Costumes, monsters, maps, and carnivals: postmodern feminist theory and Jeanette Winterson's novels

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Postmodern feminist theory and Jeanette Winterson’s novels

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an analysis of three of Jeanette Winterson's novels: The Passion, Sexing the Cherry, and Written on the Body. Chapter one examines the similarities between The Passion and Nightwood by Djuna Barnes. Although fifty years separate Barnes and Winterson, both of their texts describe lesbian relationships that begin in carnivalesque settings and depict characters who crossdress. In chapter two, the characters from Sexing the Cherry: seventeenth-century Dog Woman, contemporary Dog Woman, and Jordan are analyzed as penumbra characters. This term incorporates some of the characteristics of Donna Haraway's cyborg feminism with elements of postmodern gender theory. Chapter three discusses Written on the Body, a text filled with colonial references, using Elizabeth Grosz's corporeal feminist theory. The concluding chapter includes some additional notes on the chapters and examines the potent links between postmodern feminist theory and transgender theory.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This thesis will examine the ways in which bodies and sexualities are explained and represented in three novels by Jeanette Winterson, a contemporary British lesbian author. Her seven novels, many written in a magical realist style, have won her prizes and public acclaim in Britain, but few scholarly articles have been written about them. A synopsis of Winterson’s novels shows that they are threaded together with postmodern ideas about identity and culture, and her characters often come from the edges of mainstream society.

Winterson’s first novel, Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit (published in Britain in 1985), won the Whitbread First Novel Award and was adapted for a British Broadcasting Corporation movie. Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit follows Jeanette, a young lesbian girl living in an Evangelical family and attempting to reconcile her desire and her religion. Winterson’s second novel, Boating for Beginners (1985), is a scathing feminist revision of the Biblical story of Noah and the ark—set in a city that resembles present-day Hollywood. The Passion (1987), Winterson’s third novel, won the John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize and is currently being made into a screenplay (Rich 105-6). In The Passion the narrative fragments into the intertwined stories of Villanelle, a Venetian cross-dressing bisexual card dealer, and Henri, the starving cook responsible for keeping a chicken ready for Napoleon to eat at a moment’s notice. In Sexing the Cherry (1989), Winterson’s fourth novel, set in seventeenth-century London, Dog Woman breeds and fights dogs and kills Puritans while her son Jordan dreams of exploring the world. In 1990, after the United States publication of Sexing the Cherry, Winterson was awarded the E.M. Forster Award by the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Written on the Body (1992), Winterson’s fifth novel, features a genderless narrator telling the story of his/her relationship with Louise, a woman married to a cancer researcher. In the United States, Written on the Body appeared on the New York Times Book Review list of hardcover bestsellers in 1993. In Winterson’s sixth novel, Art and Lies: A Piece for Three
Voices and a Bawd (1994), three characters board the same high-speed train on the same day and describe their lives: Handel, an ex-priest who is now a surgeon; Picasso, a young female painter who has been thrown out of her parents' house; and Sappho, the Greek lesbian poet. Gut Symmetries (1997), Winterson’s seventh and latest novel, sets up a love triangle between two physicists and a poet: Alice, Jove, and Stella. Alice and Jove meet while working in a physics lab and have an affair until Alice falls in love with Jove’s wife, Stella.

Many of Winterson’s characters cross-dress and have bodies that are not easily gendered or contained. This thesis will examine The Passion, Sexing the Cherry, and Written on the Body, novels in which characters critique binaries traditionally associated with the human body: mind/body, male/female, gay/straight, inside/outside, and essential (biological)/cultural (social). Winterson’s fiction refigures the traditionally binary discussion about bodies, gender, and sexual orientation in ways similar to the contemporary gender theorists Donna Haraway and Elizabeth Grosz. This thesis contends that Winterson’s work is as important and useful as the work of these theorists for political feminist discussions of gender and the body.

Chapter one examines the similarities and differences between The Passion (1987) by Winterson and Nightwood (originally pub. 1936) by Djuna Barnes. Both novels contain main characters who cross-dress and female couples who meet in carnival settings, but the reason for the characters’ cross-dressing and the aftermath of the same-sex couples’ relationships demonstrates the difference between the modern and the postmodern theories of gender.

Chapter two examines the ways in which the characters of Dog Woman, Dog Woman’s alter ego, and Jordan live between the binary gender structure as penumbra characters in Winterson’s novel Sexing the Cherry (1989). My idea of the penumbra character is based on the cyborg theory of Donna Haraway, but it covers only the issues of gender and sexual
difference in this novel. Chapter three explores the connections between Elizabeth Grosz’s
theory of writing the body and Winterson’s references to mapping, colonialism, and the
agency of the subject in *Written on the Body* (1992). The concluding chapter revisits the ideas
of each chapter and includes some ideas for future study on Winterson. The first section
further explores the meaning of the similarities between Winterson and Barnes and their
novels. This chapter’s second section connects the penumbra characters to transgender
theory and back around to Haraway’s cyborg feminism. Section three discusses the shifting
questions around colonialism, power, and gender. The final section examines Winterson’s
move from fantasy to physics while holding tightly to a postmodern view of gender and
sexuality.

Winterson takes chances that have political implications in her novels. Characters
crossdress and have sexual relationships with people of different genders. History morphs and
timelines overlap and scramble. Prostitutes and nuns work in cahoots against their masters. In
her novels, fantastic characters in various historical settings fall in love and kill oppressors. Of
the few scholarly articles that have been written about Winterson’s novels, most have focused
on how politically effective her fantastic and magical techniques are at advancing feminist
thought. Some critics go farther and wrestle with the question of whether political feminist
postmodernism is an oxymoron.

In “Bending the Arrow of Time: The Continuing Postmodern Present” (1994), Alison
Lee posits that Winterson’s novel *Sexing the Cherry* and Angela Carter’s novel *Nights at the
Circus* use postmodernist techniques and are also political in the ways they write fantastic
oddball characters into history (displacing master narratives) and challenge the idea of linear
time. Lee compares the postmodern theory of history to chaos theory, the discovery that much
of the natural world is organized into repeated patterns, and Lee concludes that both systems
“[express] reiteration with a difference,” an idea which Judith Butler champions (227). In *Gender Trouble* (1990), an early work on gender performance theory, Butler says cross-dressing subverts essentialist systems of gender. While Butler argues that cross-dressing is political, Lee argues that fantasy in Winterson’s novels operates on the same principle as cross-dressing, so fantasy in *Sexing the Cherry* is also political.

Although Laura Doan does not directly state that fantasy is political, by placing Winterson’s novels on a political continuum from most heterosexist (*Oranges are Not the Only Fruit*) to most feminist (*Sexing the Cherry*), Doan does not oppose Lee’s contention that fantasy has political power. In this article, “Jeanette Winterson’s Sexing the Postmodern” (1994), Doan reads *Oranges* (Winterson’s most realistic novel at the time Doan’s article was published) as the novel most dependent on heterosexist binary thinking (because the main character Jeanette has a black and white view of her life) and she reads *Sexing the Cherry* as the most transgressive text (particularly in its introduction of grafting as a metaphor for creating new ways of thinking about gender and sex). While Doan stays close to the plots of each novel, by endorsing *Sexing the Cherry* she could be read as backhandedly endorsing the fantastic technique of the novel.

Like Doan, Lisa Moore praises *Sexing the Cherry*, but instead of calling it the most transgressive of Winterson’s novels, as Doan does, Moore calls *Sexing the Cherry* “Winterson’s most ‘postmodern’, most ‘lesbian’, most postmodern-lesbian text” (106). Once again, fantasy’s role in politics is not directly addressed, but could perhaps be presumed because of the magical tone of Moore’s preferred novel. Yet, in the same article, “Teledildonics: Virtual Lesbians in the Fiction of Jeanette Winterson” (1995), Moore takes a more moderate reader-response position when she asserts that Winterson’s fiction “can be read as political,” but not utopian or naive (108). Moore says that Winterson creates a “virtual lesbian” (or fantastic) world where crossdressing shocks no one, identities naturally fragment, and love saves people. Through this world, Winterson does her political work.
Christy Burns pronounces that the fantasy in *Art and Lies* is political. In “Fantastic Language: Jeanette Winterson's Recovery of the Postmodern Word” (1996), Burns argues that Winterson most directly takes up her project of investing fantasy and desire with political power in *Art and Lies*, a novel that includes characters named Sappho, Picasso, and Handel. According to Burns, in *Art and Lies*, fantasy “fuels desire, denies catharsis, and propels readers back out to their contexts” (302). Burns describes Winterson’s brand of political fantasy as an unsettling force, a description which might indicate why *Art and Lies* received mixed reviews from the mainstream press.

Two critics contend that Winterson’s use of fantastic settings and unusual, almost monstrous characters sometimes undermines her political message. In “‘Written on Tablets of Stone?’: Jeanette Winterson, Roland Barthes, and the Discourse of Romantic Love” (1995), Lynne Pearce focuses on how “Winterson's novels contest the ‘universals’ of the ‘Lover’s Discourse’ by their focus on the minute particulars of time and place” as well as gender and therefore to Pearce the moment of falling in love becomes a space for political change (161). For example, it matters that Jeanette, the main character in *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit*, is an evangelical preacher in a working-class family who falls in love with another working-class girl like herself. Pearce’s point is that the details of the situation matter; they push Jeanette’s experience outside of the conventional discourse, even while the experience is described in terms of the conventional discourse. Yet, Pearce says, Winterson’s “carnivalesque presentation of a whole range of characters who are ‘not ordinary’ (many suffer from some physical non-conformity) does tend to distract from the political significance of homosexual relationships” (163). Pearce seems to think “regular” (straight-acting?) characters who happen to be homosexual or bisexual can more effectively rewrite the discourse of romantic love. This appeal in Pearce’s article to a middle-of-the-road politics that excludes cross-dressers and oddballs also appears in Daphne Kutzer’s article.
Daphne Kutzer’s article, “The Cartography of Passion: Cixous, Wittig and Winterson” (1994), argues that in contrast with The Passion, Written on the Body is “the more realistic and more revolutionary of the two novels, one that comes quite close to fulfilling Wittig’s desire for a minority point of view that becomes truly universal” (140). Kutzer dismisses the cross-dressing in The Passion as a preliminary attempt by Winterson to rewrite gender and describes the use of the unnamed, ungendered narrator in Written on the Body as a more politically effective way to work outside of the gender binary and into a “genderless passion” (144). In the process of this move to a genderless passion, though, Kutzer jettisons cross-dressers and other border characters as too fringe. Kutzer and Pearce appeal to a more centrist (or assimilationist) politics than the critics who embrace fantasy as a feminist political tool. Yet Kutzer and Pearce do not examine the ways in which even realistic texts can be changed by the cultural context in which they are read.

Hilary Hinds looks at how a realistic lesbian text is normed (or depoliticized) by events and expectations in heterosexual culture in the case of how Oranges are Not the Only Fruit, the movie, was received by the British public. In “Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit: Reaching Audiences Other Lesbian Texts Cannot Reach” (1992), Hinds analyzes the way straight British (mainstream) reviewers received the lesbian content and cultural context of the BBC production of Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit. Since the main character, Jess, grows up lesbian in an Evangelical church, many mainstream reviewers passed off the lesbianism as a “comic device” and attacked the marginalized religion instead. In addition, Hinds says that the premiere of this production in the year that Islamic leaders placed a death threat on Salman Rushdie for writing The Satanic Verses heightened the fear of fundamentalist religion. In the wake of Section 28, the British statute which made it a crime to use federal funds to “promote homosexuality,” Hinds also explains that many straight liberal viewers were in a mindset to sympathize with the persecuted Jess and not to identify with the persecuting authority, the church. The genre--art film--also set the viewers up to find a “universal” (and apolitical) reading in which the viewer
could sympathize with the protagonist, even though Jess was persecuted for her sexual orientation. Hinds's article challenges the idea that a text can have political power no matter what the context or audience, an idea covertly expressed by the other critics' omission of audience in their critiques of the political power of Winterson's novels.

While recognizing Hinds's point that the political power of a text shifts as the text changes (in different contexts and with different readers), I argue that Winterson's use of monstrous characters, cross-dressing characters, and fantastic settings has political resonance with this reader. When Winterson's novels are read in conjunction with other texts on gender theory, Winterson's gender politics becomes clearer. For example, The Passion's differences from Nightwood by Djuna Barnes illustrate how the depiction of cross-dressing characters and lesbians relationships has changed in fifty years. When Winterson's novels are read with the feminist theories of Donna Haraway and Elizabeth Grosz, the similarities between the messages of Haraway and Winterson and Grosz and Winterson become apparent.

In Donna Haraway's book Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature (1991), chapter eight, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Later Twentieth Century," describes her theory of cyborg feminism. Haraway builds a feminist politics which meshes science, technology, and nature with feminism, socialism, and materialism in the same way that these terms become enmeshed in the experiences of women's lives. Haraway argues that at this point in technological history, the distinctions between the animal and human, between the organism and the machine, and between the physical and the non-physical have become unclear and politically useless. The only useful place to stand is in the wreckage of these binaries, embracing the new possibilities for coalitions between previously separated entities. Haraway explores the separation between women of different races, cultures, and economic classes. She proclaims that political alliances must be built on splintered identities because the search for essential unity distracts all women from political action against the structures of capitalism that keep women splintered into categories based on
“race, gender, sexuality, and class” (155, 157). For Haraway, the common enemy is the “informatics of domination,” a twentieth-century network of power within which the “actual situation of women is their integration/exploitation into a world system of production/reproduction and communication” (163). Haraway’s theory applies from the factories in which women of color earn minimum wage by making computer parts, to the pink-collar ghettos where white middle-class office workers earn above poverty-level wages coding information at computer terminals. Haraway embodies her theory in the cyborg, a monstrous creature who is us: both “machine and organism”; as “…a creature in a post-gender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labor, or other seductions to wholeness” (150). The cyborg “is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity” (151). It arises from “militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism” but does not revere its origins (151). Haraway’s cyborg theory is important to feminist theory because she names technology as the source of a new network of power and as the place for political alliance, she places the blame for divisions between race, class, gender, and sexual orientation squarely in the capitalist system of worldwide domination within which dominated people must organize, and she fuses her ideas into the cyborg—a mercenary border character who embodies possibility and works for her own liberation from networks of power. Haraway says, “Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves. This is a dream not of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia” (181).

Elizabeth Grosz’s theory also examines how bodies become translated by matrixes of power, but the tone of her theoretical writings is less confrontational than the tone of Haraway’s manifesto. In Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism (1994) she contends that culture fictionalizes bodies so that no body or pertinent feature of the body is unmarked by meaning—the skin’s color, the body’s sex, the height and width of the body, the amount of and color of hair on the body, etc. Even the newborn’s body is a product of the genetics and
culture into which it is born as well, so that the body never resembles a blank slate. Grosz is interested in how male and female bodies are marked differently by culture; she explains that the particular functions of the female body (menstruation, menopause, etc.) have been inscribed in ways which mark women’s bodies as secondary to and weaker than male bodies (202). Although women cannot erase these inscriptions, they can inscribe the power of their experiences living in female bodies in ways which resist traditional inscriptions about the inferiority of female bodies. Grosz says, “Once the subject is no longer seen as an entity—whether psychical or corporeal—but fundamentally an effect of the pure difference that constitutes all modes of materiality, new terms need to be sought by which to think this alterity within and outside the subject” (208). Women need to join this project of inscribing bodies in order to inscribe the power of the female subject in culture. From what Grosz explains about the reach of cultural messages, it would seem that this feminist inscription of female bodies needs to be done in novels as much as in cultural studies textbooks.

The conclusion of this thesis will look at how crossgender and feminist fictions and theories can work together while critiquing the systems that mark and oppress all bodies. While some feminists are wary of the ways in which postmodernism destabilizes the intent of the author, the question about postmodernism should not be “Is it political?” but “How can I use postmodernism to further my political projects?” In other words, postmodernism should not be approached as an absolute credo, but as a good tool, and as Ani DiFranco, the feminist folk-rock singer says: “Every tool is a weapon if you hold it right.” The university is still a battleground for feminists, queers, and other historically marginalized scholars who teach and write from their radical politics. We must continue to pick up the tools of contemporary theory to carry on the battle, and postmodernism is one of the more newly forged tools.

Laura Doan keeps herself from being hypnotized into the postmodernist cult in her article on Winterson’s novels. At pivotal moments in this essay, Doan splices in Winterson's voice from several different interviews and ends up writing a critical essay using postmodern
theory in a way which does not ignore Winterson, the author. Also, while promoting postmodernist theory and explaining *The Passion* as Winterson's critique of the inner/outer binary through the use of drag, Doan winks at the "problem" of essentialism by quoting Diana Fuss's notion that essentialism in the hands of the disempowered "can be powerfully displacing and disruptive" (qtd. in Doan 150). Doan does not see essentialism as necessarily normative—an assertion with which postmodernist theory disagrees. Doan's pastiche of theoretical positioning (or guerilla theory) is the only way scholars of conscience can write in the heterosexist, racist, classist academy and remain political at the same time. Feminists must take what we want from Lacan, Foucault, and Nietzsche for example, and use his theory for our own political ends. Grosz takes the ideas of these theorists and critiques their sexist and patriarchal assumptions. Then she delves into a discussion of the theories of Lacan, Foucault, and Nietzsche and refashions them using a feminist politic. Haraway builds her feminist cyborg theory on the writings of Marx and Foucault, and also references Cherrie Moraga's identity theory formed from her life as a Chicano lesbian (175). Traditionally legitimate (Marx, Foucault) and illegitimate (Moraga) sources are braided together through Haraway. With them she constructs a cyborg theory for feminist action. Both Grosz and Haraway are doing guerilla theory; using primary texts with politically questionable (and sometimes misogynist) authors and reinterpreting them for feminist goals. Haraway in particular embraces the dynamism or flux that this process includes, much like feminist theater theorists Jill Dolan and Sue-Ellen Case.

In *Presence and Desire: Essays on Gender, Sexuality, Performance* (1993), Jill Dolan takes up the debate between materialist feminists (poststructuralists) and radical feminists (adherents to identity politics), and its impact on her work as a director and theorist. She defines another aspect of what I call guerilla theory.

My challenge as a materialist feminist performance theorist, then, is to reposition myself constantly, to keep changing my seat in the theater, and to
continually ask, How does it look from over here? ...Working in theory allows such fluidity, since the only productive position for the theorist is balancing precariously on the edge of the differences between, among, and within women, who are the site of conflicting discourses in which there is no immutable truth (95-96).

In Dolan’s quote, the fluidity of identity is important to self-criticism and not the mark of an undecided theorist, an idea that Haraway echoes when she calls for coalitions among people of different political identities. Contemporary feminist critics must challenge the idea that we need to stay in one theoretical camp at all times, because many of the boundaries between theories are patrolled by apolitical critics. For example, although post-structuralists like Foucault question the importance of the author’s intentions when reading a text by Shakespeare, some black feminist authors say that politically it has to matter who is writing, particularly when that writer comes from an historically marginalized group. A guerilla theorist can say yes to both camps and use each stance when talking about different texts; always keeping her politics foregrounded. She can use Foucault’s ideas to criticize traditionally canonical works and the black feminist’s position to offer a space for marginalized writers to speak. In *Feminism and Theatre* (1988) Sue-Ellen Case says this approach places practice (and politics) before theory and addresses the criticism that theory is elitist (131). She also notes that different historical and cultural situations demand different kinds of tools to create change. “Swinging from theory to opposing theory...would not be a kind of ‘playful pluralism’, but a guerrilla action designed to provoke and focus the feminist critique” (Case 132). Although Case, Dolan, and Haraway do not question the ethical implications of such pluralism, I think that a healthy dose of self-criticism and a constant focus on improving conditions for historically marginalized groups can provide the ethics for this guerrilla theory.

About five years ago I began reading Winterson's novels and saw the literature speaking theories that I did not know, but which intrigued me. While looking for theories to fit
with Winterson’s fiction I found exciting writings on feminism and gender theory, including the writings of Grosz and Haraway. Yet, feminist theory is not static, and the transgender movement is fostering new views of gender, culture, and sexuality which directly impact feminist theory. Keeping in mind that guerrilla theory can always benefit from new tools, the conclusion of this thesis will attempt to critique Grosz’s corporeal feminism and Haraway’s cyborg feminism in light of new transgender theories.
CHAPTER 2:
COSTUMES AND CARNIVALS:
CROSS-DRESSING AND SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS
IN THE PASSION AND NIGHTWOOD

*The Passion* by Jeanette Winterson, a contemporary British lesbian writer, and *Nightwood* by Djuna Barnes, an early twentieth-century American lesbian writer, have many similarities, although the novels were written about fifty years apart and each is set in a different city and historical period. In both books, protagonists cross-dress and women have sexual relationships with women. In addition, both books feature these women falling in love in public carnival scenes: Villanelle and the mystery woman in *The Passion*, and Nora and Robin in *Nightwood*. However, the cross-dressing character in Barnes’s novel has a much darker view of his difference than the cross-dressing character in Winterson’s novel. Barnes’s novel also depicts the same-sex relationship as a source of tragedy, while Winterson’s novel does not. These differences are connected to popular theories about homosexuality at the time in which the writer of each novel was working and publishing, yet *The Passion* and *Nightwood* are still strikingly similar. The way queer cross-dressing characters are depicted in each novel illustrates a fifty-year shift from queer characters who feel melancholy and distraught about cross-dressing to queer characters who more easily accept their cross-dressing. Winterson rewrites gender and sexual orientation in ways important to contemporary gender theorists. The similarities between the novels indicate enduring
questions about the connections between costume, gender and sexual orientation and the connections between context and same-sex relationships.

**Gender Theory and Attitudes of Cross-dressing Characters**

I dressed as a boy because that's what the visitors liked to see. It was part of a game, trying to decide which sex was hidden behind tight breeches and extravagant face-paste... (Villanelle, *The Passion*, 54).

...am I to blame if I've turned up this time as I shouldn't have been, when it was a high soprano I wanted, and deep corn curls to my bum, with a womb as big as the king's kettle, and a bosom as high as the bowsprit of a fishing schooner? (Doctor O'Connor, *Nightwood*, 77)

Doctor Matthew O'Connor's prominence in *Nightwood* as a cross-dressing character rivals Villanelle's prominence as a cross-dressing character in *The Passion*, even though he is a male homosexual and she is a female bisexual. The reasons each character cross-dresses, how each one feels about his or her behavior, and the relation between the character's cross-dressing and his or her sexual orientation are different, though. Villanelle's pragmatic cross-dressing stems from her performer-audience theory, and Doctor O'Connor's tortured cross-dressing stems from his theory that he is a female psyche caught in a male body.

In *The Passion* Villanelle says she presents herself as a boy when she works at the casino "because that's what the visitors liked to see. It was part of the game, trying to decide which sex was hidden behind tight breeches" (*The Passion* 54). According to this passage, Villanelle can entertain customers as a person of undecided gender, but not specifically as a
man. She attaches a mustache “for my own amusement. And perhaps for my own protection. There are too many dark alleys and too many drunken hands on festival nights” (The Passion 55). Perhaps Villanelle will not be attacked as a man, or no one will dare attack her because she might be a man. Villanelle does not make this distinction clear, and perhaps it is not clear to the potential attackers either. In either case, Villanelle probably feels safer with the prop in public because people assume she is a man. In her description of her costume, Villanelle assumes that she passes adequately as a man and does not attract attention as a cross-dresser, which might put her in more personal danger, particularly in the dark alleys. Yet when Villanelle is in costume she is not always seen as male, because at the casino a male gambler bets for her “purse,” and the male cook decides she is a woman, proposes marriage, and then rapes her (The Passion 69, 63). These men do not presume Villanelle is a man, but passing off the costume as a quirk, approach her as they would approach another straight woman, and place her back into the role of a straight woman. Although Villanelle dresses as a man to work in the casino, she deludes herself in thinking that her mustache protects her from danger.

In Nightwood, Dr. O’Connor dresses in women’s clothing not to go out in public like Villanelle, but to stay at home. When Nora visits his apartment at three in the morning, she finds him lying in bed wearing a long wig and nightgown with blush and mascara (Nightwood 69). He hides the wig in shame when he sees Nora rather than the man he was expecting. Nora also seems embarrassed and must repossess her wits after seeing him dressed in this way. She automatically thinks of the priests and angels who wear robes much like dresses: “Is not the gown the natural raiment of extremity? What nation, what religion, what ghost, what dream
has not worn it—infants, angels, priests, the dead; why should not the doctor, in the grave
dilemma of his alchemy, wear his dress?” (Nightwood 69). In this passage, Nora naturalizes
the doctor’s outlandish behavior for both the reader and herself. This sort of correcting rarely
appears in The Passion, perhaps because its world and characters seem to have few
restrictions on gender or sexuality.

In The Passion, Villanelle shows a distinct awareness that she is dressing up to
perform, and does not think of herself as a pervert. She also does not explain her cross-
dressing as an outgrowth of a desire for women, nor does she entertain a notion that she was
born with the wrong gender. In one of the few times when she attempts to naturalize her
behavior, like Nora she appeals to the Catholic norms. “If I went to confession, what would I
confess? That I cross-dress? So did Our Lord, so do the priests” (The Passion 72). As
Villanelle notes, one of the very institutions that attempts to define morality (as connected to
gender and sexuality) actually dresses its male representatives in feminine costumes. Yet,
Villanelle’s musing on the church has a less reverent and more confrontational tone than
Nora’s in Nightwood. In comparing her behavior to the behavior of the church authorities
Villanelle shows that she does not think of her cross-dressing as sinful, while there is still an
implication that Nora thinks the doctor’s cross-dressing may be sinful, but can be explained
by his mental state. The difference is that cross-dressing in Nightwood is portrayed as an
embarrassing fetish, while in The Passion it is only an interesting facet of a character’s life—
though one that must be managed.
Doctor O’Connor’s cross-dressing is closely tied to his sexual orientation, which makes his behavior more frightening to his friends. At one point in Nightwood, Felix watches Doctor O’Connor covertly puts on perfume and makeup at Robin’s dressing table and then steals a bill off the table. After observing this, Felix tells himself that he will still attempt to remain friends with the doctor, but that “it will be in spite of a long series of convulsions of the spirit, analogous to the displacement in the fluids of the oyster, that must cover its itch with a pearl; so he would have to cover the doctor” (Nightwood 35). The text does not indicate which action bothers him more: using the makeup or stealing the money, although the difference is between Felix trying to cover for a “pervert” and trying to cover for a thief. Read in conjunction with Nora’s flustered reaction to finding the doctor in a dress, wig, and makeup, it would appear that Felix is mostly reacting against the use of the makeup which is connected to cross-dressing.

In the absence of an external reason for Doctor O’Connor’s cross-dressing, both Felix and Nora see it as a kind of illness. The doctor does not try to explain his behavior in terms of cultural pressures either, but links it directly to his feeling of being a woman stuck in a man’s body. Villanelle connects her cross-dressing with the casino culture, even though she also works at the casino dressed as a woman. Dealing cards does not require Villanelle to be male, and is not even Villanelle’s dream job. She reveals that she really wanted to work as a boatman (The Passion 53). The costumes are a game (not a work-related necessity) for her, and although both her sexuality and her costumes mark her as different, the only cause and effect relationship between the two markers is that she may sense the connection between
culturally enforced modes of gender presentation and compulsory heterosexuality. Villanelle does dress as a man to see her female lover, but primarily because the two met when Villanelle was wearing drag and Villanelle fears that the woman thinks she is male. Doctor O’Connor’s cross-dressing has even less to do with his profession; he explains the cross-dressing as an effect of his internal femaleness acting on his external maleness. How exactly cross-dressing fits into his sexual practice is not clear, but when Nora finds the doctor in a nightgown, he is expecting a visitor at three in the morning—an oblique reference to a sexual liaison with a man (69). The doctor cross-dresses for what he sees as internal reasons, while Villanelle claims that she cross-dresses because of external pressures. However, Villanelle’s unclear distinction between the internal and the external combined with the fact that she works at the casino as both a man and woman both serve to contradict her assertion that she only cross-dresses for cultural reasons..

In The Passion Villanelle’s costume actually complicates the budding relationship between Villanelle and the mystery woman. Villanelle fears that once the mystery woman “discovers” her sex, she will not desire Villanelle anymore. After an evening in which the mystery woman tries to get Villanelle to take off her shirt or boots (which would either reveal her female body or her boatman’s body), Villanelle reappears at the woman's doorstep to reveal herself:

‘I'm a woman,’ I said, lifting up my shirt and risking the catarrh.

She smiled. ‘I know.’

I didn't go home. I stayed (The Passion 71).
This exchange could be read as a revelation of essential gender, but Villanelle doubts whether the biological body is the site of desire—a notion which undercuts the importance of her action in the passage above. In fact, since Villanelle and the mystery woman began flirting when Villanelle was presenting herself as male, the connection between essential/biological gender and desire is questionable. Earlier in this section Villanelle says to herself, “Was this breeches and boots self any less real than my garters? What was it about me that interested her?” (The Passion 66). Villanelle’s fear is not that her identity is fragmented, but that she might lose the mystery woman by altering her performance.

Some critics read this scene between Villanelle and the mystery woman differently. Daphne Kutzer says that in The Passion the desire between Villanelle and the mystery woman is the most important thing, not the absence or presence of certain gendered props (mustache, breasts, phallus) (139). In opposition to both Kutzer’s assertion of the transcendence of the erotic in Winterson’s work, I read the quote about breeches and boots, and Villanelle’s fear before pulling up her shirt both describing the lover as part of the audience for a complex gender presentation. Villanelle was not dressing to attract this woman when they met, but after they have met the question of where and why desire forms are only typical ones. Does the mystery woman know Villanelle is in drag? And will she still want Villanelle when she finds out? By lifting her shirt, Villanelle changes the mystery woman’s status as an audience member and takes her backstage in order to further their relationship.

The body and its costumes are culturally constructed as sites of sexual attraction, and in this case the site of gender performance is also the site of sexual desire. Questioning the mystery
woman's sexual attraction leads Villanelle to questioning her own gender performance and the mystery woman's reception of the performance.

It is significant that in *The Passion* Villanelle lifts the shirt of her soldier's uniform to reveal her gender and does not drop her pants. If the phallus or its absence was the signifier of gender for Villanelle, as it is for Doctor O'Connor, she would drop her pants when she tells the woman her secret. In fact, the darker secret lies in the connecting tissue between her toes, a secret which she tells neither the mystery woman nor Henri, possibly because this mark classifies her as a fantastic creature, a fabled impossibility. The clannish boatmen believe that the sons of boatmen are born with webbed feet, but until Villanelle’s birth, “There never was a girl whose feet were webbed in the entire history of the boatmen” (*The Passion* 51). Villanelle’s webbed feet mark her as a body that connected to a legend, while her breasts mark her as a female body—socially less important than a male body, but not a living fable. The midwife tries to fix Villanelle’s toes at birth, but “her knife sprang from the skin leaving no mark” (*The Passion* 52). Lisa Moore calls Villanelle’s toes her mark of “hermaphroditism”, a definition that only partially describes the impact of these tissues (*The Passion* 112). Villanelle’s webbed feet are directly tied to work, class, and location because only in Venice does this mark have a classed and gendered meaning. Although the boatmen are necessary for all transportation in Venice, they make a meager living. The webbed feet give Villanelle official insider status with the boatmen, a closed group that sustains its own myths and customs, but, combined with her breasts and female genitalia, these feet make her a physical freak even to the boatmen. Villanelle is a woman caught in a mythical body, a body marked as outside of
language and culture in an even more horrifying way than her female body is. Yet, Villanelle never speaks of herself as a man caught in a woman’s body (or vice versa) or attributes her sexual orientation to her body in the way Doctor O’Connor does.

In *Nightwood* Doctor O’Connor’s body does not have any particular distinguishing marks that could parallel Villanelle’s webbed feet. He has “shaggy eyebrows, a terrific widow’s peak, over-large dark eyes, and a heavy way of standing that was also apologetic” (*Nightwood* 13). Taken together, these physical features make the doctor sound both feminine and masculine. In addition, his voice, which is compared to a “maddened woman’s” sounds effeminate as well as crazy (*Nightwood* 14). No other physical description of the doctor is given, although he often refers to himself as female—perhaps because of his desire for men. He thinks that because he desires men he should be female—a logical configuration which separates Doctor O’Connor from his body (while privileging the psychic over the physical) and reinforces the inner/outer, or emotional/physical dichotomy.

Doctor O’Connor describes himself as a woman caught in a man’s body, which may explain why the reader hears so little about his male body. However, the doctor does describe the body he wants to have: “a high soprano...and deep corn curls to my bum, with a womb as big as the king’s kettle, and a bosom as high as the bowsprit of a fishing schooner” (*Nightwood* 77). Yet, instead of pulling on dresses, wigs, and heels and trying to pass for female, he sees his gender as a mistake and attempts to make his distress into irony by using female nouns and pronouns for himself. During a discussion with Nora, the doctor describes himself as, “a lady in no need of insults,” and asks Felix, “Why is it that whenever I hear
music I think I’m a bride?” (Nightwood 125, 33). At another point in the novel, the doctor calls God a woman “because of the way she made me; it somehow balances the mistake” (Nightwood 124). The doctor’s idea that his gender struggle (and by extension, the “problem” of his sexual orientation) is between him and his body is illuminated by the story he tells about kneeling and crying in a chapel, pulling out his penis (named Tiny O’Toole), and asking God “what is permanent of me, me or him?” (Nightwood 111). By naming his penis and referring to it as a male entity outside of himself, Doctor O’Connor demonstrates that he sees his male genitalia as the “permanent mistake” of his gender (Nightwood 111). Villanelle does not name her webbed feet and has no internal conflict about whom she desires or how she dresses, but only the external conflict of whether the mystery woman is attracted to her male costume or to her fragmented self.

Villanelle’s external theory of gender and sexual orientation allows her some ironic distance from her difference, while Doctor O’Connor’s internal theory of gender and sexual orientation imprisons him in his body and makes him the character with “melancholy hidden beneath every jest and malediction” (Nightwood 38). Doctor O’Connor perceives his inner/outer gender rift as the error that demonstrates the essentialist rule. He says that he got a male body but is essentially and internally female because of his desire for men. Villanelle sees her costuming as a game that allows her to escape the cultural construction of femininity and does not necessarily entertain the notion of an internal or essential gender. Through her relationship with the mystery woman, Villanelle also realizes that when performing gender, the performer can find herself unclear of how her audience perceives her. Gender as
performance creates an ironic distance between the character and her gender which makes
sexual intimacy with another person difficult. With her perspective as a bisexual woman,
Villanelle can look on her physical gender as unconnected to her potential desire for both
genders, so this problem of irony gets played out as a performer-audience struggle. The
doctor gets caught by the binary logic of the traditional essentialist gender model and in
attempting to connect his physical gender to his homosexuality he interprets himself as a
mistake. His gender rift then, gets played out as an internal struggle. The difference between
the characters' attitudes toward gender and sexuality indicates a shift from an essential model
of gender to a cultural one and the shift from internal to external struggle results in a less tragic
picture of cross-dressing queer characters. These changes in theory and attitude indicate the
distance of the shift in cross-dressing queer characters in the fifty years between the
publication of Nightwood and the publication of The Passion.

The Carnival and Love Between Women

"It was a woman I loved and you will admit that is not the usual thing"
(Villanelle, The Passion 94).

"Love of woman for woman, what insane passion for unmitigated anguish and
motherhood brought that into the mind?" (Doctor O'Connor, Nightwood 66).

Another parallel between The Passion and Nightwood is that both books contain
female-female couples who meet in public venues where bizarre behavior of various kinds is
normalized. These carnivals allow taboos to be broken and cultural boundaries to be shifted
within a regulated space. The usually preserved hierarchy of the importance of people over
animals loses strength in these carnivals when animals act like people and vice versa. In these venues, the traditional divisions between the genders and between heterosexuality and homosexuality are also permeable. Gender and sexuality hierarchies destabilize in these arenas when acrobats drop from the sky and kiss patrons of any gender. The importance of the boundaries between humans and animals and between men and women in a non-carnival atmosphere is illustrated by Judith Butler. According to Butler, people who “do not appear properly gendered” have their “humanness” questioned (Bodies that Matter 8). The assumption is that the culturally created and reinforced distinction between men and women keeps humans separated from animals. When these gender distinctions fall, the heterosexual matrix falls away and women can openly fall in love with other women.

In The Passion the night in the casino is sexually charged and filled with oddities. Soothsayers look into crystal balls and read tarot cards (The Passion 60). Fire-eaters entertain crowds by doing what could destroy them. Little girls, with “sweet bodies hairless and pink” carry almonds through the crowd in dishes (The Passion 58). There's an element of pedophilia in the description of the girls which indicates that sexual taboos come out to play at the casino. Bears dance and monkeys sing. People dunk their heads into a glass vat shaped like a slipper to drink champagne (The Passion 59). Humans act like animals and animals take on human characteristics. In this scene the notions of humanness and gendered bodies have been tweaked, or queered: “There are women of every kind and not all of them are women” (The Passion 58). A “woman” with three breasts displays herself for the crowd. Acrobats swing above the crowd and kiss patrons of presumably any gender without warning (The
Passion 59). The social boundaries between men and women, animals and humans, are transparent and everything seems possible and permissible in this dangerous shifting world. The circus of Nightwood also has a transgressive atmosphere where the boundary between animals and humans has fallen.

In Nightwood Nora and Robin meet at the circus; much like the casino, this circus is a place where humans watch animals performing like humans. In this spectacle, clowns tumble, a horse dances on the point of his master’s whip, dogs try “to look like horses,” and elephants parade. The dogs trying to act like horses and the horses dancing like humans are similar to the humans acting like animals and vice versa in the casino of The Passion. Gender subversion in the circus appears not in the spectacle itself, but in the characters’ identities as inside or outside the circus culture. Robin’s two most significant relationships are with two characters who feel very differently about the circus.

Nora, an unconventional woman known for her salons, sometimes works for the circus as a publicist—a job that places her inside the circus culture (Nightwood 16). In contrast, Felix, Robin’s husband, admits that he always wanted to understand the circus and identify with it, but could not (Nightwood 11). Felix, the straight man who marries Robin and befriends Doctor O’Connor, stands as the only major character in Nightwood who does not seem to have sexual liaisons with people of the same gender as himself and the only character who expresses discomfort with the circus and its people. Felix, seemingly the most mainstream, heterosexual character in Nightwood, sees himself as an outsider in relation to the dangerous, homosexual circus world. The circus functions as a sort of code for homosexuality
and opens a place where Nora feels at home, Felix feels uneasy, and Robin, after feeling uneasy, meets Nora. Later in the relationship between Nora and Robin, in a move that extends the circus metaphor and its importance to their relationship, the couple gathers furniture for their apartment from circuses and odd flea markets (Nightwood 50). In the case of the circus in Nightwood, the circus’s reputation and the characters’ reactions to its atmosphere, more than the spectacle itself, help create a place where women can meet and fall in love. The Passion’s casino has acrobats and fire-eaters, but Nightwood’s circus has a checkered reputation.

Although in each novel the women meet in public carnival spaces, their costumes and their mannerisms toward each other and the conclusions to their relationships are different. Nora and Robin do not flirt the way Villanelle and the mystery woman do. In effect, the lesbian relationship in The Passion never rejects the playful feeling of the carnival setting in which it begins, and the deadly serious lesbian relationship in Nightwood never achieves that playfulness. The attitude that Nora takes toward Robin is more that of a mother toward her daughter than that of a lover toward her beloved. In this regard, Villanelle and the mystery woman have a more equitable and passionate relationship than Nora and Robin. Nora says her relationship with Robin is tragic because they are women in love, but Villanelle never says her relationship with the mystery woman is tragic, only short and passionate. Each relationship breaks up under different circumstances: in Nightwood, after Robin cheats on Nora she kicks Robin out; in The Passion, after her husband comes home the mystery woman quits seeing Villanelle. Yet, in Nightwood after their relationship ends, Nora misses Robin and the novel ends with a crazy Robin down on all fours fighting with Nora’s dog. Robin actually degenerates into an animal in Nightwood, while in The Passion Villanelle carries on her life
after her relationship with the mystery woman ends. In *The Passion* the lesbian relationship does not create misery the way the lesbian relationship in *Nightwood* does.

The flirting in the scene between Villanelle and the mystery woman begins with the way in which the mystery woman bets. Instead of throwing down her money, she holds a coin in her hand so Villanelle has to take it from her, establishing physical contact. Then she chooses three cards from the deck and the last one is the queen of spades. “A lucky card. The symbol of Venice. You win,” says Villanelle (*The Passion* 59). The woman takes off her mask, and instead of speaking to Villanelle, she smiles mysteriously. Then she orders a bottle of the most expensive French champagne while Villanelle tries to get her to gamble again so that Villanelle can recover her composure and the casino can win back its cash. The enchantress drinks a glass of the champagne, strokes Villanelle's cheek, and disappears into the darkness. Later, when Villanelle is searching the crowd for her, she drops off a gold earring for Villanelle (*The Passion* 60). Leaving the earring, stroking Villanelle’s cheek, buying the champagne, and removing her mask after winning are all flirtatious actions. The mystery woman’s silence also makes her more unusual in the ruckus of the casino. As Villanelle says, betting itself is like flirting; you give up something you need and sometimes you get back more than you bet. Actually, according to Villanelle, gambling is like love: “It was a game of chance I entered into and my heart was the wager” (*The Passion* 94). The metaphor of love as a game of chance suggests that love can hurt you but will probably not kill you—it’s much less serious than that.
In contrast, the short scene between Nora and Robin does not contain any physical or verbal banter, and neither player seems to see their encounter as a game. In *Nightwood* Nora and Robin do not flirt the way the mystery woman and Villanelle do in *The Passion*. Robin and Nora happen to be sitting together at the circus, each alone, and when the animals are drawn to Robin, Nora notices her. Nora sees in Robin what the lioness sees: someone who needs direction, attention, love—not a beautiful woman to seduce. The love Nora has for Robin is more maternal than sexual, and their meeting reflects this tone. Robin stands up after the lioness stretches toward her and Nora grasps Robin’s hand. Robin says, “Let’s get out of here!” and Nora leads her out (*Nightwood* 49). They exchange names and Robin pronounces, “I don’t want to be here” (*Nightwood* 49). In this scene, there is no flirtatious cheek stroking and no one disappears into the crowd. Robin feels unsettled and Nora takes care of her. It is also significant that the text refers to Robin as a girl, particularly since Nora reacts toward Robin in much the same nurturing way as the “powerful lioness” (*Nightwood* 49). The difference between Nora and Robin’s ages reinforces the reading of this love as similar to the love between a mother and her daughter. Nora is 40 and Robin is young enough that her pregnancy does not raise questions about her age—probably in her twenties (*Nightwood* 126). Unlike Villanelle and the mystery woman, Nora and Robin do not flirt with each other and from the beginning their relationship is based on a mother-daughter model.

The differences between the meetings become more distinct when they are placed side by side. While Nora escorts Robin out of the circus, the mystery woman orders expensive champagne and leaves Villanelle an earring to tease her. Nora and Robin move in together soon
after the meeting at the circus, but the mystery woman and Villanelle do not see each other again until a few weeks after the scene at the casino and never set up a household together. In contrast to the mother-daughter relationship of Nora and Robin, the mystery woman and Villanelle have a more dangerous and erotically charged connection since their relationship is not built on one partner’s ability to protect the other. But their connection is fleeting, and it is unclear whether the mystery woman even tells her husband about her affair with Villanelle because to her it was just an extended flirtation. In contrast, the love that Nora has for Robin could be explained as maternal and not necessarily sexual, perhaps a more “natural” kind of love for a woman to express toward another woman. The idea of Nora as a surrogate mother to Robin holds less danger for the heterosexual norm than the idea of Nora as husband to Robin (replacing her husband Felix). Yet, Robin and Nora live together like husband and wife, and Robin does not return to her husband Felix at the end of their relationship, but moves in with another woman. In this light Nightwood’s depiction of desire between women appears more subversive than The Passion’s because Nora and Robin’s relationship supplants (and mirrors) the idea of heterosexual romantic love and social power between a man and a woman. Tragedy lies within the subversive relationship between Nora and Robin, though. The impact of their breakup on both Nora and Robin also indicates that their relationship haunts both of them, and was not merely an extended flirtation for either Nora or Robin.

Nora spends many hours talking to Doctor O’Connor about Robin, both before and after Nora throws her out of their apartment. Nora does not understand why Robin cannot stay at home with her at night and commit to their relationship but has to search bars for
drink and the excitement of new lovers. Describing a conversation between herself and Robin, Nora says that Robin likes to make everyone besides Nora happy, although Nora is the person who loves her the most dearly (Nightwood 128). Nora cannot stop loving Robin, even in the wake of her emotional abuse, and at her most despondent, Nora blames fate for her feelings: “Love is death, come upon with passion; I know, that is why love is wisdom. I love her as one condemned to it” (Nightwood 115). Being condemned to love a woman who tortures her is only one step from being condemned to live as a homosexual. The doctor describes Nora’s feelings as love “for the invert” learned by both Nora and the doctor from the straight fairy tales that, because of their homosexuality, they must twist to understand (Nightwood 114). No healthy relationship, and no joy, can come to either Nora or the doctor because they are inflicted with the disease of their homosexuality, or as the doctor sees it, his entrapment as a woman in a man’s body. Nora interprets the two women’s biological inability to conceive a child together as another reason for their relationship’s failure, a reason based not on Robin’s mental state, but on the very crux of their attraction for each other (118). Two women can never conceive a child together, so Nora indicates that all lesbian relationships are doomed by biology. She says to the doctor, “We give death to a child when we give it a doll—it’s the effigy and the shroud; when a woman gives it to another woman, it is the life they cannot have, it is their child, sacred and profane...” (Nightwood 118). In Nightwood the doll symbolizes the infertility and imminent end of the lesbian relationship—the doll is the death of their impossible coupling. Nora says, “Robin’s love and mine was
always impossible, and loving each other, we no longer love. Yet we love each other like death” (116).

The final chapter of Nightwood strengthens the interpretation of the lesbian relationship between Nora and Robin as unnatural and possibly sick. The impossibility and tragedy of Robin’s relationship with Nora makes Robin lose her humanness. Robin devolves into a wild animal and fights with Nora’s dog in the chapel on Nora’s property (Nightwood 139). This disturbing scene dramatizes the illness of Robin’s feelings toward Nora, and toward Nora’s dog, who can remain loyal to his mistress in a way that Robin could (or would) not. In the final scene, it appears that the relationship has come full circle. Nora and Robin are back in a private kind of circus setting, yet now Robin has become an animal and Nora cannot reach her. The relationship between Robin and Nora has taken a physical and psychic toll on Robin which brings her back to Nora, but makes her into an wild animal even less able to love Nora. Love for another woman tragically and irreparably damages Robin.

In The Passion, Villanelle’s love for the mystery woman does not end in tragedy, but does not end as a comedy either. After the mystery woman’s husband returns, one night Villanelle peeks into the woman’s house and sees her husband lean down to kiss her. At that moment Villanelle realizes that the mystery woman loves her husband, not passionately but tranquilly, and she will not return to Villanelle (The Passion 75). Villanelle takes the story of their relationship with her, but does not tell the story as a tragedy or turn into an animal. After marrying a man she does not love who enjoys her cross-dressing, they travel the world together until she tires of him. She escapes and when he finds her again he sells her to the
French army as a prostitute for the officers. Villanelle does not attribute her situation as a prostitute back to her relationship with the mystery woman; in fact her situation is the fault of the husband she hates. Loving a woman does not bring Villanelle grief, but marrying a man does.

*Nightwood* depicts the lesbian relationship as inherently painful and incomplete, but *The Passion* depicts the lesbian relationship as passionate and fulfilling, and demonizes the heterosexual relationship. This difference indicates the fifty-year move from the idea that homosexuality makes people unable to be happy, to the idea that homosexuality (or a homosexual experience) need not ruin a person’s life. This theory is mitigated somewhat by the functional bisexuality of Villanelle, the mystery woman, and Robin—all female characters who have significant (and in some cases sexual) relationships with men as well as women. However, the difference between the depictions of the same-sex relationships in *Nightwood* and *The Passion* does indicate a difference in attitude toward homosexual relationships.

**Conclusion: Historical Contexts of the Novels**

The characters of *Nightwood* feel more remorse and endure more internal punishment for their cross-dressing habits and attractions to people of the same sex than the characters of *The Passion*. *Nightwood*'s tortured Doctor O'Connor privately cross-dresses to fix the mistake that God made when his female psyche was placed inside his male body. A pragmatic Villanelle in *The Passion* publicly cross-dresses for her own amusement. In *Nightwood* after the relationship between Robin and Nora ends, Robin loses her mind and acts like an animal while Nora curses herself for loving a woman. In *The Passion* after
Villanelle and the mystery woman end their magical relationship, Villanelle marries and eventually leaves a man who takes her around the world, and the mystery woman returns to her husband. The different messages about cross-dressing and same-sex relationships in the novels could be partially explained by the different historical contexts of each novel.

A sexual revolution and its feminist and queer trappings have impacted the depiction of cross-dressers and women who love women and the depiction of the aftermath of their relationships in The Passion. The current focus on a cultural model of gender and sexuality allows many more cross-dressers and people who desire people of the same gender to see their difference within a larger context. The strength of an essential model of gender at the time of Nightwood's publication makes the characters more likely to internalize and isolate themselves with their feelings of gender dysphoria. While Villanelle attributes her cross-dressing to forces outside herself, Doctor O'Connor sees his difference as contained by his own body. In addition, the aftermath of the relationship between Nora and Robin is also blamed on these two characters and their deviant attraction to each other. According to Lillian Faderman, Nightwood's "atmosphere of decay" descends from the French Decadent literature of Baudelaire and others (412). In these novels lesbians are portrayed as damned creatures who use their erotic power to destroy themselves and others (Faderman 295). With this literary history in mind, it is not surprising that Nightwood depicts the love between Nora and Robin as unnatural and almost evil.
Jeanette Winterson's third novel, *Sexing the Cherry*, contains several characters who have ambivalent or ironic connections to their gender, or, as Lisa Moore says in “Teledildonics: Virtual Lesbians in the Fiction of Jeanette Winterson” (1995), “the protagonists of this novel either move between and among gender and sexual identifications (Jordan), or simply exceed them (his foster mother, the Dog Woman)” (116). Moore points this out to make the case that each one is a “virtual lesbian,” but this chapter uses Moore’s quote in order to begin building the case that the characters of Dog Woman, Dog Woman’s twentieth-century alter ego, and Jordan critique binary and essential notions of gender through the actions and presentations of their bodies. In other words, Moore’s article and this chapter have related but slightly different aims.

**Haraway’s Cyborg Theory and the Penumbra Character**

Like Moore, this chapter will look at Donna Haraway’s theory of the cyborg as described in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991) in conjunction with *Sexing the Cherry*. Parts of Haraway’s theory are useful for reading this novel, particularly her discussion of border characters who embody opposites. Haraway defines a cyborg as “a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centres structuring any possibility of historical transformation,” (150). Haraway’s focus is on the
boundaries that have no meaning in the twentieth century anymore: between animals and humans, between organisms and machines, and between the physical and the ethereal. In order to focus on these concerns, Haraway places her “ironic political myth” in a post-gender world of technology, while Winterson places her novel in a seventeenth-century world of little technology steeped in gender concerns (147). Although both writers address the problems of binaries, Winterson’s novel focuses more directly on the gender binary and Haraway’s theory extrapolates from the gender binary into the twentieth-century concern of how technology and the effects of capitalism have changed the ways people are marginalized. Yet Haraway herself says that “the production of universal, totalizing theory is a major mistake that misses most of reality,” a statement which, when stretched to include the replication of universal theory, gives this writer license to take what I can use from her manifesto (181).

Like Haraway’s cyborg feminism, Winterson’s novels explore the boundary between animals and humans; but at the same time Winterson also plays with the male-female split, a border which Haraway hardly addresses (directly) as part of her theory, and she places the cyborg in a world beyond gender. Yet, by reading the cyborg solely as a fragmented border character who does not yearn for a unified self and who is “resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity” and placing it within the realm of issues of gender, I have created a “penumbra character” to describe the characters in Sexing the Cherry (151, 153). I developed the idea of the penumbra character from Haraway’s idea that partiality and contradiction can be powerful. Moore uses Haraway’s cyborg to examine Dog Woman, but I
use ideas from Haraway to construct a penumbra character and use that to examine characters such as Dog Woman. Using the metaphor of the penumbra, the area of total illumination is the cultural ideal of masculinity and the area of complete shadow is the cultural ideal of femininity, the penumbra is the fluctuating area between the masculine and feminine. In this way, the penumbra character is not genderless, but so steeped in gender and gender politics that the only way for this character to act responsibly is to ironically show him or herself performing or exceeding gender. Cross-dressing and monstrous displays of femininity are some examples of this type of performance which appear in *Sexing the Cherry*.

First, this chapter will examine the characters of Dog Woman and her alter ego as penumbra characters. Dog Woman has more monstrous and violent (or masculine) qualities than her alter ego; however her alter ego enjoys a daydream of herself as a powerful giant who forcibly retrains world leaders. The next section will describe Jordan’s forays into the “female” world as a cross-dresser and explain how the cherry he grafts is also a penumbra organism or character. The grafted cherry lends a new facet, or as Moore says, a third sex, to the discussion about gender in *Sexing the Cherry*, and allows Winterson to examine gender using a non-human character. The final section of this chapter explores the question of whether Winterson’s penumbra characters are working toward a world beyond gender.

**Seventeenth-Century Dog Woman**

Lisa Moore also makes the connection between Dog Woman and the cyborg in her article on virtual lesbians. In “Teledildonics: Virtual Lesbians in the Fiction of Jeanette Winterson” (1995), Moore says that Dog Woman can be read as a virtual lesbian character
because she "exceeds and ironizes normative femininity." Moore reads her "excess as success, her powerful monstrosity as virtually lesbian" (120). Moore also connects this power of physical ugliness with the cyborg feminist criticism of Donna Haraway. According to Moore, Dog Woman's lack of a birth story as well as her struggle to survive in a world where she is seen as a monster by the Puritans, are also cyborg qualities (122). According to Haraway, "Cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as Other" (qtd. in Moore 122). Some of the features which Moore explains as cyborg qualities also make Dog Woman a penumbra character, although the focus of this chapter is more directly on gender. The physical ugliness of Dog Woman is a characteristic which does not make her feminine.

Dog Woman does not don men's clothes, and thus cannot be explained as a cross-dresser, but she does describe her physical characteristics as distinctly un-feminine, and her occasional attempts at "female" behavior are approached ironically.

How hideous am I?
My nose is flat, my eyebrows are heavy. I have only a few teeth and those are a poor show, being black and broken. I had smallpox when I was a girl and the caves in my face are home enough for fleas. But I have fine blue eyes that see in the dark (19).

Dog Woman does not try to downplay her ugliness or cover up the pits in her face, but plays the ugliness up as a sort of virtue. The strength in her ugliness is neither feminine nor masculine, but a new power outside of gender. Her description exposes femininity and beauty as the constructions they are and shows her to be an animal like the dogs that she keeps. The
fleas living on her face give the truth to her name also. The heroine of *Sexing the Cherry* is not both strong and beautiful, but she is strong, and, in keeping with the idea of the penumbra character, somewhat masculine and somewhat animalistic. In a move that sidesteps the question of gender as performance, Dog Woman does not think about her costume, but then again neither do her dogs.

Like the cyborg, the penumbra character also explodes the distinction between an animal and a human (152). Dog Woman fits this aspect of the penumbra character because of her matter-of-fact attitude toward killing Puritans. At one point in the novel, she meets with a group of Loyalists to the King and one asks how they can kill Puritans without breaking one of the ten commandments. The speaker reminds the Loyalists of the Bible verse which calls for an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Dog Woman is heartened by this speech since she was already killing Puritans before the meeting, but had not considered how to kill while obeying the commandments. It did not occur to Dog Woman to seek justification for murder because she kills Puritans the way other people kill mosquitoes. A month after the first meeting, Dog Woman attends the next meeting with 119 eyeballs and over 2,000 teeth from Puritans (93). She is proud of her exploits, even though the other Loyalists at the meeting are appalled. Her violent approach to the opposition is not “ladylike,” but it takes the “masculine” notion of revenge to an extreme. Her behavior could be more accurately described as monstrous or animalistic. Dog Woman has an enormous capacity for violence which she uses for power and revenge, but her companions are rarely shocked by her physical power, perhaps because she never uses her strength against her son Jordan or the dogs she breeds.
Dog Woman uses her monstrous strength to dispose of Puritan bodies that are accumulating in the basement of the Spitalfields brothel. The prostitutes are killing Puritans who patronize their establishment. Dog Woman helps the sisters, as they call themselves, dispose of the Puritans' bodies because “They would not trust a man to help” (93). It sounds as though the prostitutes assume that a man will tell the police what they are doing. By asking Dog Woman to help them, they are telling her that they do not see her as male, although they all live on the edges of the cultural construction of femininity, and certainly none of them are “ladies.” Two men who torment Dog Woman the most, Preacher Scroggs and Neighbor Firebrace, frequent the brothel, and Dog Woman works out an arrangement with the prostitutes so that she can kill them the way the king was killed. The two men arrive at the brothel dressed as Caesar and Brutus, and Dog Woman forces her way into their room (and their all-male narrative) to behead them (96). This female world of the brothel is a powerful one, and a particularly dangerous one for men. In this place, women are the workers and men are the customers. However, Dog Woman’s gender could be placed as female insofar as she is a worker, but she does not sell her services; and she is not a customer and therefore male, either. Yet she kills two Puritan men inside the brothel, as the prostitutes do, and she helps them clear out the bodies. The brothel is a place where gender constructions separate women and men into workers and customers, but Dog Woman, as a penumbra character, does not easily fit into the space for men or the space for women in the brothel. Thus, the brothel actually serves as an excellent example of Dog Woman’s status as a penumbra character in a highly gendered context. The reason for this split between the men and women in the brothel
is because of the cultural ideas about heterosexual sex, which Dog Woman does not fit into either. Her penumbra body, although female in the biological sense, does not "fit" with a man's.

Dog Woman explains that she had sex with a man once in the brothel, but she was not impressed with the whole experience because she was too large for him, or he was too small for her.

I did mate with a man, but cannot say that I felt anything at all, though I had him jammed up to the hilt. As for him, spread on top of me with his face buried beneath my breasts, he complained that he could not find the sides of my cunt and felt like a tadpole in a pot. He was an educated man and urged me to try and squeeze in my muscles, and so perhaps bring me closer to his prong. I took a great breath and squeezed with all my might and heard something like a rush of air through a tunnel, and when I strained up on my elbows and looked down I saw I had pulled him in, balls and everything (121).

After he is extracted and revived, he then attempts oral sex, but gives up and says, "You are too big, madam" (121). She looks down at her genitalia, which "seemed all in proportion" to her and says, "These gentlemen are very timid" (121). Dog Woman seems to have no desire for sexual intercourse, and gets no pleasure from it, but approaches it as another event to be experienced. At another point in the novel, Dog Woman says that she would like to become pregnant and bear a child, but that "there's no man who's a match for me" (4). She doesn't want the sex, but the outcome. The penumbra character is not driven by sexual desire, and in
a sense, by living between the constructs of masculinity and femininity, the character can opt out of the heterosexual matrix. The problem is that Dog Woman wants another child, and they rarely wash up on the riverbank the way Jordan does. Dog Woman recounts her only other sexual experience with a man in the same matter-of-fact tone.

A stranger asks her to touch his penis and watch it grow. She finds this mildly interesting and places it in her mouth when he asks her to. She says, “I like to broaden my mind when I can and I did as he suggested, swallowing it up entirely and biting it off with a snap” (40). She has not been taught that this is the locus of power, and so she eats it just like the banana the explorer displays in the square. In that scene, an explorer named Johnson displays a banana that he brought back from the Bahamas and tries to explain to the astonished crowd that it is a fruit that can be eaten (5-6). Dog Woman does not learn reverence for the male member through either experience, and says that she will tell Jordan to be more careful with his heart than with his penis (41). This scene also demonstrates that Dog Woman has not been trained to service a man’s sexual desires. She sees this stranger’s invitation as another potential experience and connects his actions back to the wrong memory by equating his penis with a fruit. Certainly living between masculinity and femininity gives Dog Woman a fresh perspective on the male body, and perhaps she thinks that men have the same power over their bodies as she does. Dog Woman can disappear—an ability which downplays the importance of any physical part of the body.

Dog Woman takes off her dress about once every five years, but when she does she is invisible to others “[l]ike the angels” (98). This description indicates that there is something
at once very physical and ethereal about Dog Woman—she is both embodied and disembodied. Not even the constraints of physics stick to this penumbra character’s body. She says, “I, who must turn sideways through any door, can melt into the night as easily as a thin thing that sings in the choir at church” (8). In one scene, Dog Woman outweighs an elephant named Samson at a carnival and seems rather proud of the spectacle she creates: “It is a responsibility for a woman to have forced an elephant into the sky” (21). However, in an unfeminine and almost animalistic way, she is not embarrassed by her size nor modest about her body. Before the contest, the carny attempts to search Dog Woman and she lifts her dress to show him and the crowd that she does not have any weights on her, or any underwear either (20). Dog Woman’s attitude about the body which others see as monstrous indicates an almost childlike ignorance about how she should act. Yet, the tone of some of her statements indicates that she knows exactly what behavior is expected of her and chooses instead to provoke people. At the carnival she could have let the carny search her privately, but instead lifts her dress to astonish the crowd. As another example, Dog Woman says that whenever she knows that she will be near a Puritan church, she braids pieces of brightly-colored cloth into her hair to bother the Puritans (91). She will not go quietly, and she refuses to allow other people to classify her as a passive lady. Even the theories about the matter of her body are hers to control.

In a review of Sexing the Cherry in the Village Voice Literary Supplement (1990), Carol Anshaw says that she cannot accept that Dog Woman can both outweigh an elephant and be light enough to be wheeled around in a wheelbarrow by Jordan and Tradescant (17).
She cites this as a flaw of Winterson's novel. But as a penumbra character, Dog Woman embodies the ironic distance between the physical and the cultural and her body could be both heavy and light. In addition, like the people in the floating town in *Sexing the Cherry*, she does not need to follow the laws of gravity unless they benefit her. Anshaw's question also has to do with edges of the body and the importance of realism, which are both ideas that Winterson continually flouts. In order for the idea of the penumbra character to apply to Winterson's characters, it must also be fantastic, or both heavy and light. Dog Woman is nearly impossible, but she explodes binary ways of thinking by being both heavy and light, both human and animal, both male and female.

Dog Woman's male and female, animal and human, embodied and disembodied characteristics all show her to be a character who lives in the penumbra of these binaries. Even her violent and nurturing tendencies fit together to create the character who easily kills Puritans, but goes home to tend to Jordan. She lives not in confusion, but with the sense that the people who uphold these binaries are, like the Puritans, power mongers who want to tell her how to live. As a penumbra character, she uses her difference as power. For example, not being male or female in the construct of the brothel allows Dog Woman to learn that Puritan men frequent the establishment and allows her to kill her two enemies, but does not place her in the female role of the sex worker. As an insider and outsider, Dog Woman doles out her own kind of justice.
Contemporary Dog Woman

Another penumbral character in *Sexing the Cherry*, Dog Woman’s modern alter ego, has different ideas about gender and its connection to injustice. Dog Woman’s alter ego is a scientist who lives in a tent on a riverbank and fights the big businesses, run mostly by men, which have polluted the river. Like Dog Woman’s destruction of Puritans, the contemporary Dog Woman dreams of large-scale justice. In her ecofeminist fantasy of restructuring the world she takes on the shape of a giant monstrous woman and kidnaps suited business people from the World Bank, generals who work for the Pentagon, presidents, dictators, and anyone who wields power on an international level. Then,

I force all the fat ones to go on a diet, and all the men line up for compulsory training in feminism and ecology. Then they start in on the food surpluses, packing it with their own hands, distributing it in a great human chain of what used to be power and is now co-operation (139).

In her fantasy many of the people in power are men, but she does not scoop them up because of their gender, but because of what they have done to the earth. Her larger goal of cleaning up the water is linked to feminist thought—after all, the male world leaders have to take classes in feminism—but she sees the larger problem as a disconnection from the earth and other people. Yet, there is a hint that female world leaders would be her allies as soon as she brought them to the camp because she says she will not require them to go though classes in feminism. The theory that women in power discard their “femaleness” in order to buy into the boys’ world does rest on an essential and opposing theory of gender. Although the idea of
sisterhood based on biology is attractive, if gender is a cultural construct, then the
contemporary Dog Woman’s vision needs revision. By asserting a binary and essential model
of gender in her daydream, the contemporary Dog Woman slips out of the definition of a
penumbra character as a character who sees gender as a spectrum. Yet, her description of
herself as a woman who is not quite feminine—passive, beautiful, powerless—does fit into
the definition of a penumbra character.

The contemporary Dog Woman introduces herself as “a woman going mad...a woman
hallucinating,” but she is not crazy, only unarmed and brilliant (138). This is the woman on
the edge—of the river, of madness, of revolution, whose vision is not disconnected from her
gender. She’s fighting a war against the very structure of capitalism and concludes that her
fantasies are tied to the level of mercury in the river. This madness manifests itself in a mad
world, and perhaps it is the only sane response. The mercury in the water is physically
affecting her mind, and the edges of her body are becoming less distinct from the sick river,
and her crusade to clean up the river can be read as an attempt to heal herself. Her
unambiguous and tireless response to the world is to write articles about her scientific
findings and knock on doors to tell people about the poisoned river. Like the earlier Dog
Woman, the contemporary Dog Woman’s shifting identity does not need to completely
stabilize for her to effect change, although she does need to tear herself away from the river
and go into town. Also, like the earlier Dog Woman, this Dog Woman’s body reflects her
difference from other people.
As a child, the contemporary Dog Woman was overweight and her parents saw her as "genuinely alien" from them (141). She describes her weight as a response to being ignored: "It seems obvious, doesn't it, that someone who is ignored will expand to the point where they have to be noticed, even if the noticing is fear and disgust" (141). The physical/cultural body responds to stimuli, and reacts by taking up more space. Judith Butler would ask whether the body's physical matter can be negotiated without cultural translation through language. Elizabeth Grosz, in *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (1994), says that body building is a technique humans use to literally refigure their already marked flesh according to cultural conventions (143). This idea could apply to gaining weight as well. The character seems to frame this weight gain as a physical manifestation of an emotional need, but the emotions and the body do not exist outside of the influences of culture. At a young age, children learn that an overweight little girl is not only ugly and un-feminine, but possibly slothful and stupid. The girl's girth makes her undesirable and, in a sense, her larger body counts as less. Whether this girl has consciously or unconsciously taken up the project of expanding for the sake of embodying her anger, or whether as an adult she looks back and rewrites the meaning of her body through the cultural norms she has learned, or whether these were cultural norms she learned and used as a child, cannot quite be pinpointed, because, as Grosz would say, the girl's body was never a blank slate, but was a cultural object even at its conception (142). Like the seventeenth-century Dog Woman, the contemporary Dog Woman sees her former size as a source of power, though.
The modern Dog Woman also fantasizes about breaking her parents’ house, from the inside, with her enormous body. By physically breaking the home, she can destroy her parents’ ideas of who she should be while also destroying the culturally circumscribed seat of female power. Within this seat of female power she sees little room for doing environmental activism or inciting wide-scale revolution. It is significant that when she moves out of her parents’ house she sheds most of her weight and becomes a “closet” [my word] monster because she says that if she got a home and a partner she would “break out, splitting my dress, throwing the dishes at the milkman if he leered at me...” (144). Like a werewolf, the modern Dog Woman feels her monstrous body hiding inside her “normal” body, and fears that living a conventional life in a home with a (male) partner could act as her full moon. The idea of her as a housewife doing dishes while the milkman delivers bottled milk has a nostalgic, and mythical, ring to it. Consequently, her life living on the bank of the river allows her to feel less closeted—she is not hiding her monster self in the status quo. If she sees the home as the domain of the traditional woman, it follows that living in a tent is also an escape from the expectations of traditional woman. The penumbra character has a sense of her inability to fit into binary notions of gender, and by extension heterosexual conventions for family life. Her response is to fight.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick discusses the trope of the closet in her book *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) and speaks particularly of the times when it is used to describe instances that do not directly refer to sexual orientation:

I think that a whole cluster of the most crucial sites for the contestation of meaning in twentieth-century Western culture are consequently and
quite indelibly marked with the historical specificity of homosocial/homosexual definition...(72).

In other words, homosexuality and the idea of homosexuality are part of the ideas which are invested with heterosexual cultural significance, like the home. Sedgwick does not say this, but many of the ways in which homosexuals know they are not straight become manifest in the ways that they do not easily fit into heterosexual cultural models, like the home and the family, so these places become litmus tests for individuals living in a heterosexual culture.

The contemporary Dog Woman character says that her monster would escape if she were living a "regular" life with a partner in a possibly heterosexual relationship. In the West, the home has often been seen as a site where gender roles are rigidly enforced and learned, or as Sedgwick says, as a "site for the contestation of meaning." In order to reconcile her conflicting images of her body and subvert the culture's designs on her body, the contemporary Dog Woman lives (like an animal) on the bank of a river. Living as an animal gives this penumbra character a way out of the binary scheme of gender and culture, and allows her to fight for the political change that she values higher than companionship (with a mate). Like the seventeenth-century Dog Woman, the contemporary Dog Woman opts out of the heterosexual schema which would fix her as a housewife, and uses her power as neither a man nor woman (in the cultural sense) to devote herself to environmental activism. Once again, like the earlier Dog Woman, the contemporary Dog Woman sees her monstrous difference as the source of her power.
Jordan

The second to last penumbra character this chapter will examine also sees his difference as powerful, but unlike the seventeenth-century Dog Woman (his adopted mother), and the contemporary Dog Woman, he cross-dresses in order to explore the area between the genders. His first instance of cross-dressing is instigated by prostitutes so that he can stay in a brothel, an experience that parallels Dog Woman’s job disposing bodies in a brothel. In both instances, the penumbra character moves through this site of enforced binary gender roles and escapes categorization as either a worker or a customer. Through Jordan’s cross-dressing he learns how the binary gender scheme is enforced, while eluding it, and discovers the chauvinism of women.

While traveling and gathering information about a woman he loves, Jordan finds a group of prostitutes who tell him to return to them in “female disguise” because “As a man, however chaste, I would be driven away or made a eunuch” (27). If Jordan will not be a customer, the only role for men in a brothel, he must present himself as a woman or lose his manhood. His choices are delineated by the binary gender scheme. Like the Spitalfields brothel where the prostitutes kill Puritans and his mother helps dispose of the bodies, this brothel is a dangerous place for penumbra characters: people who are neither customers nor workers, neither male nor female. The separation between men and women is greater in this profession, but, like Dog Woman, Jordan can slip across the line by dressing as a woman. He has no qualms about wearing a dress and the prostitutes comment on his feminine skin, a comment that testifies to Jordan’s ability to pass (27). While staying at the brothel, Jordan
finds that the nuns down the river help the prostitutes escape at night, and some of them have affairs together. Both groups of women are ruled by men, but by helping each other they are able to subvert or escape the systems that control them. Some of the prostitutes had even stolen valuables from the brothel and sold them to escape their lives of prostitution. In fact, the idea of nuns and whores working together sounds like the beginning of a dirty joke, but when these confined women work together, they find that their situations are not that different. Jordan decides to continue living as a woman after leaving the brothel, and learns even more about male-female relations from a woman he meets while selling fish.

In Jordan’s experience as a woman, although the prostitutes are impressed by his beauty, he feels he cannot pass effectively when working with other women because he does not “speak the language,” which is “not dependent on the constructions of men but structured by signs and expressions, and that uses ordinary words as code-words meaning something other” (29). Jordan’s observation that gender is more than costume but that gender is also learned in concert with communication skills and an individual’s relations to systems of power extends his understanding of the binary gender system. As in the examples of the seventeenth-century Dog Woman and the contemporary Dog Woman, binary notions of gender affect the ways in which people dress, communicate, have children, raise children, set up families, and work. Jordan learns this only when he is shifted into the female side of the binary because men do not need to know how to subvert a system which privileges them. As a male penumbra character, Jordan often passes as male when he is not wearing a dress, while the female penumbra characters, Dog Woman and contemporary Dog Woman because of their
monstrous tendencies, never quite pass as female. That is why his experience of gender is slightly different than theirs.

Jordan is told by his female boss that women fancy themselves smarter than men and he says, “I never guessed how much they [women] hate us [men] or how deeply they pity us” (29). Throughout this experience, Jordan never fully identifies with the women and, even in this statement, reaffirms his maleness by using the pronouns they and us. Yet, throughout this section, there is an assertion that men are one way and women are another way. This posturing reinforces the binary structure of gender roles, while in the character of Jordan, a man-woman learns about these distinctions. This “reiteration with a difference” sounds much like Judith Butler’s call to arms in *Gender Trouble*.

The task is not whether to repeat [the binary gender scheme], but how to repeat or, indeed, to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, to displace the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself (148).

Jordan, the man dressed as a woman, learning how to be a better woman shows how foolish the whole structure of gender is. In fact, by following Butler’s logic, Jordan in drag constitutes a third gender that displaces the binary male-female essential structure of gender—he is both male and female and neither male nor female. This is also why the penumbra character is so unsettling to the male-female and human-animal binaries. The emergence of the penumbra character out of the space between the binaries points out the falseness of the cultural construction.
The woman who owns the fish market writes a book for Jordan to learn more about men, so that Jordan can be a more effective woman. By writing this book and attempting to teach Jordan the secrets of being a woman, the owner of the fish market points out the inessential character of gender. If it can be taught, it is not fixed and immutable. Her book lists short "truths" about men like these:

1. Men are easy to please but are not pleased for long before some new novelty must delight them.

2. Men are easy to make passionate but are unable to sustain it.

3. Men are always seeking soft women but find their lives in ruins without strong women.

4. Men must be occupied at all times otherwise they make mischief.

5. Men deem themselves weighty and women light. Therefore it is simple to tie a stone round their necks and drown them should they become too troublesome (30).

These aphorisms sound like the books that have become popular in the last five years that purport to explain men and women, like *Men are From Mars, Women are From Venus*, by John Gray. However, the contemporary popular books overtly emphasize cooperation between women and men while this list is more spiteful and tells women they can just kill men that become too much trouble. Since penumbra characters like Dog Woman and Jordan play with the binary gender model throughout this novel, it seems that this list that explains the rules about how men and women interact should be taken somewhat lightly. At a later
point in *Sexing the Cherry*, Winterson (this section is not attributed to a character) lists seven common lies about the world, including, “There is only the present and nothing to remember,” “We can only be in one place at a time,” and “Reality as [sic] something which can be agreed upon” (90). This list of lies questions the validity of the earlier list about men by complicating the way experience can be organized. If reality cannot be agreed upon, then how can a list about how men and women act be taken seriously at all? After all, gender is only one filter through which we see the world, so even two women would not be able to agree on what reality is. With the penumbra characters complicating the binary categorization of gender in addition to the statement about reality as disputable, the fish woman’s list looks even less useful for Jordan and for the reader.

Perhaps the point of the list is to show that as a child Jordan never learned about the cultural construction of gender because his mother lives in the penumbra between masculinity and femininity. She does not try to be a lady, although she seems to have once tried to lure a man that she loved (by bathing). She breeds and fights her dogs, and the only men she talks to, besides Jordan and Tradescant, are the Puritans she hates and kills. As a child, Jordan probably thought that she was a regular mother, and never learned to be embarrassed by her. In fact, as a child he liked her trick of holding twelve oranges in her mouth at a time, something most women (or men) could not do (21). Only when he leaves Dog Woman does Jordan discover that there are men and there are women and that each should behave differently. The penumbra character as a mother does not reinforce binary modes of thinking about gender, but raises Jordan in her own image and it is only when he leaves her that he
learns about the lies that pass as gender norms. Dog Woman creates another penumbra character by raising him mostly in seclusion from the culture of gender. Jordan’s interest in grafting plants also arises from his new knowledge about cultural notions of gender and reproduction.

**The Hybrid Cherry**

As an adult Jordan becomes fascinated with the process of grafting fruit trees to make stronger strains. He describes it as, “the means whereby a plant, perhaps tender or uncertain, is fused into a hardier member of its strain, and so the two take advantage of each other and produce a third kind, without seed or parent” (84). This third sex, produced without parents in the usual way, is another penumbra character which splits the difference between femaleness and maleness.

In Laura Doan’s article “Jeanette Winterson’s Sexing the Postmodern” (1994), she describes the grafting of the cherry as a process which undermines gender constructions by positing reproduction without heterosexual sex—a project that she says fulfills Judith Butler’s call for taking over and destabilizing of the terms of “identity” themselves (152). According to Doan, the creation of a hybrid cherry through grafting, a procedure that fascinates Jordan but disgusts the Dog Woman, creates a “third sex.” Doan describes grafting “as sexual reproduction outside of (or beyond) a heterosexual model and, in turn, spawning a third sex relatively free of binarisms” (153). While acknowledging the problem of basing a politics upon this shifting and potentially complex idea of grafting, Doan says that grafting does undermine heterosexual ideology.
Doan's reading of the process of grafting is insightful, but when seen as a penumbra character, the hybrid cherry becomes a new site of contestation about bodies and gender. In the novel, it appears that the tree grows successfully after the grafting, but humans must decide whether the cherry tree is male or female and cannot let it just thrive without a gender. Yet the cherry seems not to need a gender in order to thrive: "...the cherry grew, and we have sexed it and it is female" (85). If this quote is read chronologically, the cherry tree's grafted pieces fuse and it grows before the humans put a gender on it. A human fetus also grows and prospers before it is sexed, although this is one of the first duties of the doctor or midwife. Once again, like the cherry, the newborn baby is not allowed to thrive without being gendered. Perhaps this is a more pessimistic reading than Doan's, but I cannot see how the hybrid cherry completely escapes the binary, except in its "conception." Jordan does not describe the sexes of the grafted pieces before the operation, a detail which indicates that gender does not matter before the cherry's creation. Doan talks about how the hybrid cherry is both a biological and a cultural artifact—indeed that it is the offspring of biology and culture (152). This hybrid cherry is a penumbra character, which has gender placed upon it. The cherry has a new kind of birth story, and is both the product and process of the merging of technology, nature, and human capability. However, the cherry is sexed from outside, and exists in a gendered world. The cherry does not need a gender, but maybe its culture does.

**Conclusion: Winterson's Goal?**

Unlike the other penumbra characters in *Sexing the Cherry*, the grafted cherry cannot be said to have any agency to perform gender, as the human characters could, so the way in
which the cherry is sexed is particularly unique. Doan talks about the hybrid cherry as a metaphor for a new lesbian politics but the missing link is agency. If, as Judith Butler says, political action to dismantle the gender binary and throw off all of its cultural baggage cannot happen outside of the reach of the gender binary, then the hybrid cherry has only a temporary reprieve. Even the cherry does not escape—it is declared female. The other penumbra characters actually do the hard work of fighting the binary through their monstrous depictions of femininity, their refusal to fully participate in the heterosexual mating conventions, and their forays into cross-dressing. Although Butler says that essential notions of gender can be effectively fought only through performances of gender, essential notions of gender are at least tweaked through all of Winterson’s methods. In the characters of Dog Woman, contemporary Dog Woman, and Jordan Winterson questions the categories of femininity and masculinity, and in the example of the hybrid cherry she examines the cultural expectations of gender upon non-human entities. Because of her non-linear style, I hesitate to say that Winterson is writing toward a genderless world, or to speculate that she has any particular goal for her postmodern exploration of gender. Yet, by writing penumbra characters who move between the poles of masculinity and femininity, Winterson at least rattles the gender essentialists.
CHAPTER 4:
MAPPING, COLONIALISM, AND THE AGENCY OF THE SUBJECT
IN *WRITTEN ON THE BODY*

So now you trace me
like a country’s boundary
or a strange new wrinkle in
your own wellknown skin
and I am fixed, stuck
down on the outspread map
of this room, of your mind’s continent

“The Circle Game” Margaret Atwood (1966)

This chapter considers Jeanette Winterson’s fourth novel, *Written on the Body* (1992), in light of Elizabeth Grosz’s feminist theory on the textual/physical construction of the body explained in her book *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (1994). Winterson’s novel illustrates Grosz’s theory about mapping the body and explores the theory’s connections to power relations, colonialism, erotic love, and the possibility of agency for the subject.

In *Written on the Body*, the narrator has an affair with Louise, who is married to Elgin, a cancer researcher. When Elgin tells the narrator that Louise has leukemia, the narrator agrees with Louise’s husband to break off the relationship and to leave Louise so that Elgin will save her life with cutting-edge cancer technologies in Switzerland. When the narrator realizes that it
was a mistake to leave Louise and goes back to London for her, s/he discovers that Louise has left Elgin and that Louise’s cancer is apparently not symptomatic.

The first section of this chapter explains Grosz’s theory that language inscribes flesh and justifies how her theory can be used in literary scholarship in which bodies are only language. The second section connects Grosz’s theory to the narrator’s action in the novel. In *Written on the Body* the narrator maps Louise’s body like a newly colonized country; s/he carries out the corporeal mapping that Grosz describes. After learning the medical language of Louise’s ill body, the narrator meshes it with his/her desire for Louise, expressing a wish to be her cancer so that they will never be parted. Mapping and colonializing are acts of power over a piece of land or another body, and throughout *Written on the Body* Winterson sets up a power differential between the narrator and Louise which foreshadows the narrator’s mapping of Louise and links the narrator’s project more directly to colonialism. Section three analyzes several digressions on colonial struggles and the problems of language. In one place the narrator quotes *The Tempest* by Shakespeare, and in another section the narrator imagines s/he is Christopher Columbus. The final section of this chapter explores the political and feminist question of Louise’s agency within the discourse of physical mapping by looking at both Grosz’s theoretical and Winterson’s fictional answer to the dilemma. Although the narrator maps Louise in his/her own terms, s/he is only one of many forces inscribing a Louise who is also in the process of inscribing herself. Mapping land and mapping the body are powerful tools, but when many arms wield the different tools each can only have minimal
effects. Louise has agency to map herself within Winterson’s and Grosz’s systems, a finding that has political ramifications beyond the plot of the novel.

**Grosz’s Theory of Mapping the Body**

In the opening scene of the movie *The English Patient* (1996), a movie which contains colonial overtones, the camera plays a trick on the viewer by panning across the sand dunes of Egypt, which look like human flesh, and then changing the subject to examine a piece of parchment where bodies are being painted. This visual trick dramatizes the connections between land, bodies, and texts. The similarities between the contours of the female body and the contours of land have been noted by explorers and artists for many generations. The mapping of the “unknown” territory is usually done by a newcomer to a land that is perceived to need this new language—the land is wild and the newcomer’s language will tame or at least demystify it. The female body has also been mapped by men and (mostly) male doctors in order to tame and demystify women’s bodies. In this way, the language, the flesh, and the culture weave together an acceptable idea of femininity and transpose this back into what counts as acceptable and healthy female flesh. In this way, the language and the flesh merge so that the language, controlled by the cartographers, becomes privileged over the flesh. In fact, there is no flesh that is not negotiated through language. In *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Elizabeth Grosz explains how society writes the body.

Grosz talks about tattooing and other inscriptions on the flesh and then expands her thinking into the ways in which these visible marks are not much different from the invisible marks that create the (textual) body. She maintains that the human body is voluntarily and
involuntarily marked by violence, confinement, drugs, time (scheduling), work, clothing, hygienic routines, and hygienic products (142). The subject’s gender, race, and class come into play in the choosing and placement of the markers, and, as Grosz explains, the division between the body and its social markers is actually an artificial one.

It is crucial to note that these different procedures of corporeal inscription do not simply adorn or add to a body that is basically given through biology; they help constitute the very biological organization of the subject—the subject’s height, weight, coloring, even eye color, are constituted as such by a constitutive interweaving of genetic and environmental factors (142).

By this description, the body never comes to the social realm as a blank sheet, but its very existence and corporeality are already bound up in culture. The idea of the body as a blank sheet of paper still works, though, since all types of paper have a place of origin, a perceived monetary value, a production history, and a particular market. Grosz changes the metaphor into one of etching for similar reasons since “as any calligrapher knows, the kind of texts produced depends not only on the message to be inscribed, not only on the inscriptive tools... used, but also on the quality and distinctiveness of the paper written upon” (191). Writing on paper is not such an innocent metaphor after all, and it helps envision the body as text.

One initial difficulty of applying Grosz’s theory to a novel is the perceived split between the physical/textual body (the body which is language and flesh) and the text-only body (Louise in *Written on the Body*). Since Grosz herself writes her theory about
physical/textual bodies, it would seem that the glue for bonding these types of bodies needs to come from that end of the split. Grosz gives the beginning of an answer when she writes that “bodies are fictionalized, that is, positioned by various cultural narratives and discourses” and calls these bodies “living narratives” (118). Both the physical/textual body and Louise’s text-only body are written in and against cultural influences in which the flesh of the physical/textual body becomes translated through language. The physical carries the marks of the cultural and textual so even the flesh of a breathing person is a construction, as is the body of a fictional character. Using Grosz’s theories as a corporeal discourse bridges this gap between flesh and fiction, both of which come through language. Although there are places in her book where Grosz talks about the experience of living in a female body, it matters more to Grosz how bodies are written and mapped rather than how they are physically constituted, so her theories can be applied to fictional characters like Louise.

The Narrator Maps Louise

At the beginning of their relationship the narrator of *Written on the Body* says that s/he wants to be physically closer to Louise, but this evolves into a desire to own Louise’s body.

I didn’t only want Louise’s flesh, I wanted her bones, her blood, her tissues, the sinews that bound her together. I would have held her to me though time had stripped away the tones and textures of her skin. I could have held her for a thousand years until the skeleton itself rubbed away to dust (51).
Wanting flesh is a metaphor for sexual desire, but expressing desire as the retention of the beloved’s skeleton seems extreme. In this passage, the narrator sounds almost like a necrophiliac—and loving a dead body does not allow for any reciprocity. Desiring flesh becomes owning flesh which becomes writing flesh. The narrator tries to own Louise by mapping her body. First s/he learns the medical language for Louise’s body and disease, and then s/he attempts to write Louise’s body back to health. This method echoes the ways in which Grosz would say that Louise’s body has already been inscribed.

Dissecting and rewriting the body in his/her own terms (based on the medical terms) makes the narrator into the powerful doctor who understands and knows Louise better than she knows herself. Up to this point, the novel has no chapters and any jumps in the narrator’s meditations are signaled with a few blank lines between paragraphs. This structure is interrupted for the narrator’s project which, like a biology textbook, gives each section a separate title page. The narrator’s medical project is broken into four sections: the cells, tissues, systems and cavities of the body; the skin; the skeleton; and the special senses. After each title page a paragraph of medical jargon is reprinted in block capital letters. In the next paragraphs, the narrator muses on how s/he might save Louise’s body and rewrites events from their five-month relationship. The narrator says the aim of the research was to “drown” in Louise now that she is not physically in the narrator’s life, or to continue the relationship through the language of Louise, but:

Within the clinical language, through the dispassionate view of the sucking, sweating, greedy, defecating self, I found a love-poem to Louise. I would go on
knowing her, more intimately than the skin, hair and voice that I craved. I
would have her plasma, her spleen, her synovial fluid. I would recognize her
even when her body had long since fallen away (111).

This idea of the possession of the body through language involves taking the medical
jargon and making it passionate; infusing clinical language with a new context and goal. In
“Teledildonics: Virtual Lesbians in the Fiction of Jeanette Winterson” (1995), Lisa Moore
compares Winterson’s writing in this section to Monique Wittig’s writing in The Lesbian
Body. Moore says that, as in Written on the Body, in Wittig’s novel “the lover’s body is
flayed and vivisected in order to be known” (111). In addition, says Moore, the short
sections in the medical project are similar to Wittig’s format (111). Daphne Kutzer, in the
article “The Cartography of Passion: Cixous, Wittig and Winterson” (1994), also compares
this section of Written on the Body to Wittig’s novel, but says “both women attempt to
rescue and recreate, re-map, the masculinist scientific language of the body” (143). However,
in Winterson’s medical project, by using metaphors of conquering and colonializing to write
Louise’s body and their relationship, the narrator does not come closer to Louise, but only
attempts to own her and then trade her.

In the first section, the narrator describes Louise’s body at war with itself, and
imagines him/herself able to intervene because “Louise is the victim of a coup” while the
systems of the body just keep doing their jobs without question (115). The narrator will save
Louise from herself by rushing over her border. In the next section, the narrator says that s/he
has written on Louise’s body like an explorer on land.
I have flown the distance of your body from side to side of your ivory coast. I know the forests where I can rest and feed. I have mapped you with my naked eye and stored you out of sight...Night flying I know exactly where I am.

Your body is my landing strip (117).

Most disturbing is that this language of colonial conquest is so erotic. The project of dissecting Written on the Body as a study of how the narrator dissects his/her lover and takes ownership of Louise’s body through words is waylaid by the poetic language Winterson uses to describe this conquest. Yet, by taking Louise’s body apart and mapping it as a piece of the relationship they shared, the narrator figures their relationship only in his/her terms, however poetic. Through the actions of going to the library to learn the terminology of Louise’s body and using that knowledge in order to map and own her the narrator reveals him/herself as a powerful force over Louise. In the following section Grosz paraphrases Foucault’s theory of the interplay between knowledge and power in the inscription of bodies:

...knowledge is one of the conduits by which power is able to seize hold of bodies, to entwine itself into desires and practices: knowledge devises methods for the extraction of information from individuals which is capable of being codified, refined, reformulated in terms of and according to criteria relevant to the assessment of knowledge (148).

By learning medical language and rewriting Louise’s body, the narrator converts his/her new knowledge into textual power. Kutzer connects the narrator’s job to his/her mapping of Louise (140). As a translator of Russian into English, the narrator takes texts written in the
curlicue Cyrillic alphabet and makes them into blockish English letters. S/he rewrites figures of speech from the Russian culture and its history of revolution and revolt, and rewrites them into idioms of British English with its history of colonialism. The narrator’s livelihood is words, so s/he understands the power of language to control ideas and people.

In using poetic language for the task of mapping Louise, the narrator attempts to seduce the reader into accepting his/her singular perspective on the relationship between him/her and Louise. The beauty of the language in this section also attempts to distract the reader from the fact that by treating Louise’s body as currency to be traded to her husband the narrator has violated her. There are other signs in the text that Winterson has given the narrator more power than Louise—one of them is the absence of the character’s gender.

The Narrator’s Power

The narrator of Written on the Body does not have a gender, or his/her gender is not revealed. By not gendering the narrator, Winterson invests this character with a special kind of untouchable power. Without a gender, the narrator’s actions cannot be analyzed by the reader within the matrix of gender politics and/or sexual politics. It is a special kind of immunity that Winterson gives this character, one which hinges on the culture’s saturation with gender politics.

For example, if the narrator is read as male, then his mapping of Louise’s body has much more of a colonial tone to it because their bodies are so dissimilar and their positions in the heterosexual world are too. The historical power and labor divisions of heterosexual relationships in the West are also brought to bear on the way the relationship is read between
Louise and a male narrator. If the narrator is read as female, her body is more similar to Louise’s, and her mapping project takes on more of an ironic tone. Yet, this kind of analysis cannot go far when the narrator has no gender.

By giving the ungendered narrator’s lover a gender, Winterson sets up an inequality between the ways in which the reader, reading from within a gendered culture, can understand the two characters. While Louise’s actions and few speeches can be related to her gender, the narrator’s actions and words cannot. This reserves a mysterious quality for the narrator while Louise seems naked in comparison. In fact, through the medical project of the narrator, Louise becomes more than naked—she is skinned and decapitated by the narrator.

Winterson sets up another inequality between the lovers by allowing only the narrator to tell the story of their affair. Winterson uses the single first-person narrator in only one other book: her first novel Oranges Are not the Only Fruit. This observation indicates that Winterson deliberately chose the device of the single first-person narrator in order to set up an omnipotent narrator against a less powerful Louise. In Written on the Body Louise never gets to speak directly to the camera (so to speak) because she always comes filtered through the first-person narrator. In the article “The Cartography of Passion: Cixous, Wittig, and Winterson” (1994), Daphne Kutzer concludes that by disappearing before discussing with Louise the deal between Elgin and him/herself, “the narrator has silenced Louise, silenced the female voice, and hence silenced passion” (143). The silencing of the female voice is a common motif in feminist criticism, but this instance is more complicated because here an
ungendered character silences a female character, and both characters are written by a female author.

Winterson rarely gives Louise voice throughout the whole novel, although she is a highly educated female character (she has a Ph.D. in art history) who may have much to say about the relation between the affair with the narrator and her cancer. If a woman (Winterson) silences a woman (Louise), the breach still has an effect in a gendered world, but at least the end result is that another woman, not a man, is speaking. In this case, Winterson backgrounds Louise in order to show the narrator’s myopia and selfishness. The narrator treats Louise as property by handing her body over to her husband without consulting her, and maps Louise thinking s/he can control her. However, the narrator does not take into account the power which Louise has to inscribe her own body and is shocked when Louise leaves Elgin and his power to treat her cancer. By this logic, the absence of Louise’s voice throughout the novel, and throughout her relationship with the narrator, sets the narrator up for a lesson about his/her behavior toward Louise. Winterson does not silence a major female character in any of her other novels after Oranges are Not the Only Fruit, so Louise’s silencing could be seen as the consequence of writing the entire novel through the eyes of the single first-person narrator, who is eventually punished for trying to control Louise.

Colonial References

In one of the rare spots in the novel where Louise speaks, she accuses the narrator of sleeping with her just as a conquest by using a particularly brutal metaphor: “I don’t want to be another scalp on your pole” (53). In the same scene, when the narrator asks her if s/he can
have Louise’s petticoat, Louise accuses the narrator of “trophy hunting” (53). These are the post-coital accusations of an insecure woman who has read her lover well—and not just her/his body, but her/his potential actions. Louise understands that the narrator is mapping Louise’s body through their encounters, and through her outbursts Louise shows that she shares the narrator’s knowledge about the connections between power relations, mapping and colonialism. Colonial references appear often in the narrator’s musings on his/her relationship with Louise.

Early in the novel, when the narrator begins telling the story, s/he quotes Caliban’s curse on Prospero and Miranda in *The Tempest*: “You taught me language and my profit on’t is/ I know how to curse. The red plague rid you/ For learning me your language” (*Written on the Body* 9). The narrator seems to see him/herself as Caliban since s/he has learned how to say “I love you” and calls this “the most unoriginal thing we can say to one another” (9). However, Louise did not teach the narrator this phrase, and s/he cannot remember which one of them said it first. What is most telling to me about this reference is that in *The Tempest* Prospero’s power comes from books, or language, which corresponds to the narrator’s job as a translator. In fact, if I had to choose between seeing the narrator as a character more like Prospero or more like Caliban, I would have to choose Prospero. In *The Tempest* he conquers the island and controls the people on it. Although Caliban helped Prospero map the island when he arrived, later Prospero made him his slave, and when Caliban curses at Prospero it is because of their unequal relationship (I ii 336-338). Yet, the relationship between Louise and the narrator is different from the one between Caliban and Prospero. Louise is not simply the
narrator’s slave, although the narrator’s release of her flesh to Elgin indicates that the narrator thinks s/he has control over Louise’s body in the same way that Prospero controls Caliban’s body. The idea of the narrator as a Prospero character also fits with his/her identification with Christopher Columbus.

On first seeing Louise naked, the narrator says, “How could I cover this land? Did Columbus feel like this on sighting the Americas?” (52). In this passage, Louise’s body is the “new” land and the narrator is Columbus. So, by extension of this metaphor, sex between the narrator and Louise is like Columbus claiming the Americas for Spain. Notice the vast power differential in this metaphor: the land lies in wait for Columbus to discover it, and the land (but not the people on it who do not appear in this metaphor) does nothing. By objectifying Louise the narrator can take or use her for his/her pleasure without feeling any guilt. In another section, the narrator says, “Her hair cinnabar red, her body all the treasures of Egypt. There won’t be another find like you Louise. I won’t see anybody else” (146). Once again, the narrator speaks of Louise as an inert object; a “find.” She will sit on display in the narrator’s museum, his/her mind, like the “treasures of Egypt” brought back to the British Museum. Like museums, art galleries show the mappings of women’s bodies by (primarily) male artists.

Louise’s degree in art history connects her to a story about Inge, one of the narrator’s ex-girlfriends. When Inge and the narrator went to the Louvre and saw nudes painted by Renoir, Inge exclaimed, “Look at those nudes... Bodies everywhere, naked, abused, exposed. Do you know how much those models were paid? Hardly the price of a baguette. I should rip
the canvases from their frames and go to prison crying ‘Vive la resistance’” (21). Paintings of nudes are a sort of cartography, but one in which the maker may be particularly unaccountable for the perceived differences between the model and the painting. The artist pays the model for the privilege of this unaccountability to "realism." Louise, the art historian, would perhaps know the history of Renoir’s models, and understand the connection to her own situation as a body being passed from the narrator to Elgin. Mapping and painting serve to control the body, but painting often tries to do this while appealing to aesthetics. The painter’s appeal to beauty could be connected to the narrator’s use of poetic language in his/her medical mapping of Louise. Not all critics see the relationship between the narrator and Louise as unequal, however.

Daphne Kutzer (1994) says that mapping serves as a metaphor for the beginning of the relationship between Louise and the narrator, and implies that it becomes a metaphor in which both partners act as cartographers. In “The Cartography of Passion: Cixous, Wittig and Winterson,” Kutzer cites passages where Louise is also implicated as a map maker as evidence for her claim (141-142). However, the ending of the relationship in which Louise’s body is used as a kind of currency between the narrator and Elgin indicates to me that there is not really “autonomy and equality between the two,” as Kutzer says (142). Actually, the narrator thought s/he had colonized Louise to the point where it was her/his responsibility to give up Louise’s body to Elgin, in order to avoid giving the body up to the cancer—another force which is trying to own Louise’s body. It is not until after s/he leaves that the narrator...
decides s/he was wrong to trade off Louise’s body, and their relationship, for a cure to Louise’s cancer.

**Conclusion: Agency and the Mapped Subject**

The narrator, Elgin, and Louise’s cancer all attempt to control Louise’s body, and they all have an effect, but Louise still escapes them all. Louise does not control her body in a vacuum that does not include cultural influences, but constantly picks her way through these obstacles. However, this does not excuse the narrator’s decision to exclude Louise from the negotiations with Elgin over her body. Although the entire novel is spoken through the narrator, and the reader knows their relationship only through the narrator’s viewpoint, it seems that Louise had an effect upon the narrator and s/he was not completely powerless in their relationship. In the medical section, the narrator says, “Bone of my bone. Flesh of my flesh. To remember you it’s my own body I touch. Thus she was, here and here” (130). The narrator rewrites his/her own body through his/her relationship with Louise. In the goodbye letter to Louise the narrator says: “Your hand prints are all over my body. Your flesh is my flesh. You deciphered me and now I am plain to read. The message is a simple one: my love for you” (106). Yet, the narrator stands as both the reader and text and s/he has not been taken by Louise in the same way that s/he took Louise. After having sex with Louise the narrator says: “she has translated me into her own book” (89). According to this quote, the ownership of the narrator’s body belongs to Louise now, but there is no affirmation from Louise that she owns the narrator. In a few quotes, there is also an implication that Louise asked to be mapped: “‘Explore me,’ you said and I collected my ropes, flasks and maps,
expecting to be back home soon. I dropped into the mass of you and I cannot find the way out...Myself in your skin, myself lodged in your bones, myself floating in the cavities that decorate every surgeon’s wall” (120). The narrator thinks of Louise’s body as trapping the narrator inside, and s/he cannot escape, from Louise or from the doctor’s wall. After rewriting the subject, the cartographer has become part of the map. Yet, the map was always part of the narrator—the narrator’s vision, the narrator’s power, the narrator’s Louise. The punchline is that Louise was not only being mapped by the narrator; she was also mapping herself.

Although the narrator hands Louise over to her husband without consulting her, and maps her body in order to control her, Louise never becomes the relic in the museum that the narrator imagines her to be. She has power over her own body and uses that power to leave both her husband and the narrator. The narrator thought s/he could control Louise, but when the power shifts, the narrator realizes that one person cannot completely control another because there are too many other factors. On the second-to-last page of the novel, the narrator is talking to a friend about Louise, whom s/he cannot find anywhere. The narrator says, “I couldn’t find her. I couldn’t even get near finding her. It’s as if Louise never existed, like a character in a book. Did I invent her?” (189). The narrator mapped a Louise that did not correlate with the Louise who ran, but only because the narrator thought s/he had all the power in their relationship and did not expect that power equation to change. It did not occur to the narrator that Louise had any agency that the narrator did not give her, but the narrator was only one of many influences on her.
Grosz explains the place of agency in her theory of corporeal inscription as an important byproduct of the amount of inscription happening to each person’s body. All of us, men as much as women, are caught up in modes of self-production and self-observation; these modes may entwine us in various networks of power, but never do they render us merely passive and compliant. They are constitutive of both bodies and subjects. It is not as if a subject outside these regimes is in any sense more free of constraint, less amenable to social power relations, or any closer to a state of nature. At best such a subject remains indeterminate, nonfunctional, as incapable of social resistance as of social compliance. Its enmeshment in disciplinary regimes is the condition of the subject’s social effectivity, as either conformist or subversive (144).

Grosz’s answer to the question of agency is forceful and all-encompassing. However a body is inscribed by cultures of power, no matter how many categories that body is fit into, the subject and still has agency. According to Grosz, women’s bodies are written by the culture in contrast to men’s, and women need to inscribe the history and experience of their own bodies while fighting and subverting the power of patriarchal cultural inscription. In particular, Grosz says that uniquely female physical experiences, like menstruation, need to be rewritten by women in feminist terms. By rewriting the body, feminists can act as yet another cultural influence upon women’s bodies. Through Grosz’s method, feminists can take up the tools of cultural influence to rewrite the meaning of their physical difference in new terms. In this way, writing, or mapping, the female body does feminist work. Affecting the
cultural influence of women’s bodies means rewriting women. Perhaps the metaphor from the opening scene of *The English Patient* misses the crux of the theory: bodies and land are inscribed by outside powers, but unlike land, only bodies have the power of self inscription.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION:

NOTES ON BARNES, TRANSGENDER THEORY,

COLONIALISM, AND PHYSICS

This final chapter will touch on some additional issues that have tangential relationships to each chapter. Chapter two examines how, in contrast to Djuna Barnes, Winterson writes cross-dressing and non-straight characters who are not tragic or confused. Winterson's penumbra characters, who do not embrace a binary theory of gender, are analyzed in chapter three. Chapter four examines the ways in which Winterson writes a novel about how the culture and the individual writes and dissects bodies.

Chapter 2: Winterson and Barnes

In this chapter, perhaps a great deal more could be made of the fact that both Winterson and Barnes are lesbians. Someone could make the case that The Passion and Nightwood are similar for this very reason, but I think that would be too simplistic. The historical context for lesbians was very different in the Britain of the late 1980s than it was in the Britain and France of the middle 1930s. It could even be said that the word lesbian did not mean quite the same thing, or have the same connotations in each time period. In "Nightwood: The Sweetest Lie" (1991), Judith Lee quotes Barnes as saying, “I’m not a lesbian. I just loved Thelma” (207). Instead of entering this quagmire of sexual identity and historical linguistics, I decided to focus on the similarities between The Passion and Nightwood. Winterson probably
read Nightwood during her time at Oxford, and perhaps The Passion was written with
Barnes’s text in mind. However, this is not an argument I wish to pursue.

Chapter 3: Penumbra Characters and Transgender Theory

While reading Haraway’s theory of the cyborg in conjunction with Marjorie Garber’s book Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety (1992) on transgender theory, I was struck by how similar Cultural influences which converge on female bodies also attempt to control transgender bodies, and transgender theorists are also attempting to deconstruct essential theories.

Marjorie Garber deals with both the theoretical and physical implications of gender theories in her article “Spare Parts: The Surgical Construction of Gender” (1989). Using case studies and quoting researchers of transsexualism and transvestitism, Garber argues that “male subjectivity” (the subject of the journal’s issue) is not easily studied because the culture has simplified gender with essentialism. Garber asserts that the assumption of many of the sources that Garber quotes, that gender is essential and biological, is in itself a social construction. Male to female transsexuals focus on the penis as the site of maleness because the patriarchal culture teaches them to do so. In addition, female to male surgery is much rarer than male to female surgery, which upholds the idea that there is something privileged about the penis that is born on a person, while surgery to construct a penis is too easy or false—it goes against psychoanalytic theories that also privilege the penis or phallus. Garber adds that in order to study gender, theorists must study the transsexuals and transvestites because they have the most invested in the culture’s ideas of gender, even while they “problematize the binary” (157).

In the introduction to her book Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety (1992) Garber says, “transvestitism is a space of possibility structuring and confounding culture: the disruptive element that intervenes, not just a category crisis of male and female, but
the crisis of category itself” (Garber’s emphasis 17). Garber’s emphasis on the physical body as the place in which binary structures of gender are tested sounds similar to Grosz’s theory of the body which is inscribed and actually produced by culture. However, in her theory Grosz falls back on the binary theory of gendered physical bodies in order to maintain a feminist politics when she says, “There will always remain a kind of outsideness or alienness of the experiences and lived reality of each sex for the other. Men, contrary to the fantasy of the transsexual, can never, even with surgical intervention, feel what it is like to be, to live, as women” (207). By privileging the biology of woman over the cultural experience of what it means to be treated as a woman, Grosz cuts her theory of feminism off from Garber’s transgender theory and dilutes the importance of culture on all bodies. Like Grosz, Haraway’s theory of the cyborg also has similarities to Garber’s transgender theory. The cyborg and the transgendered person are cousins in a world which is trying to protect the binaries that they embody and explode. The cyborg exists as both a human and a machine, both animal and human, both matter and ether, while the transgendered person exists as both woman and man, and sometimes as both human and machine. At the same time, both creatures have their humanity called into question as they reject society’s boundaries. Yet, Haraway describes her political manifesto as an “ironic political myth faithful to feminism, socialism, and materialism” and places her politics in a world beyond gender so that the culture cannot use gender to splinter people the way it does now (147). Although I understand the reasons why the cyborg must exist in a post-gender world, this dream of a world beyond gender seems contradictory to her notion that the cyborg does not yearn for a unified self or a perfect language (176). Wouldn’t a world beyond gender be more unified in some senses than a world of many genders—more than two? The difference between the cyborg and the transgendered person is that the transgendered person is steeped in gender and the meanings of gender, while the cyborg is beyond gender. However, the transgender person could be seen as a cyborg that we in a gendered society can understand. The post-operative transsexual is a perfect example of the
merging of machine and human, nature and nurture, male and female. By translating Haraway's cyborg theory through Garber's transgender theory, transgender theory can be understood as complementary to feminist politics in a world that is still struggling through its conceptions of gender. Winterson is already writing the fiction for this alliance.

Chapter 4: Colonialism, Power, and Gender

Some of the conclusions in this chapter carry politically volatile baggage. Louise in *Written on the Body* is being written and colonized by the narrator through his/her medical project, yet she leaves both her husband and the narrator—she writes herself out of their lives. Does this indicate that any colonized body can rewrite her life? Some factors of Louise’s position are taken for granted in this chapter and not examined carefully. She is highly educated (Ph.D. in art history) and, according to Louise’s grandmother, when she divorced Elgin (a doctor) she received a lot of money (167). Her education gave her the qualifications to find a well-paying job and her divorce settlement gave her the financial means to escape her situation. Without education and money her escape would have been much more difficult. I wanted to clarify this position because Grosz’s theory does not take education and financial status into account when a person writes her body. Although she would say that these are both factors that write the body, they also set the context for the possibility of the subject writing her own body; and what form that agency can possibly take.

An Overview: Winterson’s Move From Fantasy to Physics

After *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit*, Winterson wrote several novels using elements of magical realism to explore gender and sexual orientation. *The Passion* and *Sexing the Cherry*
stand as the best examples of this early writing. In *Written on the Body* she moved away from
the full-blown historical fantasy and used a narrator without a gender instead. In *Art and Lies: A Piece for Three Voices and a Bawd*, she moved back to a fantastic style by placing three
characters with historical names on the same train on the same day: Sappho, Handel, and Picasso. Yet, only Sappho is who the reader thinks she is, and the other characters have
different characteristics from their historical namesakes. In this novel, Picasso is a young
female painter whose parents torment her and throw her out of the house. By reinventing
Picasso as a woman, Winterson examines the place that cultural gender oppression can hinder
genius, and takes her examination of gender into the question of who becomes a hero and what
becomes history. However, the fantastic elements of the novel (including a non-linear view of
time), make this one of her least realistic texts. Lately Winterson has integrated reality and
fantasy through physics.

Winterson’s latest novel *Gut Symmetries (1997)* contains a love triangle between two
physicists and a poet. The physicists, Jove and Alice, interpret their relationships with other
people through the lens of their science. Since physicists studying molecular particles cannot
see the particles they are studying, they must create equations of probability to indicate
where a particle is not. This inexact science can be understood as fantasy in a lab, and its
implications restructure human ideas of matter and what counts as reality. In other words, in
physics if you cannot see it, it may still be real. In this way, Winterson is able to write about
gender through the intellectually accepted theories of physics and keep her fantasy. In
addition, physicists understand that studying a particle changes it so that the scientist
becomes part of the experiment. Objectivity is a myth when the boundary between observer
and observed is shattered. Winterson uses this theory in *Gut Symmetries* and gives each character a chance to speak in the first person, and their stories do not always match up because no one is objective. Winterson's use of theories from physics to write a realistic and fantastic novel makes *Gut Symmetries* one of her most ambitious, and true, novels to date.

Although I cannot predict where physics is going, I suspect Winterson will use future theories to her advantage in upcoming novels. It is intriguing that science is becoming so fantastic that Winterson can work through it to do her fantasy realistically. Perhaps future critics of her work will be less likely to ask whether fantasy is politically useful because the stigma associated with fantasy will be negated by the fantastic work being done in science. And perhaps Winterson is on to something here. If physicists cannot study the smallest particles directly and must instead examine where they are not, then perhaps we should not be studying directly what gender is, but where it is unexpectedly different: in same-sex relationships and in the lives of transgendered people.


