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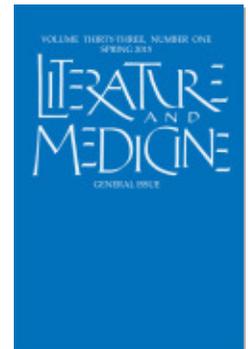
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# The Body, Gender, and Biotechnology in Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods*

Luna Dolezal

While societies have always engaged in cultural and ritualistic body modification, in the twenty-first century the body operates under an unprecedented set of ideologies and practices. Radical developments in technology and biomedicine within an ever-intensifying system of consumer capitalism have drastically changed work practices, lifestyles, and the very understanding of our flesh. No longer physically driving the machinery of capitalist production, the body has assumed a different role within the free market: it has become the centerpiece of capital acquisition. It is an entity not only to be adorned, but to be worked on and transformed through self-reflexive body projects. More than ever before, these projects take place within the realm of biomedicine, where appearance and lifestyle are increasingly positioned as medical concerns. As a result, practices such as cosmetic surgery, anti-aging procedures, and body alterations, operating under normalizing medical frameworks, have proliferated with an astonishing momentum, driven in part by the novelty of emerging technologies and the commercial interests of what I call the biomedical-beauty complex.<sup>1</sup>

Jeanette Winterson's 2007 novel *The Stone Gods* reads in part as a cautionary tale about the effects of biomedicine and consumerism on the body, interrogating the systematic "normative narcissism" that has arisen in late-capitalist postmodern societies in the wake of commercial biotechnologies which work to enhance the body aesthetically.<sup>2</sup> Winterson's analysis of these trends through the fictional landscape of Part 1 of *The Stone Gods* is driven not only by her uneasiness with technology—especially considering the human propensity for vanity, selfishness, and self-destruction—but also by her interest, familiar to readers of her work, in gender, the body, and sexuality.<sup>3</sup> By employing a speculative fiction narrative, Winterson chooses a genre that is associ-

ated with both biotechnological imagery and the interrogation of social conventions regarding gender roles and the body. However, *The Stone Gods* is not earnest science fiction. The story is satirical, using humor, irony, and exaggeration to expose and ridicule not only forms of the speculative genre itself, but also current trends in gender discrepancies arising from the use and development of aesthetic biotechnologies.<sup>4</sup>

Winterson's explicit interest in the body, sexuality, gender, and biomedical technologies, as articulated in her 1992 novel *Written on the Body*, feeds the narrative of *The Stone Gods*. In one sense, *The Stone Gods* realizes the ambiguity that self-consciously permeates gender and sexuality in the earlier work. In *The Stone Gods* sexuality is fluid and gender roles are ambiguous and interchangeable. The narrator is a lesbian dissident with a boy's name, Billie, who falls in love with a genderless but female-formed robot called Spike. However, as in *Written on the Body*, the systematic patriarchal tendencies of technology and medicine overshadow the possibilities for playfulness and ambiguity within gender and sexuality. Even in this post-gay, post-feminist utopia, where women are not burdened with child bearing (babies are born "womb free") or domestic responsibilities (robots called "LoBots," "Flying Feet," and "Kitchenhands" do housework and run errands), there is still a high level of gendered control and disempowerment in the society's use of technology, particularly those technologies which work on the body.<sup>5</sup>

In this article, I will argue that Winterson's use of satire and the common tropes of science fiction in *The Stone Gods* provides an effective and important critique of the gender discrepancies arising in the implementation of aesthetic biotechnologies under the logic of neoliberal consumerism. In particular, engaging with aspects of Winterson's fictional landscape in Part 1 of *The Stone Gods*, I will explore the themes of bodily normalization, the medicalization of aging and appearance, and the notion that biotechnologies such as cosmetic surgery can inculcate happiness through some sort of "psychological cure." Ultimately, I will argue that Winterson's aim in this work is to raise important questions about where rising standards of enhancement and appearance, implemented through biotechnologies, will take us and, furthermore, to demonstrate that the deeper "problems of the human condition" require more than the surface fixes offered by consumption, technological innovation, and narcissistic body projects.<sup>6</sup>

## An "Ustopian" Vision

*The Stone Gods* is a multi-layered novel in which worlds, characters, and stories repeat themselves. In the three linked stories of Parts 1, 2, and 3, we find the same characters in various incarnations playing out repeating dramas of destruction and devastation: "A repeating world—the same old story" (59). In Part 1, entitled "Planet Blue," the protagonist, a lesbian-scientist-activist named Billie Crusoe—namesake of Defoe's Robinson Crusoe—lives on Orbus, an imagined world teetering on the edge of being uninhabitable to human life due to technology-driven environmental devastation. In Part 2, "Easter Island," it is 1774 and one of Captain Cook's British sailors is marooned on Easter Island with a Dutchman named Spikkers. In this historical imagining of the demise of Easter Island's civilization, they watch as feuding tribes cut down the last remaining tree, rendering the island completely barren, a microcosm of the story of destruction told in Part 1. The final section of the novel, entitled "Wreck City," jumps back to the future, to an era known as "Post-3 War," and is set in a post-apocalyptic outland of nuclear radiation and ravaged forests. Its society is populated with cast-offs, outcasts, and damaged bodies. Each of the three stories spirals quietly to its end, all three closing with futile separation, lost love, destruction, and death. Overall, the work reads as a parable about the seeming inevitability of humankind's self-destructive impulses, exploring doom-laden repeating histories in which "we keep making the same mistakes again and again" (68).

I will focus my analysis on the imagined future world of Part 1, Planet Orbus. Planet Orbus is a near-future society that we can recognize, albeit as a hyperbolic version of our own reality. Run entirely by commercial interests (the city gates are a pair of golden arches), the society is governed by a thinly disguised private corporation called the Central Power, an anonymous big brother that regulates life down to the smallest details. Life under the Central Power is completely infused with convenience technologies, and citizens are liberated from labor, aging, illness, and poverty; the biggest problems in day-to-day life are traffic and parking. Icons have replaced words and illiteracy prevails; nature is obsolete; books have been eradicated; babies are born womb-free; meat is grown synthetically in labs and animals are all verging on extinction. Although the planet is on the brink of destruction, the citizens of the Central Power are all young, beautiful, technologically savvy, and celebrity-obsessed. They are infatuated with reality television, shopping, sex, youth, and law enforcement.

The protagonist, Billie Crusoe, is a dissatisfied and wry observer of her society's enthrallment by superficial conveniences and its propensity for narcissistic delusion and self-destruction. Billie lives at odds with this society, believing that something is lost in the quality of human life as a result of the increased domination of commercial interests and technological development. Suspected of acts of terrorism against the Central Power, Billie works reluctantly for Enhancement Services, the big brother arm of the government, whose job is, she says, "to explain to people that they really do want to live their lives in a way that is good for them and good for the community" (11). The citizens of the Central Power are micro-controlled and under constant surveillance; they are habituated to a Foucauldian panoptic gaze that is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere in particular: "I am being watched, but that isn't strange. That's life. We're all used to it."<sup>7</sup>

The omniscient gaze of the Central Power is, in part, fixated on capturing and documenting bodies in order to ensure ideal (read normalized) citizens: "The Central Power is a democracy. We look alike, except for rich people and celebrities, who look better. That's what you'd expect in a democracy" (23). Everyone is young, beautiful, and thin, and biotechnologies, such as surgery, genetic manipulation and robotic enhancement, are routinely employed to this end: "'The DNA Dynasty,' they called us, when the first generation of humans had successful recoding" (11). Spike explains: "Every human being in the Central Power has been enhanced, genetically modified and DNA-screened. Some have been cloned. Most were born outside the womb. A human being now is not what a human being was even a hundred years ago" (77). However, despite the radical technological advances which permeate life under the Central Power, Planet Orbus is dying. Citizens are facing an apocalypse due to human-induced environmental destruction, severe climate change, and massive overpopulation.

Fortunately, a new planet has been discovered. Abundant with natural resources and untouched by humans, it is pristine and amenable to sustaining human life, save for the dinosaur-like creatures that are the dominant life form on the planet. But the monsters will be "humanely destroyed" and Planet Blue, as it is called, will be duly colonized, providing the citizens of dying Orbus with an opportunity to "learn from our mistakes" and "do things differently" (6, 7, 4). However, Billie's disdain for the tendencies of the Central Power proves justified. In an effort to wipe out the dinosaur-like creatures that inhabit Planet Blue, a meteor is re-directed to the planet, destroy-

ing not only the dinosaurs, but also the entire eco-system, wiping out all chances for humankind's continuation.

Told as a science fiction narrative, Winterson's description of life under the Central Power is sardonic while delivering a message that is deadly serious. Winterson deploys many of the genre's motifs in her narrative. She writes about a possible future world, a near apocalyptic utopia/dystopia, replete with all the classical story elements: spaceships, futuristic technology, alien monsters, robot cops, sexy androids, mind reading and faster-than-light travel. Winterson's use of genre is not incidental. Exploring existing social conventions through hyperbolic, apocalyptic, or futuristic settings, science fiction is an effective cultural tool for elucidating the impact of present social trends. As Douglas Kellner asserts in his discussion of Baudrillard's prophetic critiques of postmodernity, a good science fiction writer "often illuminates aspects of reality frequently overlooked by utilizing the vantage point of a future intensification of present social trends. . . . [He] takes current trends to possible conclusions and provides instructive warnings about certain social tendencies and phenomena."<sup>8</sup> It is precisely with this intention that Winterson writes.

It is through the utopian/dystopian elements in *The Stone Gods* that Winterson makes explicit her interrogation of the current systems of oppression and destruction under what she has called "the technological dream/nightmare of the twenty-first century."<sup>9</sup> The dystopian vision that Winterson describes on Orbus is employed to criticize the utopian imaginaries implicit in our neoliberal system. Following the ideologies of contemporary neoliberalism—capital acquisition, private property, commodification, the eternal growth of the free market—the Central Power, in fact, constitutes a version of a "perfect" society: all social ills have been eradicated, there is economic abundance, limitless consumption, and everyone is eternally healthy, young, and beautiful. Winterson's vision of life under the Central Power on Orbus is an "ustopia," to borrow Margaret Atwood's term, signifying an unresolvable tension between utopian and dystopian visions, "the imagined perfect society and its opposite . . . [as] each contains a latent version of the other."<sup>10</sup> Lurking beneath the surface perfection of Orbus is a horrific vision of society. The system is rife with bureaucratic control, inequality, environmental devastation, oppression, ignorance, and social injustice.

It is through these ustopian tensions that Winterson's description of life under the Central Power reads as a satire and commentary on the excesses and superficialities of modern life. Her use of the

“ustopian” science fiction narrative, so self-consciously trope-laden, is a device to deliver a witty parable about the perils of technology, consumerism, and narcissism, showing us where existing trends, if left unchecked, might take us.<sup>11</sup> The story contains an edifying warning: if current (environmental, technological, and social) trends continue, then look out, because destruction—human and environmental—is where we’re headed.

### Gender, the Body, and Technology

Winterson’s ustopian vision in *The Stone Gods* focuses, in part, on the themes of the body, sexuality, and gender familiar to readers of her novels and autobiographical writing. In particular, Winterson picks up a narrative thread first explored in her 1992 novel, *Written on the Body*. This novel is narrated by the forlorn lover of a woman called Louise and is structured as a long missive to her. Louise has cancer and has returned to her blackmailing doctor husband for life-saving medical treatment, leaving the narrator bereft and conflicted. Throughout the novel, it is never revealed whether the narrator is a man or a woman, and the self-conscious ambiguity of gender (and, as a result, sexuality) is an important and effective device in the work, exemplifying the observations made by Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub in their introduction to *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*: “The boundary between biological sex, gender identity and erotic practice is unsettlingly fluid.”<sup>12</sup>

Sexual difference seems to be of little or no importance to the narrator of *Written on the Body*, who claims knowledge and solidarity with both quintessentially male and female behavior and relates a series of poetic anecdotes describing both male and female lovers. The reader tries to determine the narrator’s gender and sexuality, which seems to oscillate between male and female, straight and gay, depending on the narrative thread being explored.<sup>13</sup> The book, overall, disturbs and questions the gender binary and the central place it has in our appropriation and understanding of texts and experience.<sup>14</sup>

Winterson continues to explore the fluidity of gender and express her disdain for binary gender norms in *The Stone Gods*. As noted above, the protagonist in Part 1, Billie, is a lesbian with a boy’s name who has an affair with a genderless, though female-formed, robot. Billie lives in a post-gay society where the gender of one’s sexual partner is socially irrelevant. In Part 2, Billie becomes Billy, an eighteenth-

century male sailor stranded on Easter Island with his Dutch lover, a man called Spikkers. In Part 3, they morph again; Billie is back and Spike is reduced to a disembodied head, a bodiless “female” robot, who at one point performs oral sex on a woman called Nebraska not for sexual pleasure, but to accrue a “new experience” (209). Spike succinctly sums up Winterson’s stance when Billie asks her incredulously, “Do you want to kiss a woman so that you can add it to your database?” and Spike responds: “Gender is a human concept . . . and not interesting” (76).

But the realization of gender/sexuality fluidity that Winterson might have achieved in the post-gay utopia she describes in *Written on the Body* and on Orbus in *The Stone Gods* is tempered by the reality of a dystopian intensification of gender norms, particularly as expressed through the control of women’s bodies within biomedicine. Although scientific and medical discourses assume a tone of impartial authority, they tend to reproduce existing cultural stereotypes, particularly with respect to gender norms. For instance, Emily Martin indicates that scientific descriptions of human reproduction attribute the most negative, passive female stereotypes to the human egg: it is receptive, fragile, and waiting for the “masculine” (read active, determined, productive) sperm to penetrate it.<sup>15</sup> Hence, in this type of scientific knowledge, limiting gender-based cultural stereotypes are “able to masquerade as ‘natural fact.’”<sup>16</sup>

Similar gender-based stereotypes are reinforced by the development of certain biotechnologies. *The Stone Gods*, in particular, explores whether technology actually delivers greater social and individual freedoms, as promised under the ideological umbrella of neoliberalism, or if it in fact intensifies existing societal inequalities, homogenizing society under the patriarchal structures through which most technologies are developed. As Hope Jennings points out, in *The Stone Gods* Winterson seems to take up a question posed by feminist theorists and described by Carol Stabile in her chapter “Feminism and the Technological Fix”: Is technology “inherently patriarchal and malignant,” increasing “the polarization between the sexes”?<sup>17</sup>

In *Written on the Body*, Winterson seems to answer in the affirmative. Here Winterson critiques the patriarchal tendencies of biomedicine in controlling women’s bodies, effacing women’s autonomy and abnegating their desires. In the novel, Louise leaves her husband, Elgin, and moves in with the narrator, with whom she has fallen passionately in love. Elgin is an oncologist who reveals to Louise that she has cancer. He tells her that he can provide life-saving treatments

that money can't buy, but only if she leaves the narrator and returns to him. The control of the medical establishment—male, expert, scientific—over Louise's female body and its concomitant subjective desires is explicitly critiqued in this plotline.<sup>18</sup>

A similar critique arises in *The Stone Gods*. As noted above, although women are effectively liberated from reproductive functions and domestic drudgery, and gender inequalities seem not to exist in the professional sphere, the patriarchal control of women through technology, especially with respect to physical appearance and the body, has intensified. Although both male and female citizens of the Central Power are technologically enhanced, genetically modified, and DNA-screened, women are disproportionately affected by technological imperatives. Billie reveals this disparity: "Science can't fix everything," she says, "women feel they have to look youthful, men less so" (11).

As part of the Central Power's "enhancement" strategy, all citizens are required to get "genetically Fixed," a DNA-based intervention that entails being genetically frozen to remain a particular age for one's entire life span (10). The ageless and normalized citizens of the Central Power are reminiscent of what some are calling the "ageless generation" of contemporary celebrity culture, made up of women who seem to have transcended age, whose bodies and faces are frozen in their mid-thirties while they climb into their forties, fifties, or sixties. They further call to mind what has been dubbed the "Year-Zero Face," a cocktail of Botox, fillers, and chemical peels used to "freeze" faces with the intent of creating an ageless and "done" look.<sup>19</sup>

Through Fixing, senescence is rendered obsolete and what James Atlas calls the "narcissistic injury" of old age—exposing our vulnerability and undermining the neoliberal imperative of eternal growth—is eliminated.<sup>20</sup> Fixing, in short, helps sustain the "illusion that our urgent daily lives are permanent, and not just transient things."<sup>21</sup> Time passes, but the body—in its capacity as a worker-spectator-consumer—does not change: "In the past, people had birthdays. . . . Now birthdays don't matter because they mark the passing of the years, and for us years don't pass in the same way that they once did. G is the day and year you genetically Fix. It's a great day to celebrate" (18). Even though, on Orbus, everyone is legally required to be Fixed, the pressures for youthfulness disproportionately impact women: "Manfred [Billie's boss] is one of those confident men who have had themselves genetically Fixed as late-forties. Most men prefer to Fix younger than that, and there are no women who Fix past thirty" (11).

Billie is openly critical of genetic Fixing and other biotechnologies which aim to modify the body. Her hunch is that there is something lost in human life when the body and self are increasingly alienated from natural processes such as aging and death. Billie is nostalgic for a time when life was not dominated by technology and bureaucracy. She reads books, cooks her own food, and, like the narrator in *Written on the Body*, abandons the scientific-technological world for a cottage in the countryside. Billie lives on the last real farm, a utopian island within the technological dystopia of the Central Power. It is a museum-land complete with wild animals, pastureland, and a stream; the farm is like “an ancient ancestor everyone forgot” (13). Defying the law, Billie has refused to be genetically Fixed. She is involved in an underground rebel movement drawing attention to the lack of ethical concern in the development of biotechnologies.

However, as part of her job with Enhancement services, Billie must engage with the “hi-tech, hi-stress” life of the Central Power and, as she says, “Listen when People have Problems” (13). She is sent to visit Mrs. Mary McMurphy, or “Pink,” a woman who wants to undergo a procedure called genetic reversal in order to return to early adolescence. In particular, she wants to look like Little Señorita, a twelve-year-old pop star who has Fixed herself as a pre-teen in order to sustain her fame indefinitely. “My husband is mad about Little Señorita,” Pink declares, “I want to be her” (19). Billie explains: “I have an appointment today with a woman who wants to be genetically reversed to twelve years old to stop her husband running after schoolgirls. It’s possible, but it’s illegal” (14–15).

Billie makes a house call. Pink wears a sexy school uniform and her sitting room is decorated like a teenager’s bedroom. She is a parody of normalized femininity. Pink’s primary concern is holding onto her unfaithful, pedophilic husband: “My husband likes girls,” she says to Billie, “I don’t want to lose him. . . . We don’t have sex anymore. He says I’m too old” (20). Pink does not bat an eyelid at undergoing risky and expensive surgical interventions in order to sustain the sexual interest of her male partner. She already has buttock, thigh, and breast implants. Pink tells Billie: “I love my husband and I want his attention. I’ll never get it aged twenty-four. I even had my vagina reduced. I’m tight as a screwtop bottle” (71).

These references to aesthetic cosmetic surgeries, such as breast implants and vaginoplasty—whose primary purpose is, arguably, to fulfill the sexual fantasies of mainstream male heterosexual desire—are part of Winterson’s larger cultural critique. Biotechnologies do in fact

often reproduce and reinforce negative heterosexual patriarchal dynamics, where women are figured as passive, receptive, and dominated, while men are active, self-determining, and productive. Not only are these stereotypes reinforced when considering women's motivations for undergoing cosmetic surgery, but they are also realized in the surgeon-patient relationship, which is overwhelmingly a male-female dynamic: although women are by and large the primary recipients of cosmetic surgery, eight out of every nine cosmetic surgeons are male.<sup>22</sup> Virginia Blum astutely notes that, "insofar as conventional heterosexual male and female sexualities are experienced psychically and represented culturewide as the relationship between the one who penetrates and the one penetrated, surgical interventions can function as very eroticized versions of the [hetero]sexual act."<sup>23</sup>

The employment of biotechnologies in the service of male heterosexual desire—and to play out the cultural stereotype of dominant-passive/penetrator-penetrated—is further parodied in Winterson's discussion of Spike. Spike is a Robo *sapient*: "the first artificial creature that looks and acts human and that can evolve like a human" (17). She was built for an exploratory space mission to Planet Blue. Spike is "drop-dead gorgeous," "absurdly beautiful," and built this way solely because it was "good for the boys on the mission" (33). Despite being the most "advanced member of the crew," a central part of her role on the spaceship is to perform sexual services for the men on board, particularly Captain Handsome, a "space privateer" (34, 56). In three years, Spike tells Billie matter-of-factly, she used up "three silicon-lined vaginas" (34). Spike and Pink highlight what Winterson sees as the problem with the patriarchal employment of biotechnology: its objectifying and cavalier attitude towards women, which she calls a "boy's fantasy."<sup>24</sup>

### The "Psychological Cure"

Like many women who engage in cosmetic surgery and other medical interventions to modify the body according to prevailing heteronormative standards, Pink sees her desire to undergo genetic reversal as an expression of her own autonomy, rather than coercion by broader patriarchal structures. In conversation with Billie she says: "It's great that we have Fixing and laser. I'm fifty-eight in old years, but I look and I feel fantastic. . . . Nobody has to look horrible anymore—it's been a winner for confidence" (70–71). Undergoing cosmetic

procedures as a means to boost self-confidence is a common justification for women choosing surgery. For instance, in a study conducted on Dutch women who were granted publically funded cosmetic surgery to alleviate mental suffering like low self-esteem and chronic body shame resulting from perceived defects in their appearance, interviewees revealed that they saw their decisions to undergo cosmetic surgery as autonomous choices, and felt empowered to improve their psychic well-being and self-confidence.<sup>25</sup> As a result of these findings, Kathy Davis, the sociologist who conducted this study, makes a guarded defense of cosmetic surgery. She ultimately argues that cosmetic surgery is seen by some women not as “a *luxury*, but [as] a *necessity* for alleviating a specific kind of problem.”<sup>26</sup>

Positioning cosmetic surgery as some sort of psychological “cure” is a shrewd strategy of contemporary commercial biomedical practice.<sup>27</sup> Not only does this strategy ensure that cosmetic surgeons are seen as more than just highly skilled beauticians, it positions cosmetic surgery as a *medical* practice. Despite the (obvious) focus on the physical body in cosmetic surgery and anti-aging practices, a common justification by doctors for the medical need for cosmetic surgery is not about the physical body at all. Instead, they argue that cosmetic surgery will alleviate *psychological* distress: the anxiety and suffering arising as a result of dissatisfaction with one’s body.<sup>28</sup>

This sort of logic hinges on an outdated mind vs. body dualism, a holdover from the biomedical machine model of the body. While this model has been effectively challenged by phenomenological descriptions of embodied subjectivity, it still dominates a lot of biomedical and clinical thinking.<sup>29</sup> The dualistic idea is indeed seductive, especially considering the contemporary neoliberal emphasis on capital and private property. Under this model, the “true” self is an immaterial entity that resides within the physical body, and the body itself is merely some sort of physical avatar, private property to be designed and displayed within the social realm. Fulfillment is achieved when the “inner” self is expressed successfully through the “outer” body or, conversely, changing the “outer” body will result in a positive change to the “inner” self. Rachel Hurst has termed this phenomenon “surface imagination,” referring to “the powerful fantasy that a change to the exterior can enhance or alter the interior.”<sup>30</sup> If the outer body is not an adequate visual manifestation of our inner “truth,” then changes can be—and increasingly *should* be—made to the body in order to uncover and reveal the inner authentic self. As a result, the body is seen as a “project,” as something which should be worked on in a constant

process of self-realization and becoming.<sup>31</sup> For example, the motifs of the thin person trapped inside a fat body, the woman trapped inside a man's body, the Caucasian person trapped inside an African/Hispanic/Asian body, or the beautiful and young person trapped inside an aging body, are common in our sociocultural discourse.<sup>32</sup> Not revealing one's authentic self through the body is seen as psychologically, socially, or spiritually damaging.

In contemporary medical practice, the notion of cosmetic surgery as a psychological treatment to ameliorate a disjunction between inner and outer has become widespread.<sup>33</sup> The cosmetic "cure," as Thomas Pruzinsky suggests in an article in *Plastic Surgery Nursing*, changes "patients' perceptions of themselves" in order to "facilitate improvement in the patient's psychological functioning."<sup>34</sup> As contemporary cosmetic surgery and anti-aging technologies sit on somewhat shaky ground with respect to medical ethical issues around treatment (versus enhancement), necessity, normalization, and allocation of resources, doctors acknowledge that of course women don't *need* facelifts or breast implants in the same way one might *need* a kidney transplant or chemotherapy. However, it is, as Pruzinsky demonstrates, sometimes suggested that women may benefit psychologically from these procedures; surgery can improve self-esteem, increase social functioning, and ameliorate negative self-conceptions arising from strained relationships. As one of medicine's primary goals is to reduce suffering, insofar as cosmetic surgery can offer relief to psychological distress, then, it is sometimes argued, it should be considered a viable medical treatment.<sup>35</sup> It is by this logic that cosmetic surgery is sometimes seen as medically justified rather than merely an enhancement of so-called normal functioning, and is in the present day sometimes funded by national health services.<sup>36</sup>

Appealing to the logic of the "psychological cure" is the strategy that many women employ in order to be granted permission to undergo cosmetic surgery. As Hurst notes, "a patient who expresses that s/he would like to undergo surgery in order to please or be more acceptable to others is likely to be rejected as a candidate for surgery."<sup>37</sup> This is because doctors would see their motivations as tainted by outside influences. Patients are, as Hurst explains, "well aware of this reality, and structure their stories to fit this narrative expectation."<sup>38</sup> This is certainly the strategy Pink employs in order to be granted permission to undergo genetic reversal. Although Pink is explicit about her desire to undergo genetic reversal for no reason other than to win her husband's sexual attention, she claims that she has had a "nervous breakdown" (78). She wants to take her case to

the Court of Human Rights: “She’s already seen a psychiatrist and a Consultant specializing in Genetics” (14-15). However, Winterson is quick to point out that the logic behind the psychological cure is inherently flawed and that our “‘science can fix it’ mentality” won’t address the “real problems of the human condition.”<sup>39</sup> Indeed, Winterson is outspoken on this point: “technology is not the solution for everything.”<sup>40</sup> In conversation with Pink, Billie says:

“I was campaigning against Genetic Reversal.”

“But why?”

“Because it makes people fucked up and miserable . . . It doesn’t make sense to me, we have a society where routine cosmetic surgery and genetic Fixing are considered normal—”

“Y’know, I’d be fucked up and miserable anyway—and if I’m going to be fucked up and miserable, I’d rather be young, fucked up and miserable. Who wants to be depressed *and* have skin that looks like fried onions? . . . What was so normal about getting old?” (70–71)

Pink reveals the truth behind the “psychological cure.” Making changes to the “outside” will not necessarily ameliorate problems on the “inside”: she’s going to be “fucked up and miserable *anyway*.” Indeed, Pink mocks the idea that cosmetic surgery has any therapeutic value. When thrown off a capsized canoe, her implants act as buoyancy devices. She taunts Billie: “My implants— buttocks, thighs and breasts. Gives me the pneumatic look, and now I see that they’re pretty useful too. What do you think of that, then, Billie? Vanity surgery saves lives. Heh-heh” (88).

In fact, despite numerous testimonials that cosmetic surgery is sought out as a means to alleviate psychological distress caused by perceived flaws in appearance, there is ambiguous evidence on the overall positive psychological and social impact of cosmetic surgery, and no clear evidence on how long any reported positive impacts will last.<sup>41</sup> In a review of changes in body image following cosmetic surgery, David Sarwer makes these telling remarks: “Compared to their preoperative assessment of body image, cosmetic surgery patients reported a significant reduction in dissatisfaction with the specific feature altered by surgery. . . . These women, however, reported *no significant improvements* in the degree of investment or dissatisfaction with their overall appearance.”<sup>42</sup> It seems that cosmetic surgery may offer a superficial fix targeting a particular instantiation of body anxiety,

while, at the same time, ultimately exacerbating overall body dissatisfaction. An aspect of one's appearance that previously caused minor discontent may become an unbearable flaw after surgery on another part of the body. Those who choose cosmetic surgery frequently undergo multiple surgeries and procedures. Hence, it is not surprising that Pink is not satisfied being Fixed in her early twenties, and feels that more procedures could help diminish dissatisfaction with her life and her appearance. When asked by Billie if she is sure she wants to be Fixed at twelve for the rest of her life, Pink flippantly remarks, "I can change later if it doesn't work out" (20).

#### A Medical Approach to Appearance: Raising the Bar Even Higher

The coupling of biomedicine with the beauty industry has crystallized and legitimized the latter's normalizing tendencies. Biomedical and beauty discourses, by and large, tell us that the marked, aging, overweight, raced, or unattractive body requires medical intervention: it is, in some sense, an *unhealthy* body. Clearly this association is not entirely arbitrary, as old age and excess weight are often associated with health problems, and good health is often indicated by a certain robust external appearance, characterized by features such as a muscular form, good teeth, clear skin, and so on. However, these external manifestations of good health do not in any way imply a standardized or normalized appearance, as is promoted by the biomedical-beauty complex.

It is precisely this trend towards normalization that is critiqued by Winterson in her imagining of life under the Central Power. As Billie puts it: "we all look more or less alike, and there are only two sizes, Model Thin and Model Thinner. . . . I look wonderful in a normal sort of way" because that's true of all citizens of the Central Power: "I already look good—we all look good" (27–28).

However, as Pink's story demonstrates, expectations about acceptable appearance are not fixed but constantly shifting. These changes in bodily expectations are intrinsically tied to biotechnology's relationship with neoliberalism and the commercialization of lifestyle medicine. For neoliberalism to be viable, needs can never be fulfilled; markets must continually grow and satisfaction must be constantly deferred. As a result, caught up in the net of the free market, the body will never be enough—never good enough, fit enough, young enough, attractive enough, stylish enough. New procedures, products, and services are

incessantly invented: calf implants, vaginoplasty, leg-lengthening, bio-identical hormone therapy, dry needling, laser skin rejuvenation. The possibilities, as *The Stone Gods* demonstrates, are literally endless. And with each new biotechnology comes a potential shift in the expectations for “normal” or “acceptable” appearance.

There are consequences to changing expectations of what is considered a reasonable or normal standard of appearance. Aesthetic standards are culturally and socially malleable; differing cultures and eras have differing thresholds for what is “acceptable.” For instance, we regularly—and uncontroversially—seek out orthodontists and dermatologists to “correct” crooked teeth or flawed skin even though these conditions often have no consequences for overall health and are often merely aesthetic concerns. Cultural expectations regarding straight teeth and clear skin have become so normalized as to render these orthodontic and dermatological practices medically reasonable, if not medically necessary.

However, these aesthetic standards are fluid and contingent. The transcultural experience of a victim of disfiguring facial burns is telling:

A few years after my accident, still looking very badly disfigured, I travelled to India. There, and in Iran and Afghanistan, my face was rarely given the slightest attention. Heavily scarred faces are regular sights, as disfiguring diseases and accidents are commonplace, while plastic surgery is not widely available in these countries. I could quite easily have lived and worked there with no further surgery. But on my return, a trip on the London Underground was enough to convince me that I need more reconstruction to live and work in Britain.<sup>43</sup>

Likewise, as the physical signs of aging become increasingly pathologized, the physical manifestations of getting older become increasingly intolerable. Consider Billie’s reaction to encountering a woman who has not been genetically Fixed and who has aged “naturally”:

Everyone had the glassy-eyed, good-looking look that is normal nowadays. Even in an air-mask people are concerned to look good. . . .

There was a woman in front of me, fumbling with her mask, coughing. I went to help her, and she grabbed my hand. “Getting old,” she said, and I wondered if I had misheard because we don’t use those words any more. . . .

"Getting old," she said again. Then she pulled off her mask. Her eyes were bright and glittering, but her face was lined, worn, weathered, battered, purple-veined and liver-spotted, with a slot for a mouth, garishly coated with red lipstick.

I recoiled. I had never seen a living person look like this. . . .

"I am what you will become," she said. "I know you haven't been Fixed." (44-45)

Acceptable appearance is largely a matter of context. As more and more people undertake anti-aging treatments and cosmetic surgery, the more "normal" such youthful and surgically altered bodies will seem—and the more exacting the standards for appearance will become.

In the present day, as a result of the routine digital enhancement of images, standards of appearance already emphasize an increasingly unrealistic and normalized body ideal. As virtually every commercial or media image we encounter has been digitally enhanced or modified, and these images are sometimes of people who have undergone cosmetic surgical enhancement anyway, the real expectations that women and men have for their own bodies are increasingly becoming "unreal." As Susan Bordo explains: "With created images setting the standard, we are becoming habituated to the glossy and gleaming, the smooth and shining, the ageless and sagless and wrinkleless. We are learning to expect 'perfection' and to find any 'defect' repellent, unacceptable."<sup>44</sup> In *The Stone Gods* these sorts of perfected images, which arise out of digital manipulation, have been literally transcribed into the flesh. Perfected people have become "reality": "One of the smart buildings was flashing one of the usual feel-good advertisements . . . kids, their parents and grandparents all identically handsome, wearing the same dirt-free nano clothes" (45). Unreal expectations for the body are increasingly becoming *real*, pushing the limits of normalized narcissism to new heights.

There are contemporary critics who argue that the normalizing effects of cosmetic surgery are negligible, that these practices are limited to an elite or image-conscious few. For instance, Henri Wijsbek, in his defense of a woman's right to choose cosmetic surgery, declares, "the number of women who do opt for cosmetic surgery is almost negligible compared to the number of women who do not."<sup>45</sup> However, what is at stake is not merely how many individuals seek out these technologies in the present day but, as Winterson demonstrates in her utopian vision of life under the Central Power, whether these practices *themselves* are becoming normalized, changing expectations of what it

means to have and be a body and producing real consequences for future generations—particularly, if current trends continue, for women: “So this is the future: girls Fixed at eight years old, maybe ten, hopefully twelve. Or will they want women’s minds in girls’ bodies and go for genetic reversal?” (26).

### Conclusion: Redemption through Love and Poetry?

*The Stone Gods* clearly raises questions about where the “technological dream/nightmare” of the twenty-first century is headed. Through Winterson’s use of satire and the common tropes of science fiction, she has provided an engaging aesthetic critique of present social trends. In the possible future world of Orbus, we see a hyperbolic vision of our own society. In engaging with aspects of Winterson’s fictional landscape in Part 1 of *The Stone Gods*, I have explored the utopian/dystopian, or “ustopian,” vision that Winterson employs in order to implicitly evaluate existing social trends. Taking the ideological vision of neoliberalism to its inevitable conclusion, the “perfect” society under the Central Power is in fact a horrific vision of oppression, control, and planetary devastation.

Winterson’s description of life under the Central Power encourages a reflection on the social role that contemporary technologies play under neoliberal sociopolitical, cultural, and economic structures, providing a fictional landscape that calls into question some of the issues raised by this emerging posthumanism. Winterson pre-empts Rosi Braidotti on this point. In her recent book, *The Posthuman*, Braidotti declares: “The pride in technological achievements and in the wealth that comes with them must not prevent us from seeing the great contradictions and forms of social and moral inequality engendered by our emerging technologies.”<sup>46</sup> If technologies, as Winterson suggests, are developed merely as a result of the impersonal demands of the free market spurred on by the “pride” of human achievements, then the post-surgical, inequality-rife ustopia Winterson describes in Part 1 of *The Stone Gods* reads as the inevitable conclusion to a trend that sets no limits on the changes we can make to bodies, changes driven primarily by commercial interests and the novelty of emerging technologies. As Billie muses: “Celebrities are under pressure, no doubt about it. We are all young and beautiful now, so how can they stay ahead of the game? Most of them have macro-surgery. . . . Their body parts are bio-enhanced, and their hair can do clever things like

change colour to match their outfits. They are everything that science and money can buy" (19). Through satirical passages such as this one, Winterson raises important questions about where narrowing standards of enhancement and appearance will take us, imploring us to ask whether being "everything that science and money can buy" is really all we should hope for.

Winterson's novel demonstrates that the deeper "problems of the human condition" require more than the surface fixes offered by consumption, technological innovation, and narcissistic body projects. In *The Stone Gods*, she does not provide a concrete vision of an alternative society: the three linked stories all spiral to an end with destruction and death. However, Winterson does provide glimpses of possible salvation for humanity through what she sees as the redemptive powers of poetry and romantic love, themes explored at length in her autobiographical writing.<sup>47</sup> Spike evolves human attributes, becoming fully capable of genuine emotion and expression, only after experiencing an alternative to the stark logic of rational computations through being introduced to poetry by Captain Handsome: "I was sensing something completely new to me," she says, "For the first time I was able to feel" (80). Unlocking this capacity for abstract human thought and developing an "inner life" and the capacity for love—an alternative to the narcissism current social structures encourage—is where Winterson indicates we should place our hope. As Spike lies dying, her heart, impossibly, starts beating. Through her love for Billie and her capacity for poetry she has become truly human, a flesh-and-bone body with a beating heart. Embodied romantic love, expressed through poetry, becomes a utopian microcosm for the human world. Billie asks Spike:

"How long do you think it will be before a human being writes a poem again?"

"It will be millions of years, and it will be a love-poem."

"How do you know that?"

"I know it because it will happen when someone finds that the stretch of the body-beloved is the landmass of the world." (110)

## NOTES

1. I use the term "biomedical-beauty complex" to signify the biotechnological progression of Sandra Lee Bartky's concept of the "fashion-beauty complex," which

she describes as a “vast system of corporations—some of which manufacture products, others services and still others information, images and ideologies—of emblematic public personages and of sets of techniques and procedures” (“Narcissism,” 39).

2. Hurst, “The Skin Textile,” 142.

3. See Winterson, “Science in Fiction,” 50–51.

4. For instance, in *The Stone Gods* Winterson refers self-consciously to the fantastical nature of the genre in order to undermine her own utilization of it: “The final frontier is just science fiction—don’t believe it” (106).

5. Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 60, 16. Subsequent page references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

6. Winterson, “Science in Fiction,” 50.

7. Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 31. For Foucault’s discussion of constant surveillance and internalization in the Panopticon, a circular designed prison that ensures constant visibility of the prisoners, see Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

8. Kellner, *Jean Baudrillard*, 203. See also Antakyalıoğlu, “Jeanette Winterson’s *The Stone Gods*: A Postmodern Warming,” 976.

9. Winterson, *Art Objects*, 178. For a discussion of the utopian and dystopian elements in *The Stone Gods*, see Jennings, “‘A Repeating World.’”

10. Atwood, “Dire Cartographies,” 66.

11. Winterson’s sardonic use of the science fiction genre in *The Stone Gods* has been criticized by Ursula Le Guin. See Le Guin, “Head Cases.”

12. Epstein and Straub, *Body Guards*, 2.

13. For a discussion of the gender ambiguity in *Written on the Body* see Hobbs, *Writing on the Body*.

14. See for example Lindenmeyer, “Postmodern Concepts of the Body.”

15. For instance, see Martin, “Body Narrative, Body Boundaries”; see also Rubinson, “Body Languages,” 218.

16. Martin, “Body Narrative, Body Boundaries,” 411.

17. Jennings, 137. See also Stabile, “Feminism and the Technological Fix.”

18. For further discussion about the employment of scientific discourses in *Written on the Body* see Rubinson, “Body Languages.”

19. Wiseman, “The Year-Zero Face.”

20. Atlas, “The Sandwich Generation,” 59. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, 207–17.

21. Atlas, “The Sandwich Generation,” 59.

22. Heyes and Jones, “Cosmetic Surgery in the Age of Gender,” 3.

23. Blum, *Flesh Wounds*, 45.

24. Winterson, “Science in Fiction,” 50.

25. For a discussion on the Dutch regulations regarding publically funded cosmetic surgery procedures, see Henri Wijsbek, “How to Regulate a Practice.”

26. Davis, *Dubious Equalities*, 62.

27. Pruzinsky, “Psychological Factors in Cosmetic Surgery,” 64. See also Fraser, “The Agent Within,” 33.

28. For a discussion of cosmetic surgery and the dynamics of the “psychological cure,” particularly as related to women’s embodied experience of shame, see chapter 6 in Dolezal, *The Body and Shame*.

29. In particular, Merleau-Ponty’s description of the lived body has overwhelmingly demonstrated that a dualistic understanding of the body subject as having a separation between mind and body as “inner” and “outer” realms is not a tenable description of subjectivity when considering aspects of embodied consciousness such as the body schema, the body image and motor intentionality. See *Phenomenology of Perception*, 67–206.

30. Hurst, *Surface Imaginations*.

31. See for example Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, and Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory*, 4–8. This modern concern with the body as a project and as an

expression of an individual's personal identity is set in contrast to pre-modern body practices where the body is ritualistically marked and decorated as an expression of collective cultural values.

32. In her monograph *Self-Transformations: Foucault, Ethics and Normalized Bodies*, Cressida Heyes explores diverse case studies of weight-loss dieting, cosmetic surgery, and sex reassignment to examine the idea that a real self lurks within and the outer body may not be an adequate visual manifestation of this inner "truth."

33. See Heyes, "Normalisation and the Psychic Life," 63.

34. Fraser, "The Agent Within," 33.

35. For instance, see Wijsbek, "The Pursuit of Beauty," 63–64. See also Coleman, "A Defense of Cosmetic Surgery."

36. It should be noted that there is extensive discussion in the bioethics literature about the treatment-enhancement distinction and the relationship between the ideal, the normal, and the pathological. For a discussion of medical necessity and the treatment-enhancement distinction, see Daniels, "Normal Functioning," 309. For a comprehensive critique of the notion of "normal" and an interrogation of the treatment-enhancement distinction itself, see Karpin and Mykitiuk, "Going Out on a Limb."

37. Hurst, "Negotiating Femininity," 447.

38. Ibid.

39. Winterson, "Science in Fiction," 50.

40. Ibid.

41. See Heyes, "Normalisation and the Psychic Life," 63.

42. Sarwer, "Cosmetic Surgery," 425. Emphasis added.

43. Quoted in de Beaufort et al., "Beauty and the Doctor," 14.

44. Bordo, *Twilight Zones*, 3.

45. Wijsbek, "The Pursuit of Beauty," 456.

46. Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 42.

47. In particular, see Winterson's autobiography, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?*.

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