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# Jeanette Winterson's Love Intervention: Rethinking the Future, in "Sex, Gender and Time in Fiction and Culture"

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# Jeanette Winterson's Love Intervention: Rethinking the Future

Abigail Rine

Is there a future? More specifically, is there a future for the queer? Queer theorists have recently been wrestling with the question of futurity, and two polarized positions are emerging from the fray: the anti-social thesis with its emblem of 'no future', and the perspective of queer utopianism, which conversely asserts that 'queerness is primarily about futurity' (Muñoz, 2006, p. 826). This chapter investigates the debate regarding queer futurity in the context of Jeanette Winterson's novel *The Stone Gods* (2008). A foray into possible futures, *The Stone Gods* both affirms and defies a queer temporality characterized by the disavowal of a redemptive future. While Winterson echoes the anti-social concept of the future as fatal repetition through her depiction of repeating, self-destructive worlds, her novel also manages to resist the futility of this perspective by offering the possibility of a love intervention that disrupts the replication of the past. In describing how Winterson problematizes distinctions between queer/straight futurities, this chapter also contributes to the ongoing debate regarding the 'queerness' of Winterson's work.

## Queer Futurity

Lee Edelman is arguably the most prominent voice of the anti-social thesis, and his book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004) has become its manifesto. In this work, Edelman describes a 'compulsory narrative of reproductive futurism' (p. 21), which, through the ideal of the Child, guarantees the continual reproduction of the heteronormative social order and locates human purpose in a never-realized, idealized future. According to Edelman, the queer can have no place within the optimistic 'Ponzi scheme of reproductive futurism'

(ibid., p. 4), which follows a relentlessly heterosexual trajectory. The queer, in fact, is society's death drive, always signifying the undoing and destruction of heteronormativity. Queerness, for Edelman, is essentially negative and can never evoke a positive identity; it can only ever disrupt or 'disturb' (ibid., p. 17) identity.

By situating queerness in direct opposition to the socio-political order, Edelman forecloses the notion of a queer future, arguing that any future dreamed up by this order can have no place for queers, whose only viable option is to abandon the notion of futurity altogether. The future, for Edelman, is always already heterosexual, symbolized by the embodiment of (heterosexual) procreation: the figure of the innocent Child that 'seems to shimmer with the iridescent promise of Noah's rainbow, serving like the rainbow as the pledge of a covenant that shields us against the persistent threat of apocalypse now – or later' (ibid., p. 18). For queers, this future is nothing more than 'mere repetition and just as lethal as the past' (ibid., p. 31), and the only solution (which is no solution at all) is to embrace negativity. Edelman is careful to assert that accepting the role of the death drive is a fundamentally hopeless gesture, one that evokes no 'hope of forging thereby some more perfect social order' (ibid., p. 4). Instead, queers must 'refuse the insistence of hope itself' (ibid.). Queers, simply by being queer, threaten the social fabric, and the only 'value' of queer negativity lies in its rejection of value itself, as defined by the social order. According to the anti-social thesis as voiced by Edelman, queer theory should refuse the ideal of futurity and its inescapable connection to and investment in the existing social order; to do otherwise is to 'prostrate' oneself before the heteronormative 'Futurch' (2006, p. 821).

Edelman's polemic account of the anti-social thesis has, unsurprisingly, generated a fair amount of criticism, and an alternative perspective on queer futurity has emerged in response, prominently voiced by theorist José Esteban Muñoz. Muñoz's primary criticism of the anti-social thesis is its anti-relationality, which asserts sexuality as the 'singular trope of difference' (Muñoz, 2006, p. 825) and distances queerness from other forms of difference and marginalization, such as gender, race, and class:

I have been of the opinion that antirelational approaches to queer theory were wishful thinking, investments in deferring various dreams of difference. It has been clear to many of us, for quite a while now, that the antirelational in queer studies was the gay white man's last stand. (Ibid.)

In addition to criticizing the undue privileging of queer difference and the reduction of queerness to sexuality, Muñoz also challenges what he sees as naïve 'ontological certitude' and uncritical futility in the anti-social perspective, which by forgoing the future offers a 'totalizing and naturalizing idea of the present' (ibid.). Both Muñoz and theorist Mari Ruti interpret the anti-social thesis as fundamentally uncreative; Muñoz regards anti-relationality and anti-utopianism as 'failures of imagination' (ibid., p. 826), and Ruti asserts that Edelman's anti-sociality 'drains the subject of agency, meaning, and creative capacity' (Ruti, 2008, pp. 116–17). Tim Dean, in his criticism of Edelman, goes as far as saying that the 'alignment of queerness with the death drive' is 'homophobic', and that 'the antisocial thesis originates not in queer theory but in right-wing fantasies about how "the homosexual agenda" undermines the social fabric' (Dean, 2006, p. 826).

In place of Edelman's nihilistic anti-sociality, Muñoz (2006, p. 826) argues for the approach of queer utopianism, which is basically an 'anti-antiutopianism'. For Muñoz, queerness – rather than anathema to the future – is 'primarily about futurity' (ibid., p. 825). Queerness is not located unflinchingly in the present; it is an 'ideality' that is 'not yet here':

queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present. Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing ... Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world. (Muñoz, 2009, p. 1)

Queerness, in the utopian view, is not about embracing inevitable negativity in the present, but about desiring and imagining a future that is not mere repetition of the same. For Muñoz, hope represents not an investment in an idealized heterosexual future, but resistance 'to the stultifying logic of a broken-down present' (2006, p. 826). According to queer utopianism, the task of queer studies is not to embrace negativity and antisociality, but to 'dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds' (ibid., p. 1).

### **Winterson's Queer 'Problem'?**

Before proceeding to explore what Winterson contributes to the debate regarding futurity in queer theory, perhaps it is fair to assess whether



her work is relevant in the first place – can/should Winterson's work be labelled 'queer'? In a 2006 article, critic Jago Morrison explores what he calls 'the problem of Jeanette Winterson' (p. 169), noting that though Winterson has often been cast by critics primarily as a lesbian feminist and/or queer writer, Winterson's work exceeds and defies these categorizations. Morrison's account of critical responses to Winterson reveals a growing trend of dissent among critics about the queerness of her work. As Morrison (2006, p. 173) notes, Winterson's first novel, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985), was greeted with 'widespread academic celebration of Winterson's assault on patriarchal heteronormativity'. With what Gabriele Griffin calls a 'defiant lesbian hero' and unapologetic account of lesbian sexuality, *Oranges* seemed to reveal a writer eager to carry the queer banner into a head-on confrontation with heteronormativity (quoted in Morrison, 2006, p. 173). Laura Doan, in her work on the lesbian postmodern, affirms this picture of Winterson, reading *Sexing the Cherry* (1989) as disclosing a lesbian 'feminist political strategy of resistance' (quoted in Morrison, 2006, p. 174). Winterson's subsequent works, however, cast some doubt on this portrayal, as her writing fails to reflect an unequivocally queer and subversive role. Patricia Duncker, for one, criticizes Winterson's *Written on the Body* (1994), with its ambiguously gendered narrator, as 'a lost opportunity to present a more affirmative and liberatory figure of same-sex desire' (Morrison, 2006, p. 173). Because Winterson's narrator *could* be a man, so the reasoning goes, this novel can ostensibly be read as yet another heterosexual romance. Morrison's own reading of Winterson continues to problematize the notion of her work as subversively queer; he argues that 'the overall thrust' of *Sexing the Cherry* 'is away from the interrogation and overturning of heterosexual normativity which Doan and others would like to see', and that in her recent fiction, 'Winterson is abandoning her erstwhile engagement with lesbianism, feminism and postmodernism' and turning towards a post-Christian aesthetic that is more concerned with disembodied agapeic love than queer erotic love (ibid., p. 176). According to Morrison, though fans and critics continue to enclose Winterson in the realm of 'queer postmodernism ... the writer herself seems to be engaged in an escape attempt' (ibid., p. 171).<sup>1</sup> This 'escape attempt' is voiced by Winterson herself in the essay 'The Semiotics of Sex' (1995), in which she resists the 'lesbian writer' label: 'I am a writer who happens to love women. I am not a lesbian who happens to write' (Winterson, 1995, p. 104). Here, Winterson criticizes how 'in any discussion of art and the artist, heterosexuality is backgrounded, while homosexuality is foregrounded' (ibid., p. 103). No critic, she

asserts, seems interested in Iris Murdoch's sex life, yet all are interested in hers – and for Winterson, this amounts to 'harassment by the back door' (ibid.).

The aim of this chapter is to engage these two ongoing discussions: first, the debate between the anti-social thesis and queer utopianism; and, second, the disputed queerness of Winterson's writing. While I can corroborate Morrison's account of the 'problem' of labelling Winterson, I would like to suggest that our expectations of queer writing have become too restrictive, too fixed – to the point where we, as critics, have unduly rigid expectations of what Winterson the Queer (and all queers, for that matter) should write. I would argue that the queer quality of Winterson's work lies not in Winterson's lesbianism, but in its ability to engage and exceed the fixed boundaries of the established order, to express the forbidden and to confound the gay/straight binary. Winterson's explicit engagement with temporality can be seen as a queer move in and of itself, as it challenges essentialized understandings of heterosexuality and homosexuality. Articulating the possibility of a queer future beyond lethal repetition, Winterson offers the transformative potential of poetic language as a vision of reproduction beyond the heteronormative. Not only, then, can Winterson's work be called queer, I will also suggest that *The Stone Gods*, Winterson's first venture into the realm of science fiction, makes a valuable contribution to the ongoing debate about futurity in queer theory, as she manages to marry the cynicism of Edelman with the hopefulness of Muñoz.

## Repeating Worlds

Winterson's futurity as presented in *The Stone Gods* shares a key parallel with Edelman's as the future is seen as 'mere repetition and just as lethal as the past' (Edelman, 2004, p. 31). The novel begins on the planet Orbus, which is on the brink of environmental disaster with a 'projected remaining lifespan of around fifty years' (Winterson, 2008, p. 32). The protagonist, Billie Crusoe, is a civil servant employed in one of the seemingly endless bureaucratic departments of the 'Central Power', an ostensibly democratic government (ibid., p. 5). Orbus appears to be a futuristic vision of Earth, and this idea is affirmed when, in a speech, the President of the Central Power quotes 'The Sun Rising' by John Donne and references past explorations of the Arctic Circle and the Americas. Yet Planet Blue, a new world that the Central Power plans to colonize, also bears a startling resemblance to Earth: it is fertile, capable of sustaining human life, inhabited only by dinosaurs and eventually

struck by an asteroid that triggers an ice age. On the mission to colonize Planet Blue, Billie encounters Captain Handsome, who describes flying through a 'bookstorm' and netting the complete works of William Shakespeare, collections of romantic poetry and Captain Cook's journal, among other works. Billie asks where the books came from, and he replies: 'a repeating world – same old story' (ibid., p. 49). Orbus, then, is in Earth's future as well as Earth's past; *The Stone Gods* is the story of a repeating world that always ultimately destroys itself. The novel takes place in three distinct times and places; first on Orbus, then on Easter Island and lastly on Earth in the near-future of the twenty-first century. Each setting features a set of main characters named Billie and Spike (or Billy and Spickers, in the Easter Island section), and each recounts the self-destruction of a world. Orbus destroys itself through unchecked technology and exploitation; the people of Easter Island ravage their forests to build the stone gods and then tear them down; Earth, struggling to recover from a nuclear Third World War, is on the brink of becoming another Orbus. As a collection of stories of repeating, self-destructive worlds, Winterson's novel seems to exhibit severe pessimism concerning the possibility of futurity.

*The Stone Gods* opens on Orbus – a world with no future, only a paralysed present. Unchecked technological advances on Orbus have resulted in 'State-approved mass illiteracy' (ibid., p. 11); this society has embraced techno-friendly means of communications with 'voice and pictures' rather than 'written words', and students are taught 'single-letter recognition' only (ibid., p. 13). Orbus is digitized, computerized and depersonalized, a world run largely by robots, and this dependence on technology gives the Central Power unrestricted control over citizens' lives. Literacy and personal freedoms are not the only casualties on Orbus; technology has advanced to the point where people no longer grow older, but instead have themselves 'genetically Fixed' (ibid., p. 9), frozen in a particular time of life and unaffected by the process of ageing. This newfound ability to defy growing older has far-reaching consequences, particularly for women, who 'feel they have to look youthful' and therefore 'Fix' themselves at progressively younger ages (ibid.). This trend is embodied in the character Pink McMurphy, a woman who has been 'Fixed' at age twenty-four, but wants to be genetically reversed into pre-pubescence to satisfy the paedophiliac urges of her husband. Pink is inspired by Little Senorita, a pop star who has 'Fixed' herself at the age of twelve, so she can 'live in the moment for as long as she can' (ibid., p. 16).

Winterson's portrayal of genetic fixing reveals the grotesque side of a society 'fixed' in the here-and-now. Living in the moment takes on

new meaning on Orbus, as each individual can select a present that will last indefinitely and immunize themselves against growth, change and becoming. Orbus, the planet with no future, is all present – and the present is not pretty. Difference is slowly being obliterated because the unified standard of sameness is dangerously attainable. Billie remarks that ‘we all look alike’ (ibid., p. 19), that ‘everything has become the same’ (ibid., p. 17). This dissolution of difference ironically results in a ‘global crisis’ of sexual perversion; everyone is ‘bored to death with sex’, so they are ‘all perverts now’ (ibid., p. 19). The sex industry consists of ‘freaks and children’ (ibid.), many of whom are trafficked from foreign cultures. It is not a leap for Billie to imagine ‘a world where there are no grown women at all’ (ibid., p. 22):

so this is the future: girls Fixed at eight years old ... or will they want women’s minds in girls’ bodies and go for genetic reversal? The future of women is uncertain. We don’t breed in the womb anymore, and if we aren’t wanted for sex ... But there will always be men. Women haven’t gone for little boys. ... Surrounded by hunks, they look for the ‘ugly man inside’. Thugs and gangsters, rapists and wife-beaters are making a comeback ... So this is the future. F is for future. (Ibid.)

Winterson emphasizes how, on Orbus, women’s bodies are changed to accommodate men’s desires and needs, so this widespread ‘perversion’ does have a heteronormative quality that is illustrated through Pink McMurphy, as well as Billie’s run-in with a giantess in a ‘perverts bar’ (ibid., p. 19). This woman has been altered to be able to ‘take four men at one time’: each of her large breasts has a mouth, and one of her legs has been removed for ‘easier access’ to her ‘front’ and ‘rear’ (ibid., p. 20). Though the giantess propositions Billie, her artificial deformities are clearly meant to please and accommodate men. Yet same-sex relations are hardly transgressive on Orbus; Manfred, Billie’s boss, has a boyfriend and fixes himself at an older age to appeal to the ‘gay toyboys’ (ibid., p. 9). In Winterson’s (non)future, there is no queerness in the sense of tabooed, perverse, non-reproductive sexuality because all sex is non-reproductive, and so-called perversion is mainstream. On Orbus, the Child functions not as a symbol of hope and heteronormative possibility, but as a sex object. People do not want to *have* children; they want either to be children or to have sex with children. So the question is: does Winterson, by using paedophilia to construct a bleak vision of the future, fall into the trap described by Edelman? Is Winterson, who

depicts a nightmarish world where innocent children are endangered, thereby *affirming* reproductive futurism, or is she perhaps subverting the opposition between queerness and reproductive futurism?

I would argue the latter, that Winterson is recasting the relationship between queerness and futurity. On Orbus, a world run almost entirely by robots where the line between the human and the non-human is murky, it is the boundaries of the *human* that are policed, rather than the boundaries of the heteronormative. Billie is a queer heroine, not because she is a lesbian (though she is), but because she transgresses fundamental norms: she refuses to be 'Fixed', but continues to age naturally; she breaks the only sexual taboo still existing on Orbus – inter-species sex – by falling in love with the female *Robo sapiens*, Spike, and she seeks out relational intimacy rather than mere sexual pleasure. Queerness, for Winterson, is not simply non-heterosexuality, but that which intentionally challenges and exceeds the constraints of the normal. This model of queerness aligns more with Muñoz's vision than Edelman's, as it intersects other forms of marginalized difference, such as gender, and questions how societal definitions of the human have been naturalized and enforced.

In the third arc of Winterson's novel, which takes place on Earth after a Third World War, she uses the figure of the Child actually to represent the queer. This third Billie and Spike pairing leaves the boundaries of Tech City, the 'official part of town', to enter the 'No Zone', where the laws and regulations of the established order have no authority (ibid., p. 151). The No Zone is populated by people who were 'unable to live a normal life' (ibid., p. 155) before the war, and after the war escaped to a separate space where 'anything can happen' (ibid., p. 157). This No Zone, I would argue, is an explicitly queer space, a 'landing-place' for those who refuse to conform to the dominant social order (ibid., p. 169). In this queer space, which sits beyond the geographical boundaries of mainstream society, as well as beyond its values, categories and laws, alternative communities are able to form and flourish. Deep in the No Zone, Billie encounters two children – a boy and a girl – who are hairless, toothless and covered in sores. A resident of the No Zone explains to her that the children are 'Tech City's big secret', kept sequestered and hidden from the rest of society; they are 'toxic radioactive mutants', born from women just after the nuclear Third World War (ibid., p. 171). Here, Winterson uses the figure of the Child explicitly to problematise the heteronormative order. As she puts it, these malformed mutant children are the 'kids from nuclear families' (ibid.). This pun highlights that she is talking about the children not simply as victims of nuclear

war, but as victims of heteronormative society. These children are born into the dominant order, but their mutations push them beyond the constraints of the normal, so they are banished to the margins and their existence is ignored. By using the figure of the Child to represent the queer, Winterson deconstructs the opposition that Edelman takes for granted.

Winterson's novel exhibits parallels with Edelman's anti-social thesis, but she is concerned with queerness as marginalization, as that which is excluded by the boundaries of the normal, and her novel challenges the oppositional relationship between queerness and futurity. While Winterson echoes Edelman's concept of the future as fatal repetition through her depiction of repeating, self-destructive worlds, her pessimism about the future does not lapse into nihilism. Unlike Edelman, she does not view the lethal repetition of the past as inevitable, but presents the possibility of a love intervention that can disrupt the endless replication of the past, thereby queering the future.

## A Love Intervention?

Recurrently throughout *The Stone Gods*, Winterson characterizes the universe as a space of infinite possibility, a space that is neither determined ('fixed') by internal laws nor completely random. Human beings, according to Winterson, have the potential to affect the course the universe takes, but as can be seen in her depiction of endlessly repeating worlds, this potential remains unrealized:

every second the Universe divides into possibilities and most of those possibilities never happen. It is not a uni-verse – there is more than one reading. The story won't stop, can't stop, it goes on telling itself, waiting for an intervention that changes what will happen next.

Love is an intervention. (Ibid., p. 68)

the problem with a quantum universe, neither random nor determined, is that we who are the intervention don't know what we're doing.

Love is an intervention. (Ibid., p. 183)

a universe of potentialities, waiting for an intervention to affect the outcome.

Love is an intervention.

Why do we not choose it? (Ibid., p. 205)

Winterson repeatedly asserts the need for an 'intervention' that will disrupt the ceaseless, lethal repetition of the social order. But in what way is love an intervention? In the section that follows, I will read Winterson's love intervention as twofold: first, she presents love as a renewed form of relationality that is not constrained by the dominant order, one that seeks mutuality and intimacy rather than appropriation and objectification; second, Winterson also suggests the possibility of a love between reader and text that opens new worlds, new potentialities.

Each arc of Winterson's novel does not merely recount the self-destruction of a world; each arc recounts a love story. Billie Crusoe the nonconformist and Spike the *Robo sapiens* fall in love on Orbus, as well as on twenty-first-century Earth; Billy Crusoe and Spickers, the castaways on Easter Island, likewise become lovers. The way each couple relates to each other stands in stark contrast to the societies in which they live. On Orbus, people have reduced one another to objects of narcissistic pleasure. Sex is ubiquitously present, but love and emotional intimacy are all but absent. All difference conforms to sameness; even the so-called freaks, such as the four-holed, one-legged giantess, are altered to fit the needs of the normal. Just as people have become either sexual predators or mere objects of sexual fulfilment, the planet itself has been reduced to an object for the use and pleasure of humankind. Billie and Spike, in contrast, develop a relationship that thrives on the differences between them; Billie describes Spike as 'the strange I am beginning to love' (ibid., p. 88) and embraces the fact that she is 'unknown, uncharted, different in every way from me, another life-form, another planet, another chance' (ibid., p. 74). Here, Winterson again underscores the parallel between how individuals think of and act towards each other, and the way humankind as a whole acts towards the planet. Each couple is able to engender a renewed love-relation with the other, both as lover and as world, a relationship that does not appropriate or objectify. These love stories are queer love stories, not merely because they depict same-sex love and desire, but because each couple's relationship transgresses the values and taboos of the social order, which prizes sameness and conformity at the expense of difference. Interrogating the ways we interact with one another and our world, Winterson advocates a radical form of relationality characterized by: 'love without thought. Love without conditions. Love without promises. Love without threats. Love without fear. Love without limits. Love without end' (ibid., p. 121). This is a love beyond 'romance' or 'sentimentality' that does not conquer or consume, but allows the other to flourish (ibid., p. 183). For Winterson this love has the potential to shift the trajectory of the present, to act as

'a force of a different nature from the forces of death that dictate what will be' (ibid.). Or, to use Edelman's terminology, this love can disrupt the lethal repetition of the normative order and queer the future.

Although Winterson emphasizes the transformative potential of love, it is important to address that each of the queer love stories in the novel ends tragically, with one or both of the lovers dying. Winterson's notion of love is clearly connected with loss, and this has interesting implications when compared with Edelman's reading of loss as inescapably negative. Edelman's anti-social thesis is grounded in the Lacanian notion of the split subject, a subject constituted around a fundamental lack. This split occurs when the subject enters the realm of the symbolic, submitting to the law of the signifier, and the perceived wholeness of the imaginary is lost. In this pre-oedipal, pre-verbal imaginary, self and other are one, but entering the realm of culture and language – the realm of the symbolic – necessitates experiencing oneself as separate from the other. This separation creates a negativity or lack at the centre of the subject, who then experiences unconscious, incessant desire for what has been lost.<sup>2</sup> Thus, 'the Lacanian subject is always born out of the loss of love' (Ruti, 2008, p. 118). According to Edelman, the symbolic suppresses the drives, energies and *jouissance* of the real to create and maintain the social order, and he aligns queerness with the real, with what is suppressed and excluded by the symbolic. His anti-social thesis, which presents an inevitable opposition between the queer and the social order, reflects the opposition between the symbolic and the real. Ruti, in her article 'Why There Is Always a Future in the Future' (2008), takes issue with Edelman's reading of Lacan, and her analysis offers another way of reading split subjectivity, one that I see reflected in Winterson's narrative of love and loss. Ruti argues that 'Edelman's account of queer anti-sociality drains the subject of agency, meaning, and creative capacity, allowing it to be overtaken by the mindless and mechanical (inhuman) pulsation of the death drive' (ibid., p. 117). The queer subject, then, has no alternative but to embrace radical negativity and anti-sociality, because there is no hope for change, no hope for a future beyond lethal repetition. According to Ruti, 'interpreters like Edelman tend to see the symbolic as a monolithic monster', without recognizing that, although entry into the symbolic creates a lack-in-being, it also endows us with language, and the capacity to 'engender new forms of meaning' (ibid., p. 118). Ruti's reading of Lacan asserts that although the subject undoubtedly experiences and is constituted by lack, this lack gives rise to creativity. Furthermore, access to language enables us to 'play with meaning', to 'take a poetic approach to the



world' and see it as a 'space of possibility' (ibid.). Edelman, in contrast, leaves 'no room for non-hegemonic forms of signification'; his queer subject has no creative capacity to generate meaning, but can only attempt to sabotage the monolithic symbolic's power to make meaning (ibid., p. 119). For Ruti, this perspective is overly simplistic, as 'the signifier does not invariably obey the dictates of the normative symbolic', but 'is capable of poetic and innovative *interventions*' (ibid., my emphasis). I emphasize the word *intervention* here, because this is precisely the term that Winterson uses to convey much the same idea.

Winterson's characters lend themselves to a Lacanian reading of split subjectivity, particularly the Billie of post-nuclear war Earth, who begins her story by describing the loss of her mother. She recounts being born – 'shipwrecked on the shore of humankind' (Winterson, 2008, p. 123) – and experiencing a profound sense of oneness with her mother, who abandons her a month after birth. This loss never ceases to haunt her: 'you never stop looking. That's what I found, though it took me years to know that's what I've been doing. The person whose body I was, whose body was me, vanished after twenty-eight days. I live in an echo of another life' (ibid., p. 124). Through Billie's narration, Winterson describes the Lacanian split of self from other, which leaves a fundamental lack at the centre of one's being: 'the lost and found/found and lost is like a section of our DNA' (ibid., p. 125). This loss is 'in the spiral of us'; it is a 'story we tell in single lines, separated from one another not by neat spaces, but by torn-out years' (ibid.). Yet unlike Edelman, Winterson does not assume that this loss precludes agency and creative potential. Reflecting Ruti's analysis, Winterson depicts a distinct connection between the experience of loss and creativity:

twice turned out – once from the womb-world, once from her, and for ever – banishment became its narrative equivalent, a story I could tell. But because of this I know that inside the story told is the story that cannot be told. Every word written is a net to catch the word that has escaped. (Ibid., p. 127)

The loss of her mother is what gives Billie desire and what allows her to write as an expression of that desire. The splitting of the subject is not the only effect of entering the symbolic; the realm of the symbolic is also the realm of language, and as both Ruti and Winterson suggest, the experience of loss and access to language gives rise to unlimited creative potential. Edelman reads the split subject as unable to signify meaning, but Ruti argues that our inability to fulfil our lack, our loss,

is what 'sustains us as creatures of becoming and what allows us, over and again, to take up the inexhaustible process of signifying beauty' (Ruti, 2008, p. 119). The capacity to, as Ruti puts it, generate 'poetic and innovative interventions' that disrupt the 'normative symbolic' (ibid.) reveals another facet of Winterson's love intervention. Not only can human beings, on an individual and communal level, create new worlds through love; Winterson's novel also suggests that the love between reader and text can likewise open new worlds.

Winterson's dying, self-destructive worlds share several commonalities, but perhaps the most significant is that they have all abandoned poetic language. On Orbus there is mass illiteracy, and language has been reduced to mere functionality; no one writes, and no one reads. As mentioned earlier, Captain Handsome, in his trek from Orbus to Planet Blue, encounters a 'bookstorm' of abandoned works of great literature that have been jettisoned into the vacuum of space. On 'post-3 War' Earth, 'feelings are out of fashion' (Winterson, 2008, p. 142); only what is practical and purposeful is seen as valuable, so excess consumerism is obsolete – but so is art and literature. Billie has to leave Tech City and enter the No Zone to find books, as normative society has completely abandoned 'book culture' (ibid., p. 162). These dying worlds have lost their connection to poetic language and art – they have forgotten how to imagine beyond the world of the present, to create new worlds through language. This is as much a destructive influence on Orbus and Earth as nuclear war and environmental devastation; without creativity, an intervention is not possible.

The notion that poetic language can intervene in the repetition of the social order also appears in the essay 'The Semiotics of Sex', where Winterson emphasizes the transformative potential of literature by describing reading as a love-relation between reader and text:

learning to read is a skill that marshals the entire resources of the body and mind. I do not mean the endless dross-skimming that passes for literacy, I mean the ability to engage with a text as you would another human being. To recognize it in its own right, separate, particular, to let it speak in its own voice, not in a ventriloquism of yours. To find its relationship to you that is not its relationship to anyone else. To recognize, at the same time, that you are neither the means nor the method of its existence and that the love between you is not a mutual suicide. The love between you offers an alternative paradigm; a complete and fully realised vision in a chaotic unrealised world. (Winterson, 1996, p. 111)

The love that Winterson is depicting in *The Stone Gods*, the love that has the potential to intervene in the ceaseless, lethal repetition of the social order, is a love that is radical enough to let the other exist fully and autonomously. This love is possible not only between two people, but between a work of literature and its reader. When this love is fertile enough, it can open an 'alternative paradigm'; it can intervene in the (re)production of the normative order. Muñoz expresses a similar connection between loss, creativity and transformative potential when he defines queerness as that which 'lets us feel that this world is not enough', that 'something is missing', and asserts that 'we can glimpse the worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic' (Muñoz, 2009, p. 1). This notion of a love-relation between text and reader that enables the conception of alternative paradigms expands the idea of reproduction beyond the heteronormative Child. While Edelman depicts the future, the social order and reproduction as resolutely heterosexual, by allowing for the possibility of non-normative signification, Winterson leaves open the possibility of a queer future that is not merely lethal repetition and affirms an idea of non-heteronormative reproduction through the creative and transformative potential of language. As the first incarnation of Billie and Spike are waiting to die on Planet Blue, Billie says that it will be millions of years before another poem is written, but that poem will be a love poem, 'because it will happen when someone finds that the stretch of the body-beloved is the landmass of the world' (Winterson, 2008, p. 91). Winterson is arguing that the creative capacity of love should not be reduced to heterosexual reproduction; love makes poetry, and poetry can change the world.

## Conclusion

In this manifesto of possible futures, Winterson exhibits commonalities with both the anti-social and utopian queer perspectives. Like Edelman, Winterson depicts subjectivity as founded on loss and displays considerable cynicism regarding humanity's capacity to realize a future that is not mere repetition. However, Winterson stops short of Edelman's futility by illuminating the connection between loss and love, between lack and creativity, and offering the possibility of a love intervention that could alter the course of the unfolding future. Rather than affirming anti-sociality and anti-relationality, she locates the hope of humankind – minimal though it may be – in forging new kinds of love-relations that cultivate and thrive on difference, relations characterized by mutuality,

intimacy, creativity and change. Winterson's account of futurity aligns with Muñoz's in many ways, but labelling her work utopian seems a misnomer. Though Winterson does present the possibility of a love intervention, she expresses severe pessimism about humankind's ability to *choose* to intervene.

Perhaps Winterson's most significant parallel with Muñoz is her refusal to confine queerness to sexuality. I would argue that this refusal is what creates the so-called 'problem' of Winterson's critical categorization. Morrison (and Edelman for that matter) equates queerness with sexuality and the erotic, and Winterson unflinchingly questions this assumption.<sup>3</sup> Her three pairs of Billie/Spike are queer in the sense of same-sex desire, but it is not only their sexuality that places them outside the normative order. The third couple, in fact, does not have a sexual relationship as much as a friendship that develops as they flee from normalcy to live in the abject Wreck City. They are queer because they resist the constraints placed upon them, develop identities beyond the norm, take a critical stance toward repetitive, destructive social forces and develop love relations that exceed the categories and temporalities of the normative order. This queerness does not foreclose eroticism, but is not reduced to eroticism, either. I would argue that the critics who think Winterson's work is not 'queer enough' have a restrictive notion of queerness that is confined to the erotic and always unquestioningly opposed to heterosexuality. Furthermore, Winterson's refusal to construct or accept an *oppositional* queer identity as a writer gives her work a queerer quality than works that seem unable to complicate the gay/straight binary.

Winterson is a queer writer, not simply because she is a lesbian, but because she confronts the fixed boundaries of the established order and expresses what is marginalized and forbidden. Though Winterson's ability to do this effectively is not determined by her sexuality, it is enriched by it. In 'The Semiotics of Sex', Winterson asserts that gay men and lesbians 'learn early how to live in two worlds; our own and that of the dominant model', so 'why not learn how to live in multiple worlds? The strange prismatic worlds that art offers?' (Winterson, 1996, p. 110). According to Winterson, then, those who exist in the margins of the social order, who are forced to occupy two worlds, are in some ways better equipped to cultivate love-relations that welcome difference and to create poetic interventions that envision new possible worlds. Rather than arguing, like Edelman, that queers have no possible future, Winterson's writing suggests that humanity's only tenable future – a future beyond mere repetition – is a queer one.

## Notes

1. For more on critical receptions to Jeanette Winterson's oeuvre, see Merleau (2003), Ellam (2006), Andermahr (2007) and Detloff (2007).
2. For readers unfamiliar with Lacan, a helpful introduction is Grosz (1990).
3. In "'Who Cares About Gender at a Time Like This?' Love, Sex and the Problem of Jeanette Winterson', Morrison primarily locates queerness in representations of sexuality and the erotic, and presents queerness as always oppositional to heterosexuality. For example, Morrison criticizes Winterson's love scene in the novel *Lighthousekeeping* (2004) for being full of 'heterosexual clichés' and argues that Winterson exhibits a 'seemingly total capitulation to a Lawrencian imaginary' (Morrison, 2006, p. 178). However, by not disclosing the gender of one of the lovers, Winterson is clearly destabilizing the gay/straight binary; she is displacing stereotypically masculine and feminine sexual roles from heterosexuality. Yet for Morrison, because Winterson does not explicitly present lovemaking that is directly oppositional to heterosexuality, this love scene is not sufficiently queer. This illustrates how Morrison, as well as other critics, seems unable to read queerness beyond the gay/straight binary.

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