

Degree Project

Bachelor's level

Mutable Mirrors: Aesthetic Readings of Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body*

Author: George Emory Juge
Supervisor: David Gray
Examiner: Billy Gray
Subject/main field of study: English Literature
Course code: EN 2028
Credits: 15
Date of examination: 22 May 2018

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I. Introduction

Following her critically acclaimed, award-winning debut novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, Jeanette Winterson has been hailed by several critics as a postmodern lesbian author (see for example Laura Doan, Antje Lindenmeyer, Anna Fåhraeus, and Nandi Weder). This work from 1985 was partially autobiographical and featured an explicitly lesbian protagonist growing up in a conservative, religious family and community in northern England in the 1970's. The author's "work has been celebrated as a breakthrough in lesbian feminist writing" (Morrison 169), and although explorations of gender and sexuality continue to be themes in her subsequent novels, these subsequent texts, according to some critics, fail to provide sufficient material for an explicitly lesbian reading. One such critic, Patricia Duncker, sees "Winterson's treatment of gender [in *Written on the Body*] . . . as a lost opportunity to present a more affirmative and liberatory figuration of same-sex desire" (Morrison 173). Laura Doan suggests "quite explicitly [that] Winterson has further work to do, both as a feminist and as a lesbian" (Morrison 174). Gabrielle Griffin is yet another Winterson critic who calls for "the affirmative expression of lesbian experience" (Morrison 178). Winterson herself explicitly resists being categorized as a lesbian writer simply because she is a writer who happens to be a lesbian (Winterson, *Art Objects* 107). *Written on the Body* (hereafter *WB*), published in 1992, features a protagonist and narrator who is never given a name or a gendered pronoun. This narrator has been called genderless by critics such as Morrison and Lindenmeyer, but is better understood, as Fåhraeus suggests, as having a gender "vascillating within the subject" (84), as their characterization is marked by references to both male and female literary figures, and touches upon tropes tied to both heterosexual cismen as well as lesbians and transpeople.

Here it will be helpful to define some key terms and the ways in which they will be employed in this thesis. For practical purposes, the narrator will alternatively be referred to as "N" (for narrator), as they are never given a name. The singular they is used for the narrator,

rather than using she/he as other critics of the novel have done, in order to avoid reifying gender binaries which preclude identities between or outside of the normative categories male and female, and because the singular they is the gender neutral third person pronoun most frequently used in English by non-binary transpeople. Cis as a term and prefix is in opposition to trans, or more specifically transgender. Transgender is an umbrella term essentially referring to people whose mental, physical, legal, or perceived gender is other than that which they were assigned at birth. If transgender is a norm-breaking identity or experience, then cis is the norm that it breaks. A cisperson, then, is one whose gender is in full alignment with the sex they were assigned at birth (Blank).

Written on the Body has been called a postmodern text by several critics (see, for example, Lindenmeyer, Burns, and Doan). One of the hallmarks of postmodern literature is its departure from literary conventions. Winterson certainly does draw on postmodern textual devices, including the narrator's self-awareness and explicit unreliability. Other postmodern literary devices include the rejection of a chronological plot. These two devices come together when the narrator wonders, "Have I got it wrong, this hesitant chronology? . . . I don't know" (Winterson, *WB* 17). Other literary conventions of the genre dictate that a narrator is omniscient and draws no attention to his own social position. At first glance, it may appear that the narrator in *WB* adheres to at least some literary traditions, as they are not given a gendered pronoun, and other social positions such as class or race can only be inferred. However, in contrast to traditionally unmarked, omniscient narrators, the story is told in first person, making the narrator synonymous with the protagonist, and thus disturbing the tradition of gendering a novel's characters. The conscious avoidance of a fixed gender in the narrator is the most salient postmodern device employed in the novel for the purposes of this analysis. The lack of physical gender markers in the narrator-protagonist has the potential to produce a number of effects on the reader. Firstly, it allows for people in normative social positions, particularly in this case

heterosexual cismen, to be drawn into the narrative and identify with the protagonist. Secondly, it allows for people in non-normative social positions, for example lesbians and trans- and intersex people, to identify with the protagonist, and gives them a rare opportunity to mirror themselves in a novel about the common human experiences of love and loss. Finally, the narration mirrors so-called real life in that it allows for a multiplicity of meaning and demonstrates that certain human experiences, such as love and loss, are universal and unbound by gender, although what these experiences mean will have important differences depending on the social positions of the reader.

The position of the reader and how it affects what is taken away from a text has been explored in reader response theory. Louise Rosenblatt was one of the first to introduce the idea of reader response theory in 1938, and has been prolific on the subject for many years. Rosenblatt advocates specifically for what she calls the Transactional Reader Response Theory, and names two ways to approach and read a text: reading with the goal of extracting concrete information from a text, called efferent reading, is placed on one end of the spectrum, while reading with the goal of experiencing an evocation of emotion, aesthetic reading, is placed on the other (“The Literary Transaction” 269). In “The Transactional Theory: Against Dualisms,” a later work, Rosenblatt encourages the recognition of “the shaping power of the environment” without losing sight of “the possibilities of choice . . . within the parameters of our complex culture, with its many subcultures . . . and the diversity of groupings any one individual represents or can join . . .” (385). Derek Attridge argues this point and refers more specifically to what he calls idioculture, that is “the internal, singular manifestation of the broader cultural field, registered as a complex of particular preferences, capabilities, memories, desires, physical habits, and emotional tendencies” of a given individual (683). This interplay of contextual positionings influence each reader’s response to a given text, producing a multiplicity of meaning in any given text which is almost infinite, or at least as numerous as those who read it.

In 2000, Cynthia Lewis criticized contemporary use of reader response theory and called for a shift in focus to criticizing texts in political and social terms. Noting that Rosenblatt's work has often been oversimplified and misinterpreted by teachers in the classroom setting (255), Lewis calls for the broadening of what aesthetic reading can mean and posits that the disruption of identification of a reader in a given social position with a character in one that is very different from the reader's own can heighten the reader's experience of both the text and of themselves (263). One of the crucial questions related to reader response theory, then, is from what position the reader approaches a text and which character or characters the reader identifies with. Lewis sets herself in opposition to what she interprets as Rosenblatt's suggestion "that it is possible to have an aesthetic response that is ideologically innocent, a position that many cultural and critical theorists would contest" (257). She notes that Rosenblatt's assumptions, particularly of interest here "the detachment of aesthetics from politics, culture, and social relations," "have been challenged . . . by work in critical literacy, feminist theory, critical race theory, poststructuralism, and cultural criticism" (259). In *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*, Jonathan Culler points out that people in certain social positions may not always be reading from those positions. In this case, Culler argues specifically that "women are led to identify with male characters," and must therefore learn to read as women (51). Women, then, carry with them the male gaze, and since an integral part of masculinity is the repudiation of femininity and the construction of women as "other," this results in women identifying against themselves (Culler 51), in much the same way as others in marginalized positions may do. This ties in to Lewis's argument that readings of the same text will depend on whether the reader is an "insider" or an "outsider" to a given experience represented in that text. She posits that certain texts can "[work] to position particular readers as outsiders. This position deepens the understanding of the characters [sic] lives as separate from the reader's own in important ways" (263).

With regard to aesthetic readings, it can be extrapolated from both Culler's and Lewis's hypotheses that not only women but other people in oppressed social positions are always carrying dual lenses – the reality which they themselves see, as well as the reality of the social norm. Few readers occupy privileged positions with regard to every social norm, and Attridge's previously mentioned concept of idioculture, the particular combination of cultural and social positions occupied by any individual at a particular time, means that readers encounter the author's idioculture mediated through the text (693). Potentially, then, almost all readers have at least two lenses through which to approach a text. These dual lenses are the primary target of analysis within feminist standpoint theory, which highlights the more complete view of reality held by those in oppressed positions, precisely because those oppressed within a given system are forced to see the reality of the oppressor, while the opposite does not apply (Haraway 584). If a given text can inspire or force identification with certain characters to be disrupted and thereby changed, as Lewis suggests (263), then it would follow that such a text creates the possibility for a multiplicity of readings for each reader.

Teachers and literary critics can profoundly affect how readers approach a text. If these literary leaders privilege certain readings, which are likely to be normative readings, they simultaneously disallow or discourage others, and those other readings are almost always the ones belonging to the most marginalized in a given classroom or readership. One example of this occurrence is elaborated upon in Melissa Schieble's "Reading between the Lines of Reader Response: Constructing 'the Other' through the Aesthetic Stance." In the classroom about which the article is written, students had read a story about a transgender protagonist and her cisgender sister. Follow-up questions were worded in such a way as to encourage an identification with the sister - and with heterosexual cispeople in general - rather than with the transgender protagonist (379-380). The desired result was that which might be expected, as readers tended to subsequently see the situation through the (cisgender) sister's eyes and

claimed that her ordeal as a loved one was more difficult than the protagonist's transition (381). Formulating LGBTQ people as “they” in opposition to the students’ own “community” and asking whether the students thought that the transgender main character is “a burden to” her cisgender sister (379) are clear examples of approaching a text from a cis gaze and presupposes that all of the readers are, or should be, heterosexual cisgender people themselves, a cornerstone of hetero- and cisnormativity. Ironically, Schieble herself misgenders the main character in the novel (376), and this hallmark of cisnormativity is not uncommon, even for authors aware of, or focusing on, transgender perspectives. In the same vein, *Written on the Body* has previously been analyzed by Jennifer A. Smith from a transgender perspective, describing the narrator as “one that displays characteristics of both genders without stably aligning with one or the other” (415-16). However, although she stresses that the narrator moves fluidly between male and female positions, Smith uses he/she pronouns to refer to the narrator throughout the article and focuses on proving that the narrator *is* a transmasculine character, rather than exploring the multiplicity of identities inherent in the narrator. Neither does she allow for the idea that the narrator may be read as transfeminine, a possibility explored in this thesis. While she does tie the reading of the text to its potential to “[enable] the reader to identify *as* the narrator, experiencing the narrator’s story of love, passion, loss and despair as if it were his/her own” (417, italics in original), she fails to explore the empowering effect the narrator’s genders and sexualities can have for sexual minorities and transpeople reading the text from an aesthetic stance, one of the primary aims of this thesis.

In “The Queer Art of Survival,” Lana Lin and H. Lan Thao Lam quote Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in order to define “queer survival [as being] made up of an ‘irreducible multilayeredness and multiphasedness’” (345). As Jacqueline Rose writes, “no reader can exhaust the meaning of . . . a text, because anyone reading cannot but select and forget – to read is always mentally to drop bits and pieces of the writing as you go – [ensuring] that it [the text]

will continuously be reinvented” (16). Rose goes on to explain that polysemy (multiplicity of potential meaning) is crucial to the shelf-life of a piece of literature (*ibid*). This thesis argues that the opportunity for mirroring made possible by nuanced, multifaceted readings of literary works can contribute in an important way not only to the survival of texts but also to the well-being of people in marginalized positions. The multiplicity of meanings present in *Written on the Body*'s narrator and other characters allows for those with marginalized identities and experiences to find themselves in a love story. Moreover, the story is written in such a way that it also invites, sometimes even forces, readers in the mainstream to imagine themselves as people with identities normally constructed as “other”, something that few texts allow for, much less demand. This thesis, then, aims to explore the revolutionary potential of a multiplicity of reader responses made possible by the postmodern ambiguity of the narrator in Winterson's *Written on the Body*.

II. Theory: Postmodernism, Reader-response, and Feminist Standpoint Theories

“Why is the measure of love loss?” Thus begins Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body* (9). Immediately, the reader is drawn into a romance, a love story. The literary conventions of the Western romance novel create certain expectations in the reader, most of which lie within the boundaries of patriarchy. Patriarchy depends on gender binaries, that is, the notion that there are two and only two sexes, and on cisnormativity, the idea that social, mental, and legal gender are both synchronous with each other and inextricably bound to the sexed body (Russo). For the romance novel, this manifests itself in conventions and the expectations created by them which uphold this sex and gender binary. Within heterosexual and cisgender norms – that is, the norms which assume everyone to have one stable gender identity which aligns with the sex assigned them at birth, and to have an attraction, emotional and sexual, to persons of the so-called opposite sex – romance novels assume a male protagonist lover and a female love object, or, in some cases, such as the works of Austen and the Brontës in the 19th

century and an increasing number of female protagonists in the 20th century, a female protagonist and a male love object. Gendered power dynamics play an integral role in how men and women are portrayed in romance novels. Often, the fate of the male protagonist is not inextricably tied to romantic love and marriage, as it is for the female. Women, whether love object or protagonist, tend to be portrayed as giving up any other lifestyle in favor of marriage, which subsumes them into the service which running a household and family entails.

Often, a reader's expectations when encountering a text are similar to those which are at play in other aspects of daily life. These expectations are the expression of norms, whose greatest power lies in their invisibility. Members of modern Western society carry with them norms surrounding not only sex and gender, but also regarding any number of aspects of individuals' lives and identities. Because norms' agency lies in their invisibility, it is oftentimes not until those expectations are disrupted or frustrated that they come to light, offering an opportunity to challenge them and to create space for other possibilities.

Norms do not only act on the psyches of those who adhere to them, whether consciously or unconsciously. They are present, arguably, for anyone in a given social context. This creates a dual, or multi-faceted, consciousness in those who exist outside these norms. Culler's previously mentioned tendency for marginalized people to identify against themselves when faced with a text may in turn lead to a sense of invisibility and isolation (51). Arguably, an important part of maintaining a cohesive identity as a marginalized person is the possibility of mirroring oneself in others, whether it be real people or fictional characters. Because of the relative lack of representation, both in mainstream culture generally and in literature in particular, of marginalized people compared with those who fall more clearly within mainstream norms, the need to find others like oneself is likely heightened. Marginalized people whose families of origin do not necessarily belong to the same marginalized group, such as LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual) people, are

perhaps those in greatest need of mirroring. Oftentimes the urgent need to mirror oneself in others leads marginalized people to develop an acute awareness of subtle clues allowing for alternative interpretations of material presented to them. Small clues, references to subcultures, and the use of sociolects (a kind of dialect employed by people in a given social group) provide marginalized people with a sense of community in a normative culture in which they are often ignored if not actively attacked. These clues are often lost on those within the mainstream. This discrepancy in what is perceived by those within and outside of cultural norms results in a kind of blindness for those within the norm and a double or multiple vision for those outside.

Within feminist standpoint theory, the multiple vision afforded to people in marginalized positions has been described as the “view from below.” This view allows for those with less social and political power to have a clearer, more complete view of social realities than their mainstream counterparts who benefit from the privilege inherent in any number of oppressive power systems (Haraway 584). Standpoint theory differs, then, from other branches of feminism in that it explicitly acknowledges and privileges this “view from below” held by people in oppressed positions. Standpoint theory becomes highly relevant when exploring the dual or multiple lenses imposed by norms on those who do not adhere to them. The many opportunities for mirroring created by the way in which the narrator in *WB* is written gives rise to politically and socially relevant standpoints for marginalized members of LGBTQIA communities.

Postmodernism and feminist standpoint theory may appear to be at odds with one another, given that postmodernism maintains that nothing, not even identity or experience, exists prior to or outside of discourse. In what may appear to be a contradiction to this claim, feminist standpoints require concrete, shared experiences that are stable, at least temporarily. Indeed, “postmodern critique of standpoint theory has been . . . strong and fairly consistent” (Hirschmarm 74). This critique has mostly been against the contention of stable, universal

identity categories necessary to achieve a standpoint (*ibid.*). However, Nancy Hirschmarm has theorized that the two can coexist in what she calls a “materialist moment” which “posits experience as having some prediscursive immediacy while simultaneously acknowledging the impossibility of ever capturing experience outside of discourse” (84). This thesis contends that *WBs* narrator is a concrete example of postmodern narratives creating the opportunity for feminist standpoints to be achieved through queer aesthetic readings.

III. Lesbian, intersex, and transgender readings and their normative counterparts

Written on the Body cannot be firmly placed as a lesbian text, despite the fact that “the majority of articles . . . identify the narrator as a lesbian” (Smith 413), as the polysemy present in the text allows for a great many interpretations, among which a lesbian reading is only one. Many critics call the novel’s narrator ungendered (Smith 414), but this is a misleading description. This thesis argues that the plethora of gender markers is of the utmost importance to the reader-response evoked. Indeed, as Fåhraeus observes, “[i]t is somewhat ironic that the narrator is so frequently called ‘genderless’ or ‘gender-neutral’ when it is the plurality of gender markers that makes determining the sex impossible” (88). If Winterson had wanted to create a genderless character, she could have done so by omitting any gender markers. Instead, the narrator compares themselves to a number of gendered literary figures and uses gendered tropes of romance, which build upon, and simultaneously subvert by their combination, gender norms and literary conventions of the romance novel. While the manner in which the narrator is written allows for some critics to “[identity] him as male and the relationship at the heart of the novel as heterosexual” (Smith 413), and, as Duncker notes, even “‘gives the (male) heterosexual reader plenty of room to feel smug’” (qtd. in Morrison 173), it also provides and retains an openness of interpretation littered with clues which engage marginalized people – particularly queer or non-heterosexual, as well as trans- and intersex people – on a personal level.

The reader learns early on that the narrator is forlorn at the loss of a great love. On the second page, they liken themselves to the eponymous main character, a little girl, in *Alice in Wonderland*, conjuring up an image of chaos and absurdity: “the rules keep changing” (Winterson, *WB* 10). This reference to Alice, a young female heroine lost in a magical realm littered with fantastical creatures, sets the tone for a novel abounding with characters with many potential queer and otherwise subversive readings. *WB*’s first few pages include a number of references to literary figures and norms surrounding romantic love, which continue to appear steadily throughout the novel. These references and clichés are often heterosexual in nature, for instance when the narrator reflects on the many truisms used about marriage, such as “my grandma and granddad did it” (Winterson, *WB* 10), but by offering a multiplicity of gendered positions, the narrator resists immediately solidifying their own gender or that of the beloved who, thus far, has only been referred to as “you.” They ask, “Still waiting for Mr. Right? Miss Right? and maybe all the little Rights?” (*ibid*), reproducing the idea of the nuclear family but refusing to position themselves within a static gender binary. This refusal allows for mirroring by the marginalized reader looking for clues to hold on to the likely unconscious hope of finding themselves within the pages of a romance novel.

The first image of the beloved, still unnamed, falls within heteronormative expectations, naming her nipples and her long, red hair. There is some mention of a husband, George, but it is unclear whether it is the beloved speaking of her own husband or someone else doing so. Soon the narrator recalls their next action: “I didn’t think, I waded in and kissed you . . . you said, ‘There’s nobody here but us.’ I looked up and the banks were empty” (Winterson, *WB* 11). This short passage is one of the first concrete scenes which allows for at least two interpretations, one normative and the other more subversive. The fact that the narrator points out that they “didn’t think” but acted impulsively, combined with the beloved’s following comment that they were alone, indicates the need for secrecy. Within hetero-cis norms, one

might assume that the protagonist lover is a heterosexual male kissing a married woman. The secrecy then might be due to a need to conceal infidelity. However, someone falling outside these norms might easily interpret the need for secrecy as a product of a same-sex encounter, which might be frowned upon if seen by others. These two interpretations certainly are not mutually exclusive. However, it is important here to note that the characters have still not been given definite, stable gender identities, and it has not been ascertained that the beloved is married. The beloved could be male – all humans have nipples and can grow their hair long – despite gender markers which, particularly to the normative gaze, indicate femininity and femaleness. Either or both characters could be male, female, intersex, cis or trans, creating a wide range of possibilities for both normative and queer readings of the couple.

The novel abounds in gendered clues that speak to many readers in different ways, depending on social position. The way in which the narrator describes their repeated affairs with married women serves as an extension of the duality of meaning in the opening scene in which N kisses the beloved on the shore. While it is explicitly clear that N has affairs over and over with married women, these women always seem to be defending their husbands and their marriages in a specific way, suggesting that N is different from their husbands, possibly because they are intersex, a woman, or a transman. One lover says, “I do love [my husband]. He’s not like other men. I couldn’t have married him if he was, we’ve got a lot in common. We talk” (Winterson, *WB* 14). The woman continues her musings, suggesting that N has awakened in her some sort of personal identity of which she was hitherto unaware, saying, “If I hadn’t met you, I suppose I *would* be looking for something” (*ibid*, italics in original). This comment bolsters a queer reading of the narrator by speaking to socially taboo desires.

It is certainly not difficult to read the narrator of *Written on the Body* as transgender. Indeed, Jennifer A. Smith has argued convincingly for this reading (415-17). However, this thesis argues that the revolutionary potential of the narrator lies in the many gender markers

which conflict with each other within a heterocisnormative paradigm, that is to say, they combine to disrupt the assumption that people are heterosexual and cisgender until proven otherwise. The protagonist's multitudinous genders act to dissolve binary dichotomies built up around the idea of male and female being separate, opposite categories outside of which one cannot live. Since established analyses of the text which position it as a thinly-veiled lesbian narrative (Smith 417) never mention the possibility of the narrator being transgender, one may only deduce that these analyses assume a cisgender narrator who was assigned female at birth. Smith does not question the assumption of the narrator being assigned female at birth, but this thesis aims to explore the possibility of a broader range of reader-responses, including those assigned male at birth. There have not to date been any analyses opening up the possibility of the narrator, or any other characters in the novel, being transfeminine. Therefore the following is an exploration of that possibility and its potential socio-political ramifications.

As Harris has previously observed, the gender markers referring to the narrator move increasingly from the masculine to the feminine end of the gender spectrum as the novel goes on (qtd. in Smith 431). Clues as to the narrator's gender, however, are far from exclusively masculine even in the beginning of the novel. Again, the first gendered reference the narrator makes is in comparing themselves to *Alice in Wonderland*. The masculine tropes associated with the narrator arise especially in relation to the narrator's sexual encounters with women married to presumably cisgender men. While the situations described in the narrator's recounting of adulterous affairs certainly leave themselves open for cisgender heterosexual men to read themselves in the protagonist, there are numerous textual details which would easily be picked up by women coming from a lesbian culture, as has been cited in previous research. Here however, it is easy to fall into the trap of the cis-gaze. The hitherto unexplored possibility of a concurrent transgender and lesbian identity potential can certainly be found for those for whom this reading is of interest, and will be further explored in the following section.

IV. Parallel normative and queer readings and their disruption by bisexuality

As outlined previously, the heterosexual cismale reader experiences no barrier to identification with the narrator of *Written on the Body* – up to a certain point in the novel. People with queer identities, particularly transpeople and lesbian ciswomen, are simultaneously allowed to easily pick up on queer subtexts from the very start of the story. It should be noted that the perspectives explored here do not necessitate a fixed, essentialist identity for any given reader. Rather, they are meant to reflect various aesthetic readings which need not exclude one another.

Not only does the novel's narrator refer to themselves and their beloved with a mishmash of gendered tropes and literary figures, N also recalls a number of situations with past lovers which hint at queer identities, but without precluding heterocisnormative identification. N once had a lover who was an anarchafeminist (Winterson, *WB* 21) and several clues imply that N is aware of environmental issues, and that they take a subversive stance towards them. The narrator describes a pair of shorts they have had for a long time on which is written "RECYCLE" and makes reference to factory farming (Winterson, *WB* 12-13). In light of ecofeminism, these clues point to someone with a feminist if not lesbian background. Ecofeminism aims to "examine the effect of gender categories in order to demonstrate the ways in which social norms exert unjust dominance over women and nature" (Miles). Ciswomen, perhaps especially lesbians, and intersex and transpeople are arguably, given their oppressed position within patriarchy, more likely than cismen to be feminists. Keeping in mind the link between feminism and the exploitation of nature, the narrator's expressed interest in environmental issues lend further support to the hypothesis that N and their lovers are queer in some way, but does not preclude normative aesthetic readings.

Given that ecofeminism links the oppression of women by patriarchy to the destructive, colonizing attitude towards nature, including animals other than humans, with the

same patriarchal structures (Miles), there is arguably a stronger tendency toward vegetarianism among feminists than in the general population. The narrator's reference to factory farming provides fodder for the conclusion that they are vegetarian, but without making this explicit, which might disrupt a normative (in this case, meat-eating) interpretation. Much later in the novel, the reader learns that N is indeed a vegetarian (Winterson, *WB* 185). This is in keeping with a broader trend in the novel to confirm the hypothesis of N's norm-breaking, likely queer identity more and more as the novel develops.

Another instance of possible parallel readings available to queer or otherwise norm-breaking on the one hand and normative readers on the others is a scene in which N assists their previous anarchafeminist girlfriend in blowing up a urinal as a symbolic gesture of destroying patriarchy (Winterson, *WB* 22). This scene is fraught with gendered meaning. Bathrooms themselves are a site of dispute and distress for many transpeople. In recent years there has been much debate as to which bathrooms transpeople should be allowed to use, and many transpeople experience severe anxiety in using public bathrooms for fear of harassment and violence. In this scene, N goes into a urinal with a stocking over their head and face (*ibid*). This act is open to at least two interpretations, once again related to secrecy, much as the opening scene in which N kisses their beloved. The narrator may simply be using the stocking to hide their face, since they are threatening the men using the urinal with a pistol, a criminal act with which they are unlikely to be willing to be identified, not to mention a reenactment of the stereotypical bank robbery associated with a male culprit. Alternatively, N may be trying to hide a female and/or transgender or intersex identity in order to keep themselves safe in a men's bathroom. N also notes that "men's bathrooms are fairly liberal places" (*ibid.*). This comment suggests a familiarity with men's bathrooms, which may support a cismale interpretation of the narrator's identity. However, the fact that N comments specifically on men's bathrooms, as opposed to bathrooms in general, suggests that they may

also have contrasting experience with women's bathrooms, which provides both transmasculine, transfeminine, and intersex people with a very strong clue indeed, suggesting a narrator who shares their particular experiences.

The narrator continues their account of Inge the anarchafeminist, and mentions temporarily staying in a women's house (Winterson, *WB* 23). Many women's houses are separatist and exclude men (and, especially in the past, trans- and intersex people of all genders), which may lead those familiar with these kinds of spaces to continue identifying the narrator as a ciswoman (and thus non-heterosexual given their many affairs with women). However, cismen or others who are not familiar with these spaces may not be aware of the separatism common in them, and would not then be disturbed in their continuing identification with the narrator. The narrator also distances themselves from the ideology of the women's house, saying "I don't feel a great deal about the Women's Institute either way . . . I don't really care" (Winterson, *WB* 23-24). This comment may further serve to solidify a normative cismale interpretation of the narrator's identity without precluding queer interpretations.

Sex is another site of parallel interpretations throughout *Written on the Body*. The narrator often refers to their sex life with past and present lovers and the potential gendered identities implicit in these stories and reflections are multiple. N rarely describes their own physical body. In fact, one of the few times they refer to their body, they say that they prefer to keep it "rolled up" (Winterson, *WB* 89), a comment that again may serve as a clue to trans- and intersex people who often need or want to hide certain parts of their sexed bodies in order to keep themselves safe and/or express their gender(s). In another rare reference to their body, N recounts an interaction with Louise, the beloved, in which she pinches their nipple under their shirt. The narrator tells Louise she is hurting them (Winterson, *WB* 162). While everyone has nipples and could potentially be hurt by someone pinching them, this may also serve as

another subtle clue speaking to trans and intersex readers. Both transmasculine and transfeminine people may experience extra sensitivity to sensation and pain in their nipples, either due to scarring after surgery or to the introduction of estrogen, causing the growth of the breasts in adulthood. This exceptional reference to N's body may be a significant detail indicating a bond of common experience with people who fall outside gender norms and who have experienced this outsider role corporeally.

N expresses the decided opinion that sex is important in romantic relationships (Winterson, *WB* 20, 28) despite others' opinions (Winterson, *WB* 20, 28, 71). N seems always to be in an active role sexually, and is always focused on the female beloved's body and her pleasure. No mention is ever made of anyone performing a sexual act on N, which is in keeping with the sexual practices of so-called "stone butches," that is, masculine lesbians who don't allow their partners to touch them sexually, and who often have sex with their clothes on. Leslie Feinburg's *Stone Butch Blues*, for example, describes a number of "stone butch" characters, one of whom is reputed to wear "a raincoat in the shower" (8). This ties in again with the idea of N's body being "rolled up" and kept out of sight. N makes many references to oral sex (Winterson, *WB* 15, 45, 73, 136, 137) in ways that are in keeping with the idea of their body being closed and invulnerable. At one point, N notes that Louise, the beloved whom N has lost, said that she wanted to eat N, but it would seem that Louise did not get her wish fulfilled (Winterson, *WB* 179). This could be interpreted as a reference to oral sex and again would support the idea that N has a "stone" role in their intimate relationship in that Louise is frustrated in her wish to pleasure N sexually, again hearkening back to Feinburg's classic in which the protagonist (a stone butch) apologizes to a lover for never having let her touch him/her (9). The emphasis on oral sex and the fact that N compares their sex life favorably with that of their lovers' husbands hints at lesbianism. There is never any indication of penile-vaginal penetration on the part of N and their lovers, and while cunnilingus is

certainly not limited to lesbians, in combination with the idea that the heterosexual practices of their lovers' husbands falls short of what N does for them sexually, these references certainly support a lesbian interpretation. The idea common among lesbians that lesbian sex is superior to heterosexual sex is also supported when N recounts an angry exchange with a former lover in which they berate her for not daring to "ask him [the lover's husband] to put his head between [her] legs" (Winterson, *WB* 45).

In several passages, N describes Louise's body in colonial terms. This has been interpreted as reinforcing patriarchal norms (Fåhraeus 91) in that it creates a kind of "textual masculinity" which objectifies Louise's female body and reifies an unspecified and thereby potentially male lover's possession of her. Many times, however, N subverts this rhetoric in saying things like "I never dreamed of possessing you but I wanted you to possess me" (Winterson, *WB* 52). Readers familiar with Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* may be reminded of a passage in which the lesbian protagonist says that she does not want to be intimate with men because they "want to be the destroyer and never be destroyed" (217), again reinforcing a lesbian or queer interpretation of the narrator and their intimate relationships. Both of these statements challenge the patriarchal oppression of women and the feminine associated with colonial possession.

Both cisnormative readings explored thus far, that of N as heterosexual cisman and that of N as lesbian ciswoman, are rather suddenly disrupted midway through the novel by the unexpected introduction of male lovers in N's past. After having constructed the narrative up until this point in such a way as to allow for both of these cisnormative readings, the sudden introduction of bisexuality (or perhaps pansexuality if one is to avoid cementing the gender binary by assuming that there are only two sexes or genders) essentially voids both of these interpretations. Both hetero- and homosexuality as stable identities are troubled by the presence of transgender identities in that hetero- and homosexuality are both based on the idea

that there are stable gender identities. In “Queering Queer Theory, or Why Bisexuality Matters,” Laura Erickson-Schroth and Jennifer Mitchell argue that queer theory is not queer enough, in that it purports to overthrow heterosexism by privileging homosexuality, all the while maintaining the idea that gender and sexual orientation are stable identities (298). No matter how the narrator’s sex or gender is interpreted, the fact that they have had both male and female lovers disrupts both heteronormativity and what Erickson-Schroth and Mitchell identify as queer theory’s reification of gender binaries (306).

While the introduction of past male lovers certainly hinders both hetero- and homosexual interpretations of the narrator, the ways in which these boyfriends are described does not preclude a queer identity for either N or their past lovers. Indeed, the men from N’s past are quirky characters whose sexuality and sexual orientation resist a heteronormative interpretation. One past boyfriend, Crazy Frank, has both nipples pierced which N notes should have made for a very “butch” look, but which, due to the chain between the piercings, looked more like a “Chanel handbag” (Winterson, *WB* 93). The choice of “butch” rather than “masculine” or “macho” once again supports a queer reading (as masculine lesbians are often referred to as butches), as does the reference to high fashion of which heterosexual cismen are generally assumed to be unaware. This character also has a view of intimate relationships which breaks established cultural norms of monogamy. He believed in “sex and friendship” rather than falling in love, and was honest and open about wanting “a hole in every port. He wasn’t fussy about the precise location” (Winterson, *WB* 93). Crazy Frank’s views of intimacy, sex, and romance are norm-breaking and the ambiguous remark about not caring about the location of the hole invites, but does not mandate, a sexual reference, perhaps indicating bi- or pansexuality. Another of N’s former male lovers had a habit of shaving all his body hair and asked N to do the same (Winterson, *WB* 143). Eventually this lover left N for a(nother?) man (*ibid.*), precluding heterosexuality and giving yet another piece of

evidence for the queerness of the narrator's love life and the narrator themselves. These accounts also serve as a means to once again distance the text from the conventions of romance fiction.

The narrator's stories about past male lovers is not the only shift in the story which troubles cisnormative, masculine readings of their identity and their sexual orientation (be they heterosexual male or butch lesbian). As the story continues, N refers more and more often to the sameness shared by themselves and Louise, which suggests a shift, at least rhetorically, from the masculine to the feminine. In the beginning of the novel, N refers to their female lovers in a way that could be seen as objectifying and thus typically masculine, for example when they explain that the reason they stayed with Inge as long as they did was because of her breasts (Winterson, *WB* 24). However, when Louise and N make love for the first time, Louise becomes upset because she has heard N tell so many stories about past lovers whom N has left and is afraid the same thing will happen to her (Winterson, *WB* 53). This seems to change the way N relates to Louise in contrast to the ways in which they have related to their past lovers (all of N's former lovers that have been named in the novel have been female up until this point when Louise and N have sex for the first time). N makes the difficult realization that they have hurt Louise by drawing her into a role of lover with which the narrator has had a less than respectful relationship: "as a friend I had been amusing; as a lover I was lethal" (*ibid.*). Starting with this realization, N seems to be jolted from their jaded (arguably masculine-coded) chase after the high of "the first six months" of romantic relationships to which they are "addicted" (Winterson, *WB* 76), and finds themselves devoted to Louise in a way they have not previously experienced. Shortly after N and Louise become lovers, N is informed by Louise's husband that Louise has terminal cancer. Because of the imminent threat of loss of the beloved due to her cancer diagnosis, N's devotion to Louise grows even deeper. The narrator begins to reflect on the fact that they and Louise have much

in common, saying that they “used to think the better part of attraction was difference, but there is so much about us that is the same” (Winterson, *WB* 129). N says, “Your body is twice. Once you once me. Can I be sure which is which?” (Winterson, *WB* 99). This shift from a masculine distancing of themselves from their female lovers to an identification of sameness with Louise might be read by a transfeminine person as a kind of emotional transition from masculinity to femininity, bolstered by the previous references to N’s body which support a transgender interpretation. This particular reading of the narrator as transfeminine has not previously been explored.

V. Truth(s)

Truth and honesty are themes that recur throughout *Written on the Body*. The narrator seems constantly to be looking for the truth in regard to intimate, particularly romantic, interpersonal relationships. N does, in the end, reach certain conclusions about the nature of relationships and how best to care for and preserve them, such as thinking of the beloved “in the little things” (Winterson, *WB* 186). The idea of honesty as a key ingredient in good relationships is also extended to platonic relationships including friends, who “have. . . less to pretend about” than lovers do (Winterson, *WB* 28), and neighbors, who fail to “say something real to one another” rather than proffering “rolled up good mornings” (Winterson, *WB* 43). The theme of honesty, particularly surrounding intimate relationships, speaks once again to the queer, trans, or intersex reader who is likely to have emotionally loaded experiences regarding telling the truth about their sexual orientation, intersex status, and/or gender identity.

Looking at the text through a reader-response lens, one can extend this concept of truth to N’s own interpersonal relationships and those they observe to the reader’s personal truth, which depends on their idioculture and how it interplays with what is written. While N does offer some definitive answers as to what makes for a healthy, successful romantic

relationship, the gendered meanings and sociopolitical consequences of those relationships remain open to the reader's interpretation. Which truth is deduced depends on the identity and experiences of the reader. As previously explored, those whose identities primarily build on normative personal experience, particularly heterosexual cispeople, will tend to read a normative narrative, at least until that reading is disrupted by the introduction of N's bi/pansexuality midway through the novel. Those with norm-breaking identities in regards to sexual orientation and gender are given the precious opportunity to read their own experiences in the novel, thereby achieving a socially and politically important standpoint, and these opportunities become more and more salient as the novel goes on.

N's attitude towards the nature of truthful relationships changes over the course of the novel. After being left over and over again for cismen by their female lovers, the narrator is suddenly presented with Louise, who has decided to leave her husband to be with N. This becomes a turning point as N struggles to find a gendered balance, having been robbed of their masks, many of them masculine romantic tropes. Towards the end of the novel, N literally meets a Ms. Right, namely Gail Right, with whom N works at a restaurant, and who comes on strongly to the narrator. Gail has also been interpreted to be a teller of truth (Smith 420), based both on her changing opinion of N's choices in regards to their relationship with Louise and on her last name. N firmly resists Gail's advances but listens to her opinion and her advice on how they should proceed with Louise, affirming her role as a bearer of the truth. At first, Gail affirms N's choice to leave Louise after her husband, a doctor specializing in cancer research, gives N an ultimatum: if they disappear from Louise's life, her husband will ensure that she survives her cancer. The narrator believes that leaving Louise is an act of saving her life, and N seems to be relieved by Gail Right's affirmation when she says that they "did the right thing" (Winterson, *WB* 144). However, later, in a state of extreme drunkenness, Gail changes her mind and tells N that they have made a mistake, calling into

question N's decision to leave "the woman [they] love . . . [e]specially. . .when you think it's for her own good" (Winterson, *WB* 160). This prompts N to leave the ramshackle apartment they have been staying in since leaving Louise in order to search for and reconcile with her (Winterson, *WB* 161). In their search, N learns that Louise has refused to stay with her husband (Winterson, *WB* 172). This news makes N happy and they imagine Louise as finally being free, which might be seen as another turning point in the way N looks at her. N has left Louise without consulting her in the belief that they are saving her life by giving her up to her husband (Winterson, *WB* 102). However, in doing so, N has enacted the trope of a male hero rescuing the damsel in distress, ironically robbing Louise of her agency. This has significance from a feminist point of view, as N has shifted from taking on a hero role typical of masculine romantic tropes to realizing in their search that Louise is an individual with free will who refuses to be dictated to in her choice of partner or how she will live and die.

After a long, failed search for the beloved, N returns home to find Gail in their apartment. N tells her that they couldn't find Louise and laments that they were therefore unable to "tell her the truth" (Winterson, *WB* 190). Precisely what that truth is remains unknown to the reader, which lends itself well to the novel's overall resistance to essentialism. A moment later, Louise appears to N. It is unclear to both narrator and reader whether she is a hallucination or real. N doubts her corporeality but finds that "she's warm," indicating that she is really present and not just a vision (*ibid.*). The narrator then expresses an uncertainty as to whether "this is a happy ending," but embarks on a new journey with Louise which contains both her agency and free will, and an openness of possibility as well as interpretation, as the narrator and their beloved find themselves "let loose in open fields" (*ibid.*).

VI. Conclusion

Written on the Body is a novel which invites and inspires a multitude of readings, many of which have revolutionary potential, politically and personally. Employing postmodern breaks with traditional literary convention, Winterson creates a first person narrator who cleverly escapes definitive gendering. This offers readers who belong to sexual minorities the rare opportunity to mirror themselves in the main character of a romance novel. One might argue that allowing for this mirroring of the experiences of oppressed people may give rise to a kind of awakening in keeping with feminist standpoint theory. The realization of shared experiences effected by oppressive power structures forms the basis for attaining a critical standpoint from which one can see truth more clearly than can those who benefit from the same power structures. In light of Hirschmarm's theory of the "materialist moment," *Written on the Body* is perhaps a literary example of how postmodernism and standpoint theory can meet in fleeting concrete experiences. Possible identities shift within the narrator and to a lesser extent within other characters, but subtle clues more easily picked up by queer and transpeople provide the basis on which to identify with shared experiences which are often erased by mainstream culture.

Reader-response theory, specifically the practice of aesthetic reading, provides a lens through which to explore the ways in which these various group members can find themselves within the narrative, where the reader's own idioculture meets a text which is very open to interpretation. This openness creates the potential for mirroring, which can lead to a self-awareness and a standpoint that in turn can give rise to political resistance and solidarity within and between oppressed social groups, particularly members of LGBTIA communities. The fact that the narrator is never definitively gendered creates the potential for not only marginalized readers but also readers in normative positions to identify with and as the main character. Because heterosexuality is precluded half-way through the narrative, this identification is necessarily interrupted, and normative readers are forced, at least

momentarily, to identify with someone whose (oppressed) experiences they may not share. Through this innovative construction of the narrator, Winterson gives rise to politically important readings among a wide range of heterocisnormative as well as queer, intersex, and/or transgender readers.

The narrator's ongoing search for truth is not insignificant. While the narrator does not explicitly state that there are a multiplicity of truths, the ambiguous nature of their identity and the ways in which their experiences are described inevitably invite a number of truths to resonate with readers with very different identities and experiences. In the end, N seems to want nothing more than to see Louise again and tell her "the truth" (Winterson, *WB* 190). This suggests the conventional idea that "the truth" is singular and knowable, but the fact that it is not elaborated maintains the openness present throughout the novel and allows each reader to fill in the blank with their own simultaneously individual and contextually situated truth.

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