

Queering Intimacy in *Written on the Body*

by

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Honors Thesis

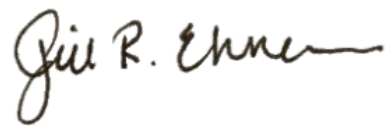
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Introduction: Framing the Conversation

Much scholarship has been devoted to determining the gender of the narrator in Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body*. The novel has been claimed by many as a fundamentally lesbian text, an ode to lesbian intimacy and aesthetics. However, I believe attempting to pin down the narrator's gender and labeling them with an overdetermined identity such as 'lesbian' works against the novel's troubling of categorization and singularity. The fragmented, postmodern structure of the novel itself challenges singularity in the creation of nonlinear time as the narrative alternates between the progression of the narrator's relationship with Louise and the narrator's meditations on past relationships. Further, the trouble is especially evident in the novel's critique of the narrator's construction of Louise, her body, and her disease, explicitly communicated through the narrator's conversations with Gail Right. While Louise's cancer functions as what David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder call "narrative prosthesis," that Gail problematizes the narrator's idealized objectification of Louise suggests a deeper engagement with systems of power as they shape intimate relationships. In this paper, I will analyze the ways in which the narrator's ultimate reckoning with their complicity in dominant and dominating systems of power in the context of their relationship with Louise opens up the possibility of resisting such systems and rearranging power relations by imagining and performing new, affective, queer intimacies.

Engaging Critics

Since publication, feminist and LGBTQ+ literary critics of *Written on the Body* (1994) such as Cath Stowers have argued for a reading of Winterson's narrator as a

lesbian, a woman loving woman with occasional bisexual habits. Despite the lack of a gendered narrator, Stowers argues that *Written on the Body* should be framed within Winterson's lesbianism and read as centered in lesbian ideologies and feminist politics, "engag(ing) with Winterson's work *as a whole* as lesbian texts, or consider(ing) the possibility of a consistent lesbian aesthetic running through her novels" (Stowers 1998, 89). Stowers claims that while Winterson has her narrator "follow masculine paradigms," there is an ultimate rejection of "such models...posit[ing] her narrator as an almost perfect illustration of Wittig's claim that lesbianism is far more than a 'refusal of the *role* "woman"' it is also 'the refusal of the economic, ideological, and political power of a man'" (Stowers 1998, 91). For Stowers, this rejection is demonstrated in the narrator's complication of the binary between self and other into "an almost fluid and fluctuating exchange of self and other, suggest[ing] symbolic gender differences become undercut by lesbian metaphors of sameness" (Stowers 1998, 93). This perceived rejection of heterosexual/masculine paradigms leaves Stowers with "little doubt that this narrator is indeed female" and is demonstrated in an "alliance between Self and Other which becomes so strong, that her/his body becomes the site of a love so reciprocal that disease too becomes dual" (Stowers 1998, 92, 94). While I agree that there is absolutely something subversive and queer happening in the way the novel conceptualizes the relationship between self and other, I hesitate to attribute this simply to a kind of lesbian aesthetic. There is indeed more being done than a simple reinforcement of normative power relations, but I believe Winterson is also doing more than trying to "lesbianise" them (Stowers 1998, 93).

Framing Winterson's text within a strictly lesbian subject position denies the intentional indeterminacy of both the narrator's gender and sexuality. While Stowers does question if "Winterson is experimenting with bisexuality as a possible subject position and narrative tactic to escape from heterosexual gendering," she undercuts the significance of such a possibility by asserting that Winterson is doing so "with specifically lesbian aims" (Stowers 1998, 99). This is exactly the kind of bisexual erasure that Laura Erickson-Schroth and Jennifer Mitchell critique in their essay "Queering Queer Theory, or Why Bisexuality Matters". Laura Erickson-Schroth and Jennifer Mitchell argue that lesbian readings of the text erase both bi-identity and theory that comes along with a conceptualization of sexuality as a "seamless matrix" rather than a binary opposition (Erickson-Schroth, Mitchell 2009, 305). Erickson-Schroth and Mitchell trouble the frequent emphasis on stable constructions of sexual identity and argue that bisexuality "demands a reconfiguration of the ways in which we define our desired-object-choice, diffusing outward from a monosexual paradigm into significantly more open-ended categories" (Erickson-Schroth and Mitchell 2009, 313). However, they recognize that though bisexuality does force a broader view of sexuality, due to the prefix *bi-*, the term itself still often implies a binary gender structure with femininity and masculinity situated oppositionally in conjunction with dimorphic biological sexes (Erickson-Schroth, Mitchell 2009, 304). Despite this, they believe that the narrator's perceived bisexuality may serve as a "rejection of any notion of a gendered/sexed core [that] allows for a reading of individuals as the 'same' regardless of sex or gender," a rejection that, to them, "theoriz[es] bisexuality" (Erickson-Schroth and Mitchell 2009, 308). Again, though it is true that there is a deeply troubling erasure

of bisexuality within mainstream and gay/lesbian circles, I do not believe that reducing the narrator to any particular identity category, including bisexuality, truly recognizes the full extent of work being done within Winterson's text.

While many theorists seem to argue that the subversiveness of Winterson's text depends on the identity of the narrator and their supposed rejection of masculinity and patriarchal norms, I would like to argue that the text is subversive regardless of any kind of identitarian claims. Claiming the narrator as a lesbian, or even as a bisexual, as a way to defend or assert the novel's subversiveness fails to recognize the ways the novel complicates gender and sexuality through entanglements with other systems of power as well as the ways in which queer people may still participate in systems of oppression including patriarchy. If the narrator is allowed to be undefined, the novel's de/construction of femininity and masculinity, love, disease, and embodiment can be reevaluated and problematized. As many critics have recognized, the narrator's understanding of relationships and intimacy falls within a normative and dominating patriarchal pattern. For example, the narrator frequently objectifies their past significant others in an often traditionally heterosexual and masculine manner, saying "Why didn't I dump Inge and head for a Singles Bar? The answer is her breasts" and "How could I cover this land? Did Columbus feel like this on sighting the Americas?" (Winterson 1994, 24, 52). Accepting ambiguity, the narrator's understanding and performance of intimacy can be analyzed beyond supposedly inherent lesbian subversiveness through an exploration of the multifaceted movements of power within the narrative. Winterson's text holds far more possibility than a strictly identity-based lesbian or bisexual politic would allow.

A Problem of Identity

While I believe gendering the narrator may ultimately limit possibilities for analysis, I am not arguing for a dismissal of the impacts of gendered systems of power. Rather, reading the narrator as indeterminate could open up the door for a more comprehensive analysis of the function of power in the construction of intimate relationships in the novel. As Susan S. Lanser argues, gender is a necessary and fundamental element of story, “whether absent or present, ...sex is a “technical feature” of narrative” (Lanser 1995, 90). As long as constructed hierarchies of gender, race, class, etc. form the ideological basis of systems of power, our literature will be formed by and participate in these same systems. In Winterson’s novel, the narrator’s lack of a specified gender identity displaces hegemonic norms of gender and sexuality, making them visible through their unsettling. However, reading the narrator exclusively in the context of gender and sexuality based systems of power denies the comorbidity of other systems at work in the text. Thus, attempting to pin the narrator down to any given identity category undoes this work and makes the systems of power which construct gender, sexuality, and other identity-based forms of categorization invisible yet again.

My unwillingness to search for the narrator’s gender or sexuality stems from my anxiety about the reinforcement of gender and sexuality based systems of power which claim that gender and sexuality are inherent and essential to an individual, that each person must have one and that it must be revealed for that person to be intelligible. While some individuals may experience their gender or sexuality as essential in their self-conceptualization, heteronormativity, the systemic naturalization of this construction, depends on rigid ontological categories with clear and defined borders

between each category. Racial, gendered, and sexual identities, among many others, are believed to be immutable and predetermined. However, the rise of Euromerican gender and sexuality based systems of power is tied to the formation of many other systems and strategies of organization and control, including modern industrial capitalism, the carceral state, modern medicine, and academic disciplines such as biology, archaeology, anthropology, and psychology¹. These systems are mechanisms which both define and regulate the boundaries around the neoliberal state constructed as a unified and homogenous body characterized by straight, white, cisgendered, male, upper/middle class, able-bodied subjects².

Recognizing the ways these entanglements between systems of power affect how identity labels and categories resonate in various contexts, Gloria Anzaldúa expresses concerns about the limitations of the category “lesbian.” For Anzaldúa, “...‘lesbian’ is a cerebral word, white and middle class, representing an English-only dominant culture, derived from the Greek word *lesbos*” (Anzaldúa 2009, 163). Despite the tradition of lesbian resistance, the category itself, wielded often by and for a particular kind of body, tends toward a false homogeneity through the imposition of a very particular kind of frame. Critiquing “lesbian” and “homosexual” as terms “with iron-cast molds,” Anzaldúa argues “Identity is not a bunch of little cubbyholes stuffed respectively with intellect, race, sex, class, vocation, gender. Identity flows between, over, aspects of a person. Identity is a river—a process” (Anzaldúa 2009, 165, 166).

¹ See Foucault, Michel. 1990. *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, 33. Vintage Books.

² See Gatens, Moira. 1991. “Corporeal Representation in/and the Body Politic.” In *Cartographies: Poststructuralism and the mapping of bodies and spaces*, edited by Rosalyn DiProse and Robyn Ferrell, 79-87. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.

Thus, the external imposition of labels becomes problematic, “La persona está situada dentro de la idea en vez de al revés,” (“The person is placed inside the idea instead of the other way around”) (Anzaldúa 2009, 166). While Anzaldúa asserts that “naming [her]self is a survival tactic,” having a name assigned to her or to her work is, frankly, violent, isolating and restricting her to a singular and homogenized facet of identity while erasing all other components which are “in actuality...constantly in a shifting dialogue/relationship” (Anzaldúa 2009, 164, 167). While rallying around shared identities may at times be politically useful, imposing names or categories on people and/or their work reinstitutes the colonial violence which created the categories in the first place.

Not only does the external imposition of colonially constructed categories reinstitute their violence, but the categories themselves are deeply fraught. Asking “What is a lesbian writer,” Anzaldúa questions whether such a categorization is ultimately useful or meaningful (Anzaldúa 2009, 164). After all, who exactly is a lesbian? Is a lesbian determined by a particular set of sexual behaviors? Is a lesbian a woman? Further, what does it mean to be a woman? These questions are only the beginning of a long line of questioning that quickly undermines the stability of such rigid categories. Similarly, in the specific context of lesbian writers, “...Is there such a thing as a lesbian language, dyke style, lesbian terminology, dyke aesthetics, or is it all up to the individual who’s writing” (Anzaldúa 2009, 170). Identity categories attempt to make individuals and their works quickly and easily legible through a claim to a recognizable (and homogenous) identity while lived experience is much more nuanced and differential. As Anzaldúa states, “One always writes and reads from the place one’s

feet are planted, the ground one stands on, one's particular position, point of view" (Anzaldúa 2009, 172). Though Winterson has been classified by many as a lesbian writer, what do we miss in doing so? What particular parts of her subjectivity go unnoticed in assuming the primary identifier of both her and her work is in being lesbian? What subtleties of her work do we miss in seeking out the best way to classify it and her narrator, by measuring it up to a particular lesbian standard of subversion? Afterall, what is so queer about seeking to discover a person or character's gender and sexuality in order to determine whether or not they are part of our ingroup?

Seeing human bodies within the purview of biological essentialism embodied through naturalized, singular, rigid ontologies and identity categories denies the ways in which bodies are determined by particular sociopolitical entanglements. Projects like Alexander Weheliye's *Habeas Viscus* which seek to uncover "the relational ontological totality of the human" and read the body as constructed by and entangled in power allow for an opening up of discourse surrounding all kinds of embodiments (Weheliye 2014, 4). When viewed as constructed by power rather than by biology, it becomes more difficult to confine bodies to singularities and rigid ontologies. Analyzed in terms of power, it becomes evident that bodies are assemblages of political, social, and cultural meaning. Further, that particular bodies inhabit such fraught positionalities, what Anzaldúa calls the "borderlands," makes it hard to deny the reality of power.

New embodied consciousness, such as Anzaldúa's mestiza consciousness, may allow us to redefine ourselves and our embodiments, creating an affect which ripples through our webs of entanglement. Anzaldúa describes the mestiza as "At the confluence of two or more genetic streams, with chromosomes constantly 'crossing

over,' ...[a] hybrid progeny, a mutable, more malleable species with a rich gene pool. From this racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollinization, an 'alien' consciousness is presently in the making...It is a consciousness of the Borderlands" (Anzaldúa 2007, 99). Inhabiting the border between dominant and oppressed groups, "*la mestiza* undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war" (Anzaldúa 2007, 100). Simultaneously within and outside each group, a mestiza consciousness/embodiment fractures its subject. This fracture, however, may be a site for creation rather than destruction, "The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity...she operates in a pluralistic mode...Not only does she sustain contradiction, she turns the ambivalence into something else" (Anzaldúa 2007, 101). Reading Winterson's narrator as undergoing their own inner war allows for a nuanced interrogation of the role of power in their constructions of self and intimacy within the novel. Rather than simply demonstrating a lesbian aesthetic or subjectivity, Winterson's narrator has to struggle with their complicity in dominant and dominating systems of power, internalization of hegemonic norms especially surrounding intimacy, and desire for a different way of being and loving. The possibilities created in this struggle are only fully visible when all assemblages of meaning and power, not only gender and sexuality, are fully reckoned with.

Reframing Power

Given that there is no outside to systems of power, explorations of gender are relevant for this project insofar as they relate to the narrator's self-conceptualization and the masculinization of power. Arguing that Winterson's novel works to trouble the production of "binary subjectivities" in dominant "hetero-narrative[s]" through

dissolving gender in narrative, Aylin Atilla characterizes the narrator as “not an ‘intelligible’ body, but as Judith Butler would put it, a ‘specter of discontinuity and incoherence’” (Atilla 2008, 1, 7). The narrator spends almost no time attempting to describe or understand themselves other than in relation to Louise. They frequently state that Louise gives them meaning such as when they long to become food so they can be “resurrected to the glorious pleasure of [Louise’s] teeth” and attest “the pads of [Louise’s] fingers...tap meaning into my body,” (Winterson 1994, 36, 89). The narrator recognizes their own illegibility and believes that this is remedied by Louise and her love, claiming “you deciphered me and now I am plain to read” (Winterson 1994, 106). Thus, the narrator is not so unintelligible as they first appear, they simply cannot be defined in the strict terms of the individual self, their meaning is found in relation. This relationality is not inherently subversive; rather, it must become so through a process of recognizing and unlearning the many power relations that structure it and creating new, affective entanglements.

In order to read this relationality, it is necessary to establish the framework I will use in my analysis of the text. While intersectionality is the dominant institutional paradigm, in many cases, it may reinstitute the reductive tendency of strict identity politics. Like the rigid construction of identity itself, institutionalized intersectionality participates in fraught representational politics theorized around rigid, anachronistic constructions of identity categories that cannot travel, creating a static, grid like construction of intersectionality (Puar 2017, 598). Puar makes sense of this construction as a theorization of “difference from,” producing “difference as a contradiction rather than as recognizing it as a perpetual and continuous process of

splitting” (Puar 2017, 597). Theorizing difference in this way reinforces the epistemic violence of the “modernist colonial agendas” from which the categories originated by constructing them as stable, homogenous, and oppositional facts of existence (Puar 2017, 598). However, Puar argues that this rigidity and stability in intersectionality is not the only way to practice intersectional methods and compares the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw to Audre Lorde’s “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” (Puar 2017, 596). While Crenshaw works to trouble “what are perceived to be irreconcilable binary options of gender and race,” Lorde’s work “reads as a dynamic, affectively resonant postulation of inchoate and sometimes contradictory intersectional subjectivities,” (Puar 2017, 596-597). Lorde consistently emphasizes the importance of troubling the categories imposed through colonization and finds power through the “integrat[i]on of] all the parts of who [she is], openly, allowing power from particular sources of [her] living to flow back and forth freely through all [her] different selves, without the restrictions of externally imposed definition” (Lorde 2007, 120-121). This method reintroduces motion to the rigid frame of intersectionality and moves beyond the construction of identity as stable categories set on a grid. Intersectionality is like a shark, if it doesn’t move, it dies.

The reintroduction of dynamism is crucial if intersectional theory is to move beyond the purely prescriptive analysis of rigid, homogenous, colonial identity categories. Rather than a dismissal of intersectionality, Puar hopes to “put intersectionality in tandem with assemblage to see how they might be thought together” in order to destabilize the grid like structure of current intersectional theory and practice (Puar 2017, 596). Puar defines assemblage, coined by Deleuze and Guattari, as focusing on

relations, arguing “Concepts do not prescribe relations nor do they exist prior to them; rather, relations of force, connection, resonance, and patterning give rise to concepts” (Puar 2017, 600). Considering identity in this way enables an understanding of the “event-ness of identity,” of continual becoming and splitting, recognizing that bodies (of animals, water, land, institutions, etc.) “are unstable entities that cannot be seamlessly disaggregated into identity formations” (Puar 2017, 602, 599-600). While intersectionality, privileging Euro/American perspectives and theories, is trapped within the inflexible and impermeable “logic of identity” established under capitalist, colonial systems of power and domination, assemblage acknowledges that identity itself is formed through power relations of discipline and control (Puar 2017, 603, 605). Identity is not formed outside or before power relations, it is formed through them.

While intersectionality is useful for understanding the ways in which entangled systems of power and domination organize societies through rigid epistemological and ontological categories of identification that affect bodies in different ways, assemblage helps to theorize the relations between and within, before and after. Intersectionality functions like a large fishing net made with many ropes woven together and assemblage is the water that moves with, through, and around as well as the microorganisms that pass through and live within and between the ropes. The water may have a different current and power in different places and at different times. It may push the net together in places and pull it apart in others, affecting the porousness of the net. It may twist the net into a knot or it may leave the net relatively stationary for a time. While the net of intersectionality performs a hugely important function, it cannot encompass or stop the flow of water, the relationality of meaning, the movements of power.

However, without looking at the net and the specific ways it is pushed, pulled, and entangled, there would be no way to ground the study of the water's motion. For example, reading the novel as subversive because of Winterson's identity or the perceived identity of the narrator may miss the specific ways in which power moves through the narrative by assuming that lesbians consistently and homogeneously work against normativity. On the other hand, failing to recognize Winterson's position as a queer person or directly naming systems at work may result not only in the erasure of queer potentiality in the text but in the failure to recognize privilege and complicity in such systems as well. Thus, intersectionality and assemblage must be "thought together" in order to produce truly generative and holistic analysis/theory/praxis.

Thinking assemblage and intersectionality together lends itself to the kind of borderland thinking Anzaldúa proposes and enacts. Those who inhabit the borderlands, a space of ambiguity and relationality, may either be consumed by their "inner war" or redefine the meaning of the borderland in such a way that it ripples out across a web of border defying entanglements. With a rejection of singularity and the acceptance of contradiction and ambiguity, it becomes possible to "[move] away from set patterns and goals and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes" (Anzaldúa 2007, 101). With this kind of divergent thinking, the logic of borders themselves are troubled and it becomes possible to embrace borderlands as an inhabitable and creative space rather than a dangerous, militarized zone. In Anzaldúa's words, "I am an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings" (Anzaldúa 2007, 103). Not

only does the creative possibility of the borderlands allow for a new subjectivity for those who inhabit them, but the creation of this subjectivity, this embodied consciousness, troubles the hegemony of the cultures on either side.

Winterson's narrator inhabits their own kind of borderland, a gendered and sexualized one, and their own ambiguity, rather than a problem for critics to solve, may instead be a space of possibility. Their relational self-understanding and their own struggle to find and create their ideal relationship while unlearning convention is a creative project that may suggest a new kind of intimacy for those who read it. In fact, the narrator's struggle with intimacy suggests another site of ambiguity in which intersectionality and assemblage can be thought together. In "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," Audre Lorde proposes a reclamation of the erotic as power in a manner that truly feels like a "becoming-intersectional assemblage" in that the erotic is theorized as a between-ness that helps us understand and respond to "all aspects of our existence" (Puar 2017, 606) (Lorde 2007, 57). Lorde defines the erotic as "a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings" (Lorde 2007, 54). Under a capitalist, colonial patriarchy, the erotic is relegated to the realm of sex, specifically pornography, through the alienation of labor and the devaluation of women, spirituality, and feeling. The same systems of power and domination that generate and enforce the logics of identity separate us from our desires, denying the ways in which emotion and feeling are themselves forms of knowledge. Lorde believes that when we are separated from or deny our erotic knowledge "our lives are limited by external alien forms, and we conform to the needs of a structure that is not based on human need, let alone individual's" (Lorde 2007, 58).

Rather than a form of identification or a static point on an intersecting grid, the erotic is a form of power grounded in the always becoming of feeling and, surely, this narrator has no end of feeling.

It is through analyzing the ways in which the narrator performs a normative intimacy which obscures erotic knowledge and desire that I hope to do the work of harmonizing assemblage and intersectionality within my analysis of *Written on the Body*. As Lorde states, “Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives” (Lorde 2007, 57). It is the narrator’s desire, amplified by grief, which forces them to look back and begin to practice self-criticism. This process of finding self-awareness allows the narrator not only to stop trying to ignore their desire, but to recognize Louise’s as well. Lorde believes the search for erotic knowledge within ourselves “open[ly] and fearless[ly] underlin[es our] capacity for joy” the knowledge of which “comes to demand from all of [our] lives that [they] be lived within the knowledge that such satisfaction is possible, and does not have to be called *marriage*, nor *god*, nor *an afterlife*” (Lorde 2007, 56-57) (emphasis in original). Further, these joys can be shared with others to form “a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference” (Lorde 2007, 56). When the narrator becomes aware of their complicity in dominant systems and the harm that has come from their normative intimacy, they are able to see both themselves and Louise more clearly. This process of unleashing erotic knowledge and desire and

engaging in self-criticism allows the narrator to see Louise and their relationship defined not by loss and pain, but by the incredible potential for shared joy.

In the following chapters, I will interrogate the ways in which the narrator's internalization of normative systems of knowledge and power impact their conception and performance of intimacy and how they must unlearn these norms in order to seek out new, queer intimacies. In the first chapter, I will look at the ways the narrator's treatment of Louise demonstrates an internalization of learned patriarchal and colonial norms of intimacy which center around possession and control. In the second chapter, I will analyze how the narrator's attempts to cope with Louise's cancer diagnosis ultimately reinforces ableist constructions of the disabled/ill subject through processes of fragmentation and objectification. I will also discuss how the grief and guilt the narrator feels after leaving Louise makes them susceptible to Gail Right's criticisms, forcing them to begin unlearning normative intimacy. Finally, I will discuss how addressing the power dynamics within their relationship creates the potential for the narrator and Louise to realize their fantasies of an utopic queer, relational, affective intimacy.

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Chapter 1: Consuming Intimacy

Throughout *Written on the Body*, the narrator struggles to navigate the normative “clichés” that surround love and intimacy in contemporary Euroamerican culture and society. While critiquing several of these norms, such as norms surrounding heterosexual marriage and reproduction, the narrator remains trapped by many others. Despite being aware of many problematic aspects of normative relationships, until the novel’s conclusion the narrator is unable to fully recognize the extent of their participation in dominant and dominating systems of power, including but not limited to patriarchy, coloniality, and ableism. In this chapter, I will analyze the narrator’s struggle with the clichés of domination and consumption that surround conventional understandings of love and intimacy as well as the subtle ways Winterson and the narrator draw our attention to the problems within such constructions. In so doing, I will begin to demonstrate the ways in which Winterson calls readers to imagine new ways of being and loving that go beyond a simple reversal or reframing of current power dynamics.

Learning Intimacy

Winterson’s narrator does not enter their relationship with Louise from a vacuum; through their own personal experiences and the observation of other relationships, the narrator has learned a particular form of intimacy. From the outset, the narrator is openly critical of the institution of marriage as they not only have little interest in joining such an institution but have seen and participated in the breaking of many marriages, stating “I’ve been through a lot of marriages. Not down the aisle but always up the stairs. I began to realise I was hearing the same story every time”

(Winterson 1994, 13). The narrator sees this story of the typical heterosexual marriage, at least the failing one, as full of “clichés” and, in the context of an affair, as a “shell” to be displayed for other people to admire (Winterson 1994, 10, 15). For the narrator, marriage and intimacy in the conventional sense is largely an empty act, as “self-exhibition” and the aspirational performance of normative conventions and ideals that become so repetitive and naturalized that they become cliché (Winterson 1994, 13).

As Anna Agathangelou, Daniel Bassichis, and Tamara Spira argue in “Intimate Investments: Homonormativity, Global Lockdown, and the Seductions of Empire,” whether heterosexual or queer, the institution of marriage is the pinnacle of “state-sanctioned kinship” which “recodes ‘good’ forms of national kinship (monogamous, consumptive, privatized) while punishing those that fall outside of them, particularly those forms of racialized and classed kinship that continue to be the target of state violence and pathology” (Agathangelou, Bassichis, and Spira 2008, 121-122). As a State institution, marriage functions as a normalizing force which dictates and polices the boundaries around acceptable and deviant behaviors. As a liberal nation-state often defines itself by its borders, by what it is not, it “requires and solicits the production of certain ways of being, desiring, and knowing (while destroying others)” (Agathangelou, Bassichis, and Spira 2008, 123). For Agathangelou, the “boundaries of this acceptable sex/relationality/being, of course, are the confines of profitability, expendability, and the ‘retention of law enforcement resources’” (Agathangelou, Bassichis, and Spira 2008, 133). Thus, existing just outside the boundary of acceptability, it is understandable that Winterson’s narrator would perceive and be wary of this regulatory force of marriage. However, the narrator’s critique of the institution of marriage does not mean that they

have a critical understanding of intimacy more generally. This is evident especially in their frequent use of language that creates a possessive and consuming dynamic between themselves and their partners.

The possessive tendency of normative intimacy is on full display in one of their most notable affairs with a married woman, Bathsheba. When the narrator gives Bathsheba an ultimatum, her marriage or their relationship, Bathsheba tells the narrator it would be “Monstrous to tell him” (Winterson 1994, 16). From her privileged seat of conformity, confessing to an affair and ending a marriage is such a departure as to be deemed “monstrous”. Further, Bathsheba sees the narrator in the terms of possession, saying the narrator’s love letters were “[The narrator’s] copyright...but her property. She had said the same about [the narrator’s] body” (Winterson 1994, 17). The narrator themselves later reiterates this kind of language toward Bathsheba, saying “I came to you for a crown and you offered me a kingdom. Unfortunately I could only take possession between five and seven, weekdays, and the odd weekend when he was away playing football” (Winterson 1994, 47). Not only does referring to Bathsheba and/or their relationship as a “kingdom” equate intimate bodies with land to be possessed and ruled over, but in the context of their intimate relationship, neither party’s body is their own, but is possessed and controlled by the other.

Reacting against their possessive relationship with Bathsheba, the narrator attempts to find a more “normal” relationship with Jacqueline but ultimately reproduces a relationship still primarily rooted in possession and the pursuit of control, specifically the control of the narrator’s desire. The narrator entered the relationship because Jacqueline “...exhibited no fetishes, foibles, freak-outs or fuck-ups...I didn’t love

her and I didn't want to love her. I didn't desire her and I could not imagine desiring her. These were all points in her favour" (Winterson 1994, 26). After the intensity of their relationship with Bathsheba, the narrator chose to date Jacqueline because it seemed stable, the kind of relationship you are supposed to be in. Rather than defying normative relationships, the narrator becomes "...an apostle of ordinariness" and shuts down their own desire in favor of "container gardening" (Winterson 1994, 27).

However, this does not last long as the narrator meets and falls in love with Louise. Their inability to control their feelings for Louise leads them to make their own critique of narratives of discipline and control surrounding desire, saying "Jacqueline was an overcoat. She muffled my senses...Contentment is a feeling you say? Are you sure it's not an absence of feeling?...Contentment is the positive side of resignation" (Winterson 1994, 76). Rather than listening to and embracing their desires, the narrator tries, and fails, to ignore them. Their apathy and confusion leads them to reach out to a friend who advises them "play the sailor and run a wife in every port...Probably I had nothing more than dog-fever for two weeks and I could get it out of my system and come home to my kennel. Good sense. Common sense. Good dog" (Winterson 1994, 40). This comment from a friend enables the narrator to problematize their attempts at controlling their own desire, that "container gardening" means being a "good dog," means denying parts of themselves and their desire. Interestingly, it is also their feelings for Louise that make the narrator refer to themselves and their relationship as territory once again, saying "She doesn't know that there is today a revision of the map. That the territory she thought was hers has been annexed" (Winterson 1994, 38). Despite how different their relationship with Jacqueline is from their relationship with Bathsheba, it

still consumes Jacqueline and the narrator's emotional wellbeing and reinforces the construction of love and intimacy in the colonial terms of land and possession.

The narrator's own relationships are not the only relationships that impact their understanding of intimacy more generally as they observe Louise and her husband Elgin's marriage. In their marriage, the narrator observes an unusual but still normalizing project. The narrator describes Louise and Elgin as "refugees" who "found comfort in each other" (Winterson 1994, 34). Finding refuge from patriarchal power dynamics, Louise gravitates toward Elgin saying "I knew he was safe, that I could control him, that I would be the one in charge" (Winterson 1994, 34). However, this is arguably a simple reversal of normative interpersonal structures that ultimately does little to challenge the nature of intimate relationships founded on an unequal and hierarchical standing between partners. Not only does this arguably simple reversal of normative interpersonal structures ultimately do little to challenge the nature of intimate relationships founded on an unequal and hierarchical standing between partners, but it is a reversal that is challenged as Elgin acts within the histories of patriarchy and coloniality tied up in his name. Elgin is named for a British Earl who facilitated the theft of several marbles from the Parthenon in Athens between 1801 and 1812³. As I will argue in the following chapter, Elgin participates in this legacy of patriarchal coloniality in attempting to possess and control Louise by making medical decisions for her and manipulating her relationship with the narrator.

³ See St. Clair, William. 1998. *Lord Elgin & the Marbles: The Controversial History of the Parthenon Sculptures*, 3rd ed. Oxford University Press.

Performing the Lesson

Beginning their relationship while each of them are in other relationships, the narrator and Louise give themselves very little time to reflect on and learn from their past relationships and the forms of intimacy they have learned. Their reflection is limited to the beginning of the relationship while the narrator is still dating Jacqueline. When the narrator casually tells Louise they love her, Louise says “Don’t say that now. Don’t say it yet. You might not mean it” and tells the narrator “I don’t want to be another scalp on your pole” (Winterson 1994, 53, 54). This analogy leads quickly to a conversation about control:

“‘You affect me in ways I can’t quantify or contain. All I can measure is the effect, and the effect is that I am out of control.’

‘So you try and regain control by telling me you love me. That’s a territory you know, isn’t it? That’s romance and courtship and whirlwind’

‘I don’t want control.’

‘I don’t believe you.’

No and you’re right not to believe me.” (Winterson 1994, 53)

Throughout this conversation, Louise communicates her fear that the narrator’s past relationships demonstrate that the narrator practices a deadly and consuming form of intimacy rooted in a desire for control that even the narrator recognizes. Louise is afraid of the form of intimacy the narrator has learned and pleads “I want you to come to me without a past. Those lines you’ve learned, forget them. Forget you’ve been here before in other bedrooms in other places. Come to me new. Never say you love me until that day when you have proved it” (Winterson 1994, 54). However, this request for the narrator to unlearn all they know when it comes to relationships and intimacy does not immediately prompt the narrator to really do the work it would take. Rather, they

simply break up with Jacqueline and return to Louise thinking that leaving Jacqueline is what it will take to “prove” their love for her. Thus, their relationship starts with a request for unlearning and relearning intimacy that is never fully fulfilled.

The narrator’s tendency to invoke the relational terms of control, consumption, domination, and possession demonstrates an internalization of learned normative constructions of intimacy that reinforce hierarchical systems of power. The consumptive element of these internalized norms shows itself early in the novel in what is otherwise a playful and sensual scene as the couple eats together for the first time. As they eat, the narrator muses, “Let me be diced carrot, vermicelli, just so that you will take me in your mouth. I envied the French stick. I watched her break and butter each piece, soak it slowly in her bowl...and then be resurrected to the glorious pleasure of her teeth” (Winterson 1994, 36). Here, consumption is sensualized. Eating is a process of tearing apart, breaking down, and devouring; yet, the narrator imagines that Louise’s teeth have the ability to resurrect, to bring back to life. This fantasy suggests that the narrator has a desire to be chewed up, broken down, so that Louise can bring them to life again. This desire to be consumed also functions as a desire to consume as the narrator calls Louise’s spit, used to see if the oil is ready for cooking, the “essential ingredient” and says “I will taste you if only your cooking” (Winterson 1994, 37).

While the consuming language is typically directed at Louise, there are a few instances, like the one above, in which it seems to work back against the narrator. Describing Louise as a volcano, the narrator states “It did occur to me that...I might be Pompeii” (Winterson 1994, 49). The narrator also imagines Louise looking on them from a place of holy power, saying “...you are gazing at me the way God gazed at Adam

and I am embarrassed by your look of love and possession and pride. I want to go now and cover myself with fig leaves” (Winterson 1994, 18-19). In a more violently possessive fantasy, the narrator asks, “Who taught you to write in blood on my back? Who taught you to use your hands as branding irons? You have scored your name into my shoulders, referenced me with your mark” (Winterson 1994, 89). With these examples of Louise taking the position of the dominant and possessive partner, it is possible to argue that their relationship was not as violent as the language suggests because it was equitable in that they “consumed each other and went hungry again,” the domination worked both ways (Winterson 1994, 20).

Sexuality is an important component in many, though not all, relationships and sexual practices can be a space of power play experienced as immense pleasure and liberation for people. Indeed, this seems to be the case for the narrator and Louise as they switch back and forth between who takes a position of dominance and experience moments of intense pleasure amplified by Winterson’s use of nonlinear time. In a discussion of queer BDSM practices, Simula argues that “...the fluid temporality of scene space enables participants to experience what Muñoz calls ‘ecstatic time’” (Simula 2013, 71). Defining “ecstatic time,” Simula quotes Muñoz saying “‘To see queerness as a horizon is to perceive it as a modality of ecstatic time in which the temporal stranglehold...[of] straight time is interrupted or stepped out of’...Ecstatic time, the time of queerness, is a time of intense pleasure” (Simula 2013, 79). In other words, during moments of intense pleasure, linear, progressive, “straight time” falls away and the distinctions between past, present, and future become blurred. In these moments, many participants feel they have been offered an opportunity “for resisting heteronormativity

and gender regulation in ways they perceive as unavailable to them in other social settings” (Simula 2013, 78). Gender is subsumed under sexual role and the relationship and trust between partners becomes central (Simula 2013, 87, 91). Understood within this erotic context, ecstatic time is necessarily “interrelationally created” as it depends on this trust and connection between partners (Simula 2013, 80). However, this experience of sexuality as enabling moments of queer utopic imagination is not inevitable even with BDSM spaces. Simula recognizes this, suggesting “It is...not BDSM practices in and of themselves, but a certain form of creating, organizing, and interpreting those experiences that has the potential to both create and reveal the horizon of the forms of queer utopia beyond many participants describe” (Simula 2013, 93). Experiencing “ecstatic time” and queer interrelationality depends on the bond between partners and their ability to trust one another and create the communicative, relational space necessary. Though the narrator and Louise experience these moments, because the narrator has not fully reckoned with their internalized understanding of intimacy as romanticized “Ecstasy without end,” their utopia crumbles when they learn about Louise’s diagnosis. Rather than continuing to trust Louise and do the work it takes build their relationship and create, organize, and interpret ecstatic moments, the narrator leaves and utopia is followed by despair.

Though they experience moments of ecstasy prior to learning Louise’s diagnosis, the narrator’s sexual fantasies take a more sinister turn as they begin to align with colonial imagery of exploration, conquest, and possession. As they pore over medical texts trying to cope with Louise’s diagnosis, the narrator blatantly compares their attempt to understand the body in a medical sense to penetration, saying “Let me

penetrate you. I am the archaeologist of tombs. I would devote my life to marking your passageways, the entrances and exits of that impressive mausoleum, your body” (Winterson 1994, 119). In this instance, sexuality is expressed on colonial terms in a morbid metaphor that renders Louise object and territory. This colonizing objectification is repeated as the narrator discusses skin, the outer layers of which are composed of dead cells. Reflecting on this, the narrator mourns, “...the piece of you I know best is already dead...Your sepulchral body, offered to me in the past tense, protects your soft centre from the intrusions of the outside world. I am one such intrusion, stroking you with necrophiliac obsession, loving the shell laid out before me” (Winterson 1994, 123). Once again, Louise is rendered a symbolic object, denied subjectivity and idealized all in one fantasy. As an “offering” Louise may be possessed and, objectified, her “shell” may be obsessed over and studied without an engagement with her whole person.

The romanticized objectification of Louise is further embodied in the narrator’s frequent referral to Louise as land or territory, the object of exploration, conquest, and study. Even in longing to be closer to Louise, the narrator echoes colonial scientists, saying “I have held your head in my hands but I have never held you. Not you in your spaces, spirit, electrons of life. ‘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” (Winterson 1994, 120). The narrator, even before knowing about Louise’s cancer diagnosis, is so fully engrossed in Louise that the world shrinks to the size of her body as the narrator considers, “Eyes closed I began a voyage down her spine...What other places are there in the world than those discovered on a lover’s

body" (Winterson 1994, 82). Louise, rather than a person to get to know, is a territory to explore, the site of a voyage that serves the narrator's curiosities more than it does reveal anything about Louise. The voyage is an exploration and glorification of the physical, of Louise's body and not necessarily her mind. When the narrator praises Louise, it is only for her body. With declarations like "Her hair cinnabar red, her body all the treasures of Egypt. There won't be another find like you Louise," the narrator solidifies Louise's position as symbolic object, as romanticized and glorified land and treasure to be obtained and possessed (Winterson 1994, 146).

This rendering of Louise as symbolic object and as territory to be explored demonstrates a masculinized power that the narrator performs. Atilla argues that, "In the beginning of their relation, the narrator invokes the need for the beloved in terms of masculine possession and consumption, relegating the beloved to the realm of object" (Atilla 2008, 4). In statements like "I will find a clue to you, I will be able to unravel you, pull you between my fingers and stretch out each thread to know the measure of you," the narrator again calls to mind the practices of colonial scientists who see the bodies of the colonized as object-subjects that can be studied and known. This is both enforced and contradicted when the narrator compares Louise to land and asks "How could I cover this land? Did Columbus feel like this on sighting the Americas? I had no dreams to possess you but I wanted you to possess me" (Winterson 1994, 52). Though the narrator claims they do not want to possess Louise, the imagery they use suggests otherwise. The narrator refers to Louise's body as object or territory many times: likening her to a tree, calling Louise "a glass-bottomed boat" saying "let me sail in you," and calling their relationship itself a "ship" saying "Where am I? There is nothing here I

recognize. This isn't the world I know, the little ship I've trimmed and rigged" after learning about Louise's diagnosis (Winterson 1994, 29, 80, 101). In all of these instances, the narrator aligns themselves with masculine, patriarchal powers through metaphors of conquest and the longing for control. Love appears to be a process akin to colonization as Louise's body becomes either the vehicle necessary for a quest, like a ship, or the quest itself, a land to be explored, studied, and known.

Continuing the narrator's project of study and observation, Atilla argues that, in the anatomical section that follows the discovery of Louise's diagnosis, "the narrator concentrates on the body by reading, exploring and mapping it as if the female body has been a text" (Atilla 2008, 3). The narrator frames the anatomical section as a "love-poem" and the meditative aspect of this section complicates and troubles the supposed objectivity of medical language. However, the dissecting nature of medical language and the assumption of knowability in medical practice is not challenged. The narrator believes that reflecting on each bodily fragment will allow them to "*have* [Louise's] plasma, her spleen, her synovial fluid" (Winterson 1994, 111) (emphasis added). Starting from this place of possession and objectification, the imagery only gets darker as the narrator continues their descent into grief. As the white blood cells designed to fight diseases turn on her, the narrator calls Louise "the victim of a coup" and says "[Louise is] the foreign body now" (Winterson 1994, 115, 116). Continuing this othering process and explicitly introducing colonial imagery, the narrator muses "I have flown the distance of your body from side to side of your ivory coast...I have mapped you with my naked eye and stored you out of sight" (Winterson 1994, 117). Further extending this metaphor of expedition and colonization, they imagine themselves an explorer inside

the territory of Louise, “Myself in your skin, myself lodged in your bones, myself floating in the cavities that decorate every surgeon’s wall. That is how I know you. You are what I know” (Winterson 1994, 120). In constructing Louise as territory, as object/subject, the narrator positions themselves as a colonial scientist; fragmenting Louise and her body to make it knowable and consumable.

As the narrator is overwhelmed with grief and blames themselves for Louise’s inevitable death, their own grief consumes and possesses Louise. Proclaiming, “Nail me to you. I will ride you like a nightmare. You are the winged horse Pegasus who would not be saddled. Strain under me” the narrator casts themselves as the “nightmarish” master who tames a free Pegasus, putting them in a position of dominance and control (Winterson 1994, 131). As the narrator continues to feel guilty for trying to impose their will on Louise, they reflect “You were a brightly lit room and I shut the door. You were a coat of many colours wrestled into the dirt” (Winterson 1994, 138). Here, the narrator seems to find themselves guilty of Louise’s suffering and eventual death. This becomes clearer as the narrator likens themselves to a grim reaper of sorts, saying “I held you as Death will hold you” (Winterson 1994, 132). While cancer is inevitably painful as well as fatal, this particular perception of Louise as tamed, dimmed, or tarnished arguably has more to do with the narrator’s own state of grief and guilt than Louise or her well-being. As a reflection of the narrator more than Louise, these guilty feelings point to the beginning of a process of self-discovery and awareness raising for the narrator as they realize their complicity, not in Louise’s illness, but in her consumption and disablement.

Questioning the Lesson

From the first page of the novel, Winterson makes connections between love and coloniality. Winterson relates the language of colonizers to the normative language of love, or Romance, quoting Caliban in Shakespeare's *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" (Winterson 1994, 9). Language naturalizes cultural constructions through the creation of a particular frame that determines the extent to which individuals are able to name their situation and make visible the ways in which power may be operating around them. Thus, language is often an important site of colonization as an important step in forcing the assimilation of a colonized people is in shaping their perception of what is "natural" and "normal" through the imposition of a cultural frame through language. Additionally, even queer desires can be colonized and normalized within state based white supremacist capitalist colonial patriarchies. As Agathangelou, Bassichis, and Spira argue, "...the neoliberal empire has quite effectively commandeered our affective yearnings for safety, security, redress, and peace and collapsed them with carnage, punishment, and confinement such that they might appear synonymous" (Agathangelou, Bassichis, and Spira 2008, 136). In other words, granting queer people a few, limited rights, such as the right to marriage, is dependent upon the re/defining of the borders surrounding the neo-liberal body politic, "...freedom depends on the (re)founding of unfreedoms" (Agathangelou, Bassichis, and Spira 2008, 131). Homonormativity, exercised every time a queer person says "but I'm just like you," comes at the expense of all those who still fall outside of a state's body politic. By expanding who is allowed within the borders of acceptability, states are able to cast silence around their violences through false claims to tolerance. This

reinstitution of borders “Foreclos[es] potential and increasingly crucial solidarities, we are drawn into our own corners and ultimately diverted from the possibilities of massive, cross-bordered mobilizations, movements and revolutionary projects” (Agathangelou, Bassichis, and Spira 2008, 138). In many ways, Winterson simultaneously demonstrates and critiques these dynamics within queer communities and relationships as the narrator’s own homonormativity and complicity in systems of power destroys each of their relationships in the novel and stops them from finding new, truly queer and loving ways of performing intimacy.

Not only does Winterson draw a connection between love and coloniality on the first page of *Written on the Body*, she also creates a narrator who questions their own actions and assumptions about romance and intimacy throughout the novel. Despite their clear invocation of violent, possessive, and colonizing language and imagery in their performances of intimacy, the narrator, speaking in past tense until the final page of the novel, sews self-criticism throughout their reflections. Criticizing their own pursuit of short, passionate relationships that they know will never work out, the narrator reasons “I thought the fiery furnace must be better than central heating. I suppose I couldn’t admit that I was trapped in a cliché every bit as redundant as my parents’ roses round the door...Ecstasy without end. I was deep in the slop-bucket of romance” (Winterson 1994, 21). Critiquing themselves, the narrator seems to recognize for a brief moment that abstaining from and critiquing marriage does not inherently mean that a person’s relationship will subvert dominant norms, that it takes more the unlearn toxic forms of intimacy than simply rejecting a single set of dominant norms in favor of another. A similar critique may be read in the narrator’s comment that “I love

you' is always a quotation. You did not say it first and neither did I, yet when you say it and when I say it we speak like savages who have found three words and worship them" (Winterson 1994, 9). In a Butlerian manner, the narrator seems to imply that the phrase "I love you," in its constant repetition, is performative and over determined. It can be "worshiped" and invoked but it is always a somewhat empty iteration of an elusive ideal. In this way, Winterson draws attention to and complicates every instance in which the narrator says "I love you" or performs intimacy as moments already entangled in webs of meaning.

The narrator's seeming contradictions only intensify over time as they begin to question the basics of what it means to function in the world. Taking out their existential angst on sunflowers, the narrator wonders "Very few people ever manage what nature manages without effort and mostly without fail. We don't know who we are or how to function, much less how to bloom. Blind nature. Homo sapiens. Who's kidding whom" (Winterson 1994, 43). Envious of sunflowers' ability to grow and bloom without questioning how to do so, the narrator seems to struggle to know exactly who they are or how they should move through life. However, their ennui seems to be supplanted by concern about the increased automation of life under quickly globalizing industrial capitalism as they discuss chronobiology, saying "Interest in the clock is growing because as we live more and more artificially, we'd like to con nature into altering her patterns for us" (Winterson 1994, 80). Their dread of a technological future becomes more apparent as they implore "The scientists say I can choose but how much choice have I over their other inventions? My life is not my own, shortly I shall have to haggle over my reality. Luddite? No, I don't want to smash the machines but neither do I

want the machines to smash me” (Winterson 1994, 97-98). Though distressed because they struggle to know what the right way to “bloom” is, the narrator is afraid of their agency being denied because of technology and automation.

Though the above contradictions seem to be evidence for an unreliable narrator, I would argue, rather, that they are evidence of a narrator struggling with the hegemonic norms of Euromerican society. Rather than demonstrating that the narrator is untrustworthy when they say “I love you,” by calling attention to the performativity of such a phrase, Winterson lays the foundation for questioning norms surrounding love and intimacy. Additionally, in the seeming contradiction between the narrators angst about who they are and how they should act as well as their fear about being denied agency, Winterson may again be calling attention to and problematizing the ways systems of power attempt to privilege one way of life as *the* correct way to be in the world. Thus, it is possible to read the narrator not as unreliable, but instead as struggling with the confines of hegemonic norms imposed through many entangled systems of power. As I have begun to demonstrate, the narrator fails many times in ways that are damaging and violent to those around them. In the following chapter, I will expand on the ways the narrator’s grief is informed by and informs an ableist response to Louise’s cancer diagnosis which denies her agency and fractures her subjectivity. However, the narrator remains open to questioning such systems and gradually does the work it takes to become aware, ultimately recognizing their complicity and making room for imagining other ways of being.

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Chapter 2: Disabling Love

Winterson's narrator performs intimacy in many ways that reinforce normative constructions of intimacy through possessive, consuming, and controlling language steeped in patriarchy and coloniality. These dynamics become entangled with ableism as the narrator finds out that Louise has leukemia and submits to Elgin's paternalistic suggestion that the narrator leave Louise so that she will return to him for treatment. Not only is the decision to leave itself a patriarchal denial of Louise's agency, but the narrator's coping mechanism to deal with their grief over the loss of Louise, an exploration of the medicalized body, reinforces ableist constructions of the disabled or chronically ill subject as a fractured, broken object in need of a cure. Though the narrator reinforces ableist constructions of the disabled/ill subject, it is their grief and guilt which lead them to try and gain distance from Louise through depersonalization and their grief and guilt which bring the narrator to reevaluate and begin unlearning the forms of intimacy they have internalized and seek out new forms of caring intimacy.

A Question of Agency

The sudden reveal of Louise's cancer and the narrator's perspective on it functions as what Mitchell and Snyder call "narrative prosthesis" as disability is used as a plot device to further the novel's exploration of embodiment and desire without a critical analysis of disability itself. Mitchell and Snyder define "narrative prosthesis" as the use of disability in literature as either "a stock feature of characterization" or metaphor (Mitchell, Snyder 2013, 222). Disability as metaphor often functions as a "signifier of social and individual collapse" and "literary narratives revisit disabled bodies as a reminder of the 'real' physical limits that 'weigh down' transcendent ideals

of the mind and knowledge-producing disciplines" (Mitchell, Snyder 2013, 222, 224). Rather than narratives of autonomous beings with lives of possibility and opportunity, narratives of disabled subjects from the dominant perspective are those of limitation, stagnation, and non-progress. Mitchell and Snyder's argument is reflected in the objectified victimhood of disabled persons exemplified by the narrator's belief that cancer changes Louise fundamentally, that Louise "will break up bone by bone, fractured from who [she is], [she is] drifting away now, the centre cannot hold" (Winterson 1994, 100-101). Once the narrator realizes Louise has cancer and feels that they have lost her, they "cannot let [Louise] develop, [she] must be a photograph not a poem" (Winterson 1994, 119). Once considered disabled by cancer, Louise is relegated to a static existence in the narrator's mind as they see her as no longer dynamic, complex, or whole; she is frozen in time, a knowable object, broken.

The first step in Louise's relegation to disabled object status comes through attempts to deny her agency in determining her own treatment plan. Louise's agency is denied by both her ex-husband Elgin and the narrator as Elgin uses her diagnosis as leverage to convince the narrator that they should leave Louise so she will come back to him. Denying Louise her right to choose when and to who she discloses personal medical information, Elgin uses his knowledge to undermine her relationship with the narrator by dismissing the narrator's claim that "Louise tells [them] everything," asserting "Then you won't be surprised to hear she's got cancer" (Winterson 1994, 100). Continuing to manipulate the narrator, Elgin tells them his plan: "...if Louise came back to him he would give her the care money can't buy" at his high end research facility in Switzerland (Winterson 1994, 102). This plan denies Louise agency in many

ways: Elgin both assumes that the narrator leaving Louise would make her go back to him and tries to make the decision about how she wants to address her diagnosis for her. In addition to failing to consider the possibility that Louise would make choices that do not align with his plan, Elgin places the blame for her inevitable death on the narrator. At the end of their conversation, the narrator asks, “Will she die?” and Elgin responds claiming, “That depends...On you” and implies that only he can care for Louise (Winterson 1994, 102). Despite the narrator’s initial hesitation, asking “But why treat her as an invalid before she is an invalid” and Elgin’s own admission that “Cancer is an unpredictable condition,” Elgin’s insistence that he will be able to cure Louise ultimately convinces the narrator (Winterson 1994, 104, 105). By submitting to Elgin’s request rather than listening to Louise as she attempts to advocate for herself, the narrator aligns themselves with a paternalistic voice spoken through a patriarchal, ableist hero complex.

In addition to the fundamentally manipulative and paternalistic approach Elgin takes with the narrator, the nature of Louise’s cancer makes Elgin’s plan especially problematic. Louise’s particular form of cancer, chronic lymphocytic leukemia, has long been considered incurable and potential breakthroughs have only been made in the last year¹, twenty-eight years after the publication of Winterson’s novel. Despite this, Elgin seems to have a healthy hero complex and believes he will be able to find the miracle cure. Louise even discusses this hero complex with the narrator prior to Elgin’s conversation with the narrator and sites it as one of her main problems with Elgin.

¹ See Targeted Oncology. 2019. “New Data and Approvals are Changing the Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia Treatment Landscape.”

Louise tells the narrator that “Elgin doesn’t care about people. He never sees any people. He hasn’t been on a terminal care ward for ten years. He sits in a multi-million pound laboratory in Switzerland for half the year and stares at a computer. He wants to make the big discovery. Get the Nobel prize” (Winterson 1994, 67). While the “big discoveries” are undeniably important for fatal illnesses, centering the discovery itself above patients demonstrates one of the fundamental critiques of disability studies: that prioritizing finding a “cure” does more to serve the medical institution than patients themselves. This critique is even voiced as the narrator relates “...[Elgin’s] obsessional study of carcinoma would bring more substantial benefits to himself than to any of his patients... It was very sexy medicine. Gene therapy is the frontier world where names and fortunes can be made” (Winterson 1994, 66-67). In the context of cancer research, big breakthroughs often take years of experimentation and clinical trials and depend on patients who are willing to accept the risks and costs of such trials. However, it is each patient’s right to be informed of all options to make an informed decision for themselves about the kind of care they would like to receive and both Elgin and the narrator violate Louise’s agency in this decision making.

Though her wishes are disregarded both by Elgin and the narrator, Louise clearly expresses the path she would like to take in her treatment in what I would argue is a verbal advance directive. After Elgin confronts the narrator, Louise asserts “She would not go back to Elgin, of that she was adamant. She knew a great deal about the disease and I would learn. We would face it together” (Winterson 1994, 104). Married to an oncologist for years and with time to process and research her diagnosis, Louise is aware of the reality that “Cancer treatment is brutal and toxic,” that chronic

lymphocytic leukemia has no cure, and the forms of treatment that would be available to her if she went back to Elgin (Winterson 1994, 102). However, she explicitly states that she both will not return to Elgin and that she does not trust him and wants a second opinion (Winterson 1994, 103). Additionally, Louise is asymptomatic with a prognosis of “about 100 months,” or eight years and four months. She potentially has several asymptomatic years left that, going Elgin’s route, would be consumed with hospital visits and stays as well as various grueling treatments and therapies alongside a physician and partner who she does not trust and who disregards her needs and desires. Louise makes explicitly clear that the partner she wants to face her diagnosis with is the narrator, whether that means going through with chemotherapy or denying treatment. She asks the narrator for their affective labor, for them to learn with her about her disease, and the narrator does not hear her.

Given the nature of cancer and the reality that “no doctor can accurately predict whether the disease will stabilize or for how long,” lack of access to medical resources that could potentially do more harm than good is not necessarily what makes cancer disabling, especially in Louise’s case (Winterson 1994, 175). As I have previously stated, Louise has chronic lymphocytic leukemia which may be treated to extend the person’s life but is ultimately incurable. The treatment process for cancer, chemotherapy and radiation as well as a barrage of overpriced, experimental pharmaceuticals, takes an incredible economic, emotional, and physical toll that may, for some, be worse than the cancer itself. While the nature of Louise’s cancer will undoubtedly impair and eventually kill her, the disabling aspect of it is the narrator denying her agency in how she will handle her diagnosis. Failing to take seriously Louise’s self-advocacy, the

narrator laments, “If I stay it will be you who goes, in pain, without help. Our love was not meant to cost you your life” (Winterson 1994, 105). The truly disabling aspect of Louise’s situation is the narrator’s narrow conception of what “help” could look like through their conformity to the savior narrative of compulsory heterosexuality, monogamy, and compulsory able-bodiedness that cast Elgin and medical intervention as the only resources Louise needs access to. What makes it disabling is the narrator cutting Louise off from affective labor she explicitly asks for and the kinds of help they could provide: pain relief, compassion, understanding, and loving intimacy.

Intimate Medicine

As I have begun to argue, the truly disabling element of Louise’s cancer comes not from the disease itself but from the narrator’s conception of her illness. Robert McRuer argues that “The institutions in our culture that produce and secure a heterosexual identity also work to secure an able-bodied identity” (McRuer 2004, 51). In other words, “able-bodied hegemony,” the naturalization of able-bodiedness, is produced in tandem with other European/colonial hegemonies of knowledge and power including the structures of coloniality, racism, classism, heteropatriarchy, heterosexism, and phallogocentrism (McRuer 2004, 52). While much of the novel works against normative structures and dualistic thinking, the genuine pain experienced by Louise and the narrator due to Louise’s cancer seems to blind the narrator to the way these structures continue to function in their perception of Louise as disabled and lost. Clare Barker and Stuart Murray rightly argue that “there is a pressing need, as we see it, to resist the too-easy censure of narratives that construct disability as loss” (Barker,

Murray 2013, 69). While the social model of disability² has helped assert that disability is a problem with the built/social environment rather than with the body, particular struggles, such as chronic pain, may not be helped by making changes to the environment. Thus, as “what individuals in [circumstances which call for medical intervention] experience as loss should not be rendered an invalid response by arguments that fail to recognize the wider contexts and material environments in which disablement occurs” (Barker, Murray 2013, 69). Because of the genuine trauma experienced by those diagnosed with cancer and their loved ones, the narrator’s experience of pain and loss cannot be dismissed without taking into account the conditions which lead to the loss.

Though Louise is confident that she and the narrator can face her cancer together, the narrator’s internalization of patriarchal, ableist hegemonic norms shapes their response from the outset as they feel immediately dislocated, or lost, when they learn her diagnosis. Referring to their relationship as a ship in imagery that echoes other instances of intimacy understood as a voyage or quest, the narrator laments “Where am I? There is nothing here I recognize. This isn’t the world I know, the little ship I’ve trimmed and rigged...I want to brace myself against something solid but there’s nothing solid here” (Winterson 1994, 101). The romanticized world of the addictive first six months that the narrator built with Louise is abruptly grounded by the reality of cancer (Winterson 1994, 76). The disclosure of Louise’s diagnosis rapidly shifts their relationship into a new and much more serious stage that would require a

² See Shakespeare, Tom. 2006. “The Social Model of Disability.” In *The Disability Studies Reader* edited by Lennard J. Davis, 2nd ed., 197-204. Taylor & Francis.

kind of commitment the narrator has never come close to making. As a veteran “Lothario,” the narrator has never been asked to perform the kinds of affective labor Louise is asking of them and, if their treatment of Louise is any indication, likely does not know how to (Winterson 1994, 20). The emotional dislocation they experience when Elgin tells them Louise’s diagnosis coupled with internalized patriarchal, ableist norms exacerbated by Elgin’s manipulations leaves the narrator afraid and guilty, leading them to leave Louise believing it is for her own good. However, once they leave, grief descends on the narrator rapidly as the weight of the diagnosis becomes tangled with the grief of being away from Louise.

After the narrator leaves Louise, they begin to process her diagnosis and conflate her distant but inevitable death with their current feelings of loss. Understanding their own feelings of loss as a form of death, they mourn “What is the point of movement when movement indicates life and life indicates hope? I have neither life nor hope” (Winterson 1994, 108). They sustain this line of thought as they question what it means to be alive, reflecting “Excretion, growth, irritability, locomotion, nutrition, reproduction and respiration...If that’s all there is to being a living thing I may as well be dead. What of that other characteristic prevalent in human living things, the longing to be loved?” (Winterson 1994, 108). Understanding the loss of love as death, the narrator begins to prematurely memorialize Louise through comments like “Now that I have lost you I cannot allow you to develop, you must be a photograph not a poem. You must be rid of life as I am rid of life” (Winterson 1994, 119). Through explorations of medical texts, they begin a process of “embalm[ing]” Louise through fragmentation (Winterson 1994, 119). As a coping mechanism, the narrator adopts the ableist

mentality of figuring Louise as a static object, no longer a living subject but a project for study and analysis.

The narrator's motivation for learning about anatomy and diving into cancer research comes from a divided place of simultaneously wanting distance from and proximity to Louise. As they read anatomy textbooks, the narrator states "Within the clinical language, through the dispassionate view of the sucking, sweating, greedy, defecating self, I found a love-poem to Louise" (Winterson 1994, 111). Their divided desire is evident in the contradiction between the "dispassionate" nature of clinical language and the search for intimacy indicated in calling it a "love-poem." Further, discussing the facial bones, the narrator muses "Frontal bone, palatine bones, nasal bones, lacrimal bones, cheek bones, maxilla, vomer, inferior conchae, mandible. Those are my shields, those are my blankets, those words don't remind me of your face" (Winterson 1994, 132). While shielding themselves from the pain of losing Louise, they continue to search for her in medical textbooks, hoping to strike a balance between a kind of protective distancing and a desire for intimacy. Though understandable as a coping mechanism for their grief, the narrator's method in trying to find this balance results in a fragmentation and objectification of Louise that mirrors an ableist medicalization of the disabled or chronically ill body.

The narrator's use of medical language and a certain medical perspective of the body as a conglomerate of discrete parts separable from a whole subject is evidence of the extent to which medical objectification has been normalized through compulsory able-bodiedness. In the first section of the narrator's meditation on anatomy, thinking about mitosis, the narrator says "In the secret places of her thymus gland Louise is

making too much of herself...The security forces have rebelled. Louise is the victim of a coup" (Winterson 1994, 115). Playing into the tragic victim narrative of disability, the narrator imagines Louise defenseless and in need of protection. This understanding of Louise as fragile plays out in sensual musings as well as the narrator suggests "The leukaemic body hurts easily. I could not be rough with you now, making you cry out with pleasure close to pain...That was when we were in control, our bodies conspirators in our pleasure" (Winterson 1994, 124). Though pain is an inevitable part of leukemia, this again strips Louise of agency over her own body. Not only could Louise be asymptomatic for months or even years, but this statement suggests that, because of her diagnosis, Louise is no longer in control of her body and no longer able to experience bodily pleasure let alone decide for herself whether or not she would like to have sex.

The tragic victim narrative which denies Louise's right and ability to make decisions for her own body also contributes to her fragmentation through eerily colonial medical discourse that understands chronic illness and disability as bodily failure. Likening cancer to the military invasion of a nation-state, the narrator states "This is no time to stamp the passports and look at the sky. Coming up behind are hundreds of [white blood cells]. Hundreds too many, armed to the teeth for a job that doesn't need doing. Not needed? With all that weaponry?" (Winterson 1994, 116). Invoking the liberal body-politics' notion of a nation/body as defined by set borders through the reference to passports, suffering from and inevitably dying of cancer becomes a metaphor for the collapse of such a nation, a preventable failure if the body had only protected itself and not been so lax with its borders. Medical discourse's

reliance on this type of body politic is again demonstrated as the narrator refers to Louise as “broken” due to the affects cancer will have on her body (Winterson 1994, 125). This framing of illness as a process of breaking positions the ill or disabled subject as no longer a functional whole but rather as an object in need of fixing, a problem to be solved or cured.

As the narrator explores medical textbooks, they begin to wonder if the medicalized fragmentation of the body is really the way to seek Louise. Early in their exploration, the narrator expresses doubt, questioning “...my hands full of tools to record and analyse...I’ll have you bagged neat and tidy. I’ll store you in plastic like chicken livers. Womb, gut, brain, neatly labelled and returned. Is that how to know another human being?” (Winterson 1994, 120). Though they continue their anatomical meditation, they seem to recognize for a moment that this method of analysis, looking for Louise in isolated body parts, will not allow them to truly know Louise and have the kind of emotional intimacy they seem to crave. Following their anatomical deep dive, the narrator continues this line of questioning as they research cancer itself:

Metastasis is the problem. Cancer has a unique property; it can travel from the site of origin to distant tissues. It is usually metastasis which kills the patient and the biology of metastasis is what doctors don’t understand. They are not conditioned to understand it. In doctor-think the body is a series of bits to be isolated and treated as necessary, that the body in its very disease may act as a whole is an upsetting concept. Holistic medicine is for faith healers and crackpots, isn’t it? Never mind. Wheel round the drugs trolley, bomb the battlefield, try radiation right on the tumour. No good? Get out the levers, saws, knives and needles. Spleen the size of a football? Desperate measures for desperate diseases. Especially so since metastasis has often developed before the patient sees a doctor. They don’t like to tell you this but if the cancer is

already on the move, treating the obvious problem, lung, breast, skin, gut, blood, will not alter the prognosis. (Winterson 1994, 175)

This passage is the most explicit critique of the medical institution within the novel and lays out many of the problems with its treatment of chronic illness and disability. Referred to as “doctor-think,” the narrator problematizes the tendency in the medical field to break bodies into component parts dislocated from the subject to whom they are attached in an attempt to claim objectivity. Metastasized cancer challenges this logic as cancerous cells may spread throughout the body, necessitating a more holistic treatment approach rather than a cut and chemo approach. Rather than finding these holistic approaches, the medical institution remains stuck in a rigid idea of what it means to practice medicine that is based on biology and chemistry without much consideration of the affective and general well-being.

As the text function as narrative prosthesis in which Louise’s illness is reflected back on the narrator, it is possible to read this problem of metastasis as metaphor for the narrator’s struggles with intimacy. Before meeting Louise, or going to the doctor, the narrator had learned and internalized possessive, controlling, patriarchal, colonial, ableist constructions of love and intimacy. The metastasis of normative power relations were already going to cause problems for their relationship with Louise. Treating the obvious problem of ending their relationship with Jacqueline did nothing to change the outcome of the relationship as the narrator still left when things became too intense. However, with a more holistic approach, seeing the metastasis together as an assemblage

of entangled power relations and experiences, it may become possible to address the cancer of oppressive systems of power as they impact the narrator's intimate relationships.

Healing the Wounds

Though the narrator resorts to an ableist mentality and objectifies Louise through fragmentation via medical discourse as a way to cope with their grief, at various points throughout the novel, they mobilize a different kind of relational body politic. In statements like "The pads of your fingers have become printing blocks, you tap a message onto my skin, tap meaning into my body" and "She has translated me into her own book," the narrator suggests that their own meaning is defined through their relationship with Louise (Winterson 1994, 89). This relational self-definition creates interesting implications for understanding disability as a metaphor for "individual collapse" as the metaphor can be read as mapped doubly onto Louise and the narrator (Mitchell, Snyder 2013, 222). As I argue above, the narrator themselves projects their own experience of grief as death and the inevitability of Louise's death onto both of them. Additionally, the fragmentation of Louise through medical discourse may be read as cast back on the narrator as their mental health spirals due to their feeling of loss. This feeling of loss may be read as what Kafer describes as a phenomena in which "People with 'acquired' impairments...are described...as if they were multiple...the 'before disability' self and the 'after disability' self...Compulsory nostalgia is at work here, with a cultural expectation that the relation between these two selves is always one of loss" (Kafer 2013, 42-43). Seeing Louise through the nostalgic lens of their idyllic honeymoon period, the narrator cannot recognize her as the same person once they are aware of

her diagnosis and experiences the disunity as a loss. However, “This presumption of loss...is a symptom of the compulsory able-bodiedness/able-mindedness challenged by disability studies scholars and activists” (Kafer 2013, 43). Louise is not lost, she is not dead nor has she fundamentally changed. However, because the narrator has internalized this understanding of disability as loss while defining themselves relationally with Louise, this perceived loss is experienced doubly as a loss of Louise and a loss of self.

The narrator’s relational self-definition, highlighted by their experience of intense loss after leaving Louise, may read as unhealthy co-dependence; however, dependence may be recuperated as a crucial element in an ethics of care rooted in disability studies. As Eva Kittay argues in “The Ethics of Care, Dependence, and Disability,” dependence is often understood as threatening autonomy (Kittay 2011, 50). As Euroamerican culture and society is greatly dependent on the privileging of the autonomous individual, this understanding stigmatizes both people who depend on others for care and those who perform care work. Building on the argument that dependency is produced through many entangled systems of power, Kittay states “I worry that the emphasis on independence extols an idealization that is a mere fiction, not only for people with disability, but for all of us” (Kittay 2011, 51). The hegemonic systems of power which structure our society, including ableism, coloniality, patriarchy, capitalism, heterosexism, cissexism, etc., produce inequalities which necessitate dependency not only for impaired or disabled persons, but for many people who are unable to meet their needs within these exploitative and oppressive systems. In fact, in “The Cost of Getting Better: Ability and Debility,” Jasbir Puar states “in working-poor

and working class communities of color, disabilities and debilities are actually ‘the norm.’ Thus a political agenda that disavows pathology is less relevant than a critique of the reembedded forms of liberal eugenics propagated by what they call the medical-industrial complex and its attendant forms of administrative surveillance” (Puar 2013, 180). In other words, the pathologization or medicalization of chronic illness and disability is only one part of the problem. Deeper critiques of the medical institution should be oriented toward its participation and entanglement in systems of power that privilege a specific mode of being (white, able-bodied, cisgender, heterosexual, class privileged, patriarchal subjectivity) and render those who fall outside this norm in a state of debility by the circumstances of oppression.

In the face of many entangled systems of power and oppression propped up by individualism, collectivism and agentic interdependence through an ethics and economy of care and dependence may be a crucial pathway to resistance. As Kittay argues, “If we conceive of all persons as moving in and out of relationships of dependence through different life-stages and conditions of health and functionings, the fact that the disabled person requires the assistance of a caregiver is not the exception, the special case” (Kittay 2011, 54). We all require caring labor at various points throughout our lives for any number of reasons. Even beyond the context of ability, “...if we see ourselves as always selves-in-relation, we understand that our own sense of well-being is tied to the adequate care and well-being of another” (Kittay 2011, 54). In other words, if we acknowledge that each of us exist within these entangled webs of social, cultural, economic, political, and power relationships, within assemblages of meaning, the myth of individualism may fall away and the value of collectivism and

relationality may come into view. We can ask along with Puar, “How would our political landscape transform if it...[opened] toward an affective politics, attentive to ecologies of sensation and switchpoints of bodily capacities, to habituations and unhabituations, to tendencies, multiple temporalities, and becomings” (Puar 2013, 183). In the context of the novel, how would the narrator and Louise’s relationship change if the narrator were able to unlearn the lessons of patriarchy, ableism, heteronormativity, and coloniality? How would it change if the narrator understood their relationship not in the terms of possession and control but in the relational terms of affect, of feeling, desire, and pleasure? The narrator’s reflections as they begin to doubt their choice to leave Louise may offer us some answers to these questions.

Despite their often problematic performance of intimacy, the narrator’s understanding of relationality is one part of what ultimately pushes them to reevaluate their choice to leave Louise. When they decide to attend church and pray for Louise despite not being Christian, the narrator reflects, “As to prayer, it helped me to concentrate my mind. To think of Louise in her own right, not as my lover, not as my grief. It helped me to forget myself and that was a great blessing. ‘You made a mistake,’ said the voice” (Winterson 1994, 153). Though they claim this clarity in seeing Louise as an autonomous subject rather than a love-object or objectified cancer patient allows them to forget themselves, I would argue that this reflection enables the narrator to understand the relational dynamics between the two of them better, thereby allowing them to see themselves more clearly. In seeing Louise for the agentic subject she is, the narrator is able to reflect on their own actions and understand the role they played in their relationship in a brief moment of self-awareness.

The narrator's moment of self-awareness does not negate their understanding of themselves as relationally defined; rather, it enables a troubling of the hegemonic, patriarchal, ableist, colonial dynamics of their intimacy that allows a more loving, caring, and truly queer intimacy to begin to emerge. After starting to open up to a reevaluation of their choices on their own, Gail Right, the narrator's coworker, pushes the narrator to continue to question their choice and unlearn the forms of intimacy they have enacted in the past. Drunkenly speaking her mind on the narrator's treatment of Louise, Gail tells them "You made a mistake" (Winterson 1994, 158). Gail continues, insisting "You shouldn't have run out on her...She wasn't a child... You didn't give her a chance to say what she wanted. You left" (Winterson 1994, 159). In making these statements, Gail highlights the narrator's problematic treatment of Louise, forcing them to admit that they treated her as a child "[their] baby. The tender thing [they] wanted to protect" and destabilizing their self-conception as "heroic" (Winterson 1994, 159). Gail further problematizes the narrator's own hero complex, mocking "What right has she to poke her nose into your shining armor... You don't run out on the woman you love. Especially you don't when you think it's for her own good" (Winterson 1994, 160). Gail quickly and pointedly deconstructs the narrator's perception of their role in the relationship and the paternalistic nature of their decision to leave. Later on, the narrator asks Gail "Did I invent [Louise]" to which Gail responds "No, but you tried to...She wasn't yours for the making" (Winterson 1994, 189). Though they tried to "invent" Louise, Louise is not the always victim the narrator constructs them as. Louise is not a child who needs protection, she is not a quest or voyage, she is a fully

independent and autonomous woman and the narrator is not heroic for denying her agency.

Realizing their mistake in leaving, the narrator resolves to find Louise again and the gravity of their error is driven home as they find evidence that Louise continued to exercise the agency the narrator and Elgin attempted to deny her by disregarding their plans. Returning to their apartment, the narrator finds a letter from Louise's doctor reporting "There was some swelling of the lymphatic nodes but this had remained stable for six months. The consultant advised regular checks and a normal life" (Winterson 1994, 164). As Louise, and the narrator themselves initially, insisted, she remains asymptomatic and her doctor's advice is to continue to live as she sees fit. As they continue to look for information about where Louise is being treated, the narrator discovers that "She was not undergoing treatment anywhere" (Winterson 1994, 173). Despite Elgin and the narrator's attempts to decide her treatment plan for her, Louise ignores them and takes back her agency by opting not to undergo the brutal treatment Elgin had planned for her. On discovering this, the narrator spirals again; however, this time, they spiral not necessarily because Louise has cancer and will die, but because they did not listen to her and left. Calling the end of their relationship a "wasteful end," the narrator mourns "Louise, stars in your eyes, my own constellation. I was following you faithfully but I looked down....I should have trusted you but I lost my nerve" (Winterson 1994, 187). Though their language still has an echo of possession, this reflection demonstrates a step toward the narrator's unlearning of their previous construction of intimacy as they critique their own paternalistic behaviors and, at least retroactively, begin to listen to Louise. Like any other project of unlearning, troubling

the forms of intimacy the narrator has internalized and relearning new intimacies is a long process that will take time. However, the narrator has begun this process and, as I will continue to discuss in the conclusion, their orientation toward relationality suggests the possibility of adopting a new kind of intimacy built on an ethics of care that holds a great deal of queer possibility.

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Conclusion: Reimagining Intimacy

As I have argued, *Written on the Body* presents a complex engagement with desire, intimacy, embodiment, and power. Though the narrator critiques hegemony and the compulsory systems of heterosexism and heteronormativity through explicit critiques of the institution of marriage, they remain complicit in other systems of power including and especially patriarchy, coloniality, and ableism. Frequently referring to Louise through possessive, controlling, and objectifying language the narrator denies her the agency of choice over her medical decisions and produces a context of disablement through their inability and refusal to provide affective labor. However, the narrative as a whole critiques the narrator and their complicity in these systems as the narrator's self-doubt is amplified by Gail Right's critiques. As the narrator begins to unlearn their internalization of oppressive, hegemonic norms relating to intimacy, it becomes possible to imagine a new form of queer intimacy characterized by relationality and affective labors.

The Self in Relation

The compulsory and hegemonic nature of notions of self under dominant lenses is persistently critiqued over the course of the novel. Though the narrator, and thus the novel, often participate in dominating systems of power, the narrator's blurring of distinctions between self and other align, to an extent, with anti-identitarian politics. In this vein, McRuer argues that "composing straightness and able-bodiedness is always on some level impossible" as composition, what I refer to as construction or fabrication, attempts to homogenize nuanced lived and embodied experiences (McRuer 55). Thus, insofar as disability is positioned in opposition to the "composed" (normative/

dominant/hegemonic) able-body, disability represents “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning,” an alternative way of being that is creative, fully embodied rather than fragmented, and that recognizes the movements of power (McRuer 58). Donna Haraway refers to this thinking from “gaps” and borders as “permanently partial identities,” identities that are never stable as they are fluid and made in relation (McRuer 60). Despite the narrator’s failure to recognize the role of power in their relationship with Louise, they do practice this kind of relational making.

While the narrator often discusses their relationships in the terms of possession and control, there are other moments in which their language begins to reflect a more complex understanding of intimacy. At times, the narrator shifts from the hierarchical and individualistic paradigm of normative intimacies and blurs the distinction between self and other, saying things like “I will explore you and mine you and you will redraw me according to your will. We shall cross one another’s boundaries and make ourselves one nation” (Winterson 1994, 20). Though the colonality of this particular comment in its continued reliance on narratives of quest, knowability, and the construction of nation-states is important to note, this sentiment demonstrates an awareness of the contingency of such constructions. This blurring of self and other is heightened as the narrator states “When I look in the mirror it’s not my face I see. Your body is twice. Once you and once me. Can I be sure which is which?” (Winterson 1994, 99). Evident as well in the double mapping of illness on the narrator and Louise, these sentiments show how “the narrator discovers through Louise the allure of doubleness” (Atilla 2008, 3). Heightened awareness of the relationality between them and Louise, interpreted as

reflection or doubleness, allows the narrator to find a clarified self-perception. Reflecting “Your face, mirror-smooth and mirror-clear. Your face under the moon, silvered with cool reflection, your face in its mystery, revealing me,” the narrator reaffirms this relational meaning making as they find themselves revealed by a reflective quality in Louise (Winterson 132). In conceiving of themselves through relational entanglements, the narrator demonstrates Shildrick’s argument that “...the lived body is not identical with the material entity bounded by the skin” (Shildrick 2015, 15). The self is not confined to its materiality, but is composed through a complex network of social, political, and material relationships including affective entanglements.

This shift from understanding the self as individualistic to relational is not an entirely peaceful process and can be disruptive and painful. Discussing moments of ecstasy and queer utopian imagination in queer BDSM practices, Simula argues that “...the queer utopian beyond toward which BDSM participants are reaching promises neither harmony nor freedom from harm” but queer utopia is nonetheless “centered on intense moments of interrelationality” (Simula 2013, 94). The narrator’s perception that “[Louise] was jealous but so was I. She was brute with love but so was I...Neither of us had the upper hand, we wore matching wounds...” reflects that, though their relationship is often understood in deeply relational terms, it is not free of pain (Winterson 1994, 162-163). In fact, the entanglements between Louise and the narrator may amplify pain as the narrator mourns, “She was my twin and I lost her. Skin is waterproof but my skin was not waterproof against Louise. She flooded me and has not drained away...[she] threatens my innermost safety. I have no gondola at the gate and the tide is still rising” (Winterson 1994, 163). In her absence, the narrator experiences

their love for Louise as threateningly overwhelming. The narrator's sense of self is tied so deeply to their relationship with Louise that the perceived experience of losing her becomes dangerous.

The flipside of the risk of pain in opening up the self is the possibility of amplified pleasure and ecstasy. Suspending one such moment of pleasure in time, the narrator wonders "Perhaps we were in the roof of the world...Perhaps the rush and press of life ended here, the voices collecting in the rafters, repeating themselves into redundancy. Energy cannot be lost only transformed; where do the words go?" (Winterson 1994, 52). In a similar moment, they relate "This is outside of time. The edge of a black hole where we can go neither forward nor back...Perhaps that's where God is" (Winterson 1994, 72). In this suspension of time and experience of pleasure as pushing the limits of reality and possibility, Louise and the narrator discover moments of queer, utopic imagination. Arguing for the importance of these kinds of imaginations, Muñoz states that "Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality" (Muñoz 2009, 1). In their moment of interrelationally produced ecstasy, Louise and the narrator imagine themselves at the cusp of an event horizon, a space of transformation and possibility.

Loving Possibilities

These moments of queer, utopic imagination are dependent upon a centering of critical relationality that the narrator idealizes but frequently fails to perform. The narrator expresses their ideal intimacy in a story about an older couple they observed, saying "Time had not diminished their love. They seemed to have become one another

without losing their very individual selves” (Winterson 1994, 82). Though it demonstrates a desire for “the recognition of another person that is deeper than consciousness, lodged in the body more than held in the mind,” it does not suggest total knowability nor construct itself through the dynamics of possession and control (Winterson 1994, 82). Antithetical to normative constructions of intimacy produced within Euromerican systems of patriarchy, coloniality, white supremacy, capitalism, ableism, etc., this intimacy is characterized by what I argue is a form of relational self-determination and agentic interdependence. Rather than understanding each partner as firmly individual or the couple as one cohesive unit, this requires approaching individualism and collectivism through a both/and construction. Further, this kind of intimacy is impossible without acknowledging that “...molecules and the human beings they are a part of exist in a universe of possibility. We touch one another, bond and break, drift away on force-fields we don’t understand” (Winterson 62). In other words, it is impossible to truly recognize and care for a person without acknowledging the assemblages of social, economic, and political meaning which we are all entangled within.

When the narrator begins to critique normative constructions of intimacy and love, they begin more consistently access the horizons of possibility imagined in their moments of ecstasy and fantasy. Considering definitions of love, the narrator contemplates, “No, it doesn’t come under the heading Reproduction...The model family, two plus two in an easy home assembly kit. I don’t want a model, I want the full-scale original. I don’t want to reproduce, I want to make something entirely new” (Winterson 108). This desire for a love and intimacy that is productive rather than reproductive is

the beginning the narrator's decolonization intimacy. This project is continued as the narrator reflects "[Louise] opened up the dark places as well as the light. That's the risk you take" (Winterson 174). This statement seems to echo Anzaldúa's statement that, as a mestiza, she is "an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings" (Anzaldúa 2007, 103). The narrator's emerging critical consciousness and their openness to Louise create a space in which the light and the dark, the idyllic and the normative, may both be exposed and begin to work back on each other and create new possibilities of meaning and relation.

As the narrator continues to realize the mistakes they made in their treatment of Louise, they realize that loving Louise both requires and is worth the affective labor she has asked for as she deals with her diagnosis. As Kittay states, "As an attitude, caring denotes a positive, affective bond and investment in another's well-being" (Kittay 2011, 52). This attitude is finally reflected as the narrator realizes, "And if anyone had said [losing Louise] was the price I would have agreed to pay it. That surprises me; that with the hurt and the mess comes a shaft of recognition. It was worth it. Love is worth it" (Winterson 156). While the narrator says this believing they have already lost Louise, I believe the end of the novel suggests that the narrator has the opportunity to apply this sentiment in the future. If the end of the novel is read literally as Louise's return to the narrator, it is possible to believe that the narrator may apply all they have learned about intimacy in the future of their relationship. Overwhelmed with joy, the narrator states "This is where the story starts, in this threadbare room. The walls are exploding...I stretch out my hand and reach the corners of the world. The world is

bundled up in this room...I don't know if this is a happy ending but here we are let loose in open fields" (Winterson 190). With Louise's return, the narrator has the chance to correct their past mistakes and reimagine intimacy with Louise. Reading optimistically, the narrator and Louise are truly "let loose in open field" of possibility and queer, utopic imagination.

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