

Reference and Repetition in Jeanette Winterson's Novels

by

Maximillian Coghlan

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NAME OF STUDENT: Maximillian Coghlan
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Signature of Supervisor

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Date

Supervisor's Name (Printed) _____

Abstract

Jeanette Winterson's infamous use of intertextuality and self-quotation, often dismissed as arrogance, compels her readers to locate her works within an interconnected cycle. This thesis argues that Winterson's reference and repetition are evidence of a poststructuralist project: she reconceives the unities of autobiography, history, and identity as networks of relations. Foucauldian archaeology, the study of discourse as a system of references rather than a thematic unity, provides an appropriate toolkit in studying Winterson's discursive method. Her memoir *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* returns to many of the same events of her semi-autobiographical novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, suggesting that any attempt at writing the authoritative version of one's life story is always partial or fractured. Much the same, the fantastic elements and self-deprecating narrators within her historical novels *The Passion* and *Sexing the Cherry* imply authoritative or historical facts are as fictions, open to the surreal or contradictory and accessed through the personal. Last, in *Written on the Body*, Winterson encourages her reader to interpret the narrator's gender from textual clues, just as the reader of *Weight* confronts biographical parallels between author and character; in both cases, identity is a narrative, open to play and revision.

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Introduction

1.1 Artefact and Accident

Jeanette Winterson's notorious self-referentiality is perhaps the most prominent aspect of her writing style: she lifts memorable phrases from her older works for use in later novels, and uses many of the same images between texts. For example, the phrase "Time is a great deadener" appears not only in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (218), but in three later novels as well (*Passion* 35; *Sexing* 127; *Written* 189). At times, Winterson refers to her novels by name: in *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?*, she recounts writing *The Battle of the Sun* (172), and she has MiMi act in a stage version of *The PowerBook* within *The Gap of Time* (49). Despite this "reiteration compulsion" (Gustar 60), Winterson values what she calls the "permanencies" of art objects, the longevity of the physical artefact: "if books, music and pictures are happy enough to be indifferent to time, then so am I" (*Art Objects* 5). Much in the vein of Susan Sontag's call for "an erotics of art" (14) as an alternative to hermeneutic interpretation, Winterson is "against interpretation" as it leads to a focus on context—reputation, periodization, and canonization—that inhibits the pleasure of viewing, thereby impeding a personal relationship with the object. She argues, "When the sense of familiarity becomes too great, history, popularity, association, all crowd in between the viewer and the picture and block it out" (*Art Objects* 12). But where Sontag turns to critics for "more attention to form in art" (Sontag 12), Winterson turns to the artist to tell a different story than that of the critics. In new works, "the past is reclaimed. It is not lost to authority, it is not absorbed at a level of familiarity. It is re-stated and re-instated in its original vigour....It is not so much influence as it is connection" (*Art Objects* 12).

However, as Winterson clarifies, she intended the phrase "art objects" to be read as "a verb not a noun. Art objects to the lie against life that it is pointless and mean" ("Art Objects").

As a creative mode, art incites a particular way of viewing the world, made possible through the viewer's engagement with the physical artifact: she claims, "Art is conscious and its effect on its audience is to stimulate consciousness. This is sexy, this is exciting, it is also tiring" (*Art Objects* 26). But Winterson's position as both artist and critic complicates this reading of art's power. Despite calling for a personal relationship with art, *Art Objects* is a book of critical essays in which Winterson advocates a certain way of reading her texts. Moreover, she attempts to frame her readers' perception of her novels through her website and the books' cover matter. Of her earlier works, Winterson claims, "There are seven books and they make a whole cycle. *Oranges*, *The Passion*, *Sexing the Cherry*, *Written on the Body*, *Art and Lies*, *Gut Symmetries*, and *The Powerbook*" ("Powerbook"). In this way, she mandates that her texts be read as part of a closed set, more intimately connected than a series of works written by the same author, but she never reveals exactly what common thread runs through this cycle. While these works are heavily intertextual, often lifting phrases and themes from each other, so too are her later works that fall outside of this cycle. The themes and recurrent images of these novels likewise appear outside of the cycle. *The Stone Gods* ends with the assertion, "Everything is imprinted forever with what it once was" (207), and similarly, *Weight* begins, "The strata of sedimentary rock are like the pages of a book" (ix), both of which are variations of the palimpsest image used to great effect in *Written* and *Oranges*.

I think Winterson is less concerned with linking her texts together than in encouraging a certain way of reading her work. In the introduction to *Oranges*, Winterson encourages us to "read in spirals" (xiii) when approaching non-linear narratives. This is not out of necessity—Winterson's novels are much less "anti-linear" in structure than Joyce's or Stein's, and can often be read straightforwardly—but out of Winterson's belief that literature should renew rather than

reproduce. Each reading of the novel constitutes a map of the route taken through the messy structure of the text: “Draw several [spirals], each drifting into each... Our mental processes are closer to a maze than a motorway” (xiv). Navigation of the text is at once navigation of the self; for Winterson, identity is subject to the same flexibility afforded by works of fiction, and it is similarly a product of its intertextuality. Just as Virginia Woolf argues, “[L]ife is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end” (160), Winterson’s focus on the spiral or cycle foregrounds how art is not only an artifact, available for the viewer’s use, but also an accident, in the sense of a conspicuous arrangement of the intertexts that inform the author’s identity. By repeating conspicuous phrases and referencing other texts, Winterson shows the construction of a postmodern identity in practice: it develops through the layering and reevaluation of the intertexts that compose it. This is an ongoing process, and as such she never prescribes a single definitive reading of her texts. Just as she questions the authority of autobiography and history in conclusively defining their subjects, Winterson maintains that the reading of identity cannot be likened to that of historical records or literary criticism. Instead, identity must be understood as the product of intertexts and changes.

1.2 Textual Archaeology

Michel Foucault’s archaeological method, the practice of analyzing an object through the underlying theories or discourses that constitute it, forms an appropriate metaphor for Winterson’s approach to identity as a fiction. In both cases, the discursive intertexts reveal more than the linear narrative. Regarding fiction, Foucault writes:

The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it

is a node within a network. (*Archaeology* 23)

If meaning rests at the level of reference, then no object is a self-contained unity; Foucault suggests such decentering is the end of “such defined unities as individuals, *oeuvres*, notions, or theories” (*Archaeology* 21). This line of thinking resembles Winterson’s own approach to reading history and identity as elaborate fictions. Her notion of “cover versions,” as opposed to rewrites or borrowings from earlier texts, foregrounds the continuous links between the original and present works. That is, older texts are never inert, as they inflect the present author’s language and manner of thought. In Chapter Two, I focus on the form of autobiography as an example of Winterson’s suspicion of unities. Although autobiography is supposedly an objective account of the author’s life, Winterson’s focus on the intertexts that define her—favourite quotations, works of art, and the literature that informs her thought—is a means of providing an alternative to the “womb to tomb of an interesting life” (*Happy* 229).

This focus on references rather than essential meanings reflects a shift in authority. Foucault claims that theories of the death of the author have “merely transposed the empirical characteristics of an author to a transcendental anonymity,” a restoration of the “religious principle of hidden meanings” (“Author” 120) to be revealed through exegesis. Both Winterson and Foucault reject this notion that the text is a puzzle endowed with certain truths for the critic to illuminate. As I will argue in Chapter Three, Winterson’s recourse to oft-repeated cultural texts, such as myths and folktales, is a means of critiquing this model of textual authority. By having different authors lay claim to the same story, she suggests that the model of the transcendent author has no place in the cultural circulation of stories and meanings, without clear author or origin point. However, certain “signs that refer to the author” (Foucault, “Author” 129) remain in the text, clues such as extratextual references, quirks of grammar, and adherence to

generic or periodic conventions. Rather than critiquing the methodology of a literary criticism that would ignore such clues in favour of seeking out the text's hidden meaning, Foucault argues for a parallel mode and focus of scholarship, necessitated by the form of the modern archive:

The document... is no longer for history an inert material through which it tries to reconstitute what men have done or said, the events of which only the trace remains; history is now trying to define within the documentary material itself unities, totalities, series, relations. History must be detached from the image... of an age-old collective consciousness that made use of material documents to refresh its memory. (*Archaeology* 7)

In short, the growth of archives implies that no single author defines or originates any given discourse. While Aristotle was once *the* philosopher, the arbiter of philosophical discourse's content and style, scholarship has moved to a model where writers "meet without knowing it and obstinately intersect their unique discourses in a web of which they are not the masters, of which they cannot see the whole" (126). Moreover, the material documents that constitute the archive are always partial, making use of a system of references to other texts and conventions to secure their identity within a given discourse. That is, the text itself cannot stand as the definitive model of a discourse, as it makes use of a web of references to texts beyond itself.

What Foucault says here about the social sciences applies just as well to literary criticism, a field increasingly given to quantitative or lateral approaches to particular texts in light of the modern ease of collecting and connecting the literature of a period or movement. Although digital humanities work cannot supplant interpretative textual criticism, the fields might complement each other: Franco Moretti describes quantitative literary analysis as "a way to widen the domain of the literary historian" (2), a supplement rather than a replacement. I think

that applying an archaeological method to textual criticism, focused not on discovering hidden meanings planted by the author so much as the lateral links and intertexts that constitute the work, is a viable means of approaching literature. In fact, if Eileen Williams-Wanquet is right in defining the postmodern or metafictional novel as “a new way of conveying the world” by “reproducing previous texts with a difference” (“Postrealism” 392), then textual archaeology suits this genre through its focus on the transformations, parodies, and ironies enabled by such references. Winterson’s repetitions are never confined to the text in which they appear. Although they are in one sense a “puzzle” for her critics to decipher, these references do not claim the authority of definitive textual meaning; they are always generative, providing new contexts through which the linear narrative may be read, but not fixing meaning as one proper configuration. Like the palimpsest, these intertexts are continually rewritten, always offering a partial view. When Winterson condemns the “misreading of art as sexuality” (*Art Objects* 104) that would consign her works to a lesbian canon, she criticizes attempts to read autobiographical traces in her writing as evidence of definite meaning. As an alternative, she advocates keeping the text fluid: “What we do need is to accept in ourselves, with pleasure, the subtle and various emotions that are the infinity of a human being. More, not less, is the capacity of the heart. More not less is the capacity of art” (108). This link between “heart” and “art” speaks to the inseparability of the emotional from the political in Winterson’s work. Many of her novels invite the reader to participate somehow in the generation of textual meaning. Her habitual use of the second person, even outside of dialogue—“Do you remember how Sinbad tricks the genie?” (*Happy* 34); “I could tell you the truth” (*Sexing* 2); “Look around you” (*Weight* 6)—compels the reader to answer or confirm what the narrative voice has said. In this way, her novels have a dialogic quality, such that the reader is involved in writing part of the text. In Chapter Four, I

suggest that by encouraging the readers of *Written* to interpret the qualities of her unnamed, ungendered narrator, Winterson shows how identities are all too often prescribed rather than observed.

This thesis will work at the level of archaeology, surveying intertexts and patterns of language to argue that Winterson's repetitions are part of her philosophical project in undermining claims to concrete meaning. She targets a range of assumed unities, from the notion of a stable identity to the self-integrity of a work of fiction, in deconstructing narratives of wholeness. Chapter Two, on her semi-autobiographical novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* and her later memoir *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?*, focuses on Winterson's construction of autobiography as an elaborate lie. By admitting that her memoir, which returns to the events of *Oranges*, is "a true story but it is still a version" (*Happy* 229), she suggests that any attempt at a definitive narrative is always partial and open to revision. Similarly, Chapter Three examines in greater detail her claim that history is "a hammock for swinging and a game for playing" (*Oranges* 119). With reference to *The Passion* and *Sexing the Cherry*, I argue that Winterson's self-conscious storytellers, who often draw attention to their own unreliability, treat historical fact as akin to the fantastic and surreal stories they tell. Lastly, in Chapter Four I read *Written on the Body* and *Weight* as examples of Winterson's view of identity as a mutable fiction. Modelling identity on the image of the palimpsest that recurs in her works, Winterson advocates a performance of the current configuration of traits, emotions, and stories about the self.

“I can write my own”: Autobiography (*Oranges and Happy*)

2.1 Autobiography as Fiction

Winterson delights in deception: her novels feature crossdressing, masks, ambiguities of gender and race, and conspicuously unreliable narrators. Rather than viewing fiction as a flawed form, unable to speak to anything authentic, Winterson follows Gertrude Stein in delighting in the freedom that a lie posing as truth affords the author:

Like *Orlando* and *Oranges are not the only fruit*, the *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* is a fiction masquerading as a memoir. It seems that if you tell people that what they are reading is “real”, they will believe you, even when they are being trailed in the wake of a highly experimental odyssey....Like Stein, I prefer myself as a character in my own fiction. (*Art Objects* 53)

In this view, autobiography functions as a palimpsest, bearing traces of the author beneath the surface configuration, a distorted version of events. Eileen Pollard claims that “the figure of the author, and [his/her] agency (so *seductive* within memoir)... is a ruptured position, a story, subject to the same unravelling, if scrutinized, as any text” (7). Pollard points to Winterson’s rewriting of characters from *Oranges* in *Happy* as evidence of this palimpsest at work (6):

Winterson reveals Elsie was a sympathetic character written in “because I really wished it had been that way” (*Happy* 6-7), drawing attention to her method of reconstructing events. Similarly, Winterson summarizes the plot of *Oranges* as a “semi-autobiographical” (1) retelling of events, and proceeds to add details about Mrs Winterson that contradict or extend the earlier text. The image of Mrs Winterson “smoking into the night underneath a haze of fly spray” (62) superimposes elements of theatricality and self-contradiction upon the Mrs Winterson of *Oranges*. Much like Stein writes someone else’s autobiography, Winterson promises truth but

delivers fiction: “It is a true story but it is still a version” (229). In her view, autobiography is less a stable genre category than an element of fiction, more or less present in any work.

This conflict between truth and construction recurs in Winterson’s writing. In *Oranges*, the surface conflict between Jeanette and her mother about sexuality is at once an argument about how identity is shaped. Jeanette’s narrative constitutes a rebuttal of her “destiny” to become a missionary (132), constructing a new identity through the writing process. Although Mrs Winterson can compose an alternate ending for *Jane Eyre* and plans Jeanette’s future with exact detail, she cannot apply this same art of composition to her own life. In *Happy*, Winterson focuses on the pervasive despair that results from her mother’s inability to construct a more suitable identity, describing her variously as a “flamboyant depressive” (1) and a “black hole that pulled in all the light” (119). The chapter “English Literature A-Z” intersperses Winterson’s praise of Woolf and Stein with grim accounts of a childhood with Mrs Winterson, linking her creative ability to her access to literature, the “wild card” (120) that rescued her. For Winterson, the ability to treat the self as a cipher, open to rewriting and even contradiction, is a viable alternative to the predetermined and immutable worldview she accords Mrs Winterson. Autobiography becomes a political device, transforming and fictionalizing authoritative narratives through processes of repetition and rearrangement.

Both texts feature a book burning as a turning point in the conflict about the importance of language in constructing the self. In *Oranges*, Mrs Winterson burns “all the letters, all the cards” pertaining to Melanie (143), while in *Happy*, she burns her daughter’s collection of paperbacks. Jeanette remains stoic and claims Mrs Winterson is “not my queen any more” (*Oranges* 143), but in *Happy*, Winterson admits, “I had been damaged and a very important part

of me had been destroyed” (*Happy* 42). Her response to this takes the form of a mission statement:

[S]tanding over the smouldering pile of paper and type, still warm the next cold morning, I understood that there was something else I could do.

‘Fuck it,’ I thought, ‘I can write my own.’ (*Happy* 43)

Writing an identity is not just a gut reaction, but a necessity: Reina van der Wiel claims that “trauma can paradoxically... become the site on which identity is founded” (135), reading Winterson’s return to traumatic events through semi-autobiographical fiction as a method of revising her identity. This idea of writing “through” trauma at both narrative and autobiographical levels bridges identity formation and the writing of a fictional character: in allowing identity to be rewritten in the same way as fiction, Winterson transforms the open wound into a creative source.

Much as Winterson fashions an identity from language and literature, she structures her writing with references, quotations, and word motifs, even naming the chapters of *Oranges* after the first eight books of the Old Testament. Many critics follow Isabel Gamallo in reading this Biblical framework as “parody and pastiche” (Gamallo 133) rather than faithful indebtedness: it is a “deliberately unfitting or incongruous use of the Bible, in which Scripture gives rise to titles in a lesbian coming-out novel” (Makinen 32). However, despite Winterson’s irreverence there are congruencies between text and intertext in theme, if not always tone. Sometimes Jeanette overtly links events in her narrative to those in the Bible, such as when she connects her lack of blind faith to the pillars of cloud and fire in the chapter “Exodus.” Additionally, there are echoes of Biblical exegesis at work in her narration. Jeanette plays on Biblical typology in her characterization of herself and Mrs Winterson, the interpretative strategy in which Old

Testament events and characters prefigure the New Testament. In “Genesis,” Jeanette presents herself as the Christ child to her mother’s Virgin: Mrs Winterson “followed a star until it came to settle above an orphanage, and in that place was a crib, and in that crib, a child” (*Oranges* 14). Instead of taking the New Testament as her framework, Jeanette chooses to echo New Testament events through the severe, mythical Old Testament context.

Gamallo argues that Jeanette’s “search for a sexual identity shapes and orients her literary identity” (124), resulting in not only her use of intertexts, but the way she approaches relationships and familial narratives. That is, Jeanette’s sexual relationships are shaped by her engagement with texts, most notably the Bible. The structure of Jeanette’s relationship with Melanie is mediated by her church and expressed through performative acts before the community. Instead of dates, they go to church, where Jeanette finds the opportunity to “g[i]ve her hand a little squeeze” under the pretense of the Spirit’s influence (109). During one service, Melanie makes a public confession of sin, such that “a ripple of joy ran through the church. There was no one else, so Melanie had plenty of attention” (109). Seeing Melanie’s embarrassment, a churchgoer assures her, “Don’t worry...It’s homeopathic” (109). As in Jeanette’s missionary work, which informs her religious identity, rituals of cathartic redemption are important in the creation and maintenance of her sexual identity. This purgation spurs Melanie to ask Jeanette to be her “counsellor” in search of Jesus, linking the progress of their relationship with spiritual development.

Appropriately, the public castigation of their relationship takes the form of an inverted marriage ceremony. Jeanette enters the church with Melanie after the service has started, and finds the pastor “standing on his lower platform, with my mother next to him. She was weeping” (133). When the girls reach the front, the pastor intones, “Do you deny you love this woman with

a love reserved for man and wife?" (134) Melanie, "trembling uncontrollably," repents and is led off, but Jeanette remains at the platform and repeats, "I do, I do" (135). That night, Jeanette takes solace in Miss Jewsbury's home, where instead of consummating the marriage with Melanie, she has sex unwillingly, and describes it in terms of sinfulness or fallenness: "We made love and I hated it and hated it, but would not stop" (136). The language of sacraments in this section links Jeanette's loss of virginity to her choice in rejecting her mother's most explicit command, "Don't let anyone touch you Down There" (112), and thereby her mother's worldview. Even so, both Jeanette's and Mrs Winterson's standpoints derive from the Bible: Jeanette and Melanie are "drawn together sexually by a text, but the text bringing the two young women closer is later invoked to indict them" (Bailey 72). Jeanette is ostracized not only for defying the edict against "Unnatural Passions," but for appropriating or remixing Biblical authority to suit her needs.

This use of authority is similar to Mrs Winterson's strategy in raising Jeanette as "a missionary child" (14), devoted to argument for the sake of conversion. As if adopting the tools of the master, Jeanette acquires her mother's knack for sampling Scripture defensively. Her response to the pastor's condemnation of her relationship with Melanie is to quote, "To the pure all things are pure" (*Oranges* 134), refusing her church's interpretation of the text in favour of her own. She borrows this relationship to the Bible from her mother: in *Happy*, Mrs Winterson "wrote out exhortations and stuck them all over the house" (100), trading Scripture for bricolage. However, Mrs Winterson, who "invent[s] theology" (8) with the same audacity that she amends the ending of *Jane Eyre*, is content to treat her new construction as authoritative. Jeanette recognizes that even though her sampling retains the original words, it is decontextualized and applies only to the current context. This is most apparent in her sampling of stories, poems, and myths.

2.2 Myths and Intertexts

Besides the Biblical chapter structure and language, *Oranges* makes frequent use of myths and fairy tales, both retellings of famous stories and invented tales. Often, Jeanette inserts brief story sections into her narration that either reflect or predict her own situation. The locations of these inserts in the narrative are telling: Gamallo argues that the fairy tale segues are “carefully selected to lay stress on the most crucial moments in the girl’s development as a female subject and as a lesbian” (121), affirming her preference for multiplicity and difference rather than Mrs Winterson’s absolutism. Times of stress are marked by aphoristic inserts, less descriptive than philosophical: during a fever after losing Melanie, Jeanette asks, “Who will cast the first stone?...Is it necessary to live without a home?” (*Oranges* 144) This section is curt and heavily allusive, bridging Biblical language with stories of the Black Prince and Humpty Dumpty, as if following a train of associations in Jeanette’s thought. Echoes of cultural and mythical characters universalize Jeanette’s stories even when they are inextricable from her own narrative. Where her own versions deviate from the standard tale, Jeanette does not outright reject the tale, but instead questions its place in culture. She reads the traditional “Beauty and the Beast” pattern of heterosexual marriage as “a terrible conspiracy” against young women (93), and responds to her pastor’s sermon on divine perfection as flawlessness through an invented tale about a misguided prince who seeks this perfection without reward (78-86). In both cases, Jeanette offers counternarratives that expose these widely held beliefs as contestable and mutable.

The stories of Perceval (of the Grail legend) and Winnet Stonejar (Winterson’s invention) are unique among the rest: Jeanette tells them in multiple installments throughout the last two chapters, and they feature named protagonists rather than symbolic characters. Mara Reisman

observes that unlike the “archetypal figures” (26) of the earlier stories, Jeanette’s shift to specifically named characters “allows the reader the possibility of differentiating him- or herself from the characters and narratives presented” (27). That is, Jeanette begins to tailor her stories to her unique circumstances rather than presenting them as part of a universal consciousness. Perceval’s dark night of the soul, cut off from the familiarity and security of Arthur’s court (*Oranges* 173), mirrors the disarray of Jeanette’s worldview when her mother contests her ability to preach and lead for having “taken on a man’s world” and “flouted God’s law.” Crafting a story is Jeanette’s response to this crisis of faith: “Until this moment my life had still made some kind of sense. Now it was making no sense at all” (171). Jeanette’s alterations to the Grail story are specific to her mother’s accusations of gender impropriety. Anne DeLong argues that the relationship between Perceval and Arthur, resembling at turns that between child/parent and errant knight/beloved, “not only inverts the gender of the lesbian daughter’s quest but is itself knotted up by the story’s homoerotics” (271). It is at once a repetition and a universalization of the thematic elements of Jeanette’s story, incorporating the question of sexuality into the older text. As “the darling, the favourite” (173) of Arthur, Perceval receives a token from his king as if the symbol of the beloved (211). Guinevere is distant from this version of Arthur, supplanted by Perceval: “There was a woman, he remembers her. But oh, Sir Perceval, come and turn cartwheels again” (166). Jeanette’s “dismissal of the traditional heterosexual emphasis” (DeLong 271) in her version renders it an abstraction of her own quest, relating her particular suffering to a universal pattern of struggle and loss.

Although this retelling is certainly inflected by Jeanette’s narration, her own story is “made to parallel Perceval’s, so that one is not privileged over the other” (Lacey 58). The interlacing of Perceval’s and Winnet’s sections throughout the last two chapters makes Jeanette’s

narration seem more like a series of vignettes, akin to the way she uses other stories throughout the novel. These sections progress in tandem. Whereas Perveval's sections tend to reiterate what has already happened in Jeanette's narrative, Winnet's are largely predictive, or alternatively, more honest versions of Jeanette's feelings than what little she reveals in the main narrative.

Gamallo writes,

Winnet's story becomes an allegory of Jeanette's painful separation from her mother...allowing her to express feelings of sorrow and homesickness...that [are], for the most part, concealed or overlooked in the main autobiographical and 'realistic' narration. (129)

As I will argue, Jeanette's positive feelings for her mother, and her tendency to sample and expand on the Bible in particular, go largely unremarked in the main narrative. Winnet's cautious adoption of the sorcerer's power, albeit "differently" than the sorcerer intended of his apprentice (189), reflects Jeanette's evaluation of the worth of her mother's thought.

Winnet's story also serves as a contrast to Jeanette's narrative. Where Winnet's story ends as she sails away from home, certain that "she can't go back" (204), Jeanette returns to visit her mother at the end of the novel. Much as her retelling of the Grail legend mythologizes certain events in her own life, Jeanette's obfuscation of her narrative through fantasy universalizes her story somewhat, emphasizing the wider applicability of certain elements while diminishing others. DeLong claims that "the simultaneous juxtaposition of [Winnet's] quest with Jeanette's works precisely to destabilize the homo/heterosexual binary by suggesting love as a universal," presenting Winnet's relationship with a village boy as part of the same pattern as Jeanette and Melanie's relationship (273). In a similar vein, many critics read Jeanette's various stories as deconstructions of the rigid, binary thinking of Mrs Winterson and the church community. In

Gamallo's reading, the stories function negatively, disconfirming the "possibility of a single authoritative reading of her fiction" (126) by revealing the patriarchal tendencies of these intertexts. Similarly, Louise Aikman argues that Winterson's engagement with myths is "a means of re-viewing the world" (193), providing an atemporal space for the storyteller to critique "hegemonic historical narratives and conventions surrounding the self" (194). However, this irreverence is not as clear within the narrative, which ends with Jeanette's return to the family home and a peaceful (if uncertain) relationship with Mrs Winterson, as per the conventions of *Bildungsroman*. If Jeanette's goal is to refute her mother's thought, why does her narrative end with an affectionate image of Kindly Light at her CB radio as always (224)? Although her stories certainly transgress or deconstruct orthodoxy to some extent, they also build upon precedent elements instead of rejecting them outright. Bruno Latour's claim that "what performs a critique cannot also compose" (425) is certainly contestable—Alan Liu points out that hammers of critique "in fact do also put things together. That's the idea of a nail, isn't it?"—but for Winterson's purposes, creation and borrowing are separate from refutation or dismissal. Her use of remix emphasizes the need for dissent and contradiction in a pluralistic collaboration. As it applies to autobiography and identity, this strategy creates "diverse and conflicting spheres of identity for Jeanette" (Aikman 200) through her dialogic engagement with ubiquitous texts like the Bible, *Jane Eyre*, and the Grail myths.

Peggy Bailey argues that although the Biblical structure and echoes are ways in which Winterson "deconstructs Jeanette's received ideology" (61), the invented tales form "alternate narratives" (62) through parody or hyperbole that favour multiplicity rather than authoritative claims to truth. For example, Bailey reads the story of the perfection-seeking prince as a parable against the "illusion of textual infallibility" (63) that characterizes Mrs Winterson's thought. This

is not a dismissal of claims to authority altogether, but instead an ethos of taking these ideologies as a source of creativity. Similarly, Laurel Bollinger reads *Oranges* as both parody and rearrangement of the Book of Ruth, emphasizing the Biblical theme of female loyalty but through conflict and resolution rather than unquestioned devotion. Jeanette's speech, "I want someone who is fierce and will love me until death and know that love is as strong as death" (*Oranges* 216), is constructed by "language pieced together from the most powerful statements of love in the Bible" (Bollinger 370), specifically those connected to Ruth as a model of femininity. Jeanette's return to Mrs Winterson at the end of the narrative is neither reconciliation nor victory of either view; instead, it offers "a space where subjectivity can be constructed out of female connection rather than exclusively through separation and silencing" (375). Parodic elements, such as Jeanette positioning herself as the child Christ and her connection of missionary work with seduction, allow Winterson to "take what does work for her narrative purposes—female loyalty—without falling into the conventional heterosexual assumptions her source text makes" (376). This results in a heterogeneous whole, with clear links of indebtedness to the preceding narratives.

Jeanette's rearrangement of her mother's thought resembles Winterson's tendency to treat identity as a fiction: the present iteration is the result of preceding transformations, revisions, and ruptures. In such a model, contradictions are not only expected, but valuable in explaining the complexity of experience or internal conflicts. At the end of *Happy*, Winterson comments on her anger at hearing her birth mother criticize Mrs Winterson, claiming, "I would rather be this me...than the me I might have become without books, without education, and without all the things that have happened to me along the way, including Mrs W" (228). Similarly, Winterson's adoption of patriarchal modes such as Bildungsroman, Grail legends, and Biblical authority does

not prove she intends only to transgress and subvert these forms. Nothing is fully overturned in *Oranges*: although the Bible is at the center of the religious community with which she conflicts, it provides Winterson her textual structure and inflects her language. Likewise, Mrs Winterson is both antagonist and source of creativity for her daughter. Winterson's goal is not to shed the influence of these authorities as deconstruction would suggest, but to create an alternative or remixed version, bearing the marks of both author and original.

2.3 Remix, Collage, and Craft

Winterson's focus on the multiplicity of narratives and the role of the storyteller results in a personal, performative philosophy of creation: her repetition of images like the palimpsest and the layering of sediment foregrounds the unique surface configuration beneath which older formations are visible. Her notion of literary cover versions is similar in that it focuses on the current text despite its connection with the original. If autobiography itself is a cover version, a fictionalized re-creation of experience, then its success as a form depends on how well the author tailors it. Enunciative analysis, the study of "statements at the limit that separates them from what is not said" (Foucault, *Archaeology* 119), is one way of evaluating such an inaccessible form. What is left unsaid is a hint at the narrator's strategy of remixing. For Winterson, stories—whether narratives or concepts of identity and history—are structured by layering and given to surface rearrangements: any given story exists on "a field of antecedent elements in relation to which it is situated, but which it is able to reorganize and redistribute according to new relations" (*Archaeology* 124). The goal of enunciative analysis is to read the surface configuration in light of what is unsaid, revealing not the "true story" or what the story could have been, but how the present story is defined by these conscious negations.

As mentioned above, Jeanette's alteration of myth and parodic use of the Bible serve as counterarguments to Mrs Winterson's rigidity, but Jeanette's conflicts with rigid interpretation occur elsewhere in the text as well. Collages, and crafts more broadly, appear throughout *Oranges* as sites of conflict between Jeanette's view and authority. The first collage of the text is connected with Jeanette's appropriation of stories. Mara Reisman claims that "Jeanette negotiates and rewrites stories in an attempt to ascertain her place both in the household and in the church" (12), citing Jeanette's remix of the lions' den as the emblem of this conflict. As a child, Jeanette clashes with her pastor over the authority of Scripture:

There was some Fuzzy Felt to make Bible scenes with, and I was just beginning to enjoy a rewrite of Daniel in the lions' den when Pastor Finch appeared....

"Little girl," he began, then he caught sight of the Fuzzy Felt.

"What's that?"

"Daniel," I answered.

"But that's not right," he said, aghast. "Don't you know that Daniel escaped?"

(*Oranges* 17)

Finch's need to correct this remix bewilders Jeanette, as she knows the Scriptural account perfectly well from Bible study. For Jeanette, the Bible itself is not the source of authority: it is open for play, repetition, and embellishment. In fact, some of her elders teach her to keep the Bible an open text. Elsie keeps "a collage of Noah's Ark" with detachable animals for Jeanette to play with, offering rearrangement and free play with Scripture: Jeanette remembers, "I had all kinds of variations, but usually I drowned it" (33). Similarly, Mrs Winterson's use of the Bible is discursive to the point of unreliability. Jeanette recalls, "Quite often, she'd start to tell me a story and then go on to something else in the middle, so I never found out what happened to the

Earthly Paradise” (21). Although Scripture informs much of Mrs Winterson’s philosophy, in practice she sees the storyteller as more authoritative, able to tailor the letter of the Bible to all purposes.

Besides the Fuzzy Felt incident, other crafts in *Oranges* are grounds for similar conflicts in authority. In contrast with “Class 3’s collage of an Easter bunny” (56), Jeanette cross-stitches Scripture and embellishes her needlework with “the terrified damned” (57). Her resultant unpopularity comes as a lesson in context, which is Jeanette’s earliest deviation from Mrs Winterson’s monomania. Unlike her teacher who “recognized things according to expectation and environment,” Jeanette claims, “I knew that my sampler was absolutely right in Elsie Norris’s front room, but absolutely wrong in Mrs Virtue’s sewing class” (58). Instead of abandoning her idiosyncratic themes in favour of more benign crafts, Jeanette resolves to pursue non-religious themes with her characteristic fervency:

I didn’t despair; I did *Streetcar Named Desire* out of pipe-cleaners, an embroidered cushion cover of Bette Davis in *Now Voyager*, an origami William Tell with real apple, and best of all, a potato sculpture of Henry Ford outside the Chrysler building. (*Oranges* 62)

Jeanette’s selection of cultural artefacts here is quite striking: she drops the article “A” from *Streetcar* and the comma in *Now, Voyager*, her casual rearrangement suggesting they are familiar works even though they are the sort of mass entertainment that Mrs Winterson restricts. Additionally, both works feature a heroine put in a mental asylum due to familial conflict, connecting Jeanette’s choice in craft to her conflict with Mrs Winterson. Jeanette’s renditions of Tell with apple and Ford near Chrysler Building are both famous cultural images of the sort taught in a school curriculum. Given Mrs Winterson’s distaste for the “Breeding Ground” (22) of

public education, Jeanette's turn to popular rather than Biblical models is a rejection of Mrs Winterson's preferred Biblical imagery: she borrows from popular culture to form a countertext of her own. Mrs Winterson, who thinks Jeanette "should have made the Tower of Babel out of origami" instead (62), expects her daughter to replicate her preferred intertext instead of rearranging and questioning it.

Although a lesbian coming-of-age novel might be expected to contain an instance of trying to "pass" as heterosexual, Jeanette does not conceal her sexual identity. Instead, her form of "passing" relates to her art: she values intellectual honesty, and refuses to cede authority to those who would restrict her use of Fuzzy Felt and pipe cleaners, but she suffers from the reactions to her idiosyncratic work and therefore feels pressed to conceal it. Thinking of her inability to perform the expected way in school, Jeanette concludes, "The daily world was a world of Strange Notions, without form, and therefore void. I comforted myself as best I could by always rearranging their version of the facts" (*Oranges* 62). Out of necessity, she adopts a critical consciousness that evaluates individual claims to truth rather than accepting authority as infallible. She later summarizes this method as her "sandwich model" of historical fact:

[W]hen someone tells me what they heard or saw, I believe them, and I believe their friend who also saw, but not in the same way, and I can put these accounts together and I will not have a seamless wonder but a sandwich laced with mustard of my own. (*Oranges* 122)

Winterson enforces the use of such a model through the question of autobiography, never quite deciding whether her novel is factual or fantastic. She remarks, "People like to separate storytelling which is not fact from history which is fact" (120), as if chiding her gullible readers.

This conspicuous observation of unreliability is an attempt at making the reader emulate Jeanette's suspicion of the contradictory claims to truth around her.

Mrs Winterson, the other sandwich maker in *Oranges*, is less forthcoming about her method. If we include *Happy* in the characterization of Mrs Winterson, she becomes opposed to art and representation in general: Winterson recalls, "[W]e had a set of Victorian watercolours hung on the walls...But she was dead set against 'graven images'...so she squared this circle by hanging them back to front" (*Happy* 224). For Mrs Winterson, representations are perverse markers of constructed or distorted truths, not unlike how an idol is a faulty signifier of God. But as her insistence on somehow hanging the watercolours suggests, these representations cannot be entirely abandoned, a belief that aligns her with Jeanette. Winterson's gravitation towards her mother is more apparent in *Happy*, where she describes her mother's effect on her as "a dark gift but not a useless one" (214). Although she writes about her birth family affectionately, she describes this "big noisy family" (217) through their artlessness and simplicity, contrasting them with Mrs Winterson's elaborate theatricality. Unlike Winterson's ventriloquizing of her adoptive mother, her birth family's language is curt and declarative: "I have had four husbands" (216); "I have no problem with that" (214). They live in "the old Manchester working-class way" (218), clever, but uneducated, and their attributes match this antiquated, even rural characterization: her brother Gary is "well built but compact" (217), and her mother Ann is "straightforward and kind" (214). This almost condescending description aligns Winterson with her adoptive mother rather than her birth family, particularly in creative temperament.

Liu says of Latour's compositionism, "[C]ritique can't just be a matter of calling the other side shits and their positions garbage. Some of their shit and garbage mixed with ours would make good compost." In this vein, there is something compelling to Mrs Winterson's rigid

but certain worldview, if not in the product then in her methodology. Jeanette returns to her mother's rewriting of *Jane Eyre* as an incident reminiscent of both Judas' betrayal and the eating of the fruit of knowledge: "what my mother didn't know was that I now knew she had rewritten the ending....I found out, that dreadful day in a back corner of the library, that Jane doesn't marry St John at all, that she goes back to Mr Rochester" (96). As she does in her "invented theology" (8), Mrs Winterson twists and samples the text to support her own project of raising a child to "train it, build it, [and] dedicate it to the Lord" (13). Rather than condemning Mrs Winterson's falsified support of her rigid views, Jeanette admires it in some form, and even adopts it in her own narrative.

The title of *Oranges* speaks to the arena in which Jeanette contests and adapts Mrs Winterson's sandwich making. Oranges frequently signify Mrs Winterson's aggressive interpretations: she gives Jeanette an orange box in lieu of a soapbox to "shout at everyone what was happening" (77) regarding a Church event. Later, Jeanette's questions about men and marriage are mediated by Mrs Winterson's peeling an orange (95), signifying early on that these dangerous questions will go unanswered. When Jeanette is hospitalized for her temporary deafness, instead of bedside visits Mrs Winterson sends her calling card of "a letter and a couple of oranges" (39), something to which Jeanette has no means to respond. Similarly, Mrs Winterson leaves "a bowl of oranges" at Jeanette's bedside after discovering her relationship with Melanie, and Jeanette is plagued by a mocking "orange demon" (144) when deciding whether to mask her sexuality. Jeanette's relationship to oranges changes somewhat in the latter half of the novel. In her childhood, oranges mark the law, but she comes to understand this same law as constructed and surmountable. When Melanie offers Jeanette an orange after their relationship has succumbed to the Church's pressure, Jeanette "jumped up, jumped off and ran as

fast as [she] could” (155), leaving Melanie to the damning signification of oranges: they point to a “serene to the point of being bovine” (157) lifestyle that Jeanette associates with submission to the Church’s authority. Oranges have become a symbol of the inadequacy of rigid interpretations, and in Jeanette’s mind, an insult: “Have an orange” (169), Jeanette offers to her mother and pastor when they attempt to exorcise a demon within her. After this incident Mrs Winterson decides, “After all...oranges are not the only fruit” (219). Winterson underscores this change in heart through references to sudden changes in the family home and Church: Mrs Winterson replaces both her organ and radio with state-of-the-art equivalents, and tells Jeanette of the corruption and disarray of her missionary society (209).

Given the many intertexts at work in this novel, fruit imagery has an overdetermined array of meanings. From the Biblical context, oranges are the forbidden fruit guarded by Mrs Winterson, as well as the fruit of knowledge of the Church’s authority. Fruits in fairy tales are sometimes poisonous, sometimes transformative, but rarely trustworthy. Through Elsie’s invocation of “Goblin Market” (40), fruits symbolize the sexual knowledge that Jeanette acquires over the course of the text. Jeanette’s reticence to grant oranges a clear, unchanging meaning is rooted in Mrs Winterson’s own use of oranges as a catch-all end to questions, or a reminder of her authority. Although she alters the symbolic value in opening the symbol up to multiplicity, Jeanette does so through her own authority as the storyteller, able to distort events. A similar process takes place in *Happy*, where Winterson reevaluates the autobiographical thread of her earlier work.

2.4 Cover Versions of Identity

Reviews of *Happy* tend to focus on the memoir as an addendum to *Oranges*. *Bookmarks Magazine* claims that *Happy* “offers the nonfiction counterpart” to her earlier novel, while

Heather Seggel treats *Oranges* as “a scumbled version of her history,” clarified by the authoritative memoir. Similarly, in her review of *Happy*, Zoe Williams characterizes *Oranges* as a roman à clef to which *Happy* is the interpretative key: “the documents are intended as companions, to lay this one over the last like tracing paper, so that even if the author poetically denies the possibility of an absolute truth, there emerges nevertheless the shape of the things that actually happened.” These readings follow Vintage’s sensationalist marketing of *Happy* as a revelation or exposé: the back cover of the Canadian paperback promises the “true story” behind *Oranges*, presumably with a wink and a smile. This seems at odds with the Winterson who revelled in the duplicity of Stein’s *Autobiography*, boasting, “It seems that if you tell people that what they are reading is ‘real’, they will believe you” (*Art Objects* 53). I think *Happy*’s marketing as the truth behind *Oranges* is a continuation of Winterson’s ruse. This is not a condemnation of Winterson as a compulsive liar, but a reminder that any reading of her memoir is surely affected by her earlier approach to autobiography as a “Trojan horse” (*Art Objects* 50), promising private truths but delivering artful lies. Adam Mars-Jones believes there is something “not just unreliable but ostentatiously unreliable” about Winterson’s memoir: “there’s so much adrift here, so much that is actively unreal, impossible to take seriously.” The elements of fantastic realism common in her fiction are also at work in her memoir, undermining the author’s ability to tell the “true story” at all.

Happy keeps with the model of postmodern identity seen in her fiction, in which the self is iterative and fragmented rather than part of a clearly defined narrative. As such, Winterson continues to use the language of cover versions and repetitions in her memoir, refusing to fully rescind or verify autobiographical elements in her earlier works. Reina van der Wiel reads Winterson’s novels as repetitions of the autobiographical traumas first presented in *Oranges*, not

always through parallels in narrative, but through “her strong preference for first-person narration in her fictional writing...[allowing] ambiguity and alternation between different narrating voices, both inside and outside the story” (136). *Sexing the Cherry* in particular offers a thinly veiled reiteration of Winterson’s relationship with her mother. By presenting Jordan as herself and Dog Woman as her mother, but by using the first person for both narrators, Winterson obscures the boundaries between the two voices. Her other writing takes a similar position on authorship. Where *Oranges* wears its fictitiousness on its sleeve, describing history as “a hammock for swinging and a game for playing” (119), *Happy* remains playfully undecided in claims of veracity: following Stein’s *Autobiography*, Winterson offers the Trojan horse of the self as a character, created through the same stylistic processes as fictional characters while masquerading as autobiography.

As a repetition of elements in her fiction, *Happy* is concerned with patterns of becoming and invention rather than essence or biographical sequence. Like *Oranges*, it follows the pattern of Bildungsroman, charting the narrator’s conflict and resolution of social and moral issues in tandem with her growth as an artist. Although *Happy* touches on her conflict with her church, here Winterson focuses more on how being adopted affects her life and work: she writes, “Adopted children are self-invented because we have to be; there is an absence, a void, a question mark at the very beginning of our lives” (*Happy* 5). However, this self-invention can also be an “opening, not a void” (5), to be explored and expanded on through writing. Winterson is quick to call her work a “version” (229) rather than a definitive text, leaving it open to later revision or recontextualization. Her writing’s self-referentiality is one instance of this revision at work. *Happy* is structured by quotations of both Winterson’s other works and the intertexts within them. She recalls “the opening line of a novel of mine” when describing her distant

parents, linking her life experience to her art through the mantra of *Written on the Body*, “Why is the measure of love loss?” (*Happy* 8) Sometimes these quotations are less overt: for example, the images of the “fossil record, the imprint of another life” and “a kind of Braille” (5) as models of identity are surreptitious nods to *Weight* and *Written* respectively. However, Winterson usually names the older work explicitly and reveals how it connects to an element of her childhood or a particular trauma. *Dog Woman* “was another reading of my mother” (36), and *The Battle of the Sun* was her means of working through a period of “madness” (172). For Winterson, her writing’s axiomatic, repetitive quality is more important than the novel as a self-contained unity: “Whenever I write a book, one sentence forms in my mind, like a sandbar above the waterline” (156-7). The repetition of these refrains emulates what she calls her “Wintersonic obsessions” (160), as if translating her recursive pattern of thought into literary form.

Her quotation of other authors has a similar function. Much like the Jeanette of *Oranges* uses fairy tales as a means of framing events, Winterson turns to myth and literature to articulate personal experience. “Do you remember the story of Philomel?” (9) she asks, providing a mythical model for her silencing under Mrs Winterson. Later, this becomes, “Do you remember how Sinbad tricks the genie?” (34) These assumptions that the reader does in fact remember the stories in question—“you know them” (172)—elevate Winterson’s own reading habits to the level of cultural consciousness. Whether or not these stories really are universal, Winterson uses them as a shorthand to explain the origins of her thought. Stories act as a bridge between the personal and the universal: despite having a symbolic value of their own, they are accessed through a personal lens, inflected by the time and context of the reading. Winterson remarks on a common tendency to quote “without knowing the source, or misquoting and mixing” (*Happy* 28), drawing attention to how cultural symbols are never untouched, but are mediated through

processes of borrowing and alteration. Winterson's decision to use quotation to structure and order her autobiography is a reminder that an autobiographical identity is always already a construction, written through the navigation of intertexts and references. The assumption that autobiography and truth are connected is a genre convention rather than an essential element of the form.

Furthermore, these quotations reiterate the fragmentary nature of Winterson's view of identity. When she describes memorizing fragments of poetry as "a string of guiding lights" (42), she speaks to the constituent elements of her psyche. We can think of *Happy* as Winterson's attempt to describe, in Foucauldian terms, the rules of formation of her own work: as if performing psychoanalysis on herself, she describes what *enables* her current state and her art. One indication of this is how she so often returns to the six books kept in her childhood home and their continued effects on her (*Happy* 33, *Art Objects* 153). The two Bibles provide the structure of *Oranges* and a wealth of references, and relatedly, the Biblical concordance results in her self-referentiality and privilege of cycles. *The House at Pooh Corner* and the *Chatterbox Annual 1923* spark her love and creative sampling of fairy tale and poetry. Last, the *Morte d'Arthur* provides her with not only stories, but also privileged themes and characteristics: she explains, "I have gone on working with the Grail stories all my life. They are stories of loss, of loyalty, of failure, of recognition, of second chances" (*Happy* 37). Both *Happy* and *Oranges* present life writing as an amalgam, or an intersection between competing narratives. Whereas Jeanette struggles with the rigidity of her church and family, in *Happy* Winterson evaluates the author's ability to shape the self through language. As "one whose body was tattooed with Bible stories" (*Art Objects* 155) and who keeps lines of literature as "fragments...shored against my ruin" (*Happy* 41), Winterson presents herself as a composite whole. In a method reminiscent of

Latour's compositionism, she fashions an identity from arrangements of language, "retaining their heterogeneity" while also "searching for universality" (Latour 474). The semiotic and structural instabilities of this method are not flaws but features, enabling the substitution and rearrangement of parts. Much like the collages in *Oranges* are Jeanette's means of developing counternarratives from within her authoritative surroundings, Winterson uses quotation in *Happy* to construct something stable from fragmented and sometimes contradictory parts, a process she applies to identity as well.

However, treating the self as a fiction or conglomerate is not an unreservedly helpful perspective, as it runs the risk of making the concept of self too nebulous or too mutable to be of use. For Winterson, language constitutes the self, but faults in language can disrupt this unity. She describes a period of depression as a time "in the place before I had any language. The abandoned place" (*Happy* 163). The Lacanian echoes here indicate a split between the pre-discursive self in the place before language, and the constructed self, sustained through "doses, medicines" of language (42). The latter is comforting in that it promises a tangible, well-defined identity under continual revision, not possible in the ill-defined state before language. Many of Winterson's characters share in this model of identity as a cipher. In Winterson's novels, interpretation (in the sense of deciding on a feature one way or the other) is a constant threat to her narrators. She speaks through liminal figures, including the gender-undeclared narrator of *Written*, the autobiographical-seeming personae in *Oranges* and *Happy*, or the self-conscious storytellers in *Passion* and *Sexing*. Within these texts and the critical work about them, the undecidability of these narrators conflicts with a cultural need for determinacy. As I discussed earlier, much of the critical work about *Written* focuses on deciding the narrator's gender through textual cues or biographical speculation, stripping the narrator of her/his defining

characteristic. The attempts to read *Happy* as the authoritative key to *Oranges* follow a similar pattern in that they ignore Winterson's suspicion of determinacy, a theory she asserts through the referential structures of her texts.

Certain themes in Winterson's texts also pertain to this drive for ambiguity. Lesbianism is never specifically named in *Oranges*, even when Jeanette leaves Accrington and its religious community's tacit silence around sexuality. Homosexuality is sometimes "Unnatural Passion" (113), or something "different" (98); it is sometimes pathologized as an imbalance of humours (142) or the presence of a malign demon (143); most often, it is connected with outcast figures "like them two at the paper shop" (98) or the unmarried Miss Jewsbury, whose name already marks her as different from the Pentecostal community. Winterson's refusal to use the concrete term "lesbian" is a strategic choice, foregrounding the lesbian's social position rather than her sexuality. This has the effect of lumping in other women who share this liminal position, in particular the other remixers, Elsie and Mrs Winterson. Elsie "had just been able to see" Jeanette's sexuality (170), presumably because she is attuned to women's needs. She provides Jeanette with a community of women as an alternative to the church community, which becomes masculinist over the course of the text: she reads her Rosetti's "Goblin Market," and provides her with fragments of Yeats as an alternative to the insufficiencies of the Bible. Likewise, although Mrs Winterson contests her daughter's sexuality, she does not fully fit a heterosexual pattern herself, having to adopt Jeanette in an imitation of the virgin birth (14). Miss Jewsbury notices, "She's a woman of the world....She knows about feelings, especially women's feelings" (*Oranges* 135). Both Elsie and Mrs Winterson share in Jeanette's abnormal social position, although they are not ostracized in the same way.

In *Happy*, Winterson recalls finding a sex manual in her mother's wardrobe, but it was "flat, pristine, intact" (103), and never put to use. Here, Winterson presents her mother as somewhere between normal and not: she is always a *failed* heterosexual or a *thwarted* giantess. Louise Aikman relates these contradictory characterizations to Winterson's "messy sandwich" model of history, writing, "[V]arying and antithetical accounts of the same event create a dialogue between past, present and future which encourages diversity and individual expression" (198). Rather than writing the definitive biography of her mother, Winterson presents a number of variants within the same work: Mrs Winterson is Judas when she denounces Jeanette's ability to preach, but also Kindly Light on the radio. Likewise, the "Coda" of *Happy* turns from Winterson's journalistic account of finding her birth mother to the mythologization of her own life story: "I had to know the story of my beginnings but I have to accept that this is a version too. It is a true story but it is still a version" (229). In both cases, Winterson deliberately contradicts authoritative readings in favour of a variegated approach.

The idea of *mythmaking* rather than repeating or retelling clashes with the Biblical framework of *Oranges*: it expands on what should be a closed text. Mythmaking parallels Winterson's insistence on inserting herself into various canons, such as the literary trinities of Brontës-Austen-Eliot and McEwan-Amis-Rushdie, or her favourite Modernists, Woolf-Eliot-Stein. Winterson's style is at once an expression of her politics, remixing and imitating to disrupt canonicity at every turn. Rather than revealing the "valuable, fabulous thing" (*Passion* 100) that defines her as the allure of autobiography promises, Winterson only creates "a more troubled notion of subjectivity—even a nomadic subjectivity" (Lacey 57). As I will argue, this nomadic, fictionalized self is not unique to autobiography. Rather, it is one expression of the theoretical

lens through which Winterson views grand narratives, or the unities of “individuals, *oeuvres*, notions, or theories” (Foucault, *Archaeology* 21).

“I’m telling you stories, trust me”: Authority (*Passion and Sexing*)

3.1 Authority as Artistry

Despite her playful suggestions that all her work is more or less autobiographical, Winterson follows Roland Barthes in assuming the death of the author as the source of textual meaning. She uses this gap as a space of play, appealing to the authority of the author with the same frequency that she draws attention to the author as a constructed or illusory figure; the refrain of *The Passion*, “I’m telling you stories, trust me,” presents the author as a trustworthy liar, straddling both sides of the debate. Like Barthes, she views the text as “a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture” (Barthes 146), and the author as the site of this amalgamation. Further, Barthes observes the reception of literature frequently locates the author as the origin point of this composite text: criticism is “tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions” (143), and frequently given to biography and psychoanalysis. Winterson’s play with autobiography is in this sense a challenge to these forms of textual criticism that privilege the author above the work.

Foucault’s archaeology attempts to show the discourse under scrutiny as a “discursive practice that is embodied in techniques and effects” (“Archaeology” 194); as literary criticism, it traces the “tissue of quotation” to its sources, and seeks to answer why the text draws on these sources. Such a system does not permit a single author as the origin point of these quotations, as they are always “caught up in a system of references” (23). However, in applying Foucault’s archaeological model to Winterson’s novels, I take for granted the assumed unities of *oeuvre* and author that he explicitly rejects: like Barthes, he argues that the novel is “caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts” (23), and is therefore is not the isolated product of a single author. The notion of the visionary artist, the isolated wellspring of great literature, brings

to mind Hegel's world-spirit, a cultural consciousness enacted by "great men" as vehicles of historical force. In contrast with this dialectical model, where the current arrangement has clear roots in its preceding forms and the vehicle of change, Foucault attempts to "free the history of thought from its subjection to transcendence" (203). That is, archaeology deviates from teleological and causal analyses of history. Winterson's focus on marginalized storytellers and alternative histories draws on a similar methodology. One reason Winterson draws attention to the fraught position of the author is to present her work as performative or iterative rather than complete in itself. In her texts, authors and storytellers give partial or subjective accounts, left open to complimentary stories or corrections. For example, in *Sexing the Cherry*, both Dog Woman and Jordan give accounts of the first banana to reach London. Dog Woman describes the fruit as "yellow and livid and long" (4), but to Jordan it is "a great wonder" that incites him to travel (102). Winterson's tendency to use multiple narrators, often switching between them without clear delineation, speaks to the partial nature of any single narrative. In this sense, her writing structurally demands the embrace of multiplicity.

Aesthetic judgements form another problem for applications of Foucault's model to Winterson's work. Art's reception not only assumes the unity of the artist as the discourse's point of origin, but it implies an audience of viewers or readers from which the discourse emerges as well. Whether aesthetic criteria are based on the audience's emotional reactions or careful analyses of technique and arrangement, they locate the art object in a broader system of call and response: the art object is the means of stimulating its own discourse. Unlike the archaeological focus on the mutual construction of discourse, aesthetic judgements are unidirectional rather than dialogic, establishing a causal relationship between the art object and the corpus of its reception, criticism, and periodization. Criticism that draws on reader response

theory, such as Lynne Pearce's account of the personal significance she draws from Winterson's novels, advocates a dialogic relationship with the text; however, criticism that seeks to reveal the art object as a "certain way of 'meaning' or 'saying'" (Foucault, *Archaeology* 194), illuminating the object's hidden meaning, locates the object as a transcendental subject, outside of discourse.

This question of whether art cannot participate in its own discourse is a very immediate concern for Winterson. The performative elements of her work, such as her attempts to write someone else's autobiography in the vein of Gertrude Stein, depend upon a notion of discourse in which the art object does not have a single inviolable meaning for criticism to illuminate. Instead, Winterson relies on the polysemy and mutability of discourse. She is keenly aware of her work's status as an artefact, as it remains a concrete arrangement of words on a page, but despite her choice in form she embraces contradiction and ambiguity to maintain a living text that resists determinacy. As I have argued, she is "against interpretation" in favour of a restoration of the emotive and even numinous functions of art, but further, she draws attention to her work as a polysemous fabrication that cannot be understood apart from its emotive functions, defined by its conspicuous stitchwork rather than a seamless authority. The self-contradictions within her texts prevent them from being understood as unities; in fact, they depend upon nebulous models of interpretation that span autobiography, reception, and emotion. *The Passion* and *Sexing the Cherry* are assertions of this theory, bending the genre conventions of historical fiction by including elements of fantastic realism within the historical record. Much as in her interrogation of autobiography, Winterson's project here is to create a "messy sandwich" out of fact and fiction, thereby challenging claims to textual authority.

In *Passion*, Winterson contrasts Napoleon's well-ordered camps in France with the winding, illusory canals of Venice. By presenting Venice as the "city of disguises" (*Passion*

110), a place where both Henri and Villanelle might discard the past and start anew, Winterson valorizes the mutability promised by the city. Many critics apply the wider literary symbolism of Venice to the text. For example, Judith Seaboyer reads the literary Venice as a “space within which a series of myths and power relations have been precisely articulated, an ideology codified, through town planning and artistic embellishment” (484). Its infrastructure is complicit with the spirit of its people: the romantic image of winding canals and hidden passages forms a synecdoche for the multiplicity and mutability embraced by the Venetians. Within texts that use Venice as a symbol of postmodernity, the narrative exploration of the city is a navigation of both the labyrinthine “psychic inward journey” and “textuality itself” (485); exploring the maze is a reading strategy for literary texts and identities alike. Villanelle claims,

“This is a living city. Things change.”

“Villanelle, cities don’t.”

“Henri, they do.” (*Passion* 124)

By invoking the “living city” as a mutable structure, Villanelle draws an analogy between the exploration of a changing landscape and identity formation, much in the same way that Jordan describes a voyage of the “inner imaginative life” (*Sexing* 104) that runs parallel to his literal journey.

In both cases, the idealized uncharted landscape is a symbol of liberation despite the physical confines of space and place. Villanelle describes this process: “What you are one day will not constrain you the next. You may explore yourself freely” (*Passion* 164). Appropriately, the structure of Venice is not shaped by the plans of its leaders—Napoleon’s “regimental” public garden falls into disrepair, failing to impress the Venetians (57)—but by the spirit of its inhabitants. Much like the narrator’s gender-undeclared body in *Written* and Jeanette’s

intertextually-constructed identity in *Oranges*, Venice in *Passion* is less a concrete feature than a model of change, ambiguity, and accident. For Villanelle in particular, Venice is the city of accidents, both romantic (a chance meeting of an old lover) and fatal (deadly wagers and the threat of drowning). She muses, “This is the city of mazes. You may set off from the same place to the same place every day and never go by the same route. If you do so, it will be by mistake” (54). As such, her storytelling practices warp to the shape and texture of the city, repeating to key events such as meeting the Queen of Spades, but always telling a different variation. A similar process occurs in *Sexing*, as Jordan adopts the grafting of a cherry tree as an “art I might apply to myself” (77). Although Jordan claims, “What I would like is to have some of Tradescant grafted on to me so that I could be a hero like him” (77), his narrative dwells not on heroism but on the stories he hears from various women. If the novel is the product of his grafting upon himself to create a “third kind, without seed or parent” (76), then he presents a feminized self, open to the critiques of heteronormativity emphasized in the stories he encounters.

Both exploration and grafting emphasize the singularity of the end product: the transformation uses known parts to create something yet unknown. Venice, historic and well described, is somehow both determinate in the public eye but also unmapped and available for exploration. In line with Seaboyer’s view of Venice as the quintessential postmodern city, Paulina Palmer links the language of Winterson’s descriptions of Venice to the style of Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, a fabulous account of Marco Polo’s journeys to fictional cities that are implicitly tales about Venice. Winterson’s rearrangement of the travelogue “transforms the male erotic fantasy [Calvino] creates into one which is lesbian in emphasis” (113). Venice’s fluidity becomes a marker of “femininity and the fluctuating nature of desire” (113), and its labyrinthine, nested structure suggests the “clandestine behavior, exemplified by crossdressing and secret

meetings, to which lesbian lovers are forced to resort in hetero-patriarchal culture” (114). In other words, the city’s outward markers remain unchanged, but adopt new meanings in light of the author. Winterson admits that while the real Venice “has already been privately mapped,” there is yet room for a private reinterpretation of the public space as “a city you must design and build for yourself” (“Invisible Cities”). When Villanelle claims, “The cities of the interior are vast and do not lie on any map” (*Passion* 165), she speaks to the inadequacy of tradition in understanding private significance.

3.2 Historiographic Metafiction

Although Napoleon and Joséphine appear only infrequently in *Passion*, their presence frames Henri and Villanelle’s narrative, associating the fictional interrogation of passion with historical accounts of the Revolution. The appearance of Cromwell and James in *Sexing*, as well as the King’s gardener Tradescant, has a similar effect on Jordan as he aligns his interior journey of identity formation with the changing political landscape. Many critics link Winterson’s use of historical figures with Linda Hutcheon’s definition of historiographic metafiction, a genre that “asserts that its world is both resolutely fictive and yet undeniably historical, and that what both realms share is their constitution in and as discourse” (Hutcheon 142). That is, history and stories share a common structure: both take the form of a discursive text, and are therefore defined through what they reference in addition to their narrative content. For Hutcheon, writing that draws attention to this similarity is a form of semiotic criticism:

The very fabric of the novel refuses any naive separation of fictional reference from that of so-called “scientific” descriptions of the past...But it also refuses, just as firmly, any formalist or deconstructive attempt to make language into the

play of signifiers discontinuous with representation and with the external world.
(Hutcheon 144)

The metafictional novel exploits this undecideability of reference and reality, using the tropes of fiction to discuss history. For Winterson, this means a shift in focus from the historically significant to the interior. She characterizes Napoleon not through his war campaigns, but through the apochryphal stories around him: are we to believe that he swallowed his chickens whole and routinely lost to Joséphine at billiards? José Sánchez argues that Winterson's historical characters are "discursive constructs with two levels of reference, with both real and unreal characteristics" (98). As such, Winterson's Napoleon is a product of his cultural significance and mythology rather than his biography. Although such characters are marked by references to time and place, their most prominent quality is the ambiguity or indeterminacy of their relation to objective truth.

By inserting Henri as Napoleon's preferred servant and Jordan as the first to present the pineapple to Charles II, Winterson introduces overt fictions into historical narratives, exposing the same practices at work in the writing of both history and stories. This strategy levels the ground in terms of authority: "equally valid [are] the vision of Napoleon [and] the point of view of a neck wringer" (Sánchez 98). As her claim that history is "a game for playing" suggests (*Oranges* 119), the author's position is always playful, bearing an uncertain connection to truth. Because of this, alternative histories, such as those told from marginalized perspectives, become viable as revisions of the accepted historical record. Much as the stories Jeanette tells in *Oranges* are often revisions of patriarchal narratives, Winterson's play with historical verifiability is overtly political. Palmer argues that in *Passion*, "master narratives treating masculinist concerns such as military conquest and empire-building...are interrogated, and emphasis is placed instead

on narratives produced by marginalised sections of the community” (108). Instead of focusing solely on Napoleon’s campaign, Henri dwells on his memories of home, his mother, and Villanelle. Similarly, Jordan’s account of his voyages focuses on women’s stories about love and marriage, and half of the novel is given to Dog Woman’s memories and account of Cromwell’s rule.

For Natalia Andrievskikh, the inclusion of the fantastic in these alternative histories is a means of “departing from the patriarchal version of history” (9), a split denoted by Jordan’s focus on orality as opposed to writing. She views the novel’s structure as a pastiche of voices enabled by Jordan’s repetition of stories:

the new text consumes the previous cultural narratives with their meanings, imagery, and structures, thus transforming them into a new creation. The multiple stories bleed into each other without transitions...Winterson assembles the corpus of her text through stitching together of intertexts, lists, and stories.

(Andrievskikh 9)

Whereas Jeanette draws parallels between cultural narratives and her own story, Jordan focuses on the act of retelling these stories rather than their content. Winterson emphasizes the recontextualization brought about by each new storyteller: “the novel does not simply ‘reuse’ stories or images, but consumes and appropriates them to change their meaning and subvert the message of the original source” (Andrievskikh 7). The twelve dancing princesses, “cannibalized” from the Grimms’ tale (8), tell stories that revise works of literature and cultural narratives to focus on the women absent or marginalized in the original versions. However, their stories are framed by Jordan’s seeking out these princesses and including their stories in the log of his “inner imaginative life” (*Sexing* 104), subordinating the content of their tales to his metaphoric

exploration of his identity. In this sense, he appropriates the storytellers' authority, re-revising their narratives to fit in his own account.

Jordan's repetition of these tales collapses the boundary between borrowing and creating, calling into question the identity of the storyteller. Winterson critiques both history and authority much in the same way that Foucault questions the author's identity: "In a novel, we know that the author of the formulation is that real individual whose name appears on the title page... [but] the statements do not presuppose the same characteristics for the enunciating subject" (*Archaeology* 93). Much like Winterson's historical characters are only vaguely connected with truth, the author's ownership of the statements in the text is unverifiable. As Justyna Kostkowska argues, Winterson "forces us to experience a world where even seemingly 'opposite' and mutually exclusive realities exist.... Her narrative method is a lesson in ecological interrelatedness" (98). Rather than understanding the author as the source from which the text proceeds, Winterson advocates a nebulous model of authority, allowing for fluid and unhierarchical connections of authors and subjects. She takes Foucault's claim that the author's position "is variable enough to be able either to persevere, unchanging, through several sentences, or to alter with each one" quite literally (95): her authors *do* change, as when Henri and Villanelle collapse into a single narrative voice, or when Jordan and the princesses both claim the role of storyteller. The ambiguity offered by the metafictional novel results in the levelling of fantasy and reality, creating a space where "we are forced to abandon our preconceived notions of the reality we 'know' and open up to the realities we may not know" (Kostkowska 96). With fiction as the prevailing mode, Winterson's narrators can take on impossible identities rooted in ambiguity or hybridity. Broadly speaking, both Henri and Jordan

adopt what Cath Stowers calls a “reworked and feminized” masculinity, marked by the embrace of multiplicity as opposed to determinacy (“Journeying” 147).

Winterson juxtaposes Henri’s understanding of passion with his father’s passion for his wife (the drive to possess) and Napoleon’s passion for chicken (an appetite). Instead, Henri understands passion as a form of interpellation, the construction of the self through the object of desire. Borrowing Villanelle’s gambling metaphor, “What you risk reveals what you value” (*Passion* 47), Henri seeks a form of passion that places the self in another’s hands. He dismisses conventional religion on the grounds that it expects a lover’s devotion but refuses to return the same: “I have shouted to God and the Virgin, but they have not shouted back and I’m not interested in the still small voice. Surely a god can meet passion with passion?” (10) That is, Henri expects a dialogic form of passion instead of the desire to possess a lover that he sees in the men around him. Scott Wilson, drawing on the Hegelian theme in *Passion*, suggests that love is “all about the struggle for recognition... [Passion is] somewhere between fear and desire, when one man overcomes his fear of death and risks his life in an act of valour” (61). This view of passion as a stage in the master/slave dialectic informs the displays of passion that both Henri and Villanelle admire in the text. Henri admits, “When I fell in love it was as though I looked into a mirror for the first time and saw myself” (*Passion* 169), his language resembling Villanelle’s reaction to falling in love with the Queen of Spades: “I catch sight of myself in the water and see in the distortions of my face what I might become” (67). Both narrators remark on how love incites a reconceptualization of the self in light of the beloved.

As Stowers (“Journeying” 144) and Palmer (105) argue, Henri admires a specifically lesbian approach to love that restructures power imbalances or gendered obligations between lovers. In contrast with Napoleon’s “passion for chicken” and Joséphine, whom he liked “the

way he liked chicken” (3), Henri seeks a dialogic relationship with the beloved in which both parties undergo a spiritual or personal development through interaction with the other. Because *Passion* is a retrospective text, there are clues to Henri’s feminization even within the generally masculine form of the war memoir. Despite his attention to linear time, Henri “veins the novel with his traces and memories of the home, the feminine, which has been lost” (“Journeying” 146), including meditations on his mother’s marriage and the lives of women in the villages he passes. Additionally, Henri’s inclusion of Villanelle’s “marginalized” perspective, to the point of including an entire story she tells within his own narration (*Passion* 98-109), indicates not only his interest in narratives outside the rigid military history, but also his attempt to put a “feminine multiplicity” (“Journeying” 146) into practice.

The boundary between narrators becomes indistinct in the final chapter, in which Henri and Villanelle’s accounts alternate without clear signposts. Palmer argues that Villanelle “acts as the signifier of lesbianism throughout the text” because of her agency and relationship with the Queen of Spades (104). The admixture of their voices suggests that Henri shifts towards a similarly hybridized, lesbian-coded identity. Villanelle’s webbed feet, generally only seen in hereditary boatmen (*Passion* 53), mark her body as between genders. Seaboyer explains, “Villanelle apparently identifies with both feminine and masculine subject positions; as with the city that is her mirror, this double identification is written on the body” (497). Appropriately, Villanelle’s body is a site of playful but fraught concealment: her sexual relationship with the Queen of Spades is paradoxically disembodied, as they engage in a form of kissing in which “only our lips might meet... a sweet and precise torture” (*Passion* 73). This tension between pleasure and torture recurs in her crossdressing. In the casino, she presents herself androgynously to play a “game” with visitors (59), but later she worries that the Queen of Spades will be

disillusioned when her real body is revealed: “Sweet Madonna, not my feet....Not my shirt, if I raised my shirt she’d find my breasts” (76). Later, crossdressing protects her from a more immediate threat, as she must dress as a boy “to escape detection” (108) and flee her husband. What was once a game becomes a means of survival, and Villanelle adopts traits that she formerly denounced: despite her earlier statement that in the maze of Venice, “Your course in compass reading will fail you” (53), Villanelle shows herself to be “skillful with the compass and map” (111) when disguised as male.

Although Henri lacks Villanelle’s bodily ambiguity, his position at the end of the novel suggests a similarly fraught hybridity, as he is jailed and deemed mentally ill. His decision to remain imprisoned, exchanging seeds with Joséphine through the mail and exploring only the “cities of the interior” through memory (165), associates him with a feminized private space that contrasts with the carnal masculinities elsewhere in the text; Henri condemns Napoleon’s warmongering and the soldiers’ frequent whoring alike. Similarly, in *Sexing*, Jordan depicts his search for Fortunata in terms of a masculine quest structure, expecting to seek out and possess the princess. However, once found, Fortunata refuses to follow Jordan, denying him the narrative pattern he desires and forcing him to return to his mother. Despite enjoying gender transgressions, Winterson valorizes femininity insofar as it provides an alternative to masculinity, which so often poses as universal or authoritative. The “feminization” of these narrators manifests in their changing narrative styles, marked by a self-aware renunciation of masculine authority.

3.3 Authors and Storytellers

Both *Passion* and *Sexing* contain scenes of voyeuristic interest into female communities. While visiting a brothel with his fellow soldiers, Henri watches as the cook grows violent and

tries to strike one of the whores. Awed by how one woman “held her companion for a moment and kissed her swiftly on the forehead,” he laments, “She would never do that to me” (*Passion* 16). Similarly, in *Sexing*, Dog Woman watches as a group of women gather the pieces of their parish’s stained glass window, shattered by Cromwell’s soldiers. She observes, “They gathered every piece, and they told me, with hands that bled, that they would rebuild the window in a secret place...I, not daring to follow, watched them through the hole where the window had been” (60). Both narrators admire these communities even though they exclude themselves from them. Dog Woman is awed by the notion of a community “that cannot be destroyed” (60), but considers herself unfit to join them, while Henri is interested in a type of love that is inaccessible to his gender. After hearing Villanelle’s account of the Queen of Spades, Henri complains, “She seemed carefree and the shadows that had crossed her face throughout her story had lifted, but I felt my own just beginning. She would never love me” (*Passion* 109). He falls in love with Villanelle’s lesbianism on the grounds that she “showed me the difference between inventing a lover and falling in love” (172), linking Villanelle’s sexuality to the type of passion he tries to articulate through his narrative.

Although Winterson’s narrators frequently admire these hidden communities and alternative relationships, they fail to notice that these bonds are the result of gendered oppression. Often, these communities are composed of chauvinist archetypes of women, most often nuns and whores, forming a hidden “world in which women unite against patriarchal oppression” (González 288). Winterson portrays these groups as admirable and cohesive, but altogether of a different sort than her narrators, who often straddle both masculine and feminine characteristics to resist easy identification with either group. Although Jordan admires the nuns who smuggle a rich man’s concubines from their barred quarters by night (*Sexing* 24-5), he is

conscious of his distance from their scheme: even while crossdressing to visit them, he remarks upon his ignorance of women's "private language," something "a traveller in a foreign country" like himself cannot fully learn (26). His accumulation of women's stories throughout the text is an attempt to codify this private language. Many of Jordan's stories begin with invocations of place, such as "there is a town I sometimes dream about" (39) or "In one city I visited" (72), suggesting a metaphoric voyage into the "foreign country" of women.

Both texts present encounters with female communities as formative experiences that affect the narrators' language and thought. For example, the changes in Henri's narrative style over the course of *Passion* imply his willingness to adopt some of Villanelle's philosophy of love for himself. Initially, Henri's metatextual attention to the storyteller's role deemphasizes the role of fantasy in his narrative. After describing his friend Patrick's telescopic eye, Henri advises, "Don't believe that one" (25). Even when recounting a story about Joséphine's legendary horticultural skill that comforts him in his isolated cell, he admits, "It may or may not be true" (173). In contrast, Villanelle, as the novel's perennial storyteller, often prefaces her tales with reference to where she learned them—"This is the legend" (53); "I have heard" (160)—but she never comments on their veracity. Similarly, Henri uses specific temporal markers, either the exact date—"July 20th, 1804" (26); "At Christmas" (42)—or broader periods such as "at the end of November" (40). While Villanelle also refers to time, she does so infrequently and gives only vague hints to the date: "A few weeks after" (55); "Nowadays" (63); "a long time ago" (61). This distinction between narrators gives the novel a dialogic quality, as if Henri and Villanelle are competing along the lines of retrospection/presence or history/myth. Where Henri is concerned with exactitude, Villanelle is comfortable with ambiguity in her stories, and actively mythologizes them through her language.

The first and second chapters, told by Henri and Villanelle respectively, end, “It was New Year’s Day, 1805” (49, 83). Given her propensity to conceal exact dates, it is unusual for Villanelle to echo Henri in this way. However, from this point on Winterson begins to blur the distinct styles of her narrators. When he retrieves Villanelle’s heart from the Queen of Spades, Henri’s doubt becomes an uneasy belief that what he took for a metaphor could actually be true: “Her heart was beating. *Not possible*. I tell you her heart was beating” (133). Here, his habitual doubt is displaced by Villanelle’s embrace of the fantastic. In the last chapter, the two voices are indistinct, and without the markers of doubt and time that characterized them, the transitions between narrators go unmarked. For Seaboyer, this collapse of style is evidence of a lyrical structure: “Themes, phrases, and leitmotifs introduced and repeated in one movement by one voice are taken up and modulated in another movement by the other” (493). As in the villanelle, verbal motifs structure this interchange of voices. The provocative refrain, “I’m telling you stories. Trust me” (5, 14, 43, 75), indicates the self-consciousness common to both narrators. Similarly, the repetition of “You play, you win, you play, you lose. You play” (46, 71, 145) and “what you risk reveals what you value” (47, 101) links Henri’s and Villanelle’s stories through the themes of gambling and passion. By approaching the same themes from distinct perspectives, Winterson universalizes what would otherwise be incomparable experiences.

Palmer argues that the varied narrative styles and self-conscious focus on the storyteller within *Passion* structurally enact Winterson’s model of identity:

These features...complicate Winterson’s treatment of subjectivity by problematizing the notion of a simple reflectionist relation between self and text....[R]ather than the text reflecting the individual self, the subject is a relational identity constructed through discourse and textuality. (Palmer 106)

Henri's memoir is not merely a record of facts or memories. Instead, his choice in subjects is an attempt to define all the elements that contribute to his present state. Rather than focusing on the battles or his own experience as a soldier, Henri's subject is a pastiche of "the heterogeneous forces that escape or are excluded from the Hegelian state of universal recognition: women, freaks, midgets, transvestites, lesbians, prostitutes, chickens, and the peasantry" (Wilson 66). Henri's focus on the marginalized, Wilson argues, is an ongoing attempt to revisit the past after having "looked into a mirror for the first time" (*Passion* 169): he "continually reviews and re-writes his archive... according to a feeling in the present... [A] lost love haunts the familiar notebook, rendering it foreign, yet wordlessly reflecting back an image of its own identity" (Wilson 67). As such, his account has a curatorial feel, drawing attention to his deliberate choice in intertexts.

Seaboyer claims that above all, *The Passion* is "lyrical, and most of the texts repetitively woven into it are themselves poetic" (492); Villanelle's name, an interlaced poetic form, emblemizes this textual strategy. While the literary echoes are less overt here than in *Happy* or *Sexing*, overlaps in language and theme inform many of the characters. Villanelle's friend, the mad fortuneteller, resembles Madame Sosostris of "The Waste Land": she is always connected with tarot symbols, such as the cup and crown (81), and warns Villanelle not of death by water, but of "dice and games of chance" (59). As Susana Onega points out, the "wisest woman in Europe" becomes "one of the wealthiest women in Venice" (*Passion* 126) in Winterson's revision, connecting the fortuneteller with Sosostris "who used the ancient and powerful magic of the Tarot in a devalued and meaningless way" ("Uncanny" 5). The fortuneteller's fall from wealthy elite to hag suggests that Venice's fluidity, a site of opportunity for Villanelle, is also a source of risk. The Tarot becomes an obsolete tool in the city where "compass reading will fail

you” (*Passion* 53). As such, despite her affection for the fortuneteller, Villanelle ignores the prophetic warning against risk: “Will I gamble [my heart] again? Yes” (164). Thematic repetitions are also present, as Winterson draws from both modern literature and her other works. Lynn Pykett suggests, “Woolf’s [*Orlando*] is also (so to speak) quoted extensively in *The Passion*; there is a similar mixing of real historical personages and events with invented history and fantastical events” (Pykett 58). Themes of crossdressing and masking signify a fluid, iterative identity as seen in the narrator of *Written*. Like Jordan, Villanelle takes pleasure in crossdressing, not just for the thrill of wearing a codpiece, but also for the ability to present the self as a cipher or “game” to play with others (*Passion* 59).

Literary echoes also inform identity formation in *Sexing*, as Jordan’s stories often focus on reversals of gendered traits. For example, the eleven stories that the dancing princesses tell Jordan (43-55) are predominantly feminist revisions of patriarchal tropes in literature, revealing the violence or power imbalances that may occur in heterosexual marriages. The second princess imitates Browning, “That’s my last husband painted on the wall... looking as though he were alive,” but she adopts the Duke’s role as she mummifies her husband as an inclusion in her collection of “curiosities” (45). Likewise, the third princess echoes Byron, “He walked in beauty” (45), but in her version, the spouse is a homosexual without interest in her (46). For Jeffrey Roessner, the princesses’ failed marriages are Winterson’s means of placing lesbianism at the center of her text: “Winterson invites readers to accept alternatives to heterosexuality, particularly lesbianism, as natural expressions of a basic human quest for love” (108). The same applies to Villanelle’s stories in *Passion*. Palmer argues, “From the moment of her first appearance Villanelle appropriates the role of narrator and becomes the focus of narrative interest” (105). After telling Henri of her relationship with the Queen of Spades, she directs his

attention away from Napoleon and towards herself, convincing him to go to Venice and adopt her model of psychogeography. In both texts, the inclusion of lesbian narratives serves as a reminder that there exist stories outside of those told in the authoritative account.

So far, I have presented these models of pastiche as useful approaches to writing identity, as they allow for more diverse forms of experience than a determinate identity. However, in both novels there is a sense of baggage that persists even in the new, rearranged forms. Much like the dominant concern in *Written* is the difficulty of expressing emotion without recourse to clichéd language, the narrators of *Passion* and *Sexing* rely on conventional forms, such as the war diary, travelogue, and heroic quest to convey experience. Marilyn Farwell argues, “While these novels call attention to and challenge the narrative form, they both desire and suspect totalization” (177): they depend on the very form they set out to critique in structuring their narratives. One way Winterson addresses this inadequacy is to provide a variety of models for the transcendence of form. Alchemy, grafting, and psychogeography all adhere to the motto “*Tertium non data*” (*Sexing* 136): the mechanism for transforming known parts into something new is unknowable. Tasked with keeping the log of Tradescant’s voyage, Jordan admits, “I’ve kept a book of my own, and for every journey we have made together I’ve written down my own journey and drawn my own map...I believe it to be a faithful account of what happened, at least, of what happened to me” (104). Jordan defines maps as “a subjective account of the lie of the land” (79), less a science than an art because of how it changes with the author’s hand. For Tradescant’s purposes, maps are useful ideological tools, enabling him to delineate, categorize, and thereby own new lands and new fruits; for Jordan, these maps are insufficient in that they cannot display the private mapping through memory and experience. He sets a challenge to construct a new map that displays “the places you have not found yet on those other maps, the connections obvious

only to you” (80). Presumably, this new map is available to the reader: the fantastic stories he tells throughout the novel represent, if not factual experiences, the inner developments incited by his journey.

3.4 Mythologizing the Self

The horticultural motif in *Sexing* describes Jordan’s method of identity formation, and frames his conflicts with his adoptive mother. While Dog Woman refers to Jordan’s grafting work on a cherry tree as a “monster,” Jordan sees it as a useful technique:

Grafting is the means whereby a plant, perhaps tender or uncertain, is fused into a hardier member of its strain, and so the two take advantage of each other and produce a third kind, without seed or parent...[I] wondered whether it was an art I might apply to myself. (76-7)

The creation of an unfamiliar strain, without lineage or known result, is another version of the palimpsest: both privilege the idiosyncratic, and remain undecided as to anything beyond what is present to the eye. As González argues, the gendered aspect of the grafting metaphor resembles the praise of lesbian relationships in the text: “Relationships between women, the fusion of two female beings, seems to be for Winterson the chief way out of women’s apparent dependence on men” (289). As opposed to Dog Woman’s refusal to accept female bonds, Jordan adopts this model of pastiche or fusion, positioning himself as the “third kind” that results from the competing colonial and lesbian discourses around him. Jordan’s interest in how the princesses escape heteronormative narratives effectively “‘feminizes’ the male explorer” (“Journeying” 149), depicting him as attentive to marginalized narratives despite his grooming as a colonial explorer like Tradescant. When he encounters Fortunata, the object of his quest, he does not possess her to fulfill the masculine hero pattern. Although Fortunata “had lived in hope of being

rescued,” after escaping her marriage she “learned to dance alone,” modelling herself after the regenerative and self-sufficient “habits of the starfish” (101). Instead of attempting to possess her by force, Jordan adopts some of these characteristics for himself: he returns to London “using her body as a marker” (106), the touchstone of his psychic voyage.

While Dog Woman hopes to use Jordan as a similar touchstone, he “slipped away” from her as promised by his river namesake. Jordan frames his escape from their house “with fifty dogs and no company but her own” (3) as another version of the princesses’ escape from their husbands: “[I lost myself] in my mother because she is bigger and stronger than me and that’s not how it’s supposed to be with sons....She is silent, the way men are supposed to be” (102-3). As in the princesses’ stories, the conflict here is predicated on gender relations. Dog Woman’s relationships with men are framed in terms of violent consumption. Although she perplexes other women by virtue of her stature and manner, Dog Woman actively terrorizes men: even as a child, she causes a man to faint when she asks for a kiss (32). Andrievskikh reads Dog Woman as “emblematic of the universal female experience of being lost in-between conformity and freedom of self-expression” (12). That is, she cannot properly perform the feminine characteristics demanded by her subject position, and suffers from this inability. Elizabeth Langland connects this lack to Dog Woman’s body, arguing that “the anatomically huge physical body that readily cites gender norms of tenderness or charity or maternity while threatening or performing mayhem destabilizes the conventional meanings of those terms and exposes their cultural construction” (102). Because of her monstrous body, Dog Woman is associated with patriarchal fears about unchecked or improper femininity, and the castrating woman trope in particular. Unwittingly, she castrates a man when asked to perform oral sex: “I, feeling both astonished by his rapture and disgusted by the leathery thing filling up my mouth, spat out what I

had not eaten” (37). Another suitor admits he “felt like a tadpole in a pot” (109) while attempting vaginal sex with Dog Woman, functionally losing his genitalia inside her. Her sexual inability connects Dog Woman with Fortunata, who models herself after the self-sufficient, asexual starfish. While Fortunata reduces her body to a “freed spirit through a darkened jar” through dance (69), Dog Woman’s corpulence keeps her from control over her body. Winterson presents both as disembodied in contrast with the bold whores and penitent nuns elsewhere in the text, who reveal and conceal their bodies respectively.

The link between sex and consumption is for some critics a means of liberating the female body from the potential violence of heterosexuality. Roessner views Dog Woman’s body as “a site of resistance” to heterosexual norms in that she lacks conventionally feminine characteristics, rendering her immune to sexual violence (110). She is too ferocious for her gender, and too large for her sexuality: she admits, “I would have liked to pour out a child from my body but you have to have a man for that and there’s no man who’s a match for me” (*Sexing* 3). For Susana Gonzáles, Dog Woman’s characterization is Winterson’s attempt to “break slavish bonds” that result from the “artificial, man-constructed canon of femininity” (285), much in the way that invocations of time as constructed throughout the novel deconstruct the unity of history. Specifically, Dog Woman’s unfeminine body is both the source of her physical strength and her pain at not being able to fulfill the narrative of a reproductive, heterosexual woman, and her presence in the novel is an interrogation of gendered characteristics. If Winterson’s general project is to evaluate assumptions of universality wherever they appear, then her characterization of Dog Woman appears to be one such criticism of “canonical” narratives about women.

Winterson further links sex and violence through the stories women tell about husbands and lovers. Dog Woman’s mother claims, “[M]en take pleasure and women give it” (*Sexing*

110), a notion corroborated by the madam of a brothel who indulges the “unusual” requests of Cromwell supporters before killing them (86). More overt violence occurs in nearly all of the twelve dancing princesses’ stories: of the twelve, five kill their husbands, two are physically abused, and five use an imprisonment motif to describe their marriages. However, one marriage among them is successful. One princess reveals, “The man I had married was a woman” (50), and tells of her emotional and erotic fulfillment. González argues that the success of this marriage presents lesbianism as “a choice women can make as an alternative to oppressive sexual relationships with men” (289). However, there is a sense that such an easy alternative is not permissible. When a mob approaches to execute her lover, the princess elects to “[kill] her with a single blow to the head” and flee (*Sexing* 50). Although depicted as merciful, this act re-instantiates the link between sex and violence that the lesbian relationship seeks to avoid, calling into question the viability of this alternative in the context of competing discourses about sexuality.

Winterson’s admission that Dog Woman is “another reading of my mother” (*Happy* 36) invites biographical readings of *Sexing*. There are conspicuous overlaps with *Oranges* and *Happy* at work: Dog Woman’s characterization as a thwarted heterosexual, interested in reproduction and the erotic but unable to act on her desires, aligns with Winterson’s depiction of her mother in *Happy* as self-defeating, unproductive, and “out of scale, larger than life” (3). Jordan was not born, but found “wrapped up in a rotting sack such as kittens are drowned in,” and Dog Woman remarks on his “likeness to Moses” (3), much like Jeanette is Mrs Winterson’s attempt at fostering a Christ-child (*Oranges* 14). Further, Dog Woman orders a book burning to quell dissenting views (*Sexing* 62, *Oranges* 143) and adapts Scripture to suit her own politics: “But didn’t our Saviour turn the water into wine?” she asks of Cromwell’s ban on theatres (21;

cf. *Oranges* 8). These overt parallels resemble the way Winterson links Jordan and Dog Woman to their twentieth-century counterparts in the last chapter of *Sexing*. Jordan becomes Nicolas, a Navy recruit with an anachronistic interest in exploring the oceans, while Dog Woman becomes an ecological activist who describes herself as “a woman going mad... huge, raw, a giant” (125). Moments of slippage between past and present narratives occur, in line with Jordan’s critique of the accepted truths that “Time is a straight line” and “We can only be in one place at a time” (81): while standing on his boat, Nicolas finds himself in conversation with Tradescant, and realizes he is really Jordan (124-5). Similarly, the activist invokes Dog Woman as a “patron saint” (129) of powerful women, and imagines herself to consume men whole (131).

When Jordan argues, “The self is not contained in any moment or any place, but it is only in the intersection of moment and place,” (79) he advocates a theory of identity based not on a contiguous self, but a flexible literary model. Just as Jordan repeats stories as a mode of expression, Nicolas draws on his perceived past life as a means of explaining the present. In both cases, the only way to describe identity is through fictional analogues. This notion of the textual self resembles the way Henri examines himself through writing while imprisoned. Napoleon and the other dead come to speak with him, offering a means to “review my future and my past,” which he proceeds to record in his journals (174). Although the characters of *Passion* are less suited to biographical readings than those in *Sexing*, the novel still connects with the rest of Winterson’s work through this method of re-examining the past through writing. Reina van der Wiel argues,

[B]y intentionally leaving the narrator’s identity unspecified—in using the first-person pronoun ‘I’ without a clear referent—whilst instigating shifts in tone or mood... Winterson often creates a hermeneutic space that invites autobiographical

readings in which the act of narration is of utmost importance.... Thus, blurring the boundaries between authorial and fictional self-narration, it can indeed be said that Winterson inclines towards an almost pathological and excessive form of self-narration. (van der Wiel 137)

Winterson's tendency to mythologize unique circumstances, elevating them beyond the particular into a universalized pattern, is a method of recursion: her work recycles themes and motifs in an attempt to re-answer the same questions about love and identity. Although she is less overt in linking her historical novels to her life story, Winterson's claim that the "writer must fire herself through the text" (*Weight* xv) applies to all of her fiction in terms of theme, if not narrative structure. Much like Jordan and Villanelle, the narrator of *Written* uses the language of colonialism and exploration to describe the formation of the self through others. In *Weight*, Atlas suffers from the determinacy of historical and biographical identity in the same way that Henri and Dog Woman struggle with cultural restrictions on permissible identities: "Soldiers and women. That's how the world is" (*Passion* 49). Although van der Wiel describes this repetition as a return to the wound, a solipsistic mode of obsession, Winterson stresses the universality of her "Wintersonic obsessions of love, loss and longing" (*Happy* 160) through her diverse approaches to the subject.

“It’s the clichés that cause the trouble”: Identity (*Written* and *Weight*)

4.1 Identity as Myth

The pairs of texts I have discussed so far reveal the fictional structures of supposed facts: the changes in Winterson’s life story between *Oranges* and *Happy* suggest autobiography is iterative and mutable, “a true story but still a version” (*Happy* 229), while *Passion* and *Sexing* undermine textual authority in matters of history and storytelling alike. With this in mind, *Written* and *Weight* form a similar argument about identity, calling into question the determinacy that biology and subject positions hold over the individual. But in this case, Winterson’s choice in topic is overtly connected with a broader concern about how language constitutes the individual and limits the expression of emotion. As Brian Finney claims, in *Written*, Winterson’s “subject is less love than the problems associated with describing it in narrative or textual form” (23); her goal in *Weight* is not to faithfully reiterate the Atlas myths told in Hesiod or Apollodorus, but to reveal the way language “mythologizes” and thereby constrains the individual. Because *Weight* has received significantly less critical attention than *Written*, this chapter focuses on the latter novel in greater detail; however, *Weight* is a useful complement to *Written* in that it exemplifies Winterson’s theory of a linguistic or fictional identity through the rewriting of Atlas. While Winterson’s concerns with language appear as early as *Oranges*, where Jeanette follows her mother in rearranging the supposedly sacrosanct language of the Bible, in these later novels the relationship between text and identity inflects the primary metaphors of bodily inscription and personal history as a palimpsest.

The title of *Written on the Body* derives from its genderless narrator’s assertion, “Written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain lights” (89), a refrain that Winterson repeats in *Weight* (141). In both cases, the recourse to a “secret code” emphasizes the role of reading or

interpretation in models of identity, and it is this link with language that spurs several critics to identify the narrator as specifically female and/or lesbian. In a system of language that defines the female subject in terms of lack, Celia Shiffer argues, “the female speaking subject must find means of expression” (31). Because of this lack of representation, the need to find alternatives to the clichés of romance is at once a need to carve out a space in language for “the lesbian subject who trespasses the forbidden space of male-centred letters, only to move into a desirable lesbian writing” (Stowers, “Erupting” 91). Like Shiffer, Stowers turns to the narrator’s relationship with language as proof of a lesbian subject position. But as Jordan’s adoption of a feminized subject position in *Sexing* suggests, Winterson seems more interested in degendering rather than reinstating such clearly coded relationships with language. Critical attempts to define the narrator in terms of a subject position alone, reading the novel as nothing more than a manifestation of queer theory or lesbian politics, are the sort of determinate readings that the narrator seeks to avoid: “I like to keep my body rolled up away from prying eyes. Never unfold too much, tell the whole story” (89).

Despite reviewers’ keen interest in puzzling out the narrator’s gender, there is no critical consensus that the narrator is indeed female and/or lesbian so much as an array of interpretations that emphasize certain textual clues while avoiding others. For example, Andrea Harris argues that Winterson “boldly claims universality for a feminine and lesbian subject position” (130), arguing primarily from the narrator’s relationships with other women: since the radical feminist Inge cannot be “anything but a lesbian” (143), the narrator is lesbian by implication. In contrast, Francesca Maioli claims the narrator speaks “with a definitely male voice” in terms of his choice in metaphors and phrasing (Maioli 144). Additionally, Louise’s grandmother calls the narrator “digger” (167), Australian slang for a soldier, and the narrator displays a masculine-coded

aggression when punching Elgin (172) and hitting Jacqueline (86). But for Ute Kauer, such “male identifications appear as masks,” as if part of a deliberate performance to confuse readings of gender: “a cultural palimpsest is used as a red herring for the reader” (47), appealing to the reader’s own understanding of gender codes. While Kauer proceeds to argue that a female narrator “seems natural” in light of the narrator’s sympathies for women in the text, Gregory Rubinson argues against such an interpretation from the same principle of reader bias. He claims, “Even though most reviewers agree that the narrator is female, the only evidence that they marshal is highly contestable and merely exposes the often stereotypical and heteronormative biases in their own reading practices” (219).

Winterson herself supports this latter view, admitting that *Written* “includes the reader as a player. By that I mean that the reader has to work with the book” (“Written”). Here, Winterson implicates the reader in the very process of fixing or determining identity that her narrator stays “rolled up away from prying eyes” to avoid. As such, recent criticism of the novel tends to treat the narrator as either between genders or functionally ungendered. The curious phrasing of Louise’s assertion, “I thought you were the most beautiful creature male or female I had ever seen” (*Written* 84), suggests the narrator straddles both genders to some extent while remaining distinct from each. With statements like this in mind, Jennifer Smith observes that the novel’s language “characterize[s] the narrator’s physical existence as a provisional state...transgender but also transitional” (416). Rather than reading certain codes or gendered traits, interpreting the narrator’s essential quality as fluidity better accommodates the contradictory “clues” throughout the text. Likewise, Em McAvan suggests readers “leave the text open” (434), accepting the narrator’s desire to appear ungendered at face value. She likens this to the apophatic language of devotional religion: much like God “can only be described negatively by what ‘he’ is *not*”

(McAvan 436), the narrator's gender identity is a series of disconfirming instances rather than affirmations.

These readings of the narrator as between genders suggest that his/her repeated concern, "It's the clichés that cause the trouble" (10), has to do not only with the citationality of language, but the subordination of language to gender narratives as well. Louise Aikman observes, "A genderless, classless, ageless, and raceless narrator allows Winterson to focus exclusively on language without preconceived connotations" (182). That is, as a literary device, it enables Winterson to display the limiting effect of language by compelling her readers to decide on her narrator: Tyler Bradway claims, "Winterson forces readers to interpellate the 'true' identity of the narrator's body. This formal conceit underscores that the body has no essential identity—it is an 'accumulation' of signs, of cultural inscriptions that encode the body like a palimpsest" (Bradway 186). Likewise, Smith suggests that from the narrator's status as a cipher upon which gendered meanings accumulate, "a transgender gaze emerges, a gaze that the text universalizes by erasing the separation between reader and narrator. This technique thus enables the reader to identify *as* the narrator" (Smith 414). This can lead to both overidentification, as when the text is read as a lesbian allegory to the exclusion of other possibilities, but also the refusal to identify with the narrator's position, creating dissonance between the narrator's indeterminate gender and the primarily heteronormative discourses that he/she adopts.

Although *Weight* lacks the same textual "gimmicks" that appear in *Written*, Winterson's concerns about interpretation and determinacy inform this novel as well. Her version of Atlas suffers not from his punishment of bearing the world, but from "the boundaries of his life" (71) that result from his immortalization in myth. Hilde Staels claims that "Atlas feels weighed down by an epic world-order, which is 'normative and determinative'" (112), but over the course of the

text, he becomes “a novelistic character” (113), unfixed and therefore open to reinterpretation. As such, she argues that Atlas’s decision to put down the world resembles that of the author’s relation to the text. Through the introduction and the chapters told by the author’s persona, Winterson emphasizes the personal significance of well-known narratives: she describes *Weight* as a “personal story broken against the bigger story of the myth we know and the myth I have re-told” (xiv-v). Reina van der Wiel links the refrain of “I want to tell the story again” to Winterson’s habitual return to the personal: it refers immediately to “the rewriting of the myth of Atlas and Heracles, but on a deeper plane it is closely related to the role of trauma within creative production” (van der Wiel 152). Its usage throughout the text supports this reading of a return to trauma. While Winterson refers to the phrase as a “recurring language motif” (xiv), it functions differently from the refrains in her other texts. Unlike the playful sound of “I’m telling you stories, trust me,” the clause “I want to tell the story again” is grammatically terse and unusually arrhythmic for Winterson, who prizes the musical, associative diction of Woolf and Stein. Further, she gives this refrain varied and unusual emphasis: it appears in italics (137), after the end of a frantic triple repetition of “I can lift my own weight” (100), as the title of the first and last chapters, at the end of each chapter narrated by Winterson’s persona, and it refuses to be confined to the main text, appearing twice in the introduction (xiv, xvi). In short, it has an obsessive quality, quite unlike the measured use of “Why is the measure of love loss?” or “What you risk reveals what you value,” and this quality speaks to the contested value of repetitions emphasized throughout the text.

4.2 Palimpsests

Before he temporarily shoulders the universe in lieu of Atlas, Heracles is visited by a “thought-wasp” that causes him to ask an uncharacteristic question: “Thinking was like a hornet.

It was outside his head buzzing at him. ‘What I mean to say, Atlas, is why?’” (50) During his reprieve, the same existential doubt pesters Atlas, who asks himself, “Why had he not recognized the boundaries of his life, and if he had recognized them, why did he hate them so much?” (71) Winterson uses the thought-wasp as a postmodern Edenic serpent, a trickster that offers the knowledge that boundaries are illusory, but at the cost of the secure identities emblemized by the mythic world order. Heracles, exaggeratedly macho and priapic in Winterson’s version, becomes despondent since “[t]here was no one to listen to his stories, or to get drunk with, or to praise him” (67). Likewise, after realizing his punishment “engaged his vanity,” Atlas can no longer consider himself “Lord of the Kosmos, wonder of the universe” (70). However, the two are constrained by mythology to different degrees: Heracles must succumb to Nessus’ poison as the myths ordain, but Atlas is left to bear his punishment indefinitely.

Through her admission, “My girlfriend says I have an Atlas complex” (97), Winterson reads herself into Atlas’s position as both weighted down while also part of an unfinished story. Staels claims that *Weight*’s introduction “narcissistically foregrounds the autobiographical story world as a narrative level that interpenetrates the diegetic universe” (111), a frame text that reduces the myth to a mere repetition of the personal. But Winterson claims there is “no other way” (*Weight* xiv) to write besides telling a personal story with reference to the universal. She argues, “Autobiography is not important. Authenticity is important. The writer must fire herself through the text, be the molten stuff that welds together disparate elements” (xv). In other words, the text functions as a palimpsest, the place where the narrative is superimposed over the author’s life story. Winterson introduces *Weight* by claiming, “The strata of sedimentary rock are like the pages of a book, each with a record of contemporary life written on it” (ix). With this image in mind, reading the text is a form of excavation, finding traces of the author in her

idiosyncratic version of a popular narrative. Further, this model implies that in literature, the emotional and private contexts are inseparable from the literal context; the author is always “fired through” the text, creating not only stylistic distinction, but idiosyncrasies in the arrangement and significance of common themes and symbols as well.

Appropriately for a work so concerned with writing the personal into the universal, *Weight* is one of the most self-referential of Winterson’s novels, through overt quotations as well as recurrences of theme. She “covers” her own works under the guise of writing a cover version of myth: the repetitions of “Empty space and points of light” (145) and “Always a new beginning, a different end” (137) reference *Sexing* (123) and *The Powerbook* (5) respectively, in line with her description of such phrases in *Happy* as “lighthouse signals” or “fossil record[s]...written over, yes, but still distinct” (157). When she writes yet another account of Mrs Winterson’s keeping a revolver hidden in a drawer (*Weight* 138), Winterson provides the topography of her “fossil record” as a writer. For Winterson, older texts are not inert. Instead, they are living contexts, or as the narrator of *Written* puts it: “To remember you it’s my own body I touch. Thus she was, here and here” (129-30). By evoking a tactile relationship with the corpus of her own work, Winterson suggests not only that she returns to her older writing, but that her readers similarly engage with her work in a continuous present. It seems that while *Atlas* is demythologized over the course of the novel, Winterson elevates her work to the status of myths in the making, affirming their continued cultural relevance by appealing to her savvy readers.

This strategy is perhaps what prompts critics to deem *Weight* essentially narcissistic or otherwise excessive: Caroline Alexander claims the novel is “marred” by Winterson’s insistent autobiographical links, while David Flusfeder more scathingly argues that *Weight* “reduces the

Atlas myth to a sort of whimsical autobiography.” Certainly, Winterson instrumentalizes the Atlas myth, using it as a means of exploring matters of identity and authorship. However, there is a sense that this is a parodic self-aggrandizement, much in the same way that Heracles is exaggeratedly masculine. Atlas’s “dreams were always the same; *boundaries, desire*” (104), and his obsession aligns him with Alix in *The Powerbook*:

“What is [your story] about?”

“Boundaries. Desire.”

“What are your other books about?”

“Boundaries. Desire.”

“Can’t you write about something else?”

“No.” (*Powerbook* 40)

Alix makes a living “selling” textual experiences to clients, responding to emailed requests with stories that transform the client’s sex, place, and character, a living fiction enabled and influenced by the virtual medium. Perhaps reflecting the negative critical response to Winterson’s work in the 90s, Alix’s client fights her for control of the stories, condemning them as too repetitive and too outlandish at turns. With this context in mind, the overlaps between author and Atlas are a defense of Winterson’s drive to write works that “work along the borders of our minds and alter what already exists” (*Art Objects* 26) instead of reiterating for the sake of entertainment. Further, Jennifer Gustar claims that “the writer, in some sense, carries the weight of the world and the responsibility to expose the limits of the incomplete record” (58); Winterson presents herself as duty-bound to “tell the story again,” the historian of a text still in the making.

These themes of boundaries that limit the individual and the desire to escape them recur in *Written*. Although the novel is ostensibly a devotional text for Louise alone, in the first half

the narrator makes frequent reference to her/his numerous earlier affairs: “Did I say this has happened to me again and again? You will think I have been constantly in and out of married women’s lumber-rooms” (17). The narrator’s self-positioning as “the Lothario” (20) stems from a general opposition to heteronormativity: he/she describes marriage variously as “a plate-glass window just begging for a brick” and “the same story every time” (13), and considers his/her normal-seeming relationship with Jacqueline, a “sort of household pet” (25), a form of “container gardening” (27) rather than love. In contrast, Louise appears as an interruption of the mundane: she “opened up the dark places as well as the light” (174), making the conventional form of relationships emblemized by Jacqueline seem inadequate. When the narrator hopes to “cross one another’s boundaries and make ourselves one nation” (20), he/she speaks to both the consensual domination that inflects the language of love and the transgressive or unconventional quality of their affair. That is, the thrill of deviating from the normal pattern of romance informs his/her language and descriptions of Louise.

With this in mind, the narrator’s quest for a unique expression of love is only necessary because of past accumulations. The narrator’s tendency to define his/herself through love affairs results in a confused, revisionist history. The narrator’s anecdotes about Bathsheba, Justine, and “Others of whom Louise knew nothing” (69) all defy Louise’s edict to “come to me new,” without recourse to the patterns and tropes of past loves. Presumably, by dwelling on these stories in this context, the narrator attempts to rewrite them for Louise’s sake. Regarding the embeddedness of language in past contexts, Jennifer Gustar writes,

The repetition implied in citational identity is inescapable, yet this does not necessarily mean that the repetition lacks authenticity as we unfold the strata of sedimentary rock. As subjects, we are citations of a language that is not of our

own making, but we are also citations of what we have made of that language.

(Gustar 58)

Much like Winterson refers to literature as “a string of guiding lights” (*Happy* 42) that connects and bounds the individual, Gustar suggests here that the individual subject is inseparable from past accumulations of cliché and reiteration. By acknowledging rather than suppressing his/her past relationships, the narrator attempts to move beyond them, leaving room for Louise’s “reading hands” to “translate” the wealth of accumulations “into her own book” (*Written* 89). Moreover, he/she suggests that the refusal to write over Louise is testament to her importance: “The particularness of someone who mattered enough to grieve over is not made anodyne by death. This hole in my heart is in the shape of you” (155). That is, the text in its role as an expression of devotion to Louise is the narrator’s means of erasing the “other bedrooms in other places” (54) that inhibited their romance.

The narrator’s affair with radical Inge, often glossed over in reviews of the novel as evidence of a lesbian narrator, serves to introduce the narrator’s inability to perceive the embeddedness and citationality of language. The narrator recalls, “She forbade me to telephone her....I said, fine, I’ll write. Wrong, she said. The Postal Service was run by despots....How could we communicate? Pigeons, she said” (23). Inge, a parody of feminism who explodes men’s washrooms because they are “functionaries of the penis” (22), is attentive to connotation and implication; for her, not even lovers’ private language is exempt from this politics of expression. In contrast, the narrator understands language as an instrument and, before meeting Louise, uses the clichés of love by “dropping them like coins into a wishing well” (11). Not only does this incident predict Louise’s reticence to believe the narrator’s expressions of love, but it speaks to the narrator’s inability to understand the self-defeating nature of his/her chosen modes

of expression: as Kauer summarizes, clichés “offer categorizations, whereas what the narrator seeks is an expression for a very individual sensation” (45). While the narrator makes varied attempts at avoiding clichés, his/her consistent recourse to overdetermined language makes it unclear whether this project succeeds. This issue is all the more pressing for Winterson, who borrows from “clichéd” literary and Biblical sources in her writing; both author and narrator feel pressed to escape the fixity of language, or risk remaining at the level of the banal.

4.3 Discourses and Retellings

In her short story “The Lives of Saints,” which predates *Written* by five years, Winterson’s unnamed, ungendered narrator courts his/her beloved Jane through displays of language, borrowing from da Vinci’s blueprints and hagiography alike. However, this narrator’s recourse to literature and history fails to impress the beloved, and his/her failure results only in more attempts: “She said nothing and I dredged my mind for things that might please her...Nothing I said had any effect. I felt like Marco Polo who criss-crossed the world searching for a single treasure to please Kublai Khan” (4). Like the narrator of *Written*, he/she struggles with the inadequacy of language on the grounds that “like the lives of saints, more is contained than can be revealed” (8). That is, language is both too vague to fully express the particular, and too pointed to describe the “journey [that] conceals another journey within its lines: the path not taken and the forgotten angle” (*Sexing* 2). As Finney claims, “To describe the experience of love necessarily plunges any narrator into a world of intertextuality, of language already long inhabited and become automatized” (25): the language of love is not only “always a quotation” (*Written* 9), but commercialized and trivialized through overuse. The same is true of the author: while she considers “literary experiment” as the defining feature of her writing in deference to Ezra Pound’s maxim, “Make it new” (*Art Objects* 76, 12), Winterson borrows from ubiquitous

texts like the Bible, Romantic poetry, and Shakespeare's plays. Both narrator and author "embrace the use of intertextuality and exploit it for all it is worth" (Finney 25), but it remains unclear whether this plundering of cultural texts succeeds in creating "a precise expression" from the "saggy armchair of clichés" (*Written* 10).

Gustar claims that the narrator "evades the clichés of romance precisely by invoking them, by repeating them in epidemic proportions" (61); she points to the blazon of Louise's fragmented body, the intersection of desire and illness, and obstacles between lover and beloved as evidence of such romantic tropes. In a text so concerned with recontextualization, the choice to renew overdetermined language through excessive repetition risks falling prey to the very problem it seeks to solve. At times, the strategy fails: the narrator's goodbye letter to Louise begins, "I love you more than life itself" (*Written* 105), and repeats the word "love" no less than five times despite the narrator's earlier condemnation of the word as "the most unoriginal thing" (9). Later, the narrator constructs this letter as a betrayal of Louise herself. Despite critics' focus on the narrator of *Written* as the defining feature of the text, it is Louise who occupies its structural center: she provides the narrator with not only a topic, but a mode of language. Her injunction, "Come to me new" (54), prompts the narrator's borrowing from various discourses, and measures the worth of his/her attempts. In a rough chiasmic structure, both the beginning and the end of the text are marked by Louise's absence, and are given to unrealistic descriptions or fantasy experiences of Louise as if part of an ode or a dream. This is followed by an intermediary period of courtship, or in the latter half of the novel, Louise's disappearance and the narrator's attempt to trace her. Louise's body appears in and constitutes the center of the text: the narrator constructs a "love-poem" through the "clinical language" (111) of an anatomical textbook, enabled by an intimate erotic knowledge of her body.

Frequently, the narrator explores Louise's body through the convention of Petrarchan blazon, or catalogue: her hair is composed of beads of water (11), her flesh is "a silver birch" (29), and her "breasts are beehives pouring honey" (123). Unlike the refined metals and gems common to the metaphoric body of Petrarch's mistress, Louise appears exclusively organic and untouched; still precious, but untamed. Because of this, the reverent descriptions of Louise's body are subject to a persistent colonial metaphor: an explorer, the narrator takes along "ropes, flasks and maps" to venture "into the mass" of Louise, coming to know her from within (120). Much as in the "interior journeys" that Jordan undergoes in *Sexing*, the narrator of *Written* uses the language of travel and exploration to describe a personal process parallel to the exterior occurrence, in this case the "mapping" of Louise's body. Exploring the lover's body is to offer one's own body in exchange: "For Winterson, to touch the flesh and to love the body is also to write upon it and to read it...[T]he flesh, typically considered the marker of the boundary between self and other, becomes the gateway to immersion in the other's being" (Harris 129). Louise is fragmented and explored piece by piece, but this is done in the context of "a game between equals who might not always choose to be equals" (*Written* 67), the narrator's attempt to remedy the power imbalance implied by the colonial metaphor. As Stowers argues, despite drawing on the masculine narratives of conquest and voyaging, the narrator's "exploration only leads to a reciprocal lesbian desire....Instead of the linear goal-orientated plot of traditional treasure hunts, the narrator has no investment in any simple taking or conquest of the Other" ("Journeying" 154). At times, the narrator is Pompeii to her Vesuvius (49), as if subordinate to an uncontrollable power, but elsewhere the narrator seeks to dominate Louise's every part: "I will...unravel you, pull you between my fingers and stretch out each thread to know the measure

of you” (50). By characterizing Louise as a natural force, the narrator constructs her as a dangerous yet venerable object of study.

The attempt to “create a poetry out of the discourses of science” (Rubinson 223) operates in much the same way. After leaving Louise, the narrator takes to anatomical textbooks as a means of representing her physical presence, claiming, “If I could not put Louise out of my mind I would drown myself in her” (*Written* 111). Through systematic descriptions of anatomical divisions of the body, each followed by the narrator’s meditations, the narrator attempts to “recognize her” (111) in the otherwise dispassionate language. At times, the language here intersects with the colonial discourse, positioning the narrator as an invasive bodily presence not unlike Louise’s cancer: intruding into the section on cavities, the narrator demands, “Let me penetrate you. I am the archaeologist of tombs....I embalm you in my memory” (119).

Numerous critics point out that this language fails to describe Louise herself, as the reader is left with no concrete impression of what her body might look like. Further, Rubinson claims, “As the metaphors proliferate, Louise becomes almost grotesque” (138). The frequent references to violence, death, and burial in this section, such as the “murder” inside her bloodstream (115), her bruised skin “as if an animal has clawed you” (117), and her “sepulchral body” (123), all suggest the narrator is not concerned with representing Louise as precisely as possible so much as responding to his/her own internal dilemma, “Why is the measure of love loss?” (9)

While both the medical and colonial discourses are used elaborately and consistently throughout the novel, it remains unclear whether they are successful in describing a form of love between equals. At times, the narrator admits to his/her own dishonesty:

“I don’t want control.”

“I don’t believe you.”

No and you're right not to believe me. If in doubt be sincere. That's a pretty little trick of mine. (*Written* 53)

This tension appears at a structural level as well. Francesca Maioli argues that the embeddedness of these discourses in patriarchy and imperialism “undermines the idea that there could exist a balanced relation of ownership, since the novel promotes the idea that a love story, just like a process of colonization, always implies an unbalanced relation of power” (147). Even though the narrator remarks upon Louise’s “reading hands,” comparable to his/her own, Louise is never allowed the same authority over her lover’s body within the text; the narrator remains “rolled up away from prying eyes,” while Louise is readily described (*Written* 89). Further, Maioli criticizes the narrator’s refusal to “look for inspiration in feminist or queer authors” rather than “the Canon” (154); Winterson could well have chosen a different set of metaphors to describe the lover, avoiding the threat of power imbalances entirely rather than attempting to revise them. The way Maioli approaches Winterson’s intertextuality as a political rather than a semantic problem exemplifies how attempts to rewrite discourse cannot be negotiated within the confines of any particular text. While *Written* may well succeed as an idiosyncratic expression of love, its success is bound to an idiosyncratic relationship with the overdetermined images of land, exploration, and the female body. Winterson cannot fully universalize her revisions of discourse because of the weight of history and context.

Maioli is right to point out the contradictions in these discourses, but it does not follow that Winterson constructs “feminist or queer tradition...as a kind of ‘ghetto’” (154) by virtue of her choice to revise rather than deviate. In fact, Winterson seems driven to engage with canonical texts *because of* their ubiquity; much like her narrator dwells on past loves in order to recontextualize them, Winterson engages with authoritative texts with intent to interrogate their

cultural weight. In lieu of “a space uncluttered by association” (*Written* 81), Winterson draws attention to the inextricability of language from its associations. When Louise asks, “Come to me new” (54), the narrator responds not only by recounting innumerable past relationships, but also by referencing a variety of intertexts that present love as fraught by culture, or unattainable in a pure form. Early in their affair, the narrator refers to Louise’s bedroom as “our House of Fame,” and hears illusory “voices collecting in the rafters, repeating themselves into redundancy,” but still insists on adding to the empty sound, “Louise, I love you” (52). Where Chaucer’s dreamer learns that fame is insubstantial since it spreads through mere rumour and speech, the narrator fails to apply this lesson to the clichés of romance. As such, Louise’s print of Burne-Jones’ “Love and the Pilgrim”—itself a reproduction—becomes the emblem of their relationship: “An angel in clean garments leads by the hand a traveller footsore and weary. The traveller is in black and her cloak is still caught by the dense thicket of thorns.... Would Louise lead me so?” (54) While Louise is the object of the narrator’s devotion, these references also construct her as a symbol of canonical texts, a type of muse or Beatrice-figure.

The narrator’s invocation of the first half of Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 116” (*Written* 162) functions similarly: the notion that “love is not love / Which alters when it alteration finds” speaks to the narrator’s guilt at leaving Louise to fit the model of the “perfect romance” (187). However, only a fragment of the poem appears here, stripping the sonnet of its conclusion and its integrity. The narrator’s style of reference here resembles Jerome McGann and Lisa Samuels’ notion of deformance, a reading strategy that describes the narrator’s use of intertexts quite well. The deformance of a poem uses deviant or accidental disruptions of the text to cast new light on the original. By reading the lines in reverse order, isolating or removing certain parts of speech, or altering the poem’s formal structure, the reader rejects the normative reading of the text in

favour of a fluid model, open to emotional and discursive links. In this sense, interpretation becomes a performance, an act of “disordering the senses” to reach “a highly idiosyncratic relation to the work,” enabling the study of elements “that we did not and perhaps could not otherwise know” (McGann 116). In other words, deforming the text ranks the normative meaning and private significance equally, much like the notion of parallel interior journeys that Winterson uses in *Sexing*.

Through appropriating, sampling, and sometimes distorting these intertexts, the narrator attempts to both deform the language of love, and perform it in an idiosyncratic way. Eileen Williams-Wanquet connects this method to Deleuze’s “repetition with a difference,” the practice of revising a canonical form to better include marginalized or deviant perspectives. What she writes about *Weight* applies just as well to *Written*: “The very fact of reworking an old story is ethical....The past is re-appropriated and regenerated, as the new story is grafted onto the old one that is repeated with a difference” (208). This results in a language that collapses the distinction between past and present in favour of a constantly revised, idiosyncratic relationship with discourses. This is perhaps the reason that Stowers can overlook the historical weight of the colonial metaphors when she writes, “Instead of the traditional textual questing after woman and meaning...textuality becomes rewoven as an intertwined reciprocity” (“Erupting” 97). In this sense, the narrator’s obsession with depicting possession and questing in mutual terms diminishes the power relations usually implied in such narratives. Similarly, Smith argues that the narrator’s deconstruction of bodily discourses calls into question the ways “the body has been previously articulated and conceptualized and reveals the heteronormative values underlying these discourses” (421). For example, the narrator’s intervention takes Louise’s body out of the clinical discourses that define her: their love “doesn’t come under the heading Reproduction”

(*Written* 108), and the boundaries between their bodies become unclear, as when the narrator claims, “To remember you it’s my own body I touch. Thus she was, here and here” (129-30).

A similar process of revision appears in *Weight*. The myth’s retelling is its own deconstruction: Winterson’s ruminations on the formation of strata (ix), Precambrian evolution (5), and the birth of stars (143-4) offer an alternative to cosmogonic myths. Although Atlas summarizes the mythic account of his birth and the Titanomachy in the chapter “Weight of the World,” by the end of the novel he adopts the scientific discourse that Winterson’s persona has used throughout the text: he is no longer the “World Atlas” (25) who bears the Kosmos while “petrified and motionless” (23), but the “singularity” (123) with a clinical interest in the “celestial city of millions or billions of stars, gas and dust-bound together by their gravitational pull” (124). Staels considers this transformation the development of Atlas as “a novelistic character” (113), dynamic unlike his mythic role, and the vehicle for this is his adoption of secular humanism. Despite his isolation, Atlas undergoes changes in thinking that resemble those in the history of philosophy. Specifically, he turns from theological metaphysics to natural philosophy, and in the post-Space Race present, he embraces the postmodern themes of quantum physics: “What limits? There are none. The story moves at the speed of light, and like light, the story is curved” (*Weight* 145). The distinction between Winterson’s persona and Atlas collapses by this point in the text: both artist and mythological figure are superseded by scientific discourse in explaining metaphysics. In “the limitless universe of his imagination,” Atlas imagines himself creating new life in a way that marries cosmology and science: “He would shovel away the regolith and bring in fertile soil. Soil is the active surface of a living planet” (104). As Keulks points out, through his role as creator, Atlas is “joined and thereby liberated by Winterson’s authorial voice, an intrusion that severs Atlas from his destiny and reunites him,

surprisingly, with postmodernism” (Keulks 157). Both author and Titan are empowered by their connections with ambiguity and fluidity.

4.4 Undecidability

Both *Written* and *Weight* feature encounters with physical devices that incite the adoption of new discourses: at the library, the narrator reads medical books and thereafter becomes “obsessed with anatomy” (*Written* 111) as a means of representing Louise, while Atlas rescues Laika from the Sputnik craft, learning through her “all about the world he had never seen” (*Weight* 133). These contexts differ from Winterson’s usual literary intertexts in that they are not approached as a given in the way that the Bible informs Jeanette’s identity in *Oranges*. Instead, they are acquired as a response to trauma or sudden need, whether Atlas’s existential crisis or the narrator’s desperation to redeem his/her treatment of Louise. Although the medical discourse used to describe Louise is by no means original, as it connects primarily with literary Romanticism, the narrator does not consciously attempt to mimic Keats and the like so much as find any sort of language capable of describing his/her love for Louise’s cancerous body. I think that the critics who condemn these reformations of discourse as still masculinist or imbalanced overlook the narrator’s desperation. More broadly, Winterson privileges the emotive capacity of discourses above their politics or history: when Jeanette claims she searches for a love “as strong as death” (*Oranges* 216), she strips the Song of Solomon of its heterosexual, sacred context to use it for her own purposes. *Written*’s narrator similarly attempts to make do with existing contexts. As Gustar claims, the narrator’s language is a form of consolation “predicated on the desire to replace loss” (Gustar 59), not a desire to create a new, decontextualized language. If the language of love is a supplement to emotion, then its embeddedness in other contexts is less significant than its efficacy in conveying these emotions.

After plumbing medical texts, the narrator turns to “books that dealt with death partly because my separation from Louise was final and partly because I knew she would die” (154). From this point on, Louise is functionally restored from her fragmented state brought about by the narrator’s clinical gaze. Imagining her as dead, the narrator muses, “You were intimate with every muscle, privy to the eyelids moving in sleep. This is the body where your name is written, passing into the hands of strangers” (178). Here, death is characterized as the loss of the ability to study and possess the individual parts of the lover’s body through “reading hands,” prompting recourse to “the body” an illusory whole. Where the narrator was once the indeterminate party, Louise becomes the undecidable part of the text: “It’s as if Louise never existed, like a character in a book. Did I invent her?” (189) McAvan observes that the narrator’s unclear gender “opens up but never resolves a series of questions about the sexual identity of Louise as much of the narrator” (440). Although the narrator enjoys a bodily undecidability through the novel’s grammar, it is Louise whose sexual taste has “no place in the late twentieth century where sex is about revealing not concealing” (67). Moreover, in treating Louise as the convergence of so many discourses, a palimpsest, the narrator renders her more of a text than a person. The frequent metaphors of bodily reading and writing imply the narrator “cannot fully have Louise, but only a version or interpretation of her” (Harris 137). As such, the uncertain, fantastic appearance of Louise at the end of the novel—“Am I stark mad? She’s warm” (190)—is just as unverifiable as the narrator’s gender. References to “the perfect romance” (187) and “liv[ing] in a novel” (160) abound in the latter half of the novel, suggesting that such an auspicious conclusion is the stuff of romance narratives, not reality.

As I have argued, the critical debate about the narrator’s gender plays into Winterson’s game, revealing the construction of determinate fact through appeal to social narratives. In this

sense, the narrator functions as the extratextual palimpsest upon which various critical discourses accumulate: through his/her character, the novel is at turns a manifesto for the queer appropriation of language, a lesbian critique of masculine universality, and further, an unravelling of the semiotics of sex. While these readings diverge as per the critics' political interests, they coincide in viewing the narrator's trajectory from devoted pupil to repentant lover as a sort of learning process. If the narrator is the pilgrim to Louise's Venus, then he/she must learn some lesson over the course of the text. Describing such a lesson, Ginette Carpenter writes, "Leaving Louise has produced a monolithic reading of Louise's body, condemning it to illness and decay....The narrator has to learn to allow for the free play of signifiers, to resist the translator's urge to pin down meaning" (Carpenter 72). That is, by defining the narrator through his/her ambiguity, Winterson celebrates the opportunities that indeterminacy provides in identity politics. Jane Haslett calls the narrator's body "invisible" and suggests that "like a mythical shapeshifter it remains unclassifiable, mysterious, endowed by endless possibilities" (43). Whereas Jordan in *Sexing* seeks to record "the path not taken and the forgotten angle" (2) that shadow observable events, *Written*'s narrator tries to avoid even this vague subordination of possibility to reality, as the recurrent image of the flattened palimpsest suggests.

Like the narrator's, Atlas's story ends indeterminately, with the mythological figure following Winterson's "imagining a different story for herself" through the play afforded by fiction (Williams-Wanquet, "Ethics" 214). However, as van der Wiel observes, the novel never shows this "different story" in practice: "For art to be both personal and universal...it requires transformation rather than repudiation of the autobiographical....*Weight*'s 'authenticity' stands in the way of becoming more than an act of self-narration" (154-5). As the obsessive repetition of "I want to tell the story again" suggests, Winterson's writing an identity around a certain pattern

of trauma—her adoption and fraught relationship with her foster parents (*Weight* 137-41)—binds her to the repetition of this narrative. In short, there is a gap between the theory of living a fictional identity, and one’s ability to put such a model into practice. Gavin Keulks compares this tension to a shift in Winterson’s work between her early and late career:

Assailed by emotional absolutes, Winterson’s orphic (and polymorphic) narrators crave integrity in the midst of indeterminacy and disconnection. They celebrate the ludic joy of definition-less space, the paradoxical freedoms of exile and alterity. Early in Winterson’s career, that seemed to be enough; in the evangelical political climate of the twenty-first century, however, it may no longer suffice.

(Keulks 158-9)

I think Keulks’s claim applies just as well to Winterson’s earlier works, many of which feature narrators concerned with finding ways to describe the non-linear and the ambiguous. Henri and Jordan share an obsession with recording not only events, but also changes in emotion and belief. That is, the experience of “definition-less space” does not suffice; it must somehow be charted or translated into storytelling and allusion, methods of fixing the indeterminate through concrete language.

This tension between the abstract and the concrete recurs in *Written*: Christy Burns notes that while Louise’s fantastic appearance at the end of the novel “twists back to imply that fiction might be as satisfying as reality” (300), the unverifiability of the “happy ending” is an essential problem of models of fluid identity: “fiction is no more than fantasy...and it functions only as a focal point of our desires, being perhaps useful but not ultimately able to call up the object of desire” (301). In short, even within a novel that celebrates undecidability through the emblem of the palimpsest, Winterson shows a concern for the ephemerality of the surface configuration on

the grounds of one's need for a narrative that connects past, present, and future. The temporality of writing, often collapsed in Winterson's work through the equal weighting of memory and present experience, brings to mind language's embeddedness, not only in the sense of the Derridean trace, but also in the Lockean theory of identity as a narrative of consciousness. In this sense, the language of rewriting and bodily inscription is a means of working towards a form of living text, abstracted from the weight of the past. Cath Stowers sees this abstraction as the defining feature of the narrator's writing style:

In contrast to traditional male writing of the female body as something penetrable, knowable and possessable, this is no simple translation of the body into text...[A]ny revelation is only of a reciprocity which is written *on* the body, and which even then consists of a 'palimpsest', 'a secret code' like 'braille' beneath the surface. (Stowers, "Journeying" 155)

The narrator's choice in using a reading/writing metaphor is somewhat misleading. As Stowers points out, such reading is always an act of translation between bodies, and simultaneous with the writing process. I think that Winterson seeks to emulate this sexual reciprocity in reforming the relationship between author and text; when she quotes herself or returns to autobiography, she appeals to the text as a living present, a bodily other to interpellate the author.

The question remains whether this is arcane theory or a practicable model of identity. There is no easy remedy for Winterson's narrators, who define themselves through indeterminacy while remaining bound to a written record, and the same can be said for the author herself: despite her attempt to follow Atlas in putting down the weight of the past, Winterson returns to the same autobiographical themes in *Happy*, compelled to tell another version of the story again. She admits, "I return to problems I can't solve, not because I'm an idiot, but because

the real problems can't be solved. The universe is expanding. The more we see, the more we discover there is to see" (*Weight* 137). While there is a sense of inadequacy attached to her language of cover versions and retellings, which suggest that any given work can only stand as a supplement to a greater whole, there is also a sense that the present text's ability to spark emotions in the reader redeems the text. Bradway defines Winterson's aesthetic theory in *Art Objects* as a "dynamic affective relation," and claims, "Instead of approaching art through the 'narrow gate of subjective experience,' Winterson envisions readers becoming undone by the non-subjective emotionality of art" (188). The same holds true for her theory of literature. The postmodern novel's ability to generate new meaning through intertextuality is Winterson's means of exposing readers to the numinous power of art. Lynne Pearce describes her emotional experience when reading Winterson's novels in this way: "I am unable to read [*Written*] without having images of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 'Beata Beatrix' flash before my eyes....I am unable to read any juxtaposition of beauty and serious illness as anything other than a glamorisation of the fact," a context that creates "a 'stain' upon the body of [Winterson's] work" (Pearce 35). Although this shakes Pearce's self-conception as a Winterson fan, I think this idea of staining or even spoiling the text is exactly what Winterson hopes to achieve through her "reiteration compulsion" (Gustar 60). That jarring bridge between *Written* and *Weight*, "Written on the body is a secret code, only visible in certain lights" (*Written* 89; *Weight* 141), emblemizes the author's call for an ongoing practice of deciphering, bounded only by the reader's interest in running "reading hands" over the stained textual body.

Conclusion

I couldn't forget her. Now she seemed to have forgotten everything....Time is a great deadener; people forget, get bored, grow old, go away. (*Oranges* 218)

Time is a great deadener. People forget, grow old, get bored....Had she forgotten? Had time worn away her anger? (*Passion* 35)

I started a one-woman campaign, the sort you read about in the papers....They hope you'll go away, get older, get bored. Time is a great deadener. (*Sexing* 127)

What do you want me to say? That I'll get over it? That's right, isn't it? Time is a great deadener. (*Written* 189)

The above quotations show Winterson's iterative process at work. By the time she writes *Written on the Body*, Winterson has made a cliché out of her own words: the sincerity of Jeanette's proclamation in *Oranges* has given way to the narrator's cynicism about the stock phrases used to describe loss. When Winterson repeats, "Time is a great deadener," she draws on the original context of Beckett's "But habit is a great deadener" (59), while also referring to her earlier writing. In this way, the phrase takes on a private significance that depends on the reader's contextualization. This is a form of what Gregory Ulmer calls the puncept, a generation of new meaning through an unconventional arrangement of known terms. As in Derrida's *différance*, the meaning of the pun rests in its simultaneous reference to both preceding elements, because "unlike physics, in which two bodies may not occupy the same space, language is a material in which the same names are capable of supporting several mutually exclusive meanings simultaneously" (Ulmer 165). That is, the pun contains its own antithesis: Ulmer observes that puncepts belong to a class of words that Derrida calls undecidables, units that "inhabit philosophical opposition, resisting and disorganizing it, *without ever* constituting a third term"

(qtd. in Ulmer 188). In this way, Winterson enacts Jordan's desire to create of himself "a third kind, without seed or parent" (*Sexing* 76) through language, not by creating a new vocabulary, but rather through a continual process of recontextualization.

If Winterson's clichés are functionally similar to puns, there is a sense that she sports with her readers. While I have focused on the structure of Winterson's self-quotation, I do not mean to ignore the level at which her wordplay is just that—play. There is something thrilling for Winterson's readers in tracing her motifs between texts; Jennifer Gustar claims that such repetition "provokes in the reader a desire to understand it. We are invited, by Winterson's recourse to repetition, to explore by means of 'certain lights' an undercurrent that recurs in her work" (60). Further, Ginette Carpenter draws a parallel between readers and lovers when she claims, "Writing...is something that tempts and seduces the reader in its promise to indulge and fulfil the desire to read....The pleasure of the text derives from the consummation of the desires of author and reader" (78); Lynne Pearce uses a similar term, *ravissement*, to describe her relationship with Winterson's works (30). By constructing a metatextual game with her readers, Winterson appeals to their emotions, demanding a longer relationship than the consumptive act of reading a book. For Winterson, this ability of writing to speak to more than its literal context is an advantage of the form, something the author should exploit to its full potential. In *Art Objects*, she claims,

We seem to have returned to a place where play, pose and experiment are unwelcome and where the idea of art is debased. At the same time, there are a growing number of people...who want to find something genuine in the literature of their own time and who are unconvinced by the glories of reproduction furniture. (*Art Objects* 43)

If the novel cannot stimulate the same feeling of numinous awe that Winterson feels when she stands before a Massimo Rao (3), she seeks to reproduce that emotion through elaborate metatext, a “genuine” connection to her reader.

Perhaps Keulks is right in his assessment that Winterson’s embrace of the ambiguous and undecidable “may no longer suffice” (159). Her latest novel, *The Gap of Time*, follows *Weight* in wearing its indebtedness to a specific text on its sleeve. Much like she refers to the Atlas myth as “one I haven’t been able to put down” (*Weight* 7), Winterson presents *Gap* as a retelling of *The Winter’s Tale*, “a private text for me for more than thirty years” (267). As in *Weight*, she foregrounds the incomplete nature of any retelling. The first line, “I saw the strangest sight tonight” (11), marks *Gap* as a novel of coincidences and chance events; her version of the Shepherd remarks, “The important things happen by chance. Only the rest gets planned” (21). In this way, she presents her retelling as an accident, a haphazard reconstruction from the private contexts that inform her thought. Accordingly, her self-quotations here are always “repetitions with a difference”: far from the context of Venetian gamblers, the refrain “What you risk reveals what you value” has become an Occupy protest slogan, and a neon sign reading “RISK=VALUE” adorns a hedge fund manager’s wall (30). Similarly, the phrase “everything is imprinted forever with what it once was” (206) becomes a nihilistic motto. As such, even within her work with an unambiguous source text, Winterson returns to her metatextual game, appealing to the fluid context of these phrases. Although her characters no longer depend on the “gimmicks” of concealed gender or a tenuous connection to autobiography, she still values the undecidable as a means of accessing “the path not taken and the forgotten angle” (*Sexing* 2).

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