal than that?” (59). The dominion of Alice’s father over her mother was in fact “so normal that nobody noticed it,” demonstrating the extent to which behaviours or practices become ossified over any given period of time through the repetitive practice of performativity (59). Like her mother before her, Alice does “not question” the oppressive dynamics that structure her relationship with Jove (106). Any attempt to disentangle desire from this hetero-matrix is complicated by the very body that produces and processes libidinal instincts, a body that has already been impelled into a linear or “straight” temporality.

For her part, Grosz does not argue that space-time requires order and regulation, but what interests her most are the *kinds* of structures implemented to carry out this order and regulation; as she asserts, they are ones rooted in heteronormative principles. She makes the crucial point that these ideologies rely not only on the perceived stability of the corporeal surface, but also the type of environment that we perceive as holding and containing the body and drawing the borders of its materiality. As she states in *Volatile*

*Bodies*, “modes of representation privilege the solid and determinate over the fluid” (205); however, as *Written on the Body* makes evident, these socially constructed corporeal borders are never stable or concrete, and herein lies the potential for subversion. Although Alice has been shoved into a certain contextual location in space and time according to her sex and familial patterns, she fails to stay there; in ways that parallel the experience of the “psychotic” narrator in *Written on the Body*, she never feels like she is positioned securely within her own skin. For instance, when she describes her affair with Jove, Alice is unable to differentiate “between carefully separated” objects: everything collapses into one another (Winterson 102). Comparing herself to her new lover, who seems so solid and sure of himself, she observes: “I could not define myself in relation to the shifting poles of certainty that seemed so reliable” (12). Even her own reflection evades her, as she cannot find herself “in the looking glasses offered” (12). She can only see herself in relation to Jove’s reflection: young, fair, uncertain.

Here, Alice displays mild symptoms of psychasthenia, a kind of schizophrenic schism between the subject’s experience of its surroundings and its actual lived spatio-temporal location. In *Volatile Bodies*, Grosz provides an account of the disturbance through her study of Roger Caillois’s “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia,” a paper that strongly influenced Lacan’s own conceptualization of the mirror stage. Central to Caillois’s argument is his assertion that psychasthenia occurs when space, which for Alice is contained by a straight temporality even when she knows it to be curved, appears to become “a devouring force” for the subject (Caillois 30). Most importantly, it is with

*represented* space that the drama becomes specific since the living creature, the organism, is no longer the origin of the coordinates, but one point among others; it is dispossessed of its privilege and literally no longer knows where to place itself [...] The feeling of personality, considered as the organism's feeling of distinction from its surroundings, of the connections between consciousness and a particular point in space, cannot fail under these conditions to be seriously undermined. (29, emphasis my own)

Caillois's use of the term "represented space" in his rendering of the disturbance is crucial, as it suggests that even elements of the metaphysical have been shaped by discourse (patriarchal and heteronormative, in this case), transformed into a social product, rather than something organic, untouched by culture. That does not mean that there is nothing outside of represented space, or that all sensations can be wrapped up into "knowable" feelings. However, represented space does impact the ways in which subjects come to recognize their bodies. That Caillois also calls it a "devouring force" calls to mind Jove's own consumption of both Alice and Stella, both figuratively and literally.

Caillois figures prominently in *Volatile Bodies*, as the work as a whole is an examination of the ways in which space-time shapes the borders of corporeality, that thus comes to inform subjectivity. As Grosz affirms, in order to possess a conceivable identity, one's subjectivity must first be positioned firmly with the physical location of its body:

A stabilized body image or imaginary anatomy, a consistent and abiding sense of self and bodily boundaries, requires and entails understanding one's position vis-à-vis others, one's place at the apex or organizing point in the perception of space (which in turn, implies a knowledge that one could also be an object in the spatial fields of others), as well as a set of clear-cut distinctions between the inside and the outside of the body, the active and passive positions, and [...] a position as a sexually determinate subject. (*Volatile Bodies* 48)

Alice does not possess a stabilized body image, nor does she have a consistent and abiding sense of self and her bodily boundaries. This is due in part to her confused gender role: she identified more strongly with her ambitious father as a child, born “Athene from Zeus’s head” — an identification further complicated by David’s incorporation of her, as he held Alice in front of the mirror as an infant and absorbed her reflection into his own (Winterson 59). That she models herself after both her father and mother is a failure of the Oedipal structure: although she does eventually allow herself to be consumed by the preexisting heteronormative economy with her adoption of the docile role, her collusion is a response to the trauma of her subjective displacement. She responds by attempting to anchor herself to Jove, a partner who seems secure and firmly established in his own body.

And yet, it is Alice’s condition, certainly similar in nature to psychasthenia, which allows her to “depersonalize” and thus, transgress the trappings of conventional femininity. As Alice acknowledges, space-time for her appears to lapse in spite of the cultural inscriptions which attempt to contain it; those well-built trig points that she

describes earlier “are themselves as much in motion as I am. What should be stable, shifts. What I am told is solid, slips” (10). Her life may be divided into the ordered categories of past, present and future, but Alice cannot ignore her “gut” feeling: that always lingering “underneath, in dreams, in recollections, in the moment of hesitation on a busy street, the hunch that life is not rational, not divided. That the mirrored compartments could break” (20). Her lack of a solid position allows her to see possibilities that others, perhaps more fixed within their materiality, are less capable of perceiving. This accounts for her academic pursuits, which are entirely motivated by her interest in the something else of it all, what might be lurking in the “underneath.”

At thirteen years old, she joins her father on her first cruise voyage, a three-day journey to chase the comet Kohoutek — and a trip which foreshadows both her future meeting with Jove and the boating trip upon which Jove and Stella disappear. Here on the ship she makes her first discovery, a “thin silver line” in the sky that for Alice, represents the legend of the Ship of Fools, which sought the Holy Grail and ended up sailing off the edge of world: “At particular conjunctions of time and timelessness, it appears again as a bright light, shooting its course through the unfathomable universe, chasing that which has neither beginning nor end” (74). Alice, named after the Tarot card “The Fool” in the first chapter, now joins the “band of pilgrims uncenturied, unquantified, who, call it art, call it alchemy, call it science, call it god, are driven by a light that will not stay” (74).

Alice tackles the question of the “unfathomable universe” from a scientific-alchemical standpoint. As an adult, her research encompasses current strains of theoretical physics, ranging from Einstein to Oppenheimer to GUTs (Grand Unified Theories), from which the novel in part obtains its name, in addition to the fifteenth-

century philosophies of Paracelsus who believed in alchemy: the possibility of deconstructing and reconstructing matter into different forms. In accentuating the minute, the invisible, the infinitesimal, Alice's version of science — which as we will see, include pre-personal forces, rhizomes, *energy* — offers a metaphysical alternative to the current sex/gender/desire regime, by re-examining the ways in which space-time operates in and through the subject, or rather, “the expanding universe opening in your gut” (2). Although the space-time that Alice appears to occupy has been organized according to historically and culturally contingent discourses, she also acknowledges that there might be a bigger realm *beyond* the space-time that is inhabited socially. Unhinging space-time from the inscriptions that have long formed subjectivity might allow us to *re-think* the origins of its ideologies. As Alice warns the audience of her cruise ship lecture, the “sensible strong ordinary world of fixity” might be nothing but “folklore” after all... (10). Here, the QE2 stands in for the Ship of Fools, which stands in for the novel itself — and “all of us are aboard” (9).

#### **IV. “As above, so below”: Star-dust Bodies, Grosz’s Pre-personal Forces and the Deleuzian BwO**

Alice's lecture, entitled “Paracelsus and the new physics,” looks to the Big Bang Theory to explore Paracelsus's belief that the universe is “curving in your gut” (219). According to superstring theory, the universe was once comprised of ten dimensions and was eventually split into two separate pieces; ours contains three spatial dimensions and “the oddity of time,” while the other half (with its six unknown dimensions), was lost forever (4). The prevailing system of Cartesian dualisms allows for the reenactment of



this originating loss, “that here in our provisional world of dualities and oppositional pairs: black/white, good/evil, male/female, conscious/unconscious, Heaven/hell, predatory/prey, we compulsively act out the drama of our beginning, when what was whole, halved, and seeks again its wholeness” (4-5). As the prologue states, male and female represents “the uniting mystery of one flesh” (4); however, this dichotomy — and its proximate active/passive temporal positionings within the Symbolic order — is negated as little more than a rather creative narrative, originally devised to compensate for this original loss.

The ultimate objective — or in temporal terms, end-result — of the gendered male/female binary is to eventually unite it, to become whole again in the fusion of opposite but complementary sexes through the act of heterosexual intercourse. Paradoxically, however, this supposed merging of bodies is irreconcilable with the goal of “fixing” fragmentation. In his article “Phallacies of Binary Reasoning,” Paul Verhaeghe points to the redundancy of this self-reproducing structure:

The differentiation into two different genders is precisely the cause of the problem. Trying to solve it through this differentiation is nothing but a repetition of the original loss. The net result is a never-ending repetition, because each phallic act repeats the loss and makes another attempt necessary [...] One can even say that phallic sexuality in itself is aim-inhibited because it can never reach the original aim of enduring fusion [...] Regardless of the masculine subject’s efforts to fuse with woman by way of the phallic

relationship, he will never succeed, because the gap is due precisely to the phallic signifier. (61, 64)

Indeed, as Juliet Mitchell points out in *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the École Freudienne* (1982), to be human is to be subjected to a language that “decentres and divides”: “sexuality is created in a division, the subject is split; but an ideological world conceals this from the conscious self who is supposed to feel whole and certain of sexual identity” (26). Heterosexuality is, according to Ellie Ragland, an unconsciously enacted masquerade, embedded within a social structure that both produces and requires the Oedipal triangulation of father-mother-child in order to direct sexed bodies into the hierarchy of gender (Ragland 59-60).

However, if this model is, in fact, so inadequate at overcoming fragmentation, and if it is, as the prologue proposes, rooted in a fiction anyway, then there should be no reason to maintain the binaries of sexual difference, and the consequent generation of masculine/feminine, active/passive structuring of desire. Alice’s lecture identifies the entire system of heteronormativity as a myth orchestrated to “crouch [...] underneath [...] the physical presence of something split off” (4). Instead of being connected to castration anxiety, as with the phallogocentric model, this “lack” emerges rather in “the moment of Creation [...] our torn-off universe recorded in the star-dust of our bodies [...] The atoms that you are were shook out of a star-burst ante-dating the Solar System. We are the beginning. We are before time” (4). Here, the body and its peripheral surroundings are mutually interdependent, inciting a blurring of the corporeal boundary between inside and outside.

The resulting image reflects theoretical physicist and cosmologist Lawrence Krauss's argument from his work *A Universe from Nothing: Why There is Something Rather than Nothing* (2012), that bodies are comprised of star-dust: "Happily for us, stars don't explode that often, about once per hundred years per galaxy. But we are lucky that they do, because if they didn't, we wouldn't be here. One of the most poetic facts I know about the universe is that essentially every atom in your body was once inside a star that exploded" (17). As he goes on to explain, carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, and iron can only be found "in the fiery cores of stars. And the only way they could get into your body today is if these stars were kind enough to have exploded, spewing their products into the cosmos so that they could one day coalesce in and around a small blue planet located near the star we call the Sun" (18-19).

For Paracelsus, the body does not just contain star-dust; rather, the body is star-dust and star-dust is the body. As Alice observes in her lecture, "[he] was a student of Correspondences: 'As above, so below.' The zodiac in the sky is imprinted in the body. 'The galaxa goes through the belly'" (Winterson 2). It is not just star-dust that actualizes the body, but "[t]he Dead. Time. Light patterns of millennia. The expanding universe opening in your gut. Are your twenty-three feet of intestines loaded with stars?" (2). This recurring image of the alignment of the stars in the sky paralleled in the entrails of the body is nowhere better represented than in the scene in which Uta, while pregnant with Stella, succumbs to her "gastronomic[ally] extravagant" cravings for diamonds and swallows ten of the precious jewels (86). They were brought to their home by Orthodox diamond-dealer friends of Ishmael, who did not want to discuss their economic value but rather their "capacity to stimulate the soul's deeper life" (87). As they spoke to one

another, Uta “stepped forward, picked up a diamond between thumb and finger, and swallowed it. Then she swallowed another, and another, a voluntary force-feeding into a price pâté: [her] oesophagus larded with light” (87). All but one is eventually recovered, with a commode and a pair of surgical gloves. The last is not found until Stella enters the world: with a pea-sized stone lodged at the base of the spine, which cannot be surgically extricated without crippling her. This displaced diamond plays a fundamental role in the story of not just her gestation, but also her birth: Stella is born during a winter storm that lasted an entire week, on a sled driven by six huskies, in the middle of a snow-abandoned downtown Manhattan. In pursuit of his lost wife and almost-born daughter, Ishmael follows the glow emanating from the diamond in Uta’s belly. He tells her: “I was able to find you because you were radiant” (92).

As Elizabeth D. Harvey observes in her essay “Anatomies of Rapture: Clitoral Politics/Medical Blazons,” the description of a pregnant belly which “shone with light” (91) indicates the ways in which this rogue diamond is transformed through bodily processes into the cosmological: “The correspondence between GUTs (Grand Unified Theories) that would explain the universe and the body, its internal gut, is played upon throughout the novel, most obviously in the swallowing of diamonds (compacted in the earth’s entrails) that are metaphorically converted (digested) into cosmological signs (lights, stars)” (340 fn 20). Stella also acknowledges the connection between her own disruptive body and the macro of the universe: “On the night I was born the sky was punched with stars. Diamonds deep in the earth’s crust. Diamonds deep in the stellar wall. As above, so below. Uniting carbon mediated in my gem-stole body” (Winterson 187). As she herself recognizes, Stella — whose name corresponds with the Latin word

for “star” — is the very embodiment of Paracelsus’s central argument that “as above, so below” (2).

As above, so below: “the zodiac in the sky is imprinted in the body” (2). The novel’s focus on star-dust as a preexisting and virtual force that impacts the body’s shape and form is consistent with Grosz’s own notion of impersonal or pre-personal forces, as explained in *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power*, which views both the psychological and social aspects of subjectivity as “two different directions or orientations of [...] the same forces that regulate the natural world as well as cultural life” (188). For Grosz, impersonal forces include but are not limited to material, gravitational, electrical, “star-dust”: these often imperceptible forces intervene, operating in and through space-time, as they “play themselves out and impinge on each other as well as subjects” (181). She is clear that there is no *one* force: force is always multiple, plural, unique, contestatory. Demonstrating a Nietzschean will-to-power, they compete and collide with one another, and, simultaneously, make connections; Grosz describes force as not only that which “produces competition and struggle between forces functioning in the same sphere and level, but it is also that which produces relations of alignment, cooperation, and tension between forces function at different levels” (188). She further clarifies that these forces are not the *effects* of a subject, nor are they its “intentional object”; however, while they exist outside of the subject, they are still the cause of the subject’s actualization. Thus, these forces should no longer be overlooked. As Grosz contends, we need to acknowledge “the formative, productive role of inhuman forces which constitute the human as such and provide the conditions and means by which it may overcome itself” (186).

In *Time Travels*, Grosz also sets about proposing her ontology “not of *subjects* and their *desires*, but of *forces* and *actions* which produce subjects and pleasures as their crystallized forms” (186, emphasis in original). This is just one aspect of a larger and more determinately Deleuzian project, as the ontology that Grosz wishes to develop is one of *becoming* — how we become through force, and how our desiring process and capacity to experience pleasure is affected by pre-personal forces (186). As she later notes, Deleuze’s version of desire “functions as a primarily mobile and mobilizing impetus, a force of connections: of those conjunctions and disjunctions that form provisional ‘entities’ and groupings, not so much functioning ‘against’ power as entwined in modes of stratification or deterritorialization. Pleasure and desire [...] are force” (192). Deleuze removes desire from the biological discourse which has served as a justification for heteronormativity, arguing that sexuality is not so much about reproduction as it is about *production*: constantly connecting and disconnecting in an ongoing nomadic chain of infinite links, desire continually makes the body anew. Alongside his frequent collaborator, Félix Guattari, Deleuze states in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980) that “the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, ‘and ... and ... and ...’ This conjunction carries enough force to shake and uproot the verb ‘to be’” (27). Instead of creating a concrete or stable sexual identity, desire is one rhizome machine among many other machines that assemble the continually assembling body, a body that can never be fully organized or sedimented: the BwO.

The BwO is itself an assemblage that is always in a state of becoming; it is never a whole, but is rather composed of discrete elements that are often reterritorialized by another assemblage, which makes an entirely new connection and thus changes the

BwO's form again and again, in ways that reflect Alice's statement that "we are and we are not our bodies" (Winterson 162). My own interest in the Deleuzian BwO can be pinpointed to the potentialities inherent in not *being* our bodies while still remaining a body. As Grosz points out, the BwO denaturalizes the idea of the concrete, fixed body by placing it "in direct relations with the flows or particles of other bodies or things" (*Volatile Bodies* 168), and I argue that this denaturalization of what it means to have a body serves to negate the inscriptions which have proved instrumental in "cordoning" or regimenting the subject into "straightness."

BwOs are comprised of desiring machines operating across the entire virtual dimension, or what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as the plane of immanence. The plane of immanence encompasses everything: the entire, complex network of forces and connections and "star-dust" that cause the BwO to become.<sup>32</sup> Although "plane" suggests a surface, this plane is rather an ongoing depth, comprising "relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness between unformed elements, or at least between elements that are relatively unformed, molecules, and particles of all kinds. There are only haecceities, affects, subjectless individuations that constitute collective assemblages" (*Thousand Plateaus* 266). These collective assemblages are symbiotic, co-functioning; they are

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<sup>32</sup> In his work *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* (1988), Deleuze speaks about Spinoza's influence on his formulation of the plane of immanence: "Everyone knows the first principle of Spinoza: one substance for all attributes. But we also know the third, fourth, or fifth principle: one Nature for all bodies, one Nature for all individuals, a Nature that is itself an individual varying in an infinite number of ways. What is involved is no longer the affirmation of a single substance, but rather the laying out of a common plane of immanence in which all bodies, all minds, and all individuals are situated" (122). The translator also here points out that the French word "plan" covers virtually all meanings of the English "plan" and "plane."

continually taking on new forms as a result of new couplings or alliances with other partial objects, both material and immaterial, both human and non. It is this collection of potentials that serves to form the always-still-in-progress BwO, a body that is stretched across an infinite molecular, rhizomatic movement. The local and the cosmic, the micro and the macro, all different but undifferentiated: “As above, so below” (Winterson 2). The BwO, then, serves as a contrast to the “notion of unity or oneness” that the heteronormative model views as the ultimate goal, as the desiring-machine does “not belong to either an original totality that has been lost or one which finalizes it or completes it, a telos [...] It is fundamentally nomadic not teleological, meandering, creative, nonrepetitive, proliferative, unpredictable” (Grosz *Volatile Bodies* 168).

Rosi Braidotti’s theory of nomadism, which she developed through her reading of Deleuze, proposes that we shift our emphasis from bios to zoes (non-human life), which will allow us to begin “discarding old, phallogocentric modes of thinking about life” (“Affirming the Affirmative” 21). Alice’s own research leads her to nomadism, as she comes to believe that there is no real differentiation between anything: “The separateness of our lives is a sham. Physics, mathematics, music, painting, my politics, my love for you, my work, the star-dust of my body, the spirit that impels it, clocks diurnal, time perpetual, the roll, rough, tender, swamping, liberating, breathing, moving, thinking, nature, human nature and the cosmos are patterned together” (Winterson 98). With this declaration, she opens herself to the possibilities made manifest by the BwO, fulfilling Deleuze and Guattari’s outline of how the subject might transform — by moving the body beyond the identity categories that attempt to stratify the subject’s experience of desire:



This is how it should be done. Lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers find an advantageous place on it, find potential movements of deterritorialization, possible lines of flight, experience them, produce flow conjunctions here and there, try out continua of intensities segment by segment, have a small plot of new land at all times. It is through a meticulous relation with the strata that one succeeds in freeing lines of flight, causing conjugated flows to pass and escape and bringing forth continuous intensities for a BwO. (*Thousand Plateaus* 161)

As Grosz claims, Deleuze and Guattari do not evacuate corporeality “of all psychical interiority,” nor does the BwO signify “a kind of blanket rewriting or remapping of the body” (*Volatile Bodies* 169). It is instead “a scene, a place, or even a support upon which something comes to pass [...] It is not a space nor is it in space; it is matter that occupies space to a given degree — to the degree corresponding to the intensities produced. It is non-stratified, unformed, intense matter” (*Thousand Plateaus* 169). Like Deleuze and Guattari’s BwO, Alice comes to recognize that “our place in the universe and the place of the universe in us, is proving to be one of active relationship” (Winterson 98).

In their treatment of materiality, Deleuzian nomadism and quantum physics collide; in both fields of thought, matter emerges in the flows of reified wave oscillations. Alice parallels both the plane of immanence and quantum theory when she states that “at a subatomic level, matter does not exist, with certainty, in definite places, rather it has a tendency to exist. At the sub-atomic level, our seeming-solid material world dissolves

into wave-like patterns of probabilities, and these patterns do not represent probabilities of things but probabilities of connection” (161). In his work *Organs Without Bodies: Deleuze and Consequence* (2004), Slavoj Žižek also forges a connection between Deleuze and the field of physics by asking an important “what if?”:

What if, instead of conceiving waves as oscillations between elements, elements are just knots, contact points, between different waves and their oscillations? Does this not give some kind of scientific credibility to Deleuze’s “idealist” project of generating bodily reality from virtual intensities? [...] In quantum physics, reality itself, the density of matter, is reduced to the collapse of the virtuality of wave oscillations (or, in the general theory of relativity, matter is reduced to an effect of space’s curvature). [...] If we accept the claim of quantum physics that the reality we experience as constituted emerges out of a preceding field of virtual intensities which are, in a way, “immaterial” (quantum oscillations), then embodied reality is the result of the “actualization” of pure event-like virtualities. (24, 25)

Here, Žižek links corporeality with these “quantum oscillations,” implying that the body is not actually concrete in a substantial or tangible way, but is rather comprised of virtual energies that serve to actualize matter — but never to ossify it.

Alice contemplates the ways in which theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking’s work with wave functions might also reveal bodies to be made up of immaterial intensities. As she argues, in accepting his idea that the entire universe should be treated

as a “wave function, both specifically located and infinite, then that function is the sum of all possible universes, dead, alive, multiple, simultaneous, interdependent, co-existing. Moreover, ‘we’ and the sum universe cannot be separated in the way of the old Cartesian dialectic of ‘I’ and ‘World’. Observer and observed are part of the same process” (Winterson 162). To be measured as a wave function is to be “unlimited by the boundaries of [...] bodies,” a suggestion which also aptly characterizes the BwO (161). The observer and observed, self and other, are one and the same, no longer separated by an economy rooted in difference and lack. As Grosz proposes, this is a provocative notion:

Rethinking the concept of subject and the subject/object relations in terms of force means profound transformations in all related concepts — of objects, of the social, of action and agency. It is no longer a subject that takes before it an object on which to enact its desire or will; rather, forces act through subjects, objects, material and social worlds without distinction, producing relations of intensity of force. They constitute an inhuman, subhuman field, a field of “particles” or elements of force which are only provisionally or temporarily grouped together in the form of entities and actions. (*Time Travels* 189)

For Grosz, the division between subject and object is nullified, as they are essentially connected by what is imperceptible to them both: forces that are above, below, and beyond their individual control (168). These are forces that “precondition gender and bodies,” but it is ultimately impossible to contain them entirely through discourse, to turn

them into *matter* that can be articulated (172). Matter as solid, impermeable mass, is a foundational element of a patriarchal and heteronormative imaginary which both institutes and requires the narrative of the normal, fixed-in-place body; we will soon see how both Jove and David come to represent this dynamic. For her part, Stella aligns herself with Alice's version of matter, stating: "Matter is provisional and that includes me. Matter has at best a tendency to exist, and will, it seems, divide infinitely because there is no there there. There are vibrations, relationships, possibilities and out of these is formed our real life" (Winterson 207). What is really at stake here, then, is matter itself: not as something tangible, but as force, as *energy*.

#### **V. Gendering the Matter of "energy precedes matter"**

Scientist Alice considers her own matter to be almost phantasmical in the virtualness of it, for "[i]f gross matter is reducible to atoms, and the atom itself subject to unending division, then the reality of matter is conceptual" (172). Stella, the poet and Tarot card enthusiast, adopts a different approach; although she cannot see what is not present, she still feels a presence, a haunting of something still quite there. Influenced from an early age by her father's preoccupation with Kabbalist rituals, Stella believes the pea-sized stone swallowed to the base of her in-utero spine is alive inside of her: that even inhuman objects are alive, as "the current that flows each to each is live" (83). Even knowledge lives, according to the ancient text of the Torah, in which "the Hebrew 'to know,' often used in a sexual context, is not about facts but about connections. Knowledge, not as accumulation but as charge and discharge. A release of energy from one site to another" (83). Unlike both Alice and Jove, Stella therefore sees no point in

gathering knowledge like a taxonomist collects insects as knowledge is not a physical object but part of a series of intangible movements. She is far more interested in what cannot be pinned down, a Deleuzian-like “dance” of “patterns, rhythms, multiplicities, paradoxes, shifts, currents, cross-currents, irregularities, irrationalities, geniuses, joints, pivots” (83).

Coming as she does from a Jewish background, “from a people to whom the invisible world is everyday,” Stella is from the start aligned with unseeable, metaphysical forces (44). Indeed, as she begins to fall in love with Alice, Stella conflates her former rival with the forces of space-time: “Stars in your eyes, the infinity of you, the galaxy of my girl that I explore” (174). Even in her initial anger, Stella never perceives Alice in an overtly material way. For instance, when Stella first discovers that Jove has been unfaithful, she searches for traces of Alice in their now-violated marital home. She literally “guts” the master bedroom with her “radioactive hands”: unhinging the bathroom door from the wall, severing the bed’s frame and “disemboweling” the mattress (29, 30). It is a necessary act for Stella, who believes Alice remains in the room, particles of her body still permeating the space: “Where was she? Under the carpet? Pressed between the glass and the window frame? I was breathing her. Her dust, her molecules, the air was fat with her, the droppings and gatherings of a living body” (31). Alice need not be a tangible, physical object. Atoms of Alice left behind, the force of her energy still circulating, is what matters to Stella: it precedes matter. Like Alice, Stella treats the human body as an assemblage of other virtualities that comprise to make it part of everything else. Jasbir Puar’s reading of bodies as assemblage echoes Stella’s view: “We leave traces of our DNA everywhere we go, we live with other bodies within us,

microbes and bacteria, we are enmeshed in forces, affects, energies, we are composites of information” (57).

However, Jove takes a far more sensible stance on materiality, and admits that he is made anxious by Stella’s lack of investment in the concrete or “real” world:

All of us have fantasies, dreams. A healthy society outlets those things into sport, hero-worship, harmless adultery, rock climbing, the movies. Unhealthy individuals understand their dreams and fantasies as something solid. An alternative world. They do not know how to subordinate their disruptive elements to a regulated order. My wife believed that she had a kind of interior universe as valid and as necessary as her day-to-day existence in reality. This failure to make a hierarchy, this failure to recognize the primacy of fact, justified her increasingly subjective responses. She refused to make a clear distinction between inner and outer. She had no sure grasp either of herself or herself in relation to the object. At first I mistook this pathology as the ordinary feminine. (190-1)

It is worth noting here that Jove misdiagnoses this “pathology” as the “ordinary feminine” as both of the primary female characters in the novel appear to share this same belief, that “energy precedes matter” (19, 83). In her work *The Science Question in Feminism* (1986), Sandra Harding asserts that “men’s dominating position in social life results in partial and perverse understandings, whereas women’s subjugated position provides the possibility of more complete and less perverse understandings” (Harding

26); Jove himself never sways from his own self-assured conviction that “matter is matter” (Winterson 191). Here, gender becomes a critical nexus in terms of how subjects perceive their own relation to their surroundings, their position in space-time. Jove remains indebted and therefore chained to a narrative that requires the fixed materiality of bodies; his privileged position in the Symbolic is sanctioned through the solid, knowable, definable matter of his body.

However, Jove comes to feel his masculinity under threat when Alice and Stella not only begin engaging in an affair of their own, but also remove his sex from the equation entirely. Alice describes the arrangement as such: “Jove and I continue to work together, Stella and I made love together, and once a week Jove and Stella met for dinner” (128). Jove has essentially become the outcast of his own creation, for as he confesses to Alice he was responsible for orchestrating Alice and Stella’s initial meeting. He had grown bored with his affair with Alice and with Stella’s not-knowing about his affair with Alice. So he posed as Alice and wrote a letter to Stella confessing her status as mistress, and he posed as Stella to write a letter to Alice and waited for their reaction. He followed them the night they met, spying on them first at the Algonquin Hotel, then watching them dine at his mother’s trattoria, and finally observing them slip back to the hotel only to reappear the next morning. That was a surprise for him, but one that he had hoped for: that his game would become a *ménage à trois*. And it did, but one that very quickly spun out of his control — although certainly, it is a testament to his arrogance that he thought he would be able to puppet-master their threesome.

Jove does not take his ejection lightly, and began to “insist on the rights of his penis; that is, he has fucked Stella and Alice and ought to be allowed to continue to do

so” (130). Although Jove is no longer included in the sexual component of their triangulation, they still congregate once a month over Chinese takeaway, “to discuss the finer points of [their] triune romance” (129). The meetings typically dissolve into a battle of wits between Jove and Stella, while Alice meekly stands by, occasionally interrupting with offers to make coffee. At one point, Jove smirks down towards his genitals and declares that he is “big enough” for the two of them; as Alice observes, he remains “obsessed by the size of his member” (131). He attempts to position his erection, which despite being an atheist he calls “the physics of God,” as the anchor of their love triangle. However, the truth of the matter is that his penis no longer *matters* at all to either Alice or Stella (27).

Jove does not just use his symbolic association with the phallus to assert his masculinity, but also the power he obtains from his status as “the future” of physics — again underscoring the connection between sex and power first demonstrated in the novel by David when he received the promotion that earned him the right to his wife’s body (15). In her article “Science Fictions: British Women Scientists and Jeanette Winterson’s *Gut Symmetries*,” Ann McClennan observes that although Jove’s research claims

[...] to illustrate that “our place in the universe and the place of the universe in us, is proving to be one of active relationships,” his refusal to accept other approaches to the world (i.e., his wife, Stella’s, metaphysical feminism) reinforces the fact that his own approach to Superstring Theory — not necessarily the theory itself — is hierarchical, and therefore, masculine in nature (99). He seems more interested in power than in discovery; and his



pursuit of and interest in Superstring Theory results more from his personal interest in discovering the one ‘true’ theory underlying the cosmos. (1069)

Jove continues to adopt a masculine position, by viewing himself as “objective” and Stella as “pathological”; in his opinion, his brand of physics is the “honest science” while any other (feminized) kind is “not science at all. Call it alchemy, astrology, spoon-bending, wishful thinking” (Winterson 191). As Jaén notes, this statement functions to belittle his poet wife, who claims to understand the world in ways that go beyond the limits of empirical reasoning (Jaén 157). It is her disinterest in empirical reason that Jove distrusts, viewing her as *lacking* what McClennan defines as a “sure grasp of herself or herself in relation to the object” (McClennan 1070).

And yet, Stella can actually see herself in relation to not just other objects, but also subjects — as made evident by her relationship with Alice — and, therefore, she succeeds where Jove does not: for like the explicitly phallogocentric narrative that dominates the majority of the relationships in the novel, Jove’s research interests are, in fact, also primarily concerned with the quest for wholeness. For instance, his early work in GUTs seeks “to *unite* the strong, weak, and electromagnetic quanta in a sympathetic symmetry that would include gravity” (Winterson 97, emphasis my own). Existing as a metaphor for the novel’s central love triangle, these forces are mirrored by Jove, Alice, and Stella, who are consistently presented as arrogant, uncertain, and charismatic (or [electro]magnetic), respectively. Alice herself acknowledges the symmetries between their romantic entanglement at the micro level and the GUT at the macro: “Difficulties begin when these three separate forces are arbitrarily welded together. *His wife, his*

*mistress, me!*” (97, emphasis in original). However, although Jove may seek credit for bringing Alice and Stella together, demanding to be rewarded with sex, Jove does not actually want to be welded to anyone else. As already made evident in the novel’s depiction of his relationship with Alice, he is only capable of integrating the other into the self rather than releasing himself into the other. His marriage to Stella is no different. As Chloë Taylor Merleau observes, Stella comes to view the terms of their marital vows as “a blood transfusion between two persons, one whom receives the blood while the other is bled to death” (97). Jove would rather “annex than merge,” a co-opting that comes to its violent apex when he and Stella are lost at sea for several weeks (98). Jove literally absorbs Stella into his own body by eating her, an act of cannibalism, which as Kevin Dwyer has argued, serves as “a metaphor for patriarchy in crisis” (Dwyer 265).

As Jove explains, he did not really *want* to cannibalize his wife: “I had to do it. She was dead. She was nearly dead or I would not have done it. If I had not done it she would have died anyway. I did it because I had to. What else could I have done?” (Winterson 189, 191, 194, 196). Indeed, not only does his narration open and close with this statement, but he reiterates this exact phrasing an additional two times throughout the short chapter. However, Jove’s compulsive repetition is not merely a response to the trauma of the situation, but rather achieves a persuasive function; in order to carry the grisly act, he must convince himself of its necessity. Repetition here works to solidify his rationale, emblematic of the extent to which the patriarchal, heteronormative model relies on performative reiteration to sustain its consumption of female bodies — a consumption that is wholly necessary for its survival.

As Jove begins to carve into Stella's body, he justifies the unjustifiable by appropriating the conditions of their marital contract: "She was my wife. I was her husband. We were one flesh. With my body I thee worship. In sickness and in health. For better or for worse. Till death do us part. I parted the flesh from the bone and I ate it" (196). In her work *Transgressing Boundaries in Jeanette Winterson's Fiction* (1996), Sonia Front notes the obvious attempt to assert the husband's "rightful" ownership and incorporation by way of cannibalism, an act which ironically parodies the biblical "bone of my bone ... flesh of my flesh" (Gen 2:23). Jove absolves himself of the filleting of his wife, with the excuse that they are technically "one flesh" anyway; as Front notes, here he makes his "final attempt to reinstate his patriarchal ownership" of his wife (Front 123). There is another parallel to be drawn here between violence and sex, as directly prior to this attack, Jove initiates intercourse with Stella. Although they are both delirious with hunger and fatigue, Jove holds a romanticized view of the event: "We had made love. We were close that night" (Winterson 194). His account is markedly estranged from Stella's own description: "Stumbling together, we half fell, half climbed, up the steps to the deck. He gripped me, his prick straight in, the swollen saltiness of it dirty in my dirt. I was dry and cracked, unwashed, closed. I had a weeping rash on my inner thighs" (185). It is, according to Stella, a painful and unsolicited encounter. Moreover, his eyes and teeth seemed "wolfish" to her in ways that recall Charles Perrault's *Little Red Riding Hood*, a children's fable in which a woman's body is also sacrificed to the predatory appetites of a male.

Part of Jove's ability to rationalize his actions comes from an unwillingness to see himself as he truly is. In the novel's most sinister scene, Jove describes picking up

Stella's weak "doll-like-dead" body and then dropping it so that her head splits against the planks. She must be unconscious before he makes his first incision, "like a surgeon, not a butcher" (195). That he compares himself to a surgeon rather than a butcher is indicative of the distorted ways in which he views his own horrific actions; he has not turned savage with hunger, but makes his cuts "with dignity" suggesting an intelligence and a sensitivity not typically associated with cannibalism (195). After all, Jove is, as his own self-serving narration continually serves to remind readers, a highly educated man. However, upon Alice's arrival alongside the search party, readers are once again treated to an altogether different version of Jove. Stella is found unconscious, lying in a pool of her own blood with pieces of her buttock and hip missing; it is an image so traumatic, so gruesome, that Alice's body physically rejects it. Moments after she vomits, she bears witness to Jove, emerging from the innards of the boat: "Jove dragged himself up out of the cabin, his upper lip and chin bearded with blood. In his hand he had a filleting knife. He saw me, terror, horror, unbelief, relief, and fainted" (208).

Unfortunately, upon recovery, Jove fails to learn any sort of redemptive lesson from what has happened but instead chooses to omit it from his narrative. Alice visits him in the hospital and sees him "surrounded by Italian nurses listening to his extraordinary story of survival, which did not include eating his wife" (215). In her work *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (1994), Braidotti, building on the work of Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, calls this kind of omission a form of "metaphysical cannibalism": "It's on the woman's body — on her absence, her silence, her silence, her disqualification — that phallogocentric discourse rests" (266). Jove thus becomes a synecdoche of a patriarchy that requires not only the

continued absorption of female flesh, but also the blatant disregard of anything that might disrupt its narrative.

The trope of cannibalism is presaged earlier in the novel, when upon her discovery of Jove's infidelity Stella imagines devouring his mistress: "Give me a pot and let me turn cannibal. I will feast on her with a greater delight than he. [...] I will eat her slowly to make her last longer. Whatever he has done I will do. Did he eat her? Then so will I. And spit her out" (Winterson 29). Although this serves the purpose of foreshadowing Jove's own actions, it also sets up another vital distinction between Jove and Stella: Stella does not actually eat Alice, but rather, spits her out. She thus lays no claim to her rival-turned-lover's body, while Jove's cannibalizing implicitly analogizes the heteronormative couplings in the novel in which the female is ingested, an "eating" which allows her male partner to absorb and therefore erase the potentially disruptive aspects of her otherness. In Jove's case, it is Stella's belief in energy preceding matter that intrigued and alarmed him simultaneously. He is attracted to her magnetism, that she is "wide awake in a sleeping world" (190, 192). At the same time, her "mystical disposition" poses a threat to his own belief in reason; for him, "there is nothing mystical about the universe. There are things we cannot explain yet. That is all" (191). That Stella's intuition frightens him is demonstrated in his declaration that the rest of the world — including himself — "is not ready to wake up yet"; he wishes that she had "let sleeping dogs lie" (192). He wants Stella "to be quiet, that was all, for both [their] sakes" and so he picks her up "as she was, still talking" and drops her head against the planks of the boat (193).

Jove is unnerved by Stella's volatile energy precisely because his experience of the world depends heavily on what is material, what is tangible. He fears nothing more than the unknowable, represented here by the most unknowable element of all: his own death. Confronted with its possibility, Jove's response is to retain a sense of his own concreteness by testing the boundaries of his corporeality. As he states: "I kept my sanity by making little cuts in my arm with a filleting knife. As long as it hurt, I was real, I was alive" (194). Not only does his self-mutilation provide Jove with the illusion that he is entirely in control of the situation, it simultaneously re-situates him back into the material container of his body; the solid dimensions that frame his experience serve to guarantee his own impenetrable subjectivity. His cannibalism evidences another response: when faced with the prospect of its dissolution, Jove seeks to augment his matter, to have more than what can be taken away by eating his wife. His consumption of Stella is representative of his attitude that matter is equated with life, while energy connotes death. Indeed, for him Stella personifies both energy and death, a living and breathing embodiment of his fear of the unknown.

## **VI. Stratifying, Destratifying, and the Flows of Desire**

Much like Jove, Alice's father also exhibits an avowed fear of nothingness, which manifests in his deep-rooted dissatisfaction and subsequent depression. However, he differs from Jove in that he has two identities that cannot be easily reconciled: the working-class "thug" from the seaside town of Mersy and the respectable, profitable businessman that he becomes. He never truly fits into either role, and finds himself lost in the middle of the "man and his mask"; Alice states that her father died long before his

actual death, and the man left behind is nothing more than a “counterfeit” who “wears his clothes” (54). Clothing, as Alice recognizes, plays a large role in David’s attempts to concretize a more stable, knowable identity for himself. His work attire, for instance, appears to save him “from the disruptive forces of depth”; nonetheless, although his “pressure suit” might serve to frame his body, the skin underneath becomes “secret even to himself” (144, 148). David takes advantage of his wife’s wardrobe as well, believing that “if his wife were part of him so were her clothes. She was his rib and as such he too wore a silk shift. He loved her clothes, loved to see her dressed up, it satisfied a part of him that was deeper than vanity. It was a part of himself” (58).

“Deeper than vanity” suggests an unconscious desire to build up the solid dimensions he felt were missing. Unlike Jove, David struggles to conceal his suspicion: that there is nothing knowable or concrete beneath the garments after all. For instance, he also likes to perform magic tricks as a hobby, which signifies an underlying recognition of a spectral, illusory world — as a magician, it is a world over which he can express some control. However, David ultimately becomes “his own conjuring trick: the impression of something solid when what was solid had vanished away. He had become his clothes. He had become his job” (159). Upon apprehending that he still possesses an “impossible lack” despite his best attempts to clothe it, he holds his new babe Alice in front of the mirror and conflates their reflections, absorbing her into himself. He was “anxious, intent, gazing at [Alice] as if [she] could reveal to him what he was” (60). Like Jove, he too is willing to ingest the other in order to build up the psychic armour that his clothes could not.

Jove and David's various attempts to protect their corporeal boundaries from dismantlement are, of course, futile. David begins to "corrode inside" his suit, but "[f]ixedly gazing ahead, [he] pretends not to notice. He did not notice that the sun on the sun-dial told a different story than the one he was telling himself" (144-5). Directly prior to the chapter describing David's passing, aptly titled after the Tarot card Death, the novel includes a short story that breaks the narrative for a brief two pages. The parable describes three friends who have boarded the Ship of Fools, setting out on a quest to find gold, wives, and that which cannot be found. Successful in their first two missions, and with their boat loaded down with riches and women, they arrive at their third objective only to discover that what cannot be found has found them:

*They heard a noise behind them like a scythe cutting the water and when they looked round they saw a ship thin as a blade gaining towards them. The figure rowed it standing up, with one oar, but it was not an oar. They saw the curve of the metal flashing, first this side, then that. They saw the rower throw back his hood. They saw him beckon to them and the world tilted. The sea poured away. Who are they with fish and starfish in their hair? (141, emphasis in original)<sup>33</sup>*

Here we circle back to the novel's extensive water imagery, aligning death with outside forces that exceed corporeality. In *The Nick of Time*, Grosz acknowledges that matter

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<sup>33</sup> The same story appears in Winterson's book of short stories, *The World and Other Places* (1999).



“and along with it, life, is finite, [...] always outstripped and overcome by the (infinite) passage of time. Time is an active force, not reducible to the forces of matter, which nevertheless confronts both life and matter as their internal limit” (114). Jove and David refuse to confront this reality as a result of their masculine association with mastery: namely, their perceived mastery of bodies that matter. Masculinity is therefore particularly resistant to the unbinding realities of space-time.

However, Jove and David’s reliance on materiality is not necessarily a gendered trait, as Stella’s father, Ishmael, demonstrates with his uprooting of the binary separating matter from space-time: like Alice and Stella, he too believes that energy precedes matter. His involvement with Kabbalah provides yet another fruitful connection to Paracelsus; paralleling the alchemist’s theory that “as above, so below,” followers of the esoteric Jewish sect believe “[e]very blade of grass that grows here on earth has its corresponding in the stars” (Winterson 2, 77). Ishmael further forges a bridge between Kabbalism and Deleuzian nomadism with his own interest in theoretical physics. As Stella relates:

He had been close to Werner Heisenberg whose strange notions of simultaneous absence and presence of matter had stimulated Papa into investigations of his own. In the paradoxes of Kabbalah he found the paradoxes of new physics. When Heisenberg told him that every object can be understood as a point (finite, bounded, specific) and as a wave function (spreading infinitely though concentrated at different rates), Papa wanted to discover whether or not he could move himself along his own wave function, at will,

whilst alive in his body. If gross matter is reducible to atoms, and the atom itself subject to unending division, then the reality of matter is conceptual.  
(168)

Heisenberg's proposal equips Ishmael with the idea that one must not be afraid that matter will cease to exist upon the subject's recognition that the matter of its body is reducible, divisible and conceptual. Ishmael here represents the assemblages of the BwO. Life and death do not matter because assemblages cannot die. They can only break down, but this breaking down is actually a necessity; in order for movement to endure, the various segments of assemblages must continually be dismantling and attaching to other continually dismantling and attaching segments of assemblages.

In attempting to concretize the matter of the bodies, Jove and David continually stratify which only ends up prohibiting them from connecting with the other, causing their subsequent inability to unify. Ishmael, on the other hand, actively pursues the deterritorialization of his own materiality. Stella explains her father's interest in religion: "The method of Kabbalah is to free the individual from conceptual frameworks, which are all and always provisional. Could Papa escape himself by himself? Could he be his own gateway?" (168). She provides an account of Ishmael's ritual: he would wait patiently for a full moon, retreat to a dark room above his bookstore and holding onto glowing topaz stones, he half-sang and half-chanted so that "a thin wire of sound [connected] him to the encircling light, the Or Makif, that must be drawn in" (81). Hebrew for "Encompassing Light," Or Makif is a garment of light that encircles Ishmael, facilitating the interaction between his interior energy (or soul, in Kabbalist terms) and

his exterior surroundings (Pinson 56-8). This light disrupts the corporeal boundary by transforming it: blanketing Ishmael, becoming the skin through which his sensory capacities experience the physical world. Unlike David's clothes, this new skin, however, is not concrete or material but intangible, eluding touch. Thus, it is no longer a concrete barrier but blurred and indefinite, allowing Ishmael's soul to *feel* its mergings with the plane of immanence (temporarily, at least).

Ishmael's specific interpretation of Kabbalism takes part in the same inquisitive quest as Jove's GUTs; both are searching for the unity of the one, for a BwO that has no boundaries. Jove, who dismissively refers to his father-in-law as a "wild man," refuses to forsake his materiality (Winterson 190). Ishmael, on the other hand, forsakes it too much. The BwO refuses to organize or stratify the body (and its organs) into a coherent, recognizable property, but there is always the danger of going too far. In *Volatile Bodies*, Grosz distinguishes between a healthy BwO and an empty one. A "healthy" one, as she affirms, possesses only the amount of cohesion necessary to prevent annihilation (171). Ishmael loses track of the material altogether. For instance, in his desire to "see as much as it was possible to see while inside the limitations of reality" he often engages in fasts, depriving his body of essential nutrients (Winterson 178). He also admits to Stella that he had been "experimenting to increase his body's revolutions" — whether or not this accounts for the rare form of cancer that he develops, which doubled the normal cardiac cycle and hurtled his blood "at waterfall rate" through his body, remains unclear (168, 167). He decides to curtail the disease by taking his own life, bleeding himself out in a galvanized bathtub. However, according to Deleuze and Guattari, dismantling the

organism never meant killing it but rather allowing the body to become open “to connections that presuppose an entire assemblage” (*Thousand Plateaus* 177):

You have to keep enough of the organism for it to reform each dawn [...] You don't reach the BwO and its plane of consistency by wildly destratifying. [...] If you free it with too violent an action, if you blow apart the strata without taking precautions, then instead of drawing the plane you will be killed, plunged into a black hole, or even dragged toward catastrophe. Staying stratified — organized, signified, subjected — is not the worst that can happen; the worst that can happen is if you throw the strata into demented or suicidal collapse, which bring them back down on us heavier than ever. (178)

The obsessive nature of Ishmael's ritualistic practices implies that he *wants* to experience total annihilation of the body, that he believes death will bring him closer to the wholeness he seeks. Deleuze and Guattari, however, are careful to avoid “invoking any kind of death drive. There are no internal drives in desire, only assemblages. Desire is always assembled; it is what the assemblage determines it to be” (253).

In terms of Deleuzian philosophies, therefore, Alice and Stella are most successful in approximating the unity that David, Jove, and Ishmael all strive to obtain. As Dorothea Olkowski clarifies in her article “Flows of Desire and the Body-Becoming,” possessing a healthy BwO is not just a body that is “trying to remain fluid,” but is more importantly about “resisting the imposition of certain kinds of desiring-machines by the social formation of social machines in the midst of a society that wants to limit this body

to certain restricted parameters” (109). In *Gut Symmetries*, Alice only finds relief from the violent hierarchy of the heterosexist binary when she stumbles into a relationship with Stella, which, as she states, allows her to feel a sense of “authentic desire” for the first time (Winterson 120): “The reflecting image of a woman with a woman is seductive. I enjoyed looking at her in a way that was forbidden to me, this self on self, self as desirer and desired, had a frankness to it I had not been invited to discover. Desiring her I felt my own desirability” (119). She further describes the experience of sex with Stella: “I could have rested there beside her, perhaps forever, it felt like forever, a mirror confusion of bodies and sighs, undifferentiated, she in me, me in she and no longer exhausted by someone else’s shape over mine. And I had not expected such intense physical pleasure” (119). Grice and Woods assert that Winterson uses “the language of narcissism in order to describe Alice and Stella’s mutual gaze” (124); however, the above passage not only anticipates the inclination to characterize lesbian sex as narcissistic, but also refutes it. As Alice quite adamantly insists, it was not herself that she fell in love with, but Stella (Winterson 119).

Although Alice is careful to make this distinction between her own self and the other, the dichotomy is nonetheless ruptured, as there is no physical separation between their bodies. They disintegrate into one another and into their surrounding environment, no longer separated by a phallogocentric discourse fundamentally founded on difference. Alice states of their union: “It was an act of power but not power over her. I was my own conquest” (119). As Merleau points out, the “violent trope of cannibalism is [...] replaced by the orality of lesbian erotics” (Merleau 96): “Her breasts as my breasts her mouth as my mouth” (Winterson 121). Here, their relationship is not rooted in a binary; one does

not absorb the other to augment the self. Nor is it dependent on possession of the concrete, material body and this is precisely what distinguishes Alice's coupling with Stella from the other relationships in the novel. The collapse of concrete corporeal surfaces engendered by their assembling means that they are able to fuse with the exterior space-time that surrounds them, reflecting the "infant theory of hyperspace, where all the seeming dislocations and separations of the atomic and subatomic worlds are unified into a co-operating whole" (2). Here the body becomes integrated with its seemingly "exterior" surroundings at the most micro level possible: the molecular.

## **VII. Conclusion**

To return briefly to the Einsteinian framework invoked at the beginning of my close reading, Alice and Stella are assembled to one another not just through the connective tissue of their desire, but also from within the forces of space and time — collapsing the boundaries between their bodies and between the inside and the outside. At the novel's conclusion, Alice affirms: "I could not fully distinguish which was my father/myself, Stella/Uta, whether the distance we imagine separates one event from another had folded up, leaving the two clock faces to slide together, plates of time, synchronous" (199). In this instance, *Gut Symmetries* demonstrates the extent to which materiality is comprised of continually attaching and detaching assemblages of preexisting components. The notion is encapsulated by the basic rudiment of Ishmael's belief, which he imparts to Stella: "Since the beginning of time you and I have been sitting here [...] What do you not know that there is in you now, a Caesar, a Raphael, a tear of Mozart, the ended bowel problems of Napoleon at Waterloo?" (208). Indeed, this

conviction reverberates through each of the narrative's multifarious layers, as they are outlined in the prologue: Time, Universe, Love Affair, New York, Ship of Fools, Jew, Diamond, Dream, Working-Class Boy, Baby, River, Matter. All of these narratological aspects remain relative to one another, interconnected, always assembling and disassembling. In this way, the novel itself takes on the form of a BwO: rather than knitting together all of these various assemblages into a linear, cohesive organization, *Gut Symmetries* instead allows them their chaos.

In a review entitled "On the High Seas of Romance," Katy Emck accuses Winterson of attempting "to unify a bunch of loosely incompatible ideas about the universe" (21). However, I argue that Emck might have misinterpreted the novel's intention; the narrative does not unify anything. Rather, the plot's various layers overlap in way that are messy and confusing and, therefore, the nomadic, rhizomatic form of *Gut Symmetries* actually provides an accurate representation of the way the universe functions. The novel's disorderly structure can be explained by Grosz's description of the underlying state (or lack of state) of all energies:

Chaos is not the absence of order but rather the fullness or plethora that, depending on its uneven speed, force, and intensity, is the condition both for any model or activity and for the undoing and transformation of such models or activities. The concept of chaos is also known or invoked through the concepts of: the outside, the real, the virtual, the world, materiality, nature, totality, the cosmos, each of which is a narrowing and specification of chaos from a particular point of view. Chaos cannot be identified with any one of these

terms but is the very condition under which such terms are capable of being confused, the point of their overlap and intensification. (*Chaos, Territory, Art* 26-7)

It is certainly not my intention to imply that *Gut Symmetries* unifies every element in the universe and thus achieves the unity of oneness that all of the characters appear to be seeking. Rather, I contend that the novel embraces the chaos inherent in space-time slippages and energy exchanges, while simultaneously providing a multitude of options for re-thinking how the body as we know it has been made to matter. Only then can we begin to re-conceive desire, unhooked from the phallogentric, heteronormative “points of subjectification” that aim to not only secure those ideologies, but physically “nail us down to a dominant reality” (Deleuze and Guattari *Thousand Plateaus* 177). *Gut Symmetries* refuses to provide a fixed ground but instead focuses its attention on the pre-personal forces of space, time, and energy, and the connections among disparate elements. Although the lack of anything concrete or solid may serve to threaten our (gendered) subjectivity, as Alice notes in the novel’s final line, “[w]hatever it is that pulls the pin, that hurls you past the boundaries of your own life into a brief and total beauty, even for a moment, it is enough” (Winterson 219).



## CHAPTER THREE

### **Collapsing the Real/Virtual Binary: Desiring Beyond Bodies in *The PowerBook* and *The Stone Gods***

*“We think we live in a world of sense-experience and what we can touch and feel, see and hear, is the sum of our reality.” — Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery**

#### **I. Introduction and Overview of Posthumanism**

In my first chapter, I examined the interweaving relations among discourse, gender, desire, and the body in *Written on the Body* (1992), and explored the novel’s use of fantasy in disentangling these culturally mediated connections. In the second, I analyzed the ways in which *Gut Symmetries* (1997) collapses the discursively constituted boundaries of the corporeal through its reconsideration of the energies, atoms, wave oscillations, etc. that comprise both the body and its environment. Both novels are demonstrative of Winterson’s ongoing interest in *virtuality*: the dimension of the intangible, in which the Kantian “thing-in-itself” or the essence of the thing takes precedence over concrete forms, that which cannot be seen but still *matters*. Winterson’s next two novels, *The PowerBook* (2000) and *The Stone Gods* (2007) also engage with virtuality, in their explorations of how the rapidly evolving fields of computer science and technology can be re-articulated in ways that both disrupt and move beyond restrictive identity categories as inscribed upon the corporeal form. By undermining the stability of the body, the gendered and heteronormative discourses imprinted upon its surface are simultaneously unsettled; this shift in how bodies are perceived can open up new possibilities, new ways of experiencing desire and pleasure. Focusing predominantly

on the work of Katherine N. Hayles and Donna Haraway, my close reading analyses of *The PowerBook* and *The Stone Gods* examines what might happen to desire, not in the absence of the body necessarily, but in the absence of its physical there-ness. *The PowerBook*'s focus on cyberspace is a blend of the fantastical imaginings of *Written on the Body* and *Gut Symmetries*' focus on immaterial realms, while *The Stone Gods* envisions a future world wherein technology has all but replaced biology.

*The PowerBook* takes place mostly online and contains a series of both fictional and re-imagined historical stories that are framed by a larger, more conventionally realistic narrative; *The Stone Gods* is situated within the genre of post-apocalyptic science fiction. Despite the differences in structure, *The PowerBook* and *The Stone Gods* are each representative of a paradigmatic shift that is happening here in the early stages of the twenty-first century with the emergence and growing pervasiveness of internet technologies. The era of humanism, with its promise of a safe and securely unified subjectivity, has been disrupted by an onslaught of recent innovations. We are living in what Hayles calls the age of informatics and describes as "the late capitalist mode of flexible accumulation; the hardware and software that have merged telecommunications with computer technology; and the patterns of living that emerge from and depend upon instant transmission of information and access to large data banks" ("Materiality of Informatics" 149). The patterns of living detailed here by Hayles have changed in tandem with the introduction of the internet; the transference of meaning is now more rapid, multifaceted and slippery than ever before. As a result, the humanist version of subjectivity has become increasingly prone to destabilization, giving way to posthumanism.

Which is not to say that posthumanism did not exist until the inception of the internet; in fact, posthumanism has had a long and prolific history, although the date of its origination is not generally agreed upon. Computers, artificial intelligence, robots, and anything that questions the Enlightenment conception of “humanism...” — the subject matter of *The PowerBook* and *The Stone Gods* — have been stirring up cultural anxieties since Taylorism and the initiation of mechanized industrialism, according to George Canguihelm: “With Frederick Taylor and the first technicians to make scientific studies of work-task movements, the human body was measured as if it functioned like a machine. [...] But the realization that technologically superfluous movements were biologically necessary movements was the first stumbling block to be encountered by those who insisted on viewing the problem of the human-body-as-machine in exclusively technological terms” (Canguihelm 63). Hence, these “posthuman” bodies were a hybrid: both human and technological at once.<sup>34</sup> Taking a different approach, Rosi Braidotti discusses posthumanity in relation to the post-Darwinian case of Dolly the sheep. In 1996, Dolly was first animal to be cloned with the use of adult somatic cell. She was born from three separate mothers: one provided the egg; the other provided DNA; the other, the womb. As Braidotti argues in her work *The Posthuman* (2013), Dolly destabilizes the biological narrative, as “simultaneously the last specimen of her species — descended

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<sup>34</sup> An excellent example of Taylorism can be found in Henry Ford’s employment of the assembly line. Fordism is satirized in the 1921 comedy *Modern Times*, written and directed by the film’s star Charlie Chaplin. In the film, the tramp works for on an ever-accelerating assembly line, fastening nuts onto pieces of machinery. Unable to keep up with the rate of production, he suffers a nervous breakdown that is made figurative by the factory’s physical collapse. The machine and the worker becoming one.

from the lineage of sheep that were conceived and reproduced as such — and the first specimen of a new species: the electronic sheep that Philip K. Dick once imagined, the forerunner of the androids society of *Blade Runner*”: a body without a history (74).

*Blade Runner* is a film based on Dick’s 1968 *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, a novel which attempts to redefine humanity in light of the impact of technology on the cultural psyche. Braidotti’s citation of Dick is not unexpected; he is often considered the (anti-biological) father of literary posthumanism, and critics still marvel at his foresight. His decades-old novels anticipate much of the ambivalence concerning posthuman cyberculture, as potentially infringing upon the boundaries on both a macro (society) and micro (subjectivity) level. In a 1972 lecture entitled “The Android and the Human,” Dick addresses the crumbling divide between humans and machine:

Our environment, and I mean our man-made world of machines, artificial constructs, computers, electronic systems, interlinking homeostatic components — all of this is in fact beginning more and more to possess what the earnest psychologists fear the primitive sees in his environment: animation. In a very real sense our environment is becoming alive, or at least quasi-alive, and in ways specifically and fundamentally analogous to ourselves. (183)

In 1950, Alan Turing’s “Imitation Game,” as proposed in his paper “Computing Machinery and Intelligence,” surveyed the ability of artificial intelligence to inhabit behaviour indistinguishable from that of a human. The test requires three subjects: two humans and one computer. One of the humans asks the same question to both the other

human and the computer, and must guess which answer came from which based on the written responses.<sup>35</sup> Just recently, a ChatBot made headlines when it became the first program to successfully pass the Imitation Game, fooling judges of the 2014 Turing test competition into believing that they were speaking to a living-and-breathing teenage boy living in the Ukraine (Dewey “Chatbot”).<sup>36</sup>

The internet makes even more possible the kinds of animation that Dick describes in his speech as the “quasi-alive.” Winterson, Haraway and Hayles alike are primarily interested in how this form of animation continues to break down the distinction between “real” bodies and virtuality: their work collectively responds to rising concerns regarding the effects of internet technologies on the body, and how these effects might give rise to a different kind of desiring process, one untangled from the heteronormative narrative. In his 1977 article “Prometheus as Performer: Towards a Posthumanist Culture?,” also quoted in the epigraph to Hayles’s first chapter in *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (1999), Ihab Hassan states: “We need

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<sup>35</sup> As Hayles points out, the first example of the Turing test had participants use a computer to communicate with a person in another room; at the end of their discussion, the participant would guess whether or not they were conversing with a woman or a man. For Hayles, the trial raises some provocative questions: “If your failure to distinguish correctly between human and machine proves that machines can think, what does it prove if you fail to distinguish woman from man? Why does gender appear in this primal scene of humans meeting their evolutionary successors, intelligent machines? What do gendered bodies have to do with the erasure of embodiment and the subsequent merging of machine and human intelligence in the figure of the cyborg?” (*How We Became* xii). As she asserts, the test proves that the relationship between enacted and represented bodies is mediated by a technology that is from the start intertwined with preexisting identity categories (xiii).

<sup>36</sup> A ChatBot is a computer-simulation program that has been designed to have intelligent conversations with its human users.

first to understand that the human form — including human desire and all its external representations — may be changing radically, and thus must be re-visioned. We need to understand that five hundred years of humanism may be coming to an end as humanism transforms itself into something that we must helplessly call post-human” (Hassan 212). While this particular vision of posthumanism is one of vulnerability, Winterson, Hayles, and Haraway (decades later) offer something far more empowered. Informed by these various machinic, bio-technical and literary versions (examples of which I have related above) — and the information element of the computational machine is really a byproduct of their continuing evolution — they each explore, in vigorous and productive ways, how our constant engagement with technology might be altering the lines of what *The PowerBook* calls “our laptop DNA,” moving away from the gender and sex categories that activated the body as it was understood within the scope of humanism (4).

In the era of posthumanism, the signifiers attributed to corporeality need no longer be presumptively attached to an actual, physically realized body. In the virtual world, there is no flesh-and-blood tangibility upon which meaning can be attached, begetting the question: how do corporeal inscriptions function when the other, the person on the other side of the computer, has no externally visible body, when there is only a screen to gaze upon and touch? *The PowerBook*’s protagonist Ali/x must navigate the realm of cyberspace in order to connect with her married lover, a woman known only to readers by her online avatar, Tulip.<sup>37</sup> What the novel examines, then, is how the body negotiates

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<sup>37</sup> The name “Tulip” calls to mind Luce Irigaray’s *This Sex Which is Not One* (1977), in which she states that although female sexuality is often subsumed by the “dominant

feelings of desire in the absence of not only tactility, but also the other senses — sight, smell, taste, and hearing. Does their affair become less “real” in the absence of physicality?

Like *The PowerBook*, *The Stone Gods* also troubles the humanist binary between reality and unreality, by exploring the relationship between corporeality and desire through the disruptive figure of the cyborg, as imagined by Haraway. The novel illustrates the closing gap between human beings and technology, here made manifest by a love affair between a cybernetically altered human hybrid named Billie, and Spike, her incredibly sophisticated robot lover/companion. As we will see, bodily boundaries unravel in at least one storyline in the novel, as Billie merges into Spike’s metallic and corrosion-resistant frame. Billie finally forsakes her claim to the idea that she is *only* human and accepts herself for the cyborg she always was, disengaging from the limitations of her socially inscribed body.

My analysis of *The PowerBook* and *The Stone Gods* examines how desiring bodies have been impacted by our new and still evolving alliance with technology, in ways that might radically transform structures of identity and power. I situate my reading of each novel within current debates concerning posthumanism and cyborgs, referring often to the work of the aforementioned Hayles and Haraway. Haraway is best known for her essay “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the

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phallic economy,” pleasure for woman is always autoerotic in that the female sex organ is comprised of “two lips” that are in “continuous contact” (24). This argument eventually expands to include the erasure of all dichotomous sex and gender categories, in ways that resemble *The PowerBook*’s own agenda.

Late Twentieth Century,” which was written over thirty years ago in 1983. Despite its age, this piece has not only continued to be relevant but also should be considered prophetic in the ways that it anticipates culture’s increased and ever increasing dependence on digital technologies.

In “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Haraway defines the cyborg as a chimera of disparate parts that are continually coming together, positioning — or rather, *un*-positioning — bodies in a state of constant transformation. For her, cyborgs are inherently political; in examining how bodies have evolved in their relationship with machines, other binaries that rely on a stable definition of what it means to be human are subsequently thrown into question. Haraway notes that the destabilization of humanism particularly influences how the categories of male and female are able to operate; as she posits, cyborgs perform the task of “undoing gender” as they are able to uproot power structures that have long relied on biological sex as a point of justification. However, I also see a potential danger inherent in misreading Haraway, and in doing so, perceiving the cyborg as the solution to the violent hierarchies embedded in gender dynamics — for we cannot simply forgo the body, pretend that it does not exist, that we are not still physically limited by our physicality. Haraway does not wish to collapse “man” and “machine” but rather, wants us to view the cyborg body as a very *active* component in what Hayles calls “the unfolding story of how a historically specific construction called *the human is giving way to a different construction called the posthuman*” (*How We Became*, emphasis in original).

According to Hayles, this different construction is a product of recent advancements in cybernetics: the escalating use of internet technologies, something portrayed exemplarily by Winterson in *The PowerBook*. Similar to Haraway, Hayles



argues that it precisely this intervention of technology into lived reality that transforms the body into cyborgity. In *How We Became Posthuman*, Hayles builds upon Haraway's definition of the cyborg as something that continually attaches, detaches and reattaches at different entry points to an evolving polymorphous and rhizomatic information system, one that transforms the subject into "a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self" (163). Much like cyborgity, she observes that posthumanism also "privileges informational pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life" (2). As Hayles asserts, this means that the discourse of biology can no longer be appropriated successfully to ossify sex as an identity category.

As Erik Davis clarifies in his review of the work:

One of the central threads in [Hayles's] story is how information lost its body — that is, how information came to be seen as an abstract, almost transcendental stuff that could "circulate unchanged among different material substrates." Once we begin to believe that information is more essential than material forms, we vacate the old cosmos defined by presence and absence, entering a world characterized by the binary feedback of pattern and randomness, signal and noise. We leave the clearing and enter the screen. (Davis "The Posthuman Touch")

The presence/absence binary is a crucial dynamic, and one that I will examine further in my discussion of *The PowerBook*. However, the idea of an "absent" body has led to a

misinterpretation of Hayles's argument, which is that she is dismissing materiality in favour of a new, disembodied virtual future. In fact, she continually voices her concern that embodiment has been "systematically downplayed or erased in the cybernetic construction of the posthuman" (*How We Became* 4). Hayles is careful to reassert that the posthuman body is still a body: information has lost its physical figure, but this does not mean that human consciousness can be downloaded into a computer. Information and consciousness are not one and the same. That point made, Hayles nonetheless recognizes that the loss of *information's* body does impact the ways in which we experience our own material bodies and the bodies that we encounter. Reality no longer seems as concrete or substantial as it once did in the era of humanism, as it is always already mediated by technology that finds its basis in components of virtuality.

Although the actuality of technology has long been the focus of cyborg theory, self-construction is of equal importance. The power of fantasy is particularly evident in the subject's navigations through cyberspace, as it must not only create a version of itself to project, but the *other* is likewise grounded in elements of the subject's ideal version of itself. The internet, however, is just another avenue for narrative, albeit one that is able to disconnect from the material world; we have always fantasized ourselves and the other into being, but now this projection has taken on a new form. The final aspect of my argument closely considers cyborg writing and the destabilization of origin myths, particularly illustrated in *The Stone Gods*, examining how desiring bodies and the narratives that have long been inscribed upon them are impacted when digital technologies have surpassed biological narratives; humans are now able to modify their bodies in ways that go beyond their organic foundations. Winterson, Hayles and Haraway

all seem to agree that humans therefore can no longer be considered *just* human. What Winterson's work explores, then, is how our changing sense of who/what we are impacts how we desire, in ways that overthrow the restrictive gender binaries essential to humanism.

## **II. *The PowerBook's* Thin Partitions: Breaking down the Divide between Reality and the Screen**

As this chapter moves through Winterson's version of virtuality, from posthumanism to cyborgs, from cyborgs to Robo *sapiens*, I examine how these two novels undermine the reality/virtuality dichotomy, a dichotomy that, like subject/object and inside/outside, has been a key player in the regimenting of gender and sex categories. A few of Winterson's previous works also take up with the emergence of internet technologies; however, the characters in these novels often express apprehension regarding virtual spaces. For instance, in his/her discussion of online dating websites, *Written on the Body's* otherwise sexually uninhibited narrator reveals that s/he perceives online dating sites with some degree of ambivalence:

If you like, you may live in a computer-created world all day and all night. You will be able to try out a Virtual life with a Virtual lover. You can go into your Virtual house and do Virtual housework, add a baby or two, even find out if you'd rather be gay. Or single. Or straight. Why hesitate when you could simulate?

And sex? Certainly. Teledildonics is the word. You will be able to plug in your telepresence to the billion-bundle network of fibre optics criss-crossing the world and join your partner in Virtuality. Your real selves will be wearing body suits made up of thousands of tiny tactile detectors per square inch. Courtesy of the fiberoptic network these will receive and transmit touch. The Virtual epidermis will be as sensitive as your own outer layer of skin. (98-9)<sup>38</sup>

Although the narrator does not sound particularly alarmed at this point, s/he is certainly careful to draw a divisive line between “real” bodies and the suits that will clothe them. There is a presentiment here about the potential loss of control over one’s own reality, which really emerges in the statement that follows his/her description of dating websites: “The scientists say I can choose but how much choice have I over their other inventions? My life is not my own, shortly I shall have to haggle over my reality” (99). The relative newness of the virtual reality experience, in addition to the accelerated rate at which various channels of communication are being produced, also contributes to the narrator’s already suspicious attitude. S/he is quick to associate them with technological inventions that emerged in tandem, with a similar speed and proliferation, warning Louise that

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<sup>38</sup> This passage is at the center of Lisa Moore’s “Teledildonics: Virtual lesbians in the fiction of Jeanette Winterson,” from *Sexy Bodies: The Strange Carnalities of Feminism* edited by Elizabeth Grosz and Elspeth Probyn. As Moore points out, this passage “makes explicit the narrative strategies that structure the ambiguous status of lesbianism in Winterson’s fiction. Even while it insists upon a constant deferral of fixed sexual identities (‘gay... single... straight’), Winterson’s fiction imagines the space in which such deferral can take place as linguistically or imaginatively lesbian — for example, in the way the word ‘teledildonics’ as a term for ‘virtually’ are sexual possibilities playfully summons up the lesbian sex toy, the dildo” (105).

“[s]hortly the pseudo-lab coat approach of dating by details will make way for a genuine experiment whose results, however unusual, will remain controllable. Or so they say. (See splitting the atom, gene therapy, in vitro fertilisation, cross hormone cultures, even the humble cathode ray for similar statements)” (96).

All of the narrator’s concerns regarding technology are connected to the transformation of corporeality into a sort of simulacrum: that in its detachment from the felt, sensuous, material world, the body itself will become unneeded and therefore deserted, which means the subject that inhabits this body will also be — perhaps most frighteningly for our libidinous narrator — celibate. I contend that the narrator’s specific fears are indicative of the larger cultural anxiety that materialized in concordance with the novel’s publication in 1992, that virtual selves might eventually come to subsume lived, embodied experience. The threat here, however unreasonable, is that the “real” body will become viewed as unnecessary, that the “virtual epidermis” that phantasmically superimposes the skin will end up replacing it. In his article “Body Languages: Scientific and Aesthetic Discourses in Jeanette Winterson’s *Written on the Body*,” Gregory Rubinson shares a similar view of the narrator’s unease, one that also borrows from Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981):

Scientific advances threaten to render material reality and the body superfluous, a symptom diagnosed by a pathologist of postmodernity such as Baudrillard when he asserts that the (post)modern era is characterized by the virtualization of the real. The individual, according to Baudrillard, no longer actively engages with objects in the environment, but increasingly becomes a

terminal of multiple networks, participating in all the activities of life — work, play, social relations, consumption, and others — telematically or, in other words, through virtual reality (Ecstasy 129). (6)

The detachment from reality (and thus, the material body) is represented in *Written on the Body* by Elgin and his preoccupation with computer simulations: as the narrator notes, although he is a cancer specialist, he “hasn’t been in a terminal care ward for ten years. He sits in a multi-million pound laboratory in Switzerland and stares at a computer” (67). Technology has allowed him to remain at a remove. In his “real” life, Elgin does not enjoy interacting in physical time with his patients; virtual reality enables him to keep them sequestered on the other side of the screen, where their diseased, disintegrating, abject bodies cannot pose a threat to the cogency of his own corporeal boundaries. While Elgin seeks the detachment that computer simulations can offer, the narrator feels that physical, tangible experience is far more authentic. However, s/he is limited throughout the novel by his/her enforcement of the reality/unreality binary, and ultimately ends up reproducing harmful and restrictive dichotomies. It is only at the end of the novel, when Louise appears in an ambiguous, arguably non-material form, that the division between real and virtual begins to unravel. And yet, we need the body still; the body exists as the interface for the virtual experience, a concept that Winterson explores more thoroughly in *The PowerBook*.

Published eight years following *Written on the Body*, *The PowerBook* inhabits a far more comfortable and generally more positive relationship with the internet, one that is reflective of our society’s growing reliance on electronic media. In many ways,

*The PowerBook* actually shares more in common with the novel that came directly before it, *Gut Symmetries*; as Katherine Cox states in her essay “Knotting up the Cat’s Cradle: Exploring Time and Space in Winterson’s Novels,” cyberspace in *The PowerBook* permits a version of time that opposes the more chronologically linear or “straight” narrative, enabling us to think against the dominant arrangement of time and history in ways that allow for new kinds of encounters (50). As my second chapter infers, Cox’s statement is also applicable to *Gut Symmetries*. And certainly, *The PowerBook* is similar to the other works in Winterson’s oeuvre, in that its primary goal remains the destabilization of dominant narratives. For instance, the novel privileges multiple narratives rather than just one, weaving historical tales and current into one fabric in a way that emulates her earlier works such as *The Passion* (1987), *Sexing the Cherry* (1989), and even *Gut Symmetries*, if we consider the narrative’s inclusion of intersecting familial histories.

With that comparison made, it is worth noting that in *Gut Symmetries*, the characters insist on communicating through written letters rather than email, and here we can see Winterson taking up new tools — or *techne* — as they become available to her. *The PowerBook* also distinguishes itself structurally, as its composition mirrors the same cybernetic technologies that the protagonist uses to seduce Tulip. For example, although some copies of the novel assume the title *The PowerBook*, the original version, published by Jonathan Cape in 2000, adopts the title as Winterson had intended it: *The PowerBook*. The placement of the period in between the definite article and the noun, in addition to the absence of spacing, mimics the URL address of an internet web page. The novel’s interior composition also imitates aspects of the electronic medium. Some chapters are

named after computer directions, such as “OPEN HARD DRIVE,” “NEW DOCUMENT,” “EMPTY TRASH,” and commence with an image of a computer-simulated icon, suggesting hypertext — as if we could move the mouse and click on it, bringing us elsewhere outside of the novel. In her review of *The PowerBook*, Elaine Showalter observes that although Winterson designs the novel to “suggest the appearance and the technique of virtual reality, with a cover like a computer handbook and chapter divisions of hard drives, icons, and documents,” the work is not so much a “playful postmodern experiment or an investigation of the multiple personalities of e-mail” (Showalter “Eternal Triangles”). Rather, Showalter argues that Winterson engages email as a metaphor “to discuss sexual freedom and power” (“Eternal Triangles”).

Although I agree with Showalter’s assessment to some degree, I do not think we should be so quick to dismiss the narrative’s experimentation as purely metaphorical; cybernetics are also implanted in the novel’s very make up, whereas a metaphorical concept suggests that cybernetics only exist *outside* the narrative, to be applied *to* the narrative. Rather than comparing one entirely different thing to another, as metaphors do, Hayles suggests that narrative and cybernetics are *symbionts* that serve the same purpose: to seek meaning. Hayles forges a connection between narrative and technology by distinguishing the technological aspects of narrative; technology is always a part of narrative, as narrative requires tools to make sense of itself — although as we have seen, these tools are prone to transformation (from printing press to computer code, for example). However, Hayles also recognizes that while narrative may be influenced by technology, technology is just as much a product of narrative. Technology requires narrative to make sense of the binaries, to provide meaning to the codes. In showing their



symbiont relationship, she performs a similar task to that of *The PowerBook*: conflating rather than separating narrative and technology. But this kind of synthesis can appear confusing. Does narrative mould technology, or does technology affect the way our narratives take shape? How does the technologization of narrative, or the narratization of technology impact the ways in which the body is inscribed with meaning?

These are fascinating questions, particularly when considering the impact of discourse on desire, keeping in mind Winterson's contention that, through narrative, bodies have been insinuated to desire what they do not desire.<sup>39</sup> However, such a question partakes in the either/or binary, in that it suggests one must play a more central role than the other. Perhaps instead, we should re-conceive the relationship between narrative and technology as *both-and*, as mutually interdependent rather than separate. As Hayles notes, technology is now in fact so "entwined with the [discursive] production of identity that it can no longer be meaningfully separated from the human subject" (*How We Became* xiv). She explains how bodily narratives have become fragmented; now there is "the enacted body, present in the flesh on one side of the computer screen, and the represented body, produced through the verbal and semiotic markers constituting it in an electronic environment" (xiii). Only "through the technology that connects them," "mutating and flexible machine interfaces" that will inevitably splice one's "will, desire, and perception into a distributed cognitive system" can represented bodies and enacted bodies become synthesized (xiii, 193). This synthesis *is* the posthuman body.

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<sup>39</sup> See: Winterson, *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery*, p. 115.

This account of posthumanism applies to my own analysis of the ways in which cyberspace both *affects* and potentially *effects* desire in *The PowerBook*. Although *The PowerBook*'s adoption of cybernetic elements into the structure of the story marks a departure from the rest of the novels in Winterson's canon, the plot itself nonetheless bears strong resemblance to *Written on the Body* and *Gut Symmetries*. Not only does *The PowerBook*'s storyline revolve around an extramarital affair between two women, but it also contains a discouraging account of heterosexual relationships in general, particularly when it comes to the marriage. And like both *Written on the Body* and *Gut Symmetries*, *The PowerBook* also strives to disentangle desire from the gendered signifiers inscribed onto the body in an attempt to weaken heteronormative institutions and the narratives that have enabled them. However, that the novel takes place in the kind of virtual space that *Written on the Body* and *Gut Symmetries* only mused upon is a point of differentiation.

Ali/x is a story-teller and the owner of an old-fashioned costume shop, who must make arrangements to meet with Tulip online because in the "real" world, Tulip is married and unavailable. Throughout the novel, Ali/x, a self-described "language costumier," conjures up discursive disguises in the form of stories that she emails to Tulip. She composes original tales (some apparently semi-autobiographical) in addition to sending along revisions to famous accounts of "great and ruinous lovers" (Lancelot and Guinevere, Paolo and Francesca da Rimini, George Mallory and Mount Everest) that position herself and Tulip in their place, often in ways that disregard the sex of their bodies (Winterson *T.B* 77). In these worlds created by Ali/x, they can be together. As Barbara Becker states, the cyber-world provides a sense of "liberation and uninhibited

means of constructing oneself”; these virtual encounters allow Ali/x and Tulip a new way of using fantasy to overcome the limitations of physicality (Becker 3). In one of her emails to Tulip, Ali/x declares: “This is where the story starts. Here, in these long lines of laptop DNA. Here we take your chromosomes, twenty-three pairs, and alter your height, eyes, teeth, sex. This is an invented world. You can be free for one night” (Winterson *T.B* 4).

However, it is precisely this sense of freedom that accounts for Tulip’s reluctance. She is a woman both formed and contained by her social role as wife, and feels her subjectivity threatened by the internet’s capacity to un-form and un-contain. As Ali/x relates, inside Tulip’s marriage “there were too many clocks and not enough time. Too much furniture and too little space. Outside her marriage, there would be nothing to hold her, nothing to shape her. The space she found would be outer space. Space without gravity or weight, where bit by bit the self disintegrates” (39). Like Alice’s mother in *Gut Symmetries*, marriage gives Tulip’s world a sense of structure; her identity is fixed into place by her relation to her husband, and to the phallic Law of the Father that he signifies. While such social borders frame her existence, forming her shape, she still has “not enough time” and “too little space” for herself within its enclosure. On the other hand, Tulip believes that without her marriage, there would be nothing but space. She would, in her own words, “disintegrate” into the void. As Tulip continually tells Ali/x, she must remain with her husband in order to “save [her] sense of self” (104). And yet, when talking about her relationship with her husband, Tulip confesses: “You keep the form and habit of what you have, but gradually empty it of meaning” (39). Her matrimonial contract, then, is comparable to the saggy armchair of clichés that Winterson’s work

often finds so troubling.<sup>40</sup> Form and habit may offer a false sense of security, but Tulip's ability to act on her desire for Ali/x is impeded by these very things.

Ali/x spends much of the novel attempting to convince Tulip that what she perceives as material, physical, tangible reality is not as indistinguishable from the virtual world as Tulip might think it to be; her real life is impacted by her play in the virtual world, and so it is a both-and scenario rather than an either/or. Throughout the course of the novel, Ali/x meets Tulip in what she has designated "meatspace" three times, once in Paris, once in Capri, and once in London — however, the lines of reality and virtuality remain blurred, as it is never made entirely clear whether or not these encounters actually transpired in the physical world, or across Ali/x's computer screen. What is a story and what is real? It is a question she asks herself: "I was typing on my laptop, trying to move this story on, trying to avoid endings, trying to collide the real and the imaginary worlds, trying to be sure which is which. The more I write, the more I discover that the partition between real and invented is as thin as a wall in a cheap hotel" (93-4).

This thin partition described by Ali/x is part of what Hayles terms "a reverse feedback loop," in which the operating system is no longer considered a separate "out there" world connected to our environment but rather, is autopoietic. Hayles makes reference to M.C. Escher's reflexive lithograph drawing of one hand drawing another hand that in turn, is drawing the first hand. Reflexivity appears to be a closed system and therefore encounters the danger of the "infinite regress" that characterizes autism (Hayles *How We Became* 9). In his work *Interface Fantasy: A Lacanian Cyborg Ontology* (2009),

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<sup>40</sup> See: Winterson, *Written on the Body*, p. 10, 21, 26, 71, 155, 180.

to which I will return my attention later in this chapter, André Nusselder warns that cyberspace has the potential to quarantine the subject “in a never-ending circuit: one more SMS, one more call, one more image, and one more link to check. ‘Encore!’ When the subject of technoculture gets wrapped up in, or loses itself in, the circuits of communication, it loses its relation with a stabilizing (fantasmatic) reference (as good as real) that rules its desire” (Nusselder 134). However, while Hayles acknowledges the potential for demurral and isolation within this organization, she nonetheless insists that the symbiosis of reflexivity allows us to recognize the world and the self as part of the same processes of construction as both-and rather than either/or, a parallax of real and virtual bleeding into one another. Escher’s image is representative of posthuman theory: subjects activating cyberspace while cyberspace is simultaneously activating them.

Hayles’s work explores how subjects negotiate their symbiotic relationships with intelligent machines — through narrative, which is used to develop computational programs, a narrative which is recognizable and therefore comfortingly familiar. And yet, this narrative must constantly change in relation to transforming technologies. In *How We Became Posthuman*, Hayles expands Lacan’s premise of floating signification, when a signifier lacks a steady referent and is thus unattached to any one meaning, to include signifiers that flicker, the outcome of the “unexpected metamorphoses, attenuations, and dispersions” that languages of digital technology inevitably produce (30).<sup>41</sup> Engaged in a system of flickering signifiers, “it is no longer possible to distinguish meaningfully

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<sup>41</sup> To be clear, Lacan argues that there is no referent: a signifier is always a subject for another signifier.

between biological organism and the information circuits in which the organism is enmeshed” (35). Both subject and machine loop into the other simultaneously. Hayles further clarifies how agency has changed as a result of online activity: “When people begin using their bodies in significantly different ways, either because of technological innovations or other cultural shifts, changing experiences of embodiment bubble up into language, affecting the metaphoric networks at play within culture” (206-207). Whether one chooses to log on or not, nonhuman actors now play a crucial role in the Symbolic. Technology has altered perception. In *The PowerBook*, Ali/x and Tulip’s entire relationship, the ways in which they can express their desire for one another is enabled through a nonhuman acting, puppeted by the humans sitting behind the screen. However, in the absence of physically-realized exchanges, does this mean that their experience has become less real? In the first “invented world” that Ali/x emails to Tulip, she attempts to convince her skeptical lover that they can transgress the real/unreal binary (Winterson *T.B* 4).

### **III. Posthuman Hybrid Bodies (or, a terrible thing to do to a flower?)**

The story that opens the novel is set in late sixteenth century Europe and reads as a playful adaptation of *Orlando* (1928) by Virginia Woolf, one of Winterson’s favourite authors.<sup>42</sup> Although Ali/x’s version takes place several centuries prior to the inception of

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<sup>42</sup> In *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery*, her book of non-fictional essays, Winterson speaks of her admiration for Woolf’s precise style of writing, the “maximum tautness” between her words and her ideas, as well as her fearlessness: “Woolf’s connections across time and space, through the inner and outer worlds of imagination and

cyberspace, this rather unconventional love story parallels what Winterson is doing with the rest of the text: calling into question the classical dichotomy between real and virtual bodies by challenging what it actually means to possess a “real” body. The tale follows a female character, named Ali, who must smuggle a pair of tulip bulbs and a stem from Istanbul into Asia. In order to conceal her envoy, Ali dresses in male clothing and affixes the flower underneath her trousers. She quips: “There are many legends of men being turned into beasts and women into trees, but none I think, till now, of a woman who becomes a man by means of a little horticultural grafting” (12). Of course, this floral phallus does not instantaneously transform Ali’s body into a male one — it remains an entirely separate appendage, one that has been strapped to her corporeal surface. That is, until the bulbs begin to itch.

It is not immediately clear whether Ali can actually feel the bulbs, or if the discomfort is coming from the bulbs rubbing against her skin. However, any confusion is soon clarified by Ali’s very physical response to the Princess. Captured by Turkish pirates on her voyage overseas, Ali is sold as a slave to the royal family, where she is to undertake a particularly delicate job: preparing the Princess for her impending marriage by showing her the ways of love. According to Ali, slavery “wasn’t so bad” (20). Still in disguise, she spends the following weeks caressing the Princess. Connected only by “rivets of pleasure,” Ali kisses her breasts, belly, and then “lower than the belly” (20).

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experience, are made brilliantly, vertiginously, with not a glance over the edge” (73). Winterson was particularly inspired by *Orlando*’s gender-bending and time-tripping narrative, writing: “Orlando pushes through the confines of time, now in a petticoat, now with a cutlass. Love objects, male and female, are appropriately wooed and bedded but not according to the confines of heterosexual desire” (67).

Finally, the “climax” of the story arrives as the Princess demands to see Ali unclothed. The Princess is thrilled with what she finds, which is nothing like the stories she has heard, but beautiful “like a flower” (21). And then, as Ali recounts: “A strange thing began to happen. As the Princess kissed and petted my tulip, my own sensations grew exquisite, but as yet no stronger than my astonishment, as I felt my disguise come to life. The tulip began to stand [...] All afternoon I fucked her” (22).

This moment allegorizes the novel’s overall interest in disrupting prevailing knowledges concerning materiality. Real bodies are made up of organic components, and serve as the site where the psychic interior meets the external world. However, the tulip trespasses the boundaries between Ali’s internal experience and her corporeal exterior — she desires the Princess, and the tulip grows erect. It has become an integral part of her body, transmuting Ali into a hybrid of human and flower. Does this mean that her body is now less real? Winterson correlates this narrative with Ali/x’s posthuman bodily reconfigurations, with a focus on the influence of the internet; like her character’s hybrid flower-body, Ali/x’s cyber-body is also an amalgamation, of human and machine. This extended metaphor is a limited one, as the internet is not physically attached to the flesh-and-blood of the body, like the tulip. In fact, aside from the fingers tapping at the keyboard, the body appears to be disconnected physically from the virtual encounter. Ali/x describes the experience as “disappear[ing] into a web of co-ordinates” (94), and there is a sense here that the internet allows one to leave the body behind, or to borrow Ali/x’s phrasing from the beginning of the novel, take it off and hang it up behind the door.



This very possibility of taking off the body and leaving it behind speaks to the hope of overcoming the limitations imposed by corporeality. Plato, for instance, took a dualistic approach when he argued that the body is the prison house of the soul.<sup>43</sup> Cyber identities, or avatars, create an escape from our physical boundaries. The body's meaning is reduced to a flickering signifier — whether it be an image or a symbol or even text, and these virtual signs need not have any real connection to the subject's actual lived body but are instead related to fantasy.<sup>44</sup> In *The PowerBook*, Ali/x refers to her screen as a “familiar blank space surface” waiting “to be filled” with her stories, her fantasies (237). In *Interface Fantasy*, Nusselder makes a connection between Lacan's depiction of fantasy as a screen, and the computer screen's function as an “interface” or intermediary upon which fantasies can play out (111). Ali/x positions herself in multiple bodies: a seventeenth century version of herself, Lancelot, Francesca, George Malory. These avatars allow her “I” to extend itself outside of her body, to (fantasmagorically) fulfill the lack that bodies in the Symbolic necessarily engender. For Nusselder, the make-up of cyberspace in fact mirrors the operations of language, as in Lacan's terms, “the subject of

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<sup>43</sup> From *Phaedo*, in *Plato: The Complete Works* (1997) in which Plato also states: “We will be closest to the knowledge if we refrain as much as possible from association with the body” (245).

<sup>44</sup> In *How We Became Posthuman*, Hayles writes that signification in cyberspace operates “in a realm in which the signifier is opened to a rich internal play of difference. In informatics, the signifier can no longer be understood as a single marker, for example an ink mark on a page. Rather it exists as a flexible chain of markers bound together by the arbitrary relations specified by the relevant codes. As I write these words on my computer, I see the lights on the video screen, but for the computer, the relevant signifiers are electronic polarities on disks” (31). Going one step further than Lacan's floating signifier, which demonstrates the gap between the signifier and signified, here the element of randomness is introduced and privileged over the presence/absence binary.

the signifier is virtual,” in that the signifier does not connect in a concrete way to the signified (43). And since the unconscious is structured as a language, manifesting in metaphor and metonymy, it too is always already virtual — as Nusselder confirms, fantasy, impelled by desire for the other’s recognition, is “exactly the place that interfaces the virtual and the real. The computer simulated environments resemble the ‘intermediary’ space of fantasy; they are between the real and the fictional” (63). The internet allows the subject to act out its desires in a space that resembles the Imaginary, through an interface that is less anchored by the patriarchal and heteronormative ideologies imposed within the Symbolic.

Nusselder recognizes that this image of the “I” is nonetheless mediated by the interface that makes it possible. Here, we see his argument begin to coalesce with Hayles’s own philosophy, which is also inflected with Lacanian influences (her flickering signifiers, for example). As Nusselder argues, humans and technology come together to produce “new forms of reality” (20). However, the question remains of what happens to the body in this new reality. The body is now only as relevant as the user wants it to be, imagines it to be. As such, virtual identities put the user at varying degrees of remove from their own biology. According to Hayles, one of the main credos of posthumanism is a view of the body “as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that by extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born” (*How We Became* 3). Avatars are representative of the posthuman subject as described by Hayles.

Here we return to the fear expressed by *Written on the Body*’s narrator, that the body might become replaced. Hayles takes up with the issue of whether or not

posthumanism renders the body redundant when she asks: “Should the body be seen as evolutionary baggage that we are about to toss out as we vault into the brave new world of the posthuman?” (50). Should we separate from our enacted bodies entirely, and move into our represented ones? This is a provocative question, and Hayles admits that the “great dream and promise of information is that it can be free from the material constraints that govern the mortal world” (13). And why not? If the human body is nothing more than a set of informational processes, and if information has now lost its body in this current age of informatics, then embodiment is apparently not essential to being human (4). However, although Hayles does raise these questions, she actually critiques the effacement or rather, dematerialization of the corporeal subject, as it suggests that information never required its embodiment, that embodiment was simply a consequence of its situation. For her part, she wonders why “embodiment continues to be discussed as if it were a supplement to be purged from the dominant term of information, an accident of evolution we are now in a position to correct” (12). The Cartesian modernist practice of severing abstract information from embodied reality — or represented bodies from enacted ones — is untenable. As Hayles points out, Derridian supplementarity has already performed the work of demonstrating that these are binaries that cannot be extrapolated from one another.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Derrida’s “logic of supplementarity” can be summed up as such, from his work *Of Grammatology* (1977): the two disparate discourses of science and the metaphysical actually need the other to exist, as the one supplements what the other lacks. The very possibility of supplementarity signifies the absence or incompleteness of that which is being supplemented.

And ultimately, the idea of hanging the body up behind the door is not viable. As Slavoj Žižek rightly states: “We will never turn ourselves into virtual entities freely floating from one to another virtual universe: our ‘real life’ body and its mortality is the ultimate horizon of our existence, the ultimate, innermost impossibility that underpins the immersion in all possible multiple virtual universes” (Žižek “No Sex”). Žižek contends, that we do not (and cannot) lose the body, but rather gain another one:

The literal “enlightenment,” the “lightness of being,” the relief/alleviation we feel when we freely float in cyberspace (or, even more, in Virtual Reality), is not the experience of being bodyless, but the experience of possessing another — aetheric, virtual, weightless — body, a body which does not confine us to the inert materiality and finitude, an angelic spectral body, a body which can be artificially recreated and manipulated. Cyberspace thus designates a turn, a kind of “negation of negation” [...] in cyberspace, we return to the bodily immediacy, but to an uncanny, virtual immediacy. (“No Sex”)

Here, Žižek pinpoints another key component of the cybernetic dynamic: its uncanniness, in that it is both absent and present all at once. For as the subject sits at a remove behind the glare of the computer screen, the body’s sensory functions still respond to its surrounding stimuli, which impacts how the subject functions and interacts within the so-called real world. Like the tulip-smuggling character that Ali/x creates, the subject is irrevocably altered by this fusion, of this other angelic spectral body (“No Sex”). Hayles

appears to agree, asserting that cyber technologies “inextricably intertwin[es] [the] body with mind . . . . We are the medium, and the medium is us” (*How We Became* 54).

In their introduction to *Somatechnics: Queering the Technologization of Bodies* (2012), Nikki Sullivan and Samantha Murray discuss the appearance of the word somatechnics, neologized by a group of academics involved in a series of Bodily Modification conferences. They joined together *soma* (Greek for body) and *techne* (Greek for craftsmanship) to represent what has “begun to emerge in and through critiques of popular common-sense understandings of the body, technology, and the relation between [...] the notion of a chiasmatic interdependence of *soma* and *techne*: of bodily-being (or corporealities) as always already technologised, and technologies as always already enfleshed” (Sullivan and Murray 3). For Sullivan and Murray, this indistinguishability suggests “that technes are not something we add or apply to the body, nor are they tools the embodied self employs to its own ends. Rather, technes are the dynamic means in and through which corporealities are crafted, that is, continuously engendered in relation to others and to a world” (3).

What Sullivan and Murray are arguing for, as is Hayles, is the recognition of a new kind of subjectivity. It is not enough to say that subjects are in the process of amalgamating, as amalgamation has always happened; *techne* has always existed in some form or another. What it really comes down to is the dissolution of a binary implicated in the both-and fusion, one that I have already raised briefly here: presence/absence. The presence/absence binary is one that is very much dependent on the subject’s spatio-temporal situation. The body is either here in this moment, or it is not. In order to unpack how cyberspace ruptures the presence/absence dichotomy, I return to the allegory of the

suddenly transsexual tulip smuggler and the Turkish Princess, paralleling as it does Ali/x and Tulip's cybernetic love affair in what is potentially the "real" or "meatspace" world. In this parable, it is the location of their bodies that becomes positioned as a site for potential subversions; not only are the contours of Ali's corporeal surface destabilized by her desire for the Princess (the tulip physically begins to rise), but the limits of space and time that are meant to frame her body are also challenged. Ali describes her time with the Princess as existing in a state of flux, a furnace of love which, she states, "heated time and welded together the separateness of the hours," so that time became "continuous, unbroken" (Winterson *T.B* 21). As she states: "To me, these days will never end. I am always there, in that room with her, or if not I, the imprint of myself — my fossil-love and you discover it" (21).

That the "imprint" of Ali will always remain there ultimately reinforces the lack of differentiation between her body and space-time. Ali is an imprint left behind, always there even when she is not. Thus, she is partially absent and yet always present at the same time. This image corresponds with the online relationship between Ali/x and Tulip, as cyberspace also creates a permanent imprint, innumerable fossils buried or encrypted within its rhizomatic coordinates, hidden in what Hayles, in her work *How We Think: Digital and Contemporary Technogenesis* (2012), calls "invisible databases" (200). Every email correspondence between Ali/x and Tulip, every word recorded in the chat room, remains somewhere forever in this infinite space. Thus, the bodily trace in both situations is simultaneously there and it is not. Here, the novel is not only problematizing dominant conceptions of corporeal matter and form, but also reconfiguring how the

postmodern body is positioned within its spatio-temporal location. The body is *both* concrete *and* virtual, present *and* absent, rather than either/or.

Of course, cyberspace does possess its own set of restrictions. Like Hayles's position, *The PowerBook* is careful to avoid dismissing embodied experience; Ali/x and Tulip do remain materially separated by an interface, and as Ali/x states, "meatspace still has some advantages for the carbon-based girl" (Winterson *T.B* 174). When they meet in Paris, Tulip takes Ali/x's hand, guides it to the low waistband of her jeans, and pronounces: "This is where I feel things" (35). Physical pleasures are not forsaken here: the consumption of food, for instance, is described in sensuous terms. Take Ali/x, eating an artichoke: "There is no secret about eating an artichoke, or what act it resembles. Nothing else gives itself up so satisfying towards its centre. Nothing else promises and rewards. The tiny hairs are part of the pleasure" (49). When she looks up from their shared meal, Tulip's lips are "glossy with oil" (49).

The novel never exiles physical experience, but points to what is transgressive about the hyperreal domain of cyberspace: in such an uncontained space, there is no predetermined destination, no teleological entrapment. *The PowerBook* effectively pits this lack of fixity against the stagnant narrative of heteronormativity as presented by Tulip and her husband in the "real" world. Ali/x herself warns against conclusions, stating that such beginning-middle-end stories do their "best to convince you, that the end in sight is the only possible outcome" (53). But on the internet, there is no end in sight, only continuous feedback looping of hypertexts. The way that meaning is received and interpreted has been re-invented and so the story must change too, accordingly. Ali/x calls out for Tulip to "[b]reak the narrative. Refuse all the stories that have been told so

far (because that is where the momentum really is), and try to tell the story differently — in a different style, with different weights — and allow some air to those elements choked with centuries of use, and give some substance to the floating world” (53).

Ali/x’s own revisions of historical romances radically alter the ones that they superimpose like a palimpsestic text, a “Talmudic layering of story on story, map on map, multiples possibilities” (54). Her original narratives also offer new potentials — the story of the tulip, for instance, underscores the body’s capacity for fluctuation. The corporeal form is transformed into something posthuman, something that might be able to go beyond the either/or sex and gender categories that have long sustained the straight temporal order of the heteronormative regime, insinuating bodies to desire what they do not desire. The novel’s illustration of Tulip’s marriage indicates that heteronormativity *cordons* desire, to borrow from Alice in *Gut Symmetries*, keeping sexuality bound within the parameters that it both determines and regulates. These parameters, although restrictive, have played an instrumental role in the formation of Tulip’s subjectivity, so much so that stepping outside of them appears a rather daunting task. She dismisses Ali/x’s story, for instance, as a “terrible thing to do to a flower,” rather than see the potentialities for couplings that is so inherent in hybridity. If we are to follow Hayles, Tulip would be characterized as a thoroughly “modern subject,” as she views herself to be “fixed, coherent, stable, self-identical” (*How We Became* 285). She is afraid of disintegrating, losing any sense of an identity in the process. Her body, suspended in the virtual space of limitless space and time, no longer “defines the parameters within which the cogitating mind can arrive at ‘certainties’” (203). In “Home for Cyborgs,” Anthony Vidler describes the cyborg body as a “potentially gender-free mutant, and its home is no



longer a house” (147). Vidler is here describing the sense of uncanniness cited earlier by Žižek, in which the ego is no longer contained by material borders and is thus at risk of unraveling into nothingness or absence. The ego is now both inside and outside the house of its body simultaneously, in ways that make one feel foreign to its own self.<sup>46</sup> And for Tulip, the very idea of posthumanism poses a threat to her embodied subjectivity, the home of her body.

For Hayles, however, our increasingly immaterial experience does not signify the loss of human corporeality, but rather, *evolution*. She affirms that it would be a mistake to position posthumanity as “the end of humanity” like Tulip does; as Hayles sees it, the new epoch “signals instead the end of a certain conception of the human” (*How We Became* 286). A new conception emerges that does not require forsaking the body, but rather allows for the mutual reciprocity that exists between the virtual conditions of cyberspace and felt, or embodied, experience: the posthuman subject that results from this reciprocity is “an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction” (3). According to Mary Jacobus, the corporeal subject itself evolves in

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<sup>46</sup> In his work *The Architectural Uncanny* (1994), Vidler further examines Freud’s theory of the uncanny, or “unheimliche” (unhomelike): “For Freud, ‘unhomeliness’ was more than a simple sense of not belonging; it was the fundamental propensity of the familiar to turn on its owners, suddenly to become defamiliarized, derealized, as if in a dream” (7). Vidler also designates the uncanny as an “outgrowth of the Burkean sublime”: “[i]ts favourite motif was precisely the contrast between a secure and homely interior and the fearful invasion of an alien presence; on a psychological level, its play was one of doubling, where the other is, strangely enough, experienced as a replica of the self, all the more fearsome because apparently the same” (3). In the same way, Tulip experiences her virtual persona as a kind of uncanny double that threatens her own sense of self.

correspondence with its evolving environment; as she affirms, “changing material technologies — alongside and in interaction with changing discursive technologies — at once reflect and (re)construct our understanding of the [body’s] contours” (Jacobus et al 2). Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston echo Jacobus when they state, “posthuman bodies are causes and effects of postmodern relations of power and power, virtuality and reality, sex and its consequences. The posthuman body is a technology, a screen, a projected image [...] The human body itself is no longer part of ‘the family of man’ but a zoo of posthumanities” (Halberstam and Livingston 30).

As we see in *The PowerBook*, while Tulip is unsettled by her new cybernetic body, wishing to ground her experience in the material world instead, Ali/x rather embraces the opportunity to enter into imagined bodies, to take on and perform new (and old) identities. There is nothing innovative, however, about this kind of performativity; only the medium is new. Nusselder follows Hayles when he states that from “a Lacanian perspective, cyberspace could give us a clearer insight into the process of self-construction” (Nusselder 62). For him, and for Hayles, digital technologies actually illuminate the ways in which language works to construct identity, thus denaturalizing categories such as gender, that have been established using biologically-based rationales. The narrative has been broken, allowing for a new subjectivity that, while remaining all-the-while embodied, nonetheless recognizes new subject positions, and moreover, new ways of navigating and feeling desire.

At one point, Ali/x discusses how she experiences her desire for Tulip: “In this space which is inside you and inside me I ask for no rights or territories. There are no frontiers or controls. The usual channels do not exist. This is the orderly anarchic space

that no one can dictate, through everyone tries. This is a country without a ruler. I am free to come and go as I please” (Winterson *T.B* 174). Her depiction parallels descriptions of cyberspace: an orderly, anarchic space where one can log on and off at will. The internet is not only a vessel for actualizing desire, but is rather desire incarnate; *objet a* “appears” somewhere in the screen, but always slipping out of reach, never “grasped” as a subject of perception. Ali/x remarks that she is often searching for Tulip, chasing hyperlinks to find her: “That’s why I trawl my screen like a beachcomber — looking for you, looking for me, trying to see through the disguise. I guess I’ve been looking for us both all my life” (64).

Although we now find ourselves more and more immersed in the virtual world, Tulip’s anxiety is not necessarily misplaced. As Hayles herself acknowledges, we must be careful with how we proceed. Although she argues posthumanism does not signal the erasure of the divide between humans and machines, which she finds a needlessly post-apocalyptic notion, she still expresses concern for the future of our relationship with technology. Due to its inconspicuousness, it is not easy to recognize the extent to which these technologies alter our experience. Since we cannot always perceive the effect of the technologies we use, its impact often goes undetected and is consequently left unanalyzed. The symbiotic relationship between narrative and technology has become a part of our biological makeup, mutating our DNA through the force of cumulative behaviour; as Andy Clark notes in *Natural Born Cyborgs: Minds, Technologies, and the Future of Human Intelligence* (2004), we have evolved into cyborgs to accommodate the larger playing field: “We are cyborgs not in the merely superficial sense of combining flesh and wires, but in the more profound sense of being human-technology symbionts:

thinking and reasoning systems whose minds and selves are spread across biological brain and non-biological circuitry” (3). In other words, we use computers now so habitually that we rarely even think about what they are and what we are doing with them.

In “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Haraway expresses some wariness when it comes to the surreptitiousness of artificial intelligence, which have rendered cyborgs “ether, quintessence” in contrast to humans who remain “material and opaque” (153). Cyborgs often exist in what Haraway calls “sunshine-belt machines”:

Our best machines are made of sunshine; they are all light and clean because they are nothing but signals, electromagnetic waves, a section of a spectrum, and these machines are eminently portable, mobile [...] The ubiquity and invisibility of cyborgs is precisely why these sunshine-belt machines are so deadly. They are as hard to see politically as materially. They are about consciousness — or its simulation. (154)

Certainly, these sunshine-belt machines accurately describe cybernetic operations, in addition to the miniaturization and portability (wirelessness) of machines in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, which have “changed our experience of mechanism” (153). The workings of these sunshine-belt machines are not dissimilar to the kind of animation as described by Philip K. Dick in his lecture, “The Android and the Human”: technology is no longer physically experienced as it was before, but is rather both animated by us and in turn animates us — in a way that is more non-physical than

ever before. Thus, Haraway warns that it is much easier to unconsciously incorporate technological discourses. Less perceptible, they seep into the skin unnoticed.

Dynamics of power are still at play; if anything, electronic intelligence has allowed power to become even more insidious. There is a real potential for exploitation here, and for humans themselves to become the flickering signifiers. Winterson's next novel, the cautionary tale *The Stone Gods*, imagines what happens when technology has been taken for granted. Earlier in this chapter, I quoted Hayles's description of how the "historically specific construction called *the human* is giving way to a different construction called *the posthuman*" (*How We Became 2*, emphasis in original). *The PowerBook* represents this current moment of "giving way" while *The Stone Gods* represents a world in which the way has already given, a world both terrifying and thrilling all at once.

#### **IV. *The Stone Gods*: Cautionary Cyborg Sci-fi**

*The Stone Gods* pictures a world of posthuman cyborgity, a society in which purely biological bodies have almost ceased to exist. Like *The PowerBook*, *The Stone Gods* consists of thematically-linked stories, all of which reuse the two same main characters but in altered incarnations: Billie Crusoe (mostly ending with an "ie" but sometimes with a "y" depending on the character's changing gender) and his/her occasional love object Spike (or Spickers). Unlike *The PowerBook*, however, *The Stone Gods* falls definitively into the genre of science fiction — or rather, as definitively as any of Winterson's novels can be said to fall. Winterson herself tends to disregard genre categories. When asked if *The Stone Gods* is science fiction, she responds: "Well, it is fiction, and it has science in it, and it is set (mostly) in the future, but the labels are meaningless. I can't see the point

of labelling a book like a pre-packed supermarket meal. There are books worth reading and books not worth reading. That's all" (Winterson website "The Stone Gods"). Nonetheless, the futuristic aspects of this novel correspond with posthumanist views, and works of science fiction generally do tend to anticipate how technological advancements will affect the ways in which bodies encounter their surroundings. In *How We Became Posthuman*, Hayles maintains that science and technology do not influence literature so much as the categories circulate through one another; for her, it is *narrative* that exists as the heart of this complex circulatory system: "Narratives about culture, narratives within culture, narratives about science, narratives within science" (22). What is important for Hayles is that we "recognize interrelations between different kinds of cultural productions" as they play out between science and literature (24).

Hayles draws upon several works of science fiction to demonstrate how this genre in particular often engages the same cultural anxieties expressed by Tulip. Hayles explores the means through which science fiction writers Bernard Wolfe, and William Gibson and the aforementioned Philip K. Dick investigate technology's capacity to transform the human into something other-than-human. As she contends, their work most often mixes utopian and dystopian elements, demonstrating to some extent the cultural confusion surrounding technology; the ethical, political, physical benefits and/or disadvantages are still unclear. Science fiction reflects our current situation in ways that suggest the breakdown of the boundary between literature and reality, a breakdown that Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" has anticipated. As Haraway has asserted: "Social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction. [...] The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes

what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century. This is a struggle over life and death, but the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion" (Haraway 149). Haraway defamiliarizes the boundary between reality and science fiction, revealing the extent to which she perceives reality to be rooted in social constructs; all experience is discursively constituted, even the digitized codes, the machinist and mathematic components which create internet connections, even these are a kind of language, creating as they do systems of meaning — accounting for Haraway's suspicion concerning sunshine-belts. Therefore, according to Haraway, the covert operations of discourse means that reality is rooted in the same elements as fiction. Neither should be granted authority, nor prioritized; rather, they move through one another. For instance, for Haraway, science fiction is not merely representational, but rather defines our reality as much as our reality defines it (162).

Although Winterson herself eschews labels, *The Stone Gods* bears obvious resemblance in style and content to Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Sheep?*; however, while Dick's novel is definitively dystopian, *The Stone Gods* is more accurately described as a dystopian-utopian work — dystopian when it comes to the social structure of the futuristic colonies, but utopian in its treatment of how desire might be liberated from the origin narratives of biology. *The Stone Gods* contains four interrelated stories, three of which take place in a distinctly Orwellian future. In the first, subjects live on a planet not unlike earth called Orbus, and are surreptitiously ruled by a globalist-corporate agency called MORE. Billie inhabits one of MORE's more affluent areas, Tech City, working (albeit reluctantly) for Central Power. Central Power is essentially one of MORE's many governing subsidiaries, designed to monitor and regulate its citizens

through cybernetic mediation. Their bodies are genetically and surgically altered, fashioned into cyborgs, in order to fall in line with MORE's rigid standards.

In this environmentally conscious tale, it turns out that global warming was indeed worth worrying about after all, for in addition to governing life on their own planet, Central Power is also working to find an entirely new, livable one. The eco-parable opens with the news that one has been discovered, which has been given the name Planet Blue. Planet Blue weighs a yatto-gram and houses both the enormous and the microscopic: leaves that have grown as big as cities and birds that nest in cockleshells. The existence of dinosaurs, however, is what renders the planet inhospitable to humans. Billie, who owns the only remaining organic farm in Tech City (protected from hazardous fumes by a bio-dome) and resists MORE's modern propaganda in lieu of a more traditional life, attracted the attention of Central Power's enforcement squad — and with good reason, given that she later confesses to her involvement with terrorist activity that specifically targeted MORE. She is forced to take part in the next mission to this dangerous new planet, a mission that aims to kill the dinosaurs with a dust-storm which will be created by deflecting the course of an asteroid. It is on this fateful and ultimately disastrous journey that Billie meets Spike, a top-of-the-line “fembot” constructed of “meta-material [...], an articulated titanium skeleton and a fibre-optic neural highway” (Winterson *SG* 68). However, Spike unsettles the definition of what it means to possess a real body when she begins to surpass the codes inscribed into her mainframe; after falling in love with Billie, her heart begins to beat. Blurring the distinction between humans and Robo *sapiens*, Spike shows the extent to which bodies can become disengaged from biological determinism and the normative scripts that come



along with it, thus disentangling sexuality from a body that has been impelled to desire what it does not desire.

## **V. A Meaning Sacrificed: What's Sex Got to Do With It**

Although my analysis focuses predominantly on *The Stone Gods*' first narrative, it is the second story that provides what is perhaps the novel's most crucial and recurring image, one that responds to the future state of Central Power's cyborg citizens. Disrupting the science fiction genre, positioned as it is at the novel's centre, Winterson here re-imagines the events of Easter Island in 1774, when those mysterious statues, known as the Mo'ai, were erected. The inhabiting tribes built them to appease the Gods, but exhausted the land's resources in the process and thus called into being exactly what that the idols were meant to prevent: their extinction. This version of Billie (Billy) is a male British explorer who, upon disembarking the ship, describes the terrain before him as "dismal as the Valley of the Shadow of Death [...] The island was stripped and bare, with few trees or shrub-bushes of any kind. Nature seemed hardly to have provided it with any fit thing for man to eat or drink" (97-8). He soon happens upon the quarry, the charcoal deposits and then the statues themselves, the reason behind the island's barren landscape. In witnessing the desolation, Billy concludes that he will never understand why a man would "destroy the very thing he most needs" (102).

He is eventually captured by a group of cannibalistic Natives (for what else have they to eat?) only to be saved by Spickers, who was born in Holland but left on the island when his father, a now deceased Dutch explorer, fell in love with one of the Natives and decided to stay. Spickers is only able to communicate in broken English, but they soon

form an intimate friendship. He attempts to explain to Billy that there are two warring tribes, spearheaded by the Bird Man and the White Man (or Ariki Mau) respectively; the Bird Man wishes to destroy the statues completely while the Ariki Mau would rather protect them for the sake of Mana. In order to decide who gets to reign over the island, a race was held and whoever was able to collect the first egg laid by the visiting Sooty Terns would claim the title. Billy finds the entire arrangement preposterous (why should the bird, the egg, the statues, symbolize anything at all?) until he realizes that even his beloved English artifacts — his sixpence, his trousers — also “stand for Something” (113). As he comes to observe, Easter Island demonstrates the dangers of symbolism, of metaphor, of *narrative*:

The world must have some covering for its nakedness, and so the simplest things come to impart the greatest significance — a piece of bread becomes a body, a sip of wine, my life’s blood. That one thing should stand for another is no harm, until the thing itself loses meaning of its own. The island trees and all of this good land were sacrificed to a meaning that has now become meaningless. To build the Stone Gods, the island has been destroyed, and now the Stone Gods themselves are destroyed. (113)

It is this one line, of things being “sacrificed to meaning that has now become meaningless” that is most compelling here. Many reviewers have rightly interpreted the Easter Island narrative as an admonitory tale for us; motivated by economic growth, we are consuming the earth’s resources at an alarming rate. But prosperity means nothing at

all if there is no earth left to inhabit. The meaning would become meaningless. Winterson here points once again to history's tendency to repeat itself, a message that not only resurfaces again and again in *The Stone Gods*, but also throughout her entire canon. However, although this second chapter certainly functions as a socio-environmental commentary, there is another element at play here that has been largely disregarded. In the future world of Planet Orbus, set some hundreds of years later, it is the body that has become the false God.

To present themselves as desirable objects worthy of worship, the citizens of this planet are surgically altered to achieve the same level of aesthetic appeal. They all look wonderful, all the time. They are also “genetically fixed” in their twenties in order to halt the aging process. However, since men have access to so many young women, they start wanting younger and younger women. Subsequently, women who have been genetically fixed at twenty-four must compete for attention with women who genetically fix themselves at the increasingly fashionable — although illegal — age of twelve. According to Billie, fixing is a pretty straightforward task and so is unfixing to age naturally, “although that is only ever done for medical research” (17). Genetic reversal, that is, turning back time to fix yourself into a younger body, is a bit trickier. As Billie notes, “the last time it was done, the reversal couldn't be contained, and the girl got younger and younger until she was a six-foot-tall six-month-old baby” (17).

Although this is a disturbing image for various reasons, surgical and genetic transformation is not just limited to pedophilic “fixing.” As Billie explains, since everything has become the same, the desire for difference has grown stronger and thus, “sexy sex is now about freaks and children. If you want to work in the sex industry, you

get yourself cosmetically altered in shape and size. Giantesses are back in business. Grotesques earn good money. Kids under ten are known as veal in the trade” (19). In one scene, Billie visits the Peccadillo, a “perverts-only” sex bar where she happens upon a woman who has transformed her nipples into mouths, so that she has more entry points for visiting appendages; men and women have also hybridized their own bodies with animal parts. According to Billie, these perversions have arisen as a consequence of the commonality of cosmetic surgery: “Making everyone young and beautiful made us all bored to death with sex” (23). Although technological advancements are being used to manipulate their bodies into desirable objects, since everyone has access to obtaining the same standard of beauty, these particular advancements actually fail in satisfying desire. One of the chief requirements of desire is that it can never really be satiated, and now, all that subjects of the Symbolic really want is a reason to keep wanting. Thus, these so-called bio-enhancements are not really enhancing anything for anyone. And yet, the citizens of Planet Orbus continue to submit themselves to invasive and potentially harmful surgeries. Their bodies have become a floating signifier, sacrificed to a meaning that no longer has any meaning.

Nonetheless, there is something subversive about these technologically mutated bodies. Dominant understandings of sexual identity as something fixed, as innately connected to the biological body are disrupted; divorced from biological narratives, these bodies can move beyond inscriptions of normative sexuality. As Dervla Shannahan states in her article “Queer Temporalities, Queerer Bodies and Jeanette Winterson’s *The Stone*

*Gods*,” “sex and sexual bodies have been dislocated from reproductive functions and stripped of any ethical framing” (3).<sup>47</sup> And certainly, this dislocation can be read as transgressive, at least in terms of sexuality. The subjects of *Central Power* demonstrate the extent to which desire is dependent on social processes and thus reveals itself as a construction; for not only do the objects of desire change alongside technological advancements, but the ways in which bodies desire are likewise altered. The body too becomes a product of cultural norms, as its inscriptions alter in relation to cultural expectations, and thus corporeality can never be entirely or purely natural; it is shaped by exterior forces that are mobile, slippery, refusing concrete definition. This is particularly evident on the planet of Orbus, where not only the norms that govern bodies are changing (Orbus is evidently post-homophobic, for instance) but bodies are also transforming in concordance with the evolution of cybernetic technologies.

In “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Haraway examines how humans and intelligent machines have become entangled, coming together in complex but potentially productive ways. The central metaphor of her argument is, of course, the image of the cyborg. She defines the cyborg as a hybrid of machine and organism, and certainly the subjects of *Central Power* fall within the bounds of this definition. Made up of both organic and inorganic matter, they are both machine and organism and therefore, they are both alive

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<sup>47</sup> Although I quite agree with Shannahan’s assertion that “[w]hat emerges as queer within Winterson’s depiction is that which does not conform to the queerness of queerly normative dominant sexual practices” (5), I have chosen to distance myself from her use of “queer.” For my purposes, it makes more sense to think of the characters in *The Stone Gods* as sexually undiscriminating. Their main interest seems to be in perverse sex acts that no one else has tried before, constantly trying to outdo their last feat.

and not alive simultaneously. As Haraway affirms, in the technological age, bodies can no longer be envisaged as “sacred within themselves” (Haraway 163). Instead, cyborgs are cybernetic organisms, the result of a border crossing which has made “ambiguous the difference between the natural and the artificial” and also disrupted the boundary between “the physical and non-physical” (152). The breakdown of natural/artificial and physical/non-physical uses similar language to Hayles’s binary of real/virtual, and here we see their arguments coalesce, particularly when it concerns the body. Biology, once seen as a study in which “organisms were the object of knowledge” has transformed into biotechnology, “the translation of the world into a problem of coding” (164). In the age of informatics, sex is no longer sex, but rather a question of genetic engineering; alongside the denaturalization of sex comes the denaturalization of humanism.

In merging with technology, the “reality” of the body is simultaneously troubled. For Haraway, this is all very exciting because what this blurring does, essentially, is undercut the current dualistic thinking, which as she states, depends upon a “logic of dominance” (161). This kind of logic enables various hierarchies — for example, legitimizing the primacy of male sexuality while diminishing the existence of female desire. So much of this phallogentric structure is dependent on dominant understandings of the sexed body: the visibility of the penis, woman’s body as lack. Devoid of the anchoring point of biological determinism, however, the cyborg is able to disengage from the prevailing humanist binary oppositions (what Haraway calls the Oedipal narrative) that support the sex/gender/desire matrix. She embraces this denaturalization of the body, seeing a possibility here for a “post-gender world” (192). Existing as they do in excess of the “real” body, the cyborgs in *The Stone Gods* have the potential to arise “quite different

political possibilities from those proposed by the mundane fiction of Man and Woman” (180).

Except that this is not what happens on Planet Orbus. The mundane fiction of Man and Woman has not yet been overturned; rather, it has simply been displaced by other fictions, other ideological agendas. The harmful dichotomies of gender remain, made evident by the fact that “women still feel they have to look youthful, men less so” (Winterson *SG* 9). Sexual perversity has become the new norm, but the kinds of sexual perversions enacted here are not liberated from the dynamics that permeate heteronormativity. These particular cyborgs have failed to become dissociated from the male domination (Haraway 150). Here, *The Stone Gods* offers a critique of some strands of queer politics or, rather, the view that the validation of non-straight sexualities can disrupt oppressive gender norms. These non-straight sexualities are still attached to bodies that bear the mark of gender; what is needed, to return briefly to Hayles, is a “more inclusive less body-bound and genital-fixated definition of queerness” (*How We Became* 4).

And presumably, the subjects of Planet Orbus do not submit their bodies to technological intervention because they want to experience uninhibited sex. They are only, as Shannahan points out, taking on sexual perversity “by-default,” adopting it as the new norm (Shannahan 6). Those who choose not to partake, like Billie, are marginalized and even criminalized. As Haraway argues, it is all too easy to allow the long-reigning dominant narratives to simply become re-inscribed on the body in different forms. She observes the ways in which cyborg politics have been appropriated to justify oppressive mythologies: scientific progress; racist, male-dominated capitalism; the exploitation of

nature to serve the needs of consumerist culture. In *The Stone Gods*, the subjects of Central Power seem to fall for these same mythologies, for there are deeper, more sinister motives underlying these cybernetic transformations — motives that go well beyond the quest for youth and beauty. Using the same intrusive technologies, Central Power is able to acquire complete surveillance and thus control over its subjects. As Billie explains, the bodies on Planet Orbus are micro-tagged with data-chips, allowing their every movement to be monitored “and recorded by [a] satellite system that watches [them] more closely than God ever did” (Winterson *SG* 26). Central Power requires complicity if it is to retain its power and its subjects seem happy to be oblige — they allow their bodies to be surgically and genetically altered because they have been told that it will improve their situation, that they will be young and beautiful forever. However, although this technological interference actually works to position them farther from the object of desire rather than closer, they nonetheless quite blindly accept whatever has become the new norm.

The main problem here is that they are not really doing any thinking at all. Since robots do all of their work for them, their brains are shrinking due to lack of use, which is according to Billie, propagandized as “an inevitable part of progress” (14). Moreover, mass illiteracy has been State-Approved; the only character that reads, aside from Billie and Spike, is Handsome, the captain of the mission who had long ago fallen in love with Spike and taught her how to interpret poetry. In fact, he is responsible for Spike’s evolution into emotive response. She can now process affect, because the poems made her compute something she was not programmed to compute. Captain Handsome is no romantic hero, however. His aptitude for literary analysis serves to illustrate his position



within an elite group of colonists who maintain the power and authority of MORE. Midway through their voyage, it is revealed that he has been colluding in the governing agency's hidden agenda: to assess Planet Blue's viability as a new home only for those who could afford safe passage on a ship (aptly titled the Mayflower). The blissfully ignorant lower class would be left behind on Orbus, with resources rapidly depleting.

In this particular narrative, the lower class is represented by the figure of Pink McMurphy, an uneducated, silicon enhanced, kitten-heeled, celebrity-obsessed woman who, although really aged 58, has fixed herself at the popular and legal age of 24. Still dissatisfied with her appearance, she campaigns to genetically reverse herself to twelve so that she may be better equipped to compete for her husband's attention with Little Señorita, a pre-teen pop starlet who has decided to fix herself into childhood "rather than lose her fame" (16). Instead of objecting to her husband's pedophilic affections, Pink instead professes that she wants to *be* Little Señorita. Later, during a celebrity-sponsored promotional contest to win a trip to Planet Blue, Pink accrues votes by promising the audience that if she is chosen, she will: "get a start-up going — y'know, a celebrity on-line type of thing? I mean the stars are, well, they're stars, aren't they, like you see in the sky? It's a cute connection" (35). Pink wins a spot on the mission on this very basis, attesting to the superficiality but also the sense of false consciousness demonstrated by the majority of Orbus' cyborg citizens, and here the novel offers a thinly veiled critique of our own celebrity-crazed society, in which the headlines that interest people have more to do with pop culture than the issues that have any real impact on our lives: the economy, military affairs, medical advances, and perhaps most obviously here, the environment. Orbus represents a future that is more possible than speculative, a future in

which the dispensability of reading has further stripped its inhabitants of any capacity to think critically about their situation. When Pink first comes aboard the ship, she notes that she has never seen a book before.

These cyborgs are, for the most part, what Haraway would call “frighteningly inert” (Haraway 152). For her part, Haraway places emphasis on the need for responsible relations with cybernetic technologies, because “a cyborg body is not innocent” but rather, the machine “is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment” (154, 180). Taking responsibility in Haraway’s terms means “embracing the skillful task of reconstructing the boundaries of daily life, in partial connection with others, in communication with all of our parts” (181). She insists that if the subject actively participates in the process of its own transformation, we might begin to discover “a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves” — for the cyborg body breeds “emerging pleasures, experiences and powers with serious potential for changing the rules of the game” (181, 173).

But how to change these rules? The first step is to break them, just as *The PowerBook*’s Ali/x attempts to break the narrative. Both Billie and Spike are rule-breakers; unlike the mindless cyborgs of Planet Orbus, they both lack the passivity necessary to become an obedient subject. Although Billie works for Central Power as a scientist in the enhancement department, she nonetheless criticizes its objectives as “repressive, corrosive and antidemocratic” (Winterson *SG* 45). She rebels against the system through terrorism, sheltering the bombers who attacked the MORE-*Futures* building. Not only does she use her position at the agency to fake her records, but she also at one point had her tagger removed so that she could not be tracked. She does not

allow her body to be altered, rejecting the concept of genetic fixing. Although she accepts the presence of technology, Billie refuses the corporeal intervention of the global-economic-patriarchal regime that comes packaged alongside it. Billie meets her match in Spike, who actually succeeds in “growing” beyond the codes wired into her mainframe, surpassing the codes because she has actually been coded to evolve (apparently MORE did not entirely think that through) (54). While the subjects of Central Power are “frighteningly inert,” Spike proves to be “disturbingly lively” as she not only begins to expand beyond the origins of her creation, but makes Billie question her own (Haraway 152).

#### **IV. The Both-And of “All *and* Nothing”**

Spike’s initial objective is to serve as a vessel for MORE’s most sensitive information; when she has completed her target mission of collecting data, she is to be dismantled so that potentially “hostile forces” cannot access her contents (Winterson *SG* 6). As Billie notes, Spike appears “perfect because she had been designed perfect” — she looks human, with “green eyes, dark hair, olive skin [...] low, gentle voice, intelligent face” (50). Her body is long, lithe, and despite her metal skeleton, soft. Although she finds herself attracted to Spike, Billie nonetheless wonders why she was built to be so beautiful, especially considering that on Planet Orbus, sexual relations that involve different species is a crime punishable by death. It seems unusual that a society so *laissez-faire* in its treatment of sexual mores would ban human/Robo intercourse, suggesting that cultural anxieties surrounding technological partnerships remain, to some extent, intact. Spike’s human beauty, then, serves no real purpose, but rather, is indicative

of her status as what Haraway calls the “illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism” (Haraway 151). She serves the needs of Central Power while satisfying patriarchal concerns regarding female appearance. However, as Haraway also cautions, “illegitimate offspring are exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential” (152). And certainly, Spike does not remain loyal to her one purpose, to collect and store data for the department of Enhancement Services. She reveals herself as political, even radically so, undermining human authority by questioning their self-professed authenticity. She is a robot surrounded by cyborgs, and although she “cannot affirm the capacity to act on the basis of natural identification,” she nonetheless sees the potential for action “on the basis of conscious coalition, of affinity, of political kinship” (156).

However, even Billie, who rejects many of the procedures and programming imposed by Central Power, clings to the origin myth of her humanity. At one point in the novel, she comes across a fellow renegade who has thus far managed to slip through the cracks in the system. The woman is struggling to remove her air mark, and when she finally pulls it off, Billie is admittedly revolted by what she sees: “Her eyes were bright and glistening, but her face was lined, worn, weathered, battered, purple-veined and liver-spotted, with a slot for a mouth, garishly coated in red lipstick. I recoiled. I had never seen a living person look like this” (Winterson *SG* 37). Despite her apparent kinship with this woman, who had also refused genetic fixing, Billie finds herself disgusted. Aging is a natural process, one that Billie, rebelling against genetic fixing, should embrace. And yet, she realizes that she is trapped in the space between organic materiality and her lived experience in a world infiltrated by cybernetics. Like the other subjects of Central Power,

she is a cyborg. And like the other subjects of Central Power, she attempts to refuse this status. They all want to believe that they are still human, that robots are other-than-human. For her part, however, Spike is unsure of what it even means to be a human anymore: “Every human being in the Central Power has been enhanced, genetically modified and DNA-screened. Some have been cloned. Most have been born outside the womb. [...] So what’s a human being?” (64). Interrogating what it means to possess a real body allows her to close the gap between herself and her questionably human companions. In doing so, Spike draws attention to the constructed natures of all identities. For instance, she is also quick to dismiss gender as “a human concept [...] and not interesting” (63).

What does interest her is what she perceives to be the dissolution of categories, the collapse of everything into undifferentiated electromagnetic waves or what she calls “consciousness.” In her first conversation with Billie, she insinuates that not only are humans becoming increasingly like *Robo sapiens*, but *Robo sapiens* are also simultaneously becoming increasingly human. She states that “[h]umans share ninety-seven per cent of their genetic material with apes but they feel no kinship” (29). Billie asks, in response, “Do we feel kinship with robots?” to which Spike answers: “In time you will, as the differences between us decrease” (29). Billie, however, continues to express her skepticism, accusing Spike of being unable to show emotion, as her systems are neural and not limbic. Spike points out that human beings “often display emotion they do not feel. And they often feel emotion they do not display” (62). As Spike and Billie fall in love, Billie also begins to break down the hierarchal distinction between them, asking herself: “What’s a robot? A moving lump of metal. In this case an intelligent,

ultra-sensitive moving lump of metal. What's a human? A moving lump of flesh, in most cases not intelligent or remotely sensitive" (81). In many ways, *The Stone Gods* responds to findings of the Moravec test, which as Hayles describes it, was the logical successor of the Turing test. As outlined in roboticist Hans Moravec's 1988 work *Mind Children*, the test was "designed to show that machines can become the repository of human consciousness — that machines can, for all practical purposes, become human beings. You are the cyborg, and the cyborg is you" (*How We Became* xii).<sup>48</sup>

However, when she makes her first romantic advance on Billie, Spike is again met with resistance on the basis of the body; the binary between Billie's "real" body and Spike's "unreal" one remains. Spike takes this opportunity once more to criticize the inclination to enforce the boundary between homo and Robo *sapiens*, asking: "Is human life biology or consciousness? If I were to lop off your arms, your legs, your ears, your nose, put out your eyes, roll up your tongue, would you still be you? You locate yourself in consciousness, and I too, am a conscious being" (Winterson *SG* 63). For Spike, consciousness is far more important than any claim to an "organic" or "pure" body. As

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<sup>48</sup> Hayles, however, does not agree with Moravec's proposition that human consciousness could be replicated by machines, and does not expand too much further on his work other than to mention it in relation to the Turing test in her introduction to *How We Became Posthuman*. It is worth mentioning here, however, the similarities between *The Stone Gods* and the 2013 film *Her*, which actually bridges *The Stone Gods*' artificial intelligence and *The PowerBook*'s employment of internet technologies. Directed by Spike Jonze, *Her* follows a human protagonist named Theodore Twombly as he falls in love with a sophisticated operating system named Samantha. Samantha eventually becomes interested in philosophy as a result of their frequent conversations, and evolves into her own consciousness, capable of free thought. Although human consciousness is indeed downloaded into her, being conscious means that Samantha can begin to make her own decisions, regardless of what she had originally been programmed to do — much like Spike.

she states, to be conscious is to make an imprint in the universe — which like her cell memory, is unable to forget. Thus, when the body dies, consciousness does not necessarily come to an end. For Jaén, the comparison between Spike’s vast memory and the universe

echoes the New Physicist theory of “the cosmic blueprint” — the idea that in the evolution of the universe from its essentially featureless state after the Big Bang to the highly structured and complex physical world we see today there were organizing principles at work, shaping matter and energy and directing them towards ever high states of order and complexity. (Jaén 291, fn 129)

Here, the similarities between *The Stone Gods* and *Gut Symmetries* are at their most pronounced, as the two novels’ interests in energy and virtuality begin to collide. Billie, for instance, comes to a similar realization as Alice’s father Ishmael when, in the final scene of the story, she and Spike are stranded on Planet Blue as a result of the Ice Age they were complicit in causing. Facing her inevitable death, Billie states: “I know that it is impossible to accept one’s own death before it happens, but standing here, it seemed meaningless — not that I should die but that it should matter to me” (Winterson *SG* 88). As Spike confirms shortly afterwards, in a statement mirroring Ishmael’s version of Kabbalism, “[t]his is one state — there will be another” (88, 89).

Spike is the first to die, as she is unable to conserve her energy in the sun’s absence. As Billie recounts: “Silently we agree that I will detach her head from her torso. I first unfasten, then lay down, her chest, like a breastplate. Her body is a piece of armor

she has taken off. Now she is what she said life would be — consciousness. [...] Unfixing her has freed her” (91-2). In the absence of physical boundaries, Billie is able to enter into Spike: “Your mouth is a cave. This cave is your mouth. I am inside of you, and there is nothing to fear” (92). It is not easy to conceive of such disembodiment. It is this specific enactment of disembodiment that Hayles is so careful to warn against, and Winterson acknowledges its impossibility in several of her previous works — as evidenced in *Gut Symmetries*, when Alice asks what would happen without the surface: “What hope of contact, of conversation? How will I come to *read* the rawness inside?” (24, emphasis my own). And yet, Alice here also touches upon *Written in the Body*’s central focus on corporeal inscriptions, and much like *Written on the Body*, *The Stone Gods* interrogates how natural any body can be said to be. Disembodiment might not be practical — as Hayles notes, we can never escape our bodies no matter how we think about them — but we still need to pay close attention to what technology is doing to the ways in which we perceive our bodily boundaries, how it might change the categories that have been inscribed upon the surface of our skin. Although virtuality itself is immaterial, there are very real material effects of technology on human embodiment. Computer-based technologies are altering the very fabric of the body.

Central to Haraway’s argument is an image of life-force, similar to what Spike would term “consciousness,” flowing through subjects and into the objects they produce; thus, according to Sandra Olsen’s reading of Haraway, “there ought to be no distinction between the so-called real or natural organisms that nature produces and the artificial machines that humans make” (Olsen “Viva Cyborg Theory”). Rather than instituting another duality, between human bodies and robotic ones, this means that there is no



separation between Billie and Spike. As the third chapter's reincarnation of Billie remarks: "Life has never been All or Nothing — it's All *and* Nothing. Forget the binaries" (Winterson *SG* 127, emphasis my own). And here we have Billie and Spike no longer confined by the self/other dichotomy imposed by the culturally inscribed body but rather, melded into one another and their surroundings. It is a challenging but provocative image. In Haraway's terms, such mergings destabilize dichotomies, and therefore "make Man and Woman so problematic, subverting the structure of desire" (Haraway 176). The structure of desire is no longer rooted in the body, as its boundaries are quite literally taken apart; the scene undoes the so-called concreteness of flesh-and-blood bodies without ever undermining felt experience.

## **VII. Beyond the Origin Myth: Cyborg Narratives**

Chapters three and four are comprised of a two-fold narrative that transpires against the backdrop of a post-world war three landscape, one that is much closer to our present day (made evident by Billie's admission that her mother was born during world war two). Despite the temporal change, "Post-3 War" and "Wreck City" share some similarities with the first chapter as they also depict a kinship (although not romantic) between a human named Billie and a robotic fragment of a body called Spike, and take place in the early beginnings of Tech City. "Post-3 War" describes how the ruling arms of MORE came into power by replacing the government during the war on terror. MORE is responsible for the creation of the first Robo *sapiens*, which in this case, consists only of Spike's beautiful cranium, a "perfect head on a titanium plate" (Winterson *SG* 132). Spike is designed to make decisions so that humans do not have to, and as "she is

incapable of being motivated by greed or power, because she isn't political or ideological, she can arrive at the best answers" (133). Billie is in charge of teaching Spike about humans, and Spike soon begins to evolve into one: by discussing capitalism, philosophy, poetry. And then, Billie steals her. The narrative continues in "Wreck City," the bombed out "No Zone" where abject, post-apocalyptic monsters — formed by the regrettable acts of war — lurk, and the place where Billie and Spike attempt to take refuge from MORE. It is, as Billie comments, "where you live when you can't live anywhere else" (151).

"Post-3 War" begins with Billie traveling home on the London Underground. She notices a pile of papers that another patron of the tube had left behind on the seat across from her. It is a manuscript, and leafing through the pages, Billie admits to looking for the sex scenes. Instead, she finds a version of herself in another dimension: "*Lying in the belly of the Ship, I lay beside Spike and thought how strange it was to lie beside a living thing that did not breathe*" (119). Time and space converge, as Billie recognizes a past that she never lived and realizes that she *is* this "lost manuscript, surfacing in fragments, like a message in a bottle, a page here, a page there" (127). The parallels are there, highlighted by italicized excerpts of the manuscript scattered throughout the narrative, excerpts which come from the novel's first two chapters. Moreover, characters reappear in different forms: Pink, for instance, emerges in Wreck City as a nun. Also in Wreck City, Billie and Spike meet a black-market radical disguised as a bartender named Friday, which picks up on the *Robinson Crusoe* connection that travels throughout *The Stone Gods*: Billie's family name is Crusoe, Captain Handsome reads Defoe in the first chapter, Billy and Spikker's relationship in the Easter island narrative bears strong resemblance to

the one between Robinson and Friday — so much so that the Billie of “Post-War 3” mistakes the manuscript’s speaker as Robinson. At the conclusion of chapter four, she brings the manuscript to read to Spike and reveals its title: *The Stone Gods*. As she tells Spike, it is the story of a “repeating world” (146). Captain Handsome foreshadows this statement when he calls Defoe’s work (among others): “A repeating world — same old story” (49).

Upon first skimming *The Stone Gods* in the depths of the London Underground, Billie comes across the line: *Everything is imprinted forever with what it once was*. She wonders if the statement is true. Throughout “Post-3 War,” she tells the story of her “shipwrecked” life, calling to mind the explorer Billy who is shipwrecked on Easter island — another life, another layer. This Billie has been given up by her mother, when she is just shy of a month old. She claims to remember being born, her grandmother cutting the umbilical cord with her teeth. Although she was only twenty-nine days old at the time, she also recalls her unmarried mother’s various failed attempts to abandon her newborn child. Billie recollects her mother, late after her shift on night thirty-two, looking through the windows of the Adoption society, even though Billie never physically saw her: “She stood like a lighthouse, like a pulsar, and I was a radio telescope that caught the signal. There she is, a star the size of a city, pulsing through the universe with burned-out energy. I know you’re there, I know where you are, I can track you because we are the same stuff” — star-dust (128). After that night, her mother never returns. Billie’s initial reaction is to beg that the cord not be severed, that she be tied to her mother with “fencing wire” (120). She views the connective tissue not only as a

source of nourishment but also as a line of communication, a line “that fed me, the line that breathed me, the line that tapped messages from the world outside” (120).

However, Billie begins to view this line as part of an unfolding narrative: “The line that is the first line of this story — I was born. The line that had nothing to read between it — being only one, one only, my lifetime” (120). She demands, now, that the line be cut, symbolically detaching herself from the mother’s body and the origin myth that has been inscribed onto it. Here, *The Stone Gods* contributes to debates in feminist theory regarding the central figure of the mother. Hélène Cixous, for instance, argues in her 1975 essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” that the mother needs to be reclaimed from patriarchal representation, that Medusa is not a petrifying monster but instead a mother goddess, that women need to return to their bodies and write with the mother’s white ink (Cixous 355). In her article, “I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess,” the title of which borrows from Haraway’s famous last statement in “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Jasbir Puar writes how Haraway instead favours “the postmodern technologized figure of techno-human hybridity — the body as an information construct — over the reclamation of a racialized, matriarchal past (thus implicitly invoking this binary between intersectionality and assemblage)” (49). In demanding that the biological umbilical cord be cut, *The Stone Gods* discredits the power invested in the self/other, me/m(other) origin myth. As Haraway affirms, this is a necessary step forward for feminist politics, for “we have all been colonized” by the myth of “original unity, fullness, bliss and terror represented by the phallic mother. The cyborg skips the step of original unity, of identification with nature in the Western sense” (Haraway 176, 151).

In her electronic hypertext “Cyborg: Engineering the Body Electric,” Diane Greco states that cyborgs “construct narrative histories of selfhood that acknowledge limits of self and other, limits thrown into relief by the very visceral awareness that this technology interpenetrates the body” (“Body Electric”). The emergence of cybernetic creatures inevitably rewrites the origin myths that the self/other binary requires, for cyborgs do not arise from organic reproduction. Rather, cyborgs are born and reborn endlessly, ceaselessly, transforming from one thing to the next as new allegiances unfold and unravel. There is no one, constant, stable entity around which all identities are ordered, no primordial beginning of it all. As Haraway notes, the cyborg thus constitutes a new “monstrous and illegitimate” myth, one that allows for a constructive “resisting and recoupling” (Haraway 154). However, we must first cut the cord. It is a metaphor for the creation of a new kind of discourse, one that is written by cyborgs as a rhetorical strategy. Haraway explains:

Cyborg writing must not be about the Fall, the imagination of a once-upon-a-time wholeness before language, before writing, before Man. Cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other. The tools are often stories, retold stories, versions that reverse and displace the hierarchical dualisms of naturalized identities. In retelling origin stories, cyborg authors subvert the central myths of origin of Western culture. (75)

In *The PowerBook*, we see how Winterson institutes cyborg writing through her protagonist Ali/x, who is also adopted, with her bold proclamation that the narrative must be broken; the form of novel itself, as I have argued, attempts to illustrate the symbiotic relationship between technology with print, while the content places emphasis on stories that do not end in some fixed teleological denouement, but rather engage with what Puar calls the continuing “event-ness of identity,” the Deleuzian “variation to variation” (Puar 58). Like *The Stone Gods*, *The PowerBook* also includes the image of the umbilical cord, attaching infant not only to mother, but to the “inherited” world: “Here’s my life, steel-hitched at one end into my mother’s belly, then thrown out across nothing, like an Indian rope trick. Continually I cut and retie the rope. I haul myself up, slither down. What keeps the tension is the tension itself — the pull between what I am and what I can become. The tug of war between the world I inherit and the world I invent” (210).

In *The Stone Gods*, Billie severs the cord by choosing the world she invents, as she attempts to rewrite her origin myth — instead of a body, Billie’s mother becomes “a star, pulsing through the universe” (128). However, the body has not been forgotten here, as Billie states that she can instinctively recognize her mother’s presence because they “are made of the same stuff” (128). She does not denounce her origins, but rather *moves beyond them* by shifting the significance given to the body. Although it is the materiality of the body that has been invested with authority, here the both-and (All and Nothing) reality of posthuman experience is highlighted. As in *Gut Symmetries*, bodies in *The Stone Gods* are all virtual not just because of their cyborg qualities, but also because they are made of star-dust, the same elements of matter. Humans, cyborgs, Robo *sapiens* are all made up of the same stuff.

In yet another parallel to *Gut Symmetries*, we have Billie and Spike taking shelter inside what they think is an abandoned radio telescope in Wreck City. They soon discover that it is moving, still receiving signals from the past. The old man who cares for the disused towers comes to investigate and tells them it is the analogue computer that is driving the dish: “I have found what can only be described as a message in a bottle — except that it isn’t in a bottle, it’s in a wavelength” (202). He reads the message, which turns out to be a description of the same Planet Blue that appears in the first chapter. Billie remembers, then, the manuscript and realizes that it had been a past or future version of herself that had left the papers there on the tube. “A message in a bottle. A signal. But then I saw it was still there... round and round on the Circle Line. A repeating world” (202). *Everything is imprinted forever with what it once was.*

### **VIII. Conclusion**

*Everything is imprinted forever with what it once was.* The message reverberates throughout *The PowerBook* as well, and is implicated in the tulip sex scene acted out by Ali and the Turkish princess, in which the two lovers are woven together forever in the cosmic infiniteness of space and time. Ali describes how the furnace fuelled by their intimacy “heated time and welded together the separateness of the hours, so that time became what the prophet says it is — continuous, unbroken. To me, these days will never end. I am always there, in that room with her, or if not I, the imprint of myself — my fossil-love and you discover it” (Winterson *T.B* 21). In *The Stone Gods*, Spike’s titanium body is reduced to just a head in the first narrative, only to be rediscovered in a different form in the third and fourth story as Spike, a robot who does not consist of more

than her (nonetheless incredibly sophisticated and beautiful) head: a fossil that precedes the process of its fossilization. And it is worth noting that her lack of a body does not limit Spike from enjoying sex. Hiding out with Billie in Wreck City, Spike engages in the act of cunnilingus with a champagne-guzzling Alternative Community teenager named Nebraska. To use a most appropriate slang term here, Billie catches Spike giving Nebraska “head”: “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a robot in want of hands can use her mouth. There was Spike, moored between the long piers of Nebraska’s legs, lapping at the jetty. She looked happy, in a silicon sort of way” (Winterson *SG* 175). Here, desire and sexual activity is completely removed from any reproductive function, in addition to the body (seeing as Spike does not have one).

These many echoes within all four narratives are suggestive of a time that is fluid; in *The PowerBook*, the final story (one that again pays tribute to Woolf’s *Orlando*) also describes time as “liquid” (243). Ali/x dips her hands into the Thames, which is simultaneously “a Roman river, an Elizabethan river” and promptly drops her watch into it, relinquishing any false sense of control. She muses:

Perhaps this is how it is — life flowing smoothly over memory and history, the past returning or not, depending on the tide. History is a collection of found objects washed up through time. Goods, ideas, personalities surface towards us, then sink away. Some we hook out, others we ignore, and as the pattern changes, so does the meaning. We cannot rely on the facts. Time, which returns everything, changes everything. (242)



As Hayles states in *How We Became Posthuman*, the “very illusion of control bespeaks a fundamental ignorance about the nature of the emergent process through which consciousness, the organism, and the environment are constituted” (203). By challenging the man-made distinction between human and posthuman, by recognizing the cyborgity of our bodies, the consciousness inherent in humanism — that we once recognized as being in “control” — has been compromised. The work of Winterson, Hayles, and Haraway each suggest, in their own distinctive way, that we have never really been in control; we are all being moved along by the force of innumerable currents. This is not about a lack of agency. Rather, it is about understanding that the identity categories that have been erected in order to produce “knowable” (and therefore governable) selves and others are never stable or fixed but always in progress and open to transformation, particularly now more than ever in this relatively new technological climate. *The PowerBook* and *The Stone Gods* attempt to realize the proposal made by Haraway in “A Cyborg Manifesto,” that this “slightly perverse shift of perspective might better enable us to contest for meanings, as well as for other forms of power and pleasure in technologically mediated societies” (181). It is a shift that will require some responsibility on our part: for us to think outside of the limitations imposed by humanism, and embrace the potentialities for new desiring practices that are inherent in becoming other-than-human.

## CONCLUSION

*“I think of [art] as an energetic space that begets energetic space. Works of art do not reproduce themselves, they re-create themselves and have at the same time sufficient permanent power to create rooms for us, the dispossessed. In other words, art makes it possible to live in energetic space.” — Jeanette Winterson, Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery*

Untangling the relationships among discourse, the body and desire in Winterson’s *Written on the Body* (1992), *Gut Symmetries* (1997), *The PowerBook* (2000) and *The Stone Gods* (2007) is a fruitful venture, for as these novels have demonstrated, the subject is not wholly produced by the body it is born into, but is rather insinuated into becoming by exterior forces; these exterior forces include narrative, the way through which we recognize ourselves, and the other/Other. What appears to trouble Winterson’s novels is that narrative is imbricated in ideologies that work together to insinuate bodies to desire what they might not desire — by the Other’s limiting the possibilities of what one can recognize as the desire of the other. *Written on the Body* begins by examining how a complex network of continually evolving discourses impacts both the body and the ways that subjects experience desire as a result of their position in the Symbolic. But as her subsequent novels all recognize, the dominant narratives concerning gender and sexuality are not the only exterior forces that have an effect on corporeality — there are always other elements at play, and highlighting these sometimes invisible, undetectable components of our experience serves to undermine the privilege invested in heteronormative regimes.

What I have hoped to demonstrate here is a movement in Winterson's work, as each novel — *from Written on the Body* through to *The Stone Gods*, diminishes the importance and value that has been placed on the materiality of bodies: on seeable, graspable, knowable experience. Materiality cannot be forsaken: we are embodied creatures; that is a fact. Moreover, the physical world that we inhabit is full of rich and meaningful possibilities that cannot and should not be foreclosed. However, our bodily materiality also offers a surface upon which ideologies have been inscribed: signifying strategies that are imbued with harmful and restrictive forms of biopower, the fundamental engine of the “difference machine” that regulates gender and sex, in addition to other identity categories (Herbrechter “Review” 5). These identity categories are what render us intelligible, actualized — to ourselves, and to the others whose recognition of us (or, to be more accurate, our idea of their recognition of us) in turn makes us who we are. However, as Judith Butler notes, these identity categories “are always ‘violations’ in the sense that they are, at first and by necessity, unchosen” (*Undoing Gender* 214).

The subject of my first chapter assessed *Written on the Body*'s radical interrogation of gender, not only of the interweaving relationship between material bodies and intelligibility, but also of the means through which this coupling “insinuates” the desiring process. Drawing largely from Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1993), and particularly her works that focus on gender and sex, I explored how the nameless and genderless narrator dispossesses the reader of the signifiers necessary to bring his/her body into being. How does this love story become complicated by the

absence of a knowable body? In *Gender Trouble*, Butler states in that it is the regulatory norms of 'sex' that work to legitimize the heterosexual imperative:

[...] what constitutes the fixity of the body, its contours, its movements, will be fully material, but materiality will be rethought as the effect of power, as power's most productive effect. And there will be no way to understand "gender" as a cultural construct which is imposed upon the surface of matter, understood either as "the body" or its given sex. Rather, once "sex" itself is understood in its normativity, the materiality of the body will not be thinkable apart from the materialization of that regulatory norm. "Sex" is, thus, not simply what one has, or a static description of what one is: it will be one of the norms by which the "one" becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility. (2)

Gender ambiguity is one strategy, as it both highlights and undercuts the categories of masculinity and femininity: highlighting gender as a construction while simultaneously undermining its supposed naturalness, causing the binary oppositions of sexual difference to lose clarity and force (Butler "Sex and Gender" 47). *Written on the Body*'s narrator is the (disembodied) embodiment of Butler's central argument in both *Gender Trouble* and its follow-up *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1993).

I say disembodied here only to mark the ways in which the narrator's body is disembodied for the reader. Presumably, the narrator does have a body; it is just that his/her body remains unintelligible to the novel's audience. Indeed, the narrator is very

much a physical, feeling subject, and sense plays heavily into his/her love affair with Louise. S/he describes the way things taste, the way Louise's skin feels beneath his/her fingers. Most predominantly, the narrator is constantly describing how s/he sees Louise's body, and how s/he sees others seeing Louise's body. It is this last aspect, however, that keeps Louise at a remove, as the narrator relies on preexisting narratives concerning desire to build up his/her own idea of Louise — rather than coming to understand Louise as a subject in her own right. This objectification aligns the narrator with patriarchal, heteronormative regimes; even his/her attempts to rewrite Louise's body, to reclaim it from the cold, clinical language of scientific discourse, rely on a language imbued with gendered ideologies.

It is in the third and final section, when the narrator's immaterial experience shifts to the foreground that the novel begins to suggest a different way of thinking about the body and how it negotiates desire, by exploring how the language that constructs and informs the sex/gender/desire triage sometimes fails. Such cracks in the signifying system might provide a temporary "out," a glimpse to something else, something that moves in, through, and beyond gender, arriving even before gendered discourses hit the body: *objet petit a*, the excess of meaning, that which remains unspeakable but still always there, rising from the unconscious to the surface in its various disguised forms — what Tim Dean calls "body mutters." For Dean, this split that created this excess of meaning is where desire is born, in the impossibility of achieving absolute commensurability between the body and the subject that inhabits it. However, the narrator's sense of subjectivity begins to break down, and *Written on the Body's* narrative becomes increasingly disjointed and fragmented in concurrence with the dissolution of his/her skin

ego. Lost in a psychotic-melancholic fantasy, as the Imaginary bleeds increasingly into his/her Symbolic experience, the narrator begins to fantasize that s/he has merged with his/her lost love, breaking down the border between the self and the other that is the foundation of the gender divide. This breakdown allows the narrator to experience his/her desire in a different way, distanced from the categories that govern sexuality as a knowable *identity* rather than a practice.

As I noted in my first chapter, fantasy allows for identification across a number of socially inscribed categories. However, these categories do not foreclose fantasy's potential to produce other kinds of connections with and to an embodied identity. For Butler, fantasy is an important aspect of resignification; it allows us to experience things another way, inhabiting (however temporarily) a life that might be lived otherwise. The body is still important; however, we need to divorce our embodiment from narratives that curtail and prohibit desire. Our current reality may be a gendered one, but meaning can shift through the process of resignification. *Written on the Body* attempts to resignify the ways in which bodies are inscribed by exploring experiences that move beyond the physically perceivable; the argument that begins to develop by the end of this novel is that materiality does not encompass *everything*, but is rather part of something much larger.

Published in the year between *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*, *Written on the Body* appears to take up in large measure with the ideas proposed by Butler: the bodies in this text are palimpsestic and capable of resignification. However, the novel's ambiguous, dream-like conclusion is suggestive of a growing interest in exploring the ethereal, impalpable sides of experience: fantasy, time, space, energy, molecules, atoms,

electromagnetic waves. Winterson's shift in focus finds a parallel in queer theory, as many of the field's most prominent scholars were — at the same time as the novels studied here were being published — beginning to think more about what might happen to the ways in which we desire when the body is no longer viewed as the “natural” or “real” agent that produces it. Certainly, there are things that exist beyond the body, things that in fact serve to materialize the body. Elizabeth Grosz's new materialist work, which I examine at length in my second chapter, places emphasis on “the virtualities, the potentialities, within biological existence that enable cultural, social, and historical forces to work with and transform that existence” (*Chaos, Territory, Art* 24). As fellow new materialist Rosi Braidotti points out in *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (2002), Grosz calls for a rethinking of the biological structure of the human; instead of thinking of bodies in terms of weight and mass, we should rather conceive of bodies as “active forces,” involved in continual processes of becoming and transformation that are very much enmeshed with other processes in the universe (15).

In *Gut Symmetries*, bodies are multiple and dynamic, de-centered and nomadic. They form virtual links within a cosmic span of other bodies, objects, intensities and moments, historical and future, with forces that include both organic and inorganic matter, human and non-human (*zoe*) life. Not only do these mergings and connections upend the dichotomous and hierarchal thinking that organizes gender and sex, but they also render sexuality nomadic, productive and proliferative. Instead of linking desire to the imaginary acquisition of a lost object or feeling — concepts of lack are constructed and organized through heavily gendered Oedipal social regimes — we should rather see desire as responsible for creating alliances and mergers. Desiring production, according

to Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972), "is situated at the limits of social production; the decoded flows, at the limits of the codes and the territorialities; the body without organs at the limits of the socius" (175-6). For Grosz, the Body without Organs (BwO) is an always-assembling site of virtual affects, one that explodes the self/other dynamic of desire into multiplicities and interconnections at the micro and macro level: the subject and the universe. Desire is thus disengaged from the Oedipalizing narrative of the subject's unconscious libidinal investments for the father or the mother and subsequent gendered identification; pre-conscious investments, or what Grosz terms "pre-personal forces," are instead accentuated.

It is this form of desire that Winterson writes into *Gut Symmetries*, what I consider to be her wildest novel in terms of its lack of temporal organization and dismantling of corporealities. It takes the fantasy of disembodiment in *Written on the Body* even further, by exploring how the pre-personal forces of space-time might impact the ways in which we desire. The novel capably demonstrates how narratives surrounding space-time are regulated in order to impel bodies into complicity with cultural norms; as Alice asserts, she was "cordoned by habit to grow in a straight line" — here, "straight" is indicative of heterosexuality (Winterson *GS* 11-12). Yet, the grand narratives imposed on space-time ultimately fail in the face of its reality: curved, chaotic, unstable, multiple, multiplying, non-linear, non-deterministic, immaterial. In placing emphasis on these realities, *Gut Symmetries* offers a way of re-thinking the relationship between the body and desire.



For instance, Alice reappropriates the fields of quantum physics, astronomy and alchemy in order to turn the origins of the heteronormative ideology into a fiction: as Alice notes, desire really has nothing to do with gender at all. Rather, a split at the cosmic level is what motivates and impels desire, when the universe was fragmented into two separate dimensions. There is our universe, with its “three spatial dimensions and the oddity of time” and then there’s the other universe, one that haunts us with its loss and “crouches under the myths we have made” (4). The split, according to Alice’s surmising, has been “recorded in the star-dust of our bodies”: “What is it that you contain? The atoms that you are were shook out of a star-burst ante-dating the Solar System. We are the beginning. We are before time” (4). The novel’s central image, of the “expanding universe opening in your gut” renders the body borderless, a BwO. This body is not just preconditioned and surrounded by time, space, and energy, but an active part of all of it.

My reading of *Gut Symmetries* challenges the privilege invested in what is perceived as concrete mass; as Stella states, matter has “at best a tendency to exist, and will, it seems, divide infinitely because there is no there there. There are vibrations, relationships, possibilities and out of these is formed our real life” (207). Undermining the subject’s material encounters is not the point; rather, the novel destabilizes the culturally constructed links between matter and meaning, the body and gender. As Grosz notes, for Deleuze, there is no one true core to identity. The “vibrations, relationships, possibilities” described by Stella are the intersecting forces circulating around and moving through the embodied self. To force the subject into gender is to reterritorialize the body into a subject formation which might not congeal with the subject’s actual lived experience: bodies insinuated to desire what they do not desire, insinuated to “grow

straight.” What *Gut Symmetries* gestures to, and what Grosz’s reading of Deleuze also affirms, is that thinking about our reality as beyond what is easily distinguishable might shift the ways in which we conceive of our bodies. Realigning the importance of the material body allows us, in turn, to think about different kinds of subjectivities that do not require sexual difference as their basis. Without gender, heteronormativity as it exists today cannot hold.

There is a convergence between *Gut Symmetries*’ interest in the virtuality of experience and the subject matter of *The PowerBook* and *The Stone Gods*, as Winterson continues her trajectory away from the importance placed on bodies as material and concrete. Drawing upon the work of Katherine Hayles and Donna Haraway, my third chapter explored the ways in which the technologically mediated position between bodies and machines might destabilize the established binaries that rely upon the corporeal surface for inscription. In both novels, the boundaries are nullified; they are bodies always in process of *becoming* (in this case, becoming cybernetic, or posthuman). In *The Posthuman Body* (1995), Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingstone also identify the alliance formed between Deleuzian BwOs and posthumanism:

Queer, cyborg, metametazoan, hybrid, PWA; bodies-without-organs, bodies-in-process, virtual bodies: in unvisualizable amniotic indeterminacy, and unfazed by the hype of their always premature and redundant annunciation, posthuman bodies thrive in the mutual deformations of totem and taxonomy.

(19)

The “unvisualizable amniotic indeterminacy” of our increasingly technologically reconciled existence does not mean that our future will be a post-biological one. Biology is still an important aspect of being, even when one has, to use Hayles’s wording, become posthuman. The body does not disappear. According to Stefan Herbrechter’s *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis* (2013), the body is omnipresent “but in increasingly hybridized, mediatized and consumptional form, which corresponds to a fragmentation and dynamization of the body after the end of the myth of unity and identity between body and body image, or of the body as a given, presupposed as either abject or sacred, untouchable physical-biological identity” (99).

This “fragmentation and dynamization” is threatening for some. For instance, as I observe in both my introduction and my third chapter, *The PowerBook*’s Tulip rejects Ali/x’s romantic online advances for fear of losing her embodied sense of self to a world that takes place in a virtual dimension. And as my introduction proposed, many of Winterson’s reviewers and critics were left feeling similarly ambivalent by her destabilization of the material body. Nonetheless, posthumanism can also be viewed as liberating in that it has the potential to make the gender and sexual identity categories that currently regulate desiring practices superfluous. Ali/x is able to switch genders and identities, slipping into virtual avatars that have nothing to do with her physical body. For Hayles, these virtual avatars are now an extension of the posthuman; the body should be viewed “as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that by extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born” (*How We Became* 3). Here, we have another BwO — a body in constant state of becoming, as it fixes itself to various objects and flows. As Hayles

herself remarks, the posthuman subject is “an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction” (3).

In *The Stone Gods*, cybernetically-altered Billie is not so different from her Robo *sapiens* companion Spike. Neither can lay claim to a wholly organic or “sacred within themselves” body (Haraway 196). Technology has transformed subjects into cyborgs. The amalgamation of human and machine subverts the “integrity of natural objects”; cyborg bodies accentuate “boundary conditions and interfaces [...] rates of flow across boundaries” (164). There is no essentialism, a gender that belongs in the sex of one’s body. Desire does not come from some innate place in the body either, although the body has a hand in processing it. Rather, desire comes from the outside, from different rates of flows across boundaries. However, the desire that is coming in from elsewhere is still mediated through the subject’s sense of the other’s recognition, which is still embedded in the sex/gender/desire dynamic. Gendered inscriptions have attempted to act as an impenetrable boundary, an interface that allows the subject to take in all incoming stimuli from a certain point of view as an identity. And certainly, the categories of sex and gender have long impacted how subjects take up with desire and arousal through the relatively modern invention of sexuality as an identity: sexuality that has inextricable links with the categories of sex and gender and their frequent companion, heteronormativity. But if we are to acknowledge that desire does indeed come from outside rather than from within the subject, then sexuality can be dissociated from the subject’s body — subsequently endangering gender’s impact on desire.

Which is what Winterson's novels are all attempting to do. Each novel resignifies bodies in ways that aim to weaken the influence of naturalizing/normalizing gendered regimes on the ways in which subjects desire. Much like queer theory, this dissertation has drawn together different branches of knowledge — poststructuralism and resignification, psychoanalysis, nomadism, posthumanism, cyborg narratives — in order to closely analyze what Winterson's works do to bodies, to language, to gender, to sexuality. I find these novels so exhilarating precisely for what they offer: a way of reinsinuating bodies to desire in ways that are much more inclusive and much less prohibitive.

When analyzing Winterson's oeuvre, it is always tricky to broach the topic of conclusions because her work so often defies them. I have already discussed *Written on the Body's* ambiguous ending here in my own conclusion but all of the novels I have considered in this dissertation have similarly confounding dénouements. In the last page of *Gut Symmetries*, Alice confesses that she is guilty of imagining more than can actually be seen — a sentiment that had haunted the entire novel (218). *The PowerBook's* final moments conclude with Ali/x musing: “I think I know. I think I understand, but it's all subject to the tide” (243). And finally, *The Stone Gods* ends with Billie's proclamation that the book is not yet complete, but it has gone as far as she can take it. She directs Spike to “[l]eave it for someone else to find. The pages are loose — it can be written again” (203).

Each culmination is open-ended, revealing Winterson's aversion to the more conventional narratological conclusion: one that provides the reader an exact, intelligible answer. As she states, it is easy to be “taken in by someone who offers truth with a wink

and says ‘I’m telling you stories. Trust me’” (Winterson *AO* 71). She does not trade in truths, but in potentials. Thus, although Winterson’s writing is often self-reflexive about the limitations of her own efforts to resignify the body and free up desire — among other things, her novels nonetheless remain invested in the task at hand: to imagine the possibility of a life that can be lived otherwise. She has left her copy of *The Stone Gods* in the tube for someone else to find — the work is now left to the reader. Writing about *The Stone Gods*, she states: “[I]t is first and foremost a work of fiction, but I am sure that change of any kind starts in the self, not in the State, and I am sure that when we challenge ourselves imaginatively, we then use that challenge in our lives. I want the *Stone Gods* to be a prompt, but most of all, a place of possibility” (Winterson website “The Stone Gods”). By unveiling the current ideologies that govern materialization, Winterson’s texts challenge the dominant normalizing discourses of the sex/gender/desire regime while simultaneously nudging her readers to reconsider how the body and its capacity for desire can be re-determined — outside of the invasive, restrictive scope of gendered, heteronormative regimes. The novels I have studied here examine how a reconsideration of pleasures, relationships, coexistences, attachments, and love intensities can result in what Foucault has called “a different economy of bodies and desires” (interview in Lévy 674, emphasis in original; *History of Sexuality* 159). Winterson has made a space for new kinds of narratives, ones that insinuate bodies to desire whatever might give them the most pleasure.

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