

“A repeating world”: Redeeming the Past and Future in the Utopian Dystopia of Jeanette Winterson’s *The Stone Gods*

Hope Jennings

Wright State University-Lake Campus

*Perhaps the universe is a memory of our mistakes.
And I shouldn't blame it all on us: there must be planets that are their own
mistakes—stories that began and faltered. Stories that ended long before they should.
... True stories are the ones that lie open at the border, allowing a crossing, a
further frontier. The final frontier is just science fiction—don't believe it.
Like the universe, there is no end.
~Jeanette Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 87*

For many contemporary women writers, the use of utopian and/or dystopian elements has become a preferred mode of interrogating current systems of oppression and violence while offering visions of resistance and possible (future) alternatives. However, defining utopia and dystopia as discrete genres in and of themselves is an increasingly problematic venture; both terms frequently carry the qualifying disclaimer of being “critical” of their own tradition and more often than not tend to overlap in their narrative strategies and aims. According to Raffaella Baccolini, the critical dystopia, taking precedence in the 1980s/90s, questions its former limitations by eschewing the closed endings and bleak world-views (as exemplified by Orwell and Huxley) that offered no way out of or beyond the present political systems and power structures.¹ Baccolini defines critical dystopias as texts that “maintain a utopian core at their center, a locus of hope that contributes to deconstructing tradition and reconstructing alternatives.”² Ultimately, as theorized by Tom Moylan, “both critical utopias *and* dystopias negate static ideals, preserve radical action, and create a space in which opposition can be articulated and received.”³

Jeanette Winterson’s recent foray into utopian/dystopian narrative presents a polemical critique of our present self-destructive impulses (via

environmental and genocidal disasters) alongside a poetic elegy for an unrecoverable (pastoral) past while articulating the utopian dream of a redeemable future. As such, *The Stone Gods* (2007) is a relevant example of feminist critical dystopia, which Baccolini argues offers a “multi-oppositional” writing strategy that works against the traditional “pure” forms of the science fiction genre.⁴ As Ursula K. Le Guin observes, rather disparagingly, *The Stone Gods* borrows superficially from science fiction tropes and nova.⁵ However, in an interview with *New Scientist* Winterson explains she is more concerned with exploring our problematic relationship with science and technology, and the gendered differences in men’s and women’s views and/or narratives concerning that relationship.⁶ Read in this context, Le Guin concedes Winterson’s text is indeed a “doom-laden” and “cautionary tale—or, more precisely, a keen lament for our irremediably incautious species,”⁷ and as Winterson asserts, such cautionary tales become all the more urgent when we observe how “humans are really bad at using [technology] wisely,” as seen throughout history and our current geopolitical and ecological crises.⁸

Overall, *The Stone Gods* explores the inherent dangers of repeating histories, since one of Winterson’s primary aims is to unsettle views of the past and present as isolated phenomena, and *The Stone Gods*, like many of her previous novels, might also be generally categorized as historiographic metafiction. Working more specifically within the realm of speculative fiction, Winterson deconstructs the seductions and limitations of apocalyptic myths, which the text implies often lead us into “making the same mistakes again and again.”⁹ *The Stone Gods* seeks a spatio-temporal alternative that moves us beyond the myth of apocalypse and its own utopian desire for a complete break from history and thus a more “pure” beginning, which always requires a forgetting or repression of the material conditions (and mistakes) of the past, a cultural loss of memory that inevitably leads us back to the same endings. The utopian desire embedded in Winterson’s (somewhat technophobic) dystopia is located in her vision of how we might dismantle repressive ideologies and myths through the articulation of new narratives that no longer reenact the same self-destructive cycles and repetitions of history.

Beyond Apocalypse: “History is not a suicide note.”

The myth of apocalypse is a fantasy of horror projected onto the world, imagining a violent ending in the belief that this might clear the way for a new beginning. As Frank Kermode argues in his seminal text, *The Sense of an Ending*, the apocalyptic moment arises in response to a seemingly disintegrating world, which may “exhibit all the symptoms of decay and change, all the terrors of an approaching end, but when the end comes it is not an end.”¹⁰ In Kermode’s view, the transformative power of apocalypse thus plays out in “the peculiarity of our imaginations, [which] chooses always to be at the end of an era” so that “out of a desolate reality, would come renewal.”¹¹ In other words, our belief in the End, as a fiction, is a necessary myth, since it is only through a violent

transformation in human consciousness that a positive renewal in human relationships and communities might be initiated, perhaps allowing greater freedoms in the expression of speech, imagination and individual desires. Although Winterson would seem to agree (as indicated in the epigraph to this paper) with Kermode's assertion that our fictions of the End merely signify "human periods in an eternal world," since "the great crises . . . of human life do not stop time,"¹² her text questions the extent to which the destruction of civilization might allow for a break from history's master narratives and open up an alternative (utopian) space. Even if the apocalyptic rupture from and within time promises a new world order, *The Stone Gods* reveals how the new world only turns out to be a repetition of the old. Hence, the consoling myth of apocalypse does not so much allow for a cataclysmic break from the past but in fact depends on a continuing history of violence that only ends up generating further violence.

In its deconstruction of apocalyptic myths, *The Stone Gods* demands a closer examination of the ways in which our beliefs about the End are inextricably tied to how we fantasize our beginnings, or vice versa, since the discovery of a new world, "Planet Blue," is an event located in our distant past rather than our future; the new planet is our planet, Earth, at the moment of its cosmic, or interplanetary, discovery and the ensuing failed attempt at colonization, billions of years ago, by the human inhabitants of "Orbus." The novel thus begins in the assumed realm of science fiction, presenting a projected future that illustrates where our present technology, geopolitical conflicts and socio-cultural trends might be taking us, but by the end of the first section and its seemingly abrupt shift into the eighteenth century we realize the narrative has in fact started at the originary rather than terminal point of our planet's life. Winterson's temporal sleight of hand is intended to provide an ironic shift in perspective, forcing us to view ourselves from outside our present point of view: this is who we (may) have been; this is who we are becoming, as long as we refuse to learn from our mistakes and continue adhering to the same narratives and myths that excuse us from addressing the reality of our present dilemmas.

By setting up Orbus as a template for both our past and future, Winterson is suggesting that myths of origins *and* apocalypse are problematically conflated in our imaginations. The novel's narrator, Billie Crusoe, who appears in various reincarnations in each of the three major sections or narrative strands in the text, is a wry and somewhat incredulous observer of her society's self-deluding discourse. When Billie bluntly states that their planet is dying, the corrective and media-generated response is that "Orbus is evolving in a way that is hostile to human life."¹³ Of course, humans are the ones to have evolved in a way that is hostile to the planet's life, and now that they "are running out of planet," due to overpopulation, widespread destruction of viable ecosystems and severe climate change, "the future is not sustainable."¹⁴ Luckily, they have discovered a new planet, cosmically young and ecologically amenable to human life, and mainly because, as we are left to conclude, it is

pristinely untouched by humans. Colonization of this new planet will provide, at least for those few who are privileged enough to leave (or escape) the dying Orbus, "the opportunity to do things differently."¹⁵ Billie, who inadvertently ends up joining the colonialists, seems to believe in the apocalyptic hope that "This time we will learn from our mistakes,"¹⁶ and because "Human beings will have to begin again" they will ideally find a way of "beginning again differently."¹⁷ When first arriving at Planet Blue and taking in its "beauty and strangeness," Billie observes: "It felt like forgiveness. It felt like mercy. We had spoiled and ruined what we had been given, and now it had been given again. This was the fairytale, the happy ending."¹⁸

The happy ending, or rather beginning, is indeed no more than a fairy tale, because as we go on to discover (or observe in our own history and present circumstances) humans will spoil and ruin their natural habitats, and by extension their own chances for survival, if they continue living according to the premise that "Nature's unpredictable—that's why we [have] to tame her."¹⁹ For instance, the colonizing team has arrived with the mission of making Planet Blue more viable to humans by eradicating its present inhabitants, the dinosaurs, but through human miscalculation and a technological error end up "trigger[ing] a mini ice age" and thus seem "set to destroy the place before it had even begun."²⁰ On one level this suggests the bleak inevitability of human patterns of self-destruction, our inability to learn from our mistakes, since one of the text's central questions is, as Winterson herself poses:

With all these things that we could do [with technology], what would we actually do with a new planet? . . . When Stephen Hawking bangs on about how the future of mankind is in space, it makes me really depressed. It's a boy's fantasy, like not tidying your bedroom because your mother will do it—trash the place, then leave it. I wanted to challenge the idea that we can simply leave.²¹

Winterson's critique of this (masculinist) reasoning is embedded in *The Stone Gods*' deconstruction of the myth of apocalypse, illustrating how the End rarely opens up into a "real" beginning of doing things differently because it is simply an escape fantasy, a clearing of the cluttered conscience so that we can go on making the same mistakes by conveniently forgetting how we arrived at the previous cataclysm. Moreover, Winterson indicates that the rhetoric of apocalypse is highly problematic when applied to ecocriticism, as Greg Garrard observes: "the real moral and political challenge of ecology may lie in accepting that the world is *not* about to end, that human beings are likely to survive even if Western-style civilisation does not. Only if we imagine that the planet *has* a future, after all, are we likely to take responsibility for it."²² In *The Stone Gods*, the glimmer of "authentic" hope that resists the "false" hope of apocalyptic narrative is expressed in Billie's refusal to believe they "have reached the end of everything."²³ Instead she holds out for the possibility of humanity, or

rather human choice/action at the level of free-will, redeeming itself outside the limited confines of apocalypse and its own self-defeating prophecy: "History is not a suicide note—it is a record of our survival."²⁴ Or, as Winterson explains: "I don't want to sound like a doom-monger [...] . . . I do feel we have every chance, but not unless we are realistic, both about our own negativity and our own possibility."²⁵

If the end is only a violent repetition of the beginning, then to offer a new myth or narrative that moves beyond apocalypse, one must provide an alternative vision of a future that is no longer bound to but entirely freed from the past. This by itself is a utopian endeavor, since the process of dismantling those narratives that have informed our cultural identities requires a complex reading of how myth and history are inextricably related, and are not so easily disentangled from each other. According to Paul Ricoeur, because the function of narrative is "to establish human action at the level of genuine historicity, i.e., of repetition," then we need to examine how myths themselves come down to us *through* history.²⁶ In other words, as Winterson explores through the "repeating world[s]" of her novel, all of which seem to offer the "same old story,"²⁷ our narratives would have no meaning if they were simply concerned with singular and unique events, but resonate because of their repetitive nature, connecting the past to the present and future in a more immediate dialogue with each other. This is not to suggest that Winterson articulates a relativistic view of history; rather, she locates the power of narrative in its ability to move the past closer to our present in order to transform what we envision is possible for the future. For example, on their journey toward Planet Blue and anticipating its promise of new life, the Orbus crew members pass the time by sharing stories of the many dead planets they have discovered and left behind.²⁸ Although this narrative activity is crucial to understanding past errors as a way of averting future catastrophes, it seems a futile enterprise, considering the planet they nearly destroy before even inhabiting it, yet Winterson insists on the redemptive power of storytelling. In its recurring allusions to Defoe, Donne, and Shakespeare, among others, the text repeatedly asks whether poetry and art are capable of saving us and replies: "Not once, but many times."²⁹ *The Stone Gods* thus represents human life and interactions, in the words of Ricoeur, "as an activity and a desire in search of a narrative," and ultimately as a journey aimed toward recovering and transforming "the narrative identity which constitutes us."³⁰ Indeed, one of the novel's many refrains—"Everything is imprinted for ever with what it once was"³¹—implies that if we keep committing the same mistakes then ideally we are also capable of learning from them, indicating both the dystopian and utopian impulses within the text.

The Dystopian Dilemma: "Same old story"

The dystopian vision within *The Stone Gods* expresses Winterson's ambivalence toward our relationship with technology, which offers yet another myth of utopian progress and liberation, while in fact ending up, in most cases,

a repressive tool in the hands of those who control its discursive and material production. According to Carol Stabile, this has become one of the central debates in feminist theories that question whether "technology [is] inherently patriarchal and malignant," thus further oppressing female (or marginalized) subjectivities, or if it is a tool capable of dismantling "the terms of the woman/nature binarism."³² Winterson exposes the gap that exists between the promises of technology and what it actually delivers, particularly the ways in which it might, as Stabile observes, "increase the polarisation between the sexes."³³ The text's exploration of technology's limited ability to guarantee greater individual or societal freedoms is moreover directly linked to a critique of the increasing homogenization of culture and ecosystems due to globalization's own failed promise to decrease the disparities between and among social, economic and (trans)national groups. Regardless of how far we advance in scientific discoveries and globalized networks of information and cultural exchange, we remain mired in the same old story of power relations, the same self-destructive blind-spots concerning, as Winterson asserts, "the real problems of the human condition [which] won't be solved by another set of gadgets or even by spectacular interventions of the DNA kind."³⁴

On Orbus, for instance, advancements in technology have fulfilled the utopian dream of youth, health and virtual immortality, accessible to anyone who desires to undergo "Genetic Fixing," and yet, as Billie observes, "Bio-tech has created as many problems as it has fixed."³⁵ More specifically, and elaborating on Winterson's pun, rather than freeing women and men from those discourses dictating the terms of gender according to appearance, these have become even more rigidly fixed than before, stressing further the disparities between the physical expectations for the sexes. In other words, technological innovation has not by itself radically addressed or transformed the socio-historical and cultural encodings of power because it continues to privilege male desires; as a result women are still expected to "look youthful, men less so," to the point of women Fixing at puberty, since "Legal sex starts at fourteen."³⁶ Although women have been granted the ultimate reproductive freedom now that it is no longer necessary to "breed in the womb," their subjective identities remain limited to a repressive embodiment, as well as masochistic desires directed toward fulfilling the desires of men, who in any case prefer little girls, and it is a richly ironic understatement when Billie remarks, "The future of women is uncertain."³⁷ Winterson appears to reiterate here Rosi Braidotti's suggestion that the only viable strategy for women, if they are to subvert or move beyond the existing gender schemas, is if they "repossess subjectivity by reducing their confinement to the body."³⁸

The possibility of (dis)locating female identities and desires outside of or beyond the body is explored in the text through the figure of Spike, a highly evolved "Robo *sapien*," who in spite of her female body observes: "Gender is a human concept . . . and not interesting."³⁹ For Winterson, of course, the problem of gender has long been of primary interest within her own body of work, and though Spike's general narrative function is to pose various

questions concerning how we define *Homo sapiens*, she is also a conceptual experiment addressing the nature of female desire. Spike, who exists as pure consciousness (and is thus a kind of superhuman), illustrates the capacity to continue being a desiring subject without the locus of the body. Her first act of disembodiment, when she is broken down limb by limb to nothing more than a mere head, is not simply, as Le Guin remarks, “grotesquely sad,” but an elegiac scene describing the power of love and romantic intimacy to outlast and outweigh physical signs and/or attachments. Her second reincarnation, when (in Le Guin’s estimation) she “succeeds, as . . . no other detached head has, in having sex,”⁴⁰ is riotously, and yes, grotesquely subversive, demonstrating how (female) sexual desire can be a complex matter of the mind rather than reduced to the flesh.

Winterson is clearly playing with Donna Haraway’s Cyborg fantasy, while remaining skeptical of its utopian “dream,” since to give up the body not only distances us from confronting the realities of gendered differences, particularly as these continue to exist in gender repressive cultures, but also risks the possibility of supporting, as Rosemary Hennessey suggests, “the hegemonic interests of multinational capitalism” in its material control over the uses and development of biotech.⁴¹ Spike, after all, is corporate owned, and without her body, limited in her range of autonomous freedom and movement. Overall, Winterson problematizes the uses of technology, situating alongside each other the discursive positionings of technophobia vs. technomania, and questioning whether either of these “offer[s] the tools necessary for reshaping reality,” which Stabile argues is necessary to any feminist confrontation with technology.⁴² According to Stabile, technophobic discourses equate technology “with the war machine and a death drive” and thus “consolidate a feminist opposition equated with nature and life.”⁴³ In this context, as Stabile observes, technology is interpreted as the sign of our own destruction and women’s oppression, and so to reject technology is to reject patriarchy, a strategy that marks out humankind’s, or at least women’s, “sole chance for survival.” However, to assert categorically that women “inhabit . . . a realm distinct from the death-loving province of masculinity” tends to “reproduce stereotypes of female nature” at the level of essentialist discourse.⁴⁴ Consequently, as Stabile goes on to argue, because technology is often used “to oppress those who do not possess it or cannot engage with it,” feminists should maintain a complex relationship with technology by acknowledging “its liberatory potential” while remaining “skeptical about immediate possibilities for intervention.”⁴⁵ Or, as Braidotti argues: “The most effective strategy remains for women to use technology [through mimesis or parody] in order to disengage our collective imagination from the phallus and its accessory values: money, exclusion and domination, nationalism . . . and systematic violence.”⁴⁶

The Stone Gods employs these tactics in order to resist oversimplifying the dangers and promises of science, using technology at the level of parody in order to demonstrate how our fantasized utopias concerning the benefits of science often lead to dystopian futures or worlds. This is not to say that

Winterson views technology as inherently destructive but that regardless of how much "it has made our lives infinitely better. . . . Every good thing that we make we manage to turn into a negative, which increasingly threatens both the planet and its species."⁴⁷ In the novel's second section, Winterson uses the "true" story of the Easter Islanders to illustrate this premise of our seemingly inherent death-drive, reiterating the text's central question: "Why would a man destroy the very thing he most needs [or loves]?"⁴⁸ In brief, the Easter Islanders have organized their social and religious life of ancestral worship around the construction of totemic statues, eventually depleting all of the island's trees and as a consequence all of its natural resources. The Islanders are forced into competing for subsistence, while also engaging in a series of internecine wars centered on the "deadly destruction of [the] vying Idols," since to kill one man's ancestor is to confer power on oneself,⁴⁹ and thus "all of this good land [has been] sacrificed to a meaning that has now become meaningless."⁵⁰ All of which leads the narrator to conclude: "Mankind . . . wherever found, Civilized or Savage, cannot keep to any purpose for a substantial length of time, except the purpose of destroying himself."⁵¹

According to Winterson, our pervasive tendency to set up "science and technology . . . in the service of the bottom line" is primarily responsible for the repetition of systematic violence, exclusion and domination.⁵² Her dystopia in the last third of the text, "Post-3 War," has little to do with science fiction but is rather a nightmarish depiction of our present, albeit located a few years further on into the early half of the twenty-first century. It is a far more discomfitingly imaginable future than the parodic technological inventions of Orbus, and borrows heavily from the Orwellian vision of a London where constant surveillance and restriction of citizen rights and privacy are justified in the name of the "Freedom Act," while the current "freedom war[s]," aimed at "liberating" China, Iran, and Pakistan, are obvious nods toward the implications of post-9/11 anti-terrorism policies and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.⁵³ Moreover, the text implies that the paranoid discourses of the perennial war-state are a manifestation of the increasing corporatization of power. In the aftermath of Post-3 War, "Government was finished," replaced by MORE, "a new kind of global company"⁵⁴ that sets itself up as the savior of a devastated world economy, offering stability and peace, while holding an absolute monopoly on the production of thought and culture through the rationing of private ownership as a new kind of consumerism.⁵⁵ Winterson's implicit critique here is of the failed utopia of globalization, in so far as its unforeseen effect of supplanting diversity, as Garrard argues, through the homogenizing impulses of transnational companies and their "monocultures of the mind," which in their excessive growth and reach often far surpass national political powers.⁵⁶

Thus, in its confrontation with and critique of hegemonic discourses, *The Stone Gods* fulfills Baccolini's criteria for those feminist critical dystopias that are defined by narrative strategies aimed at "rejecting the traditional subjugation of the individual" while opening up "a space of contestation and

opposition for those groups . . . for whom subjectivity has yet to be attained,” and a typical strategy for doing this is to “portray surviving and imperfect utopian enclaves within the larger dystopian world.”⁵⁷ Outside “Tech City,” run by MORE, exists “Wreck City,” comprised of diverse lifestyles resisting the discourse of MORE’s normalization and repression of difference, and inhabited not so much by persons “displaced by War and unable to live a normal life,” but those who “were unable to live a normal life before the War.”⁵⁸ As a truly multi-cultural “paradise” without limits or boundaries,⁵⁹ this utopian space stretches into the “Unknown,” representing a haven for anyone who “didn’t want to go back into a cage,”⁶⁰ and where “the power of thought” offers the last refuge of redemption, expressing Winterson’s belief, contra the dream or myth of technology, that “people need to change from the inside out, not the outside in.”⁶¹

The Unknown Utopia: “Love is an intervention”

The prevailing conflict for human beings, as explored throughout *The Stone Gods*, revolves around whether we choose love or destruction. In each section of the novel, the power of love and narrative provide the redemptive/utopian answer to the repeating patterns of violence and devastation. As an individual act of free-will that embraces the other, “Love is an intervention,”⁶² capable of resisting the totalizing claims of a society’s internalized death-drive and its repression of difference. Embedded within Winterson’s parodic treatment of the science fiction genre as yet another manifestation of the “boy’s fantasy” of travel, adventure, discovery and conquest of the unknown, is an “other” story, the “true” story of our quantum universe: “Every second the Universe divides into possibilities and most of those possibilities never happen. It is not a universe—there is more than one reading. The story won’t stop, can’t stop, it goes on telling itself, waiting for an intervention that changes what will happen next.”⁶³ In other words, love is the intervening force capable of changing the story, disrupting the desire for absolute power and knowledge, for “final frontiers” that limit our imaginations from seeking possibilities beyond the law of the same. In Winterson’s view, love itself is the great adventure story of discovery because it risks venturing beyond all “certainty of return,”⁶⁴ while at the same time allowing passage “home.” Rather, love returns us to the locus of belonging and reciprocity that makes human connection possible, by extension redeeming our humanity in the face of an increasingly disconnected world.

Ironically, it is Spike, the Robo *sapiens*, who demonstrates the redeeming power of desire for human connection, and that love itself is “the chance to be human.”⁶⁵ Although “inter-species sex is illegal,”⁶⁶ Spike actively and romantically pursues Billie, who herself fears this intimate contact with otherness and difference in spite of her attraction to Spike. Once Billie and Spike are left alone, stranded on Planet Blue and trapped in a cave but no longer confined to the restrictions of cultural prejudice, they accept the infinite possibilities of love that might transcend the inevitability of their deaths. In the

process of dying, and Spike's gradual disembodiment, they come to discover "that the stretch of the body-beloved is the landmass of the world,"⁶⁷ which in turn inspires Billie to dream the story of a new world that originates "in a walnut shell, cracked open by love's finger and thumb."⁶⁸ Her dream expresses the utopian desire for a "true" beginning, or origin myth, from which our humanity might evolve in a pattern that embraces difference; where the power of imagination, and the choice of love as a redeeming alternative to our destructive impulses, is always that which allows us to begin again even if it might still turn out the same:

There will be men and women, there will be fire. There will be settlements, there will be wars. There will be planting and harvest, music and dancing. Someone will make a painting in a cave, someone will make a statue and call it God. Someone will see you and call your name. Someone will hold you, dying, across his knees.⁶⁹

In the novel's shift to the dystopian world of Post-3 War, the section begins with a narrative exploring the mother-child bond as representative of our most primal myth, articulating our desire for return to the lost archetypal paradise and its infinite plenitude: "Love without thought. Love without conditions. Love without promises. Love without threats. Love without fear. Love without limits. Love without end."⁷⁰ The mother's love/body is offered as a model of utopian desire, the unfulfilled dream of return home, because it can never be reestablished or rediscovered. In this context, as Fredric Jameson has argued: "the problem of utopian desire" is inevitably "the expression of [our] collective yearning for that which cannot be fulfilled . . . it is a desire, so its representation is always highly contingent and its realization necessarily impossible."⁷¹ On the other hand, utopia remains a necessarily disruptive force in its "transformative potential," since, as Jameson has also observed, "the desire called Utopia is actually a desire-aesthetic, its tension-moment is therefore something to be not cured or repressed, but rather critically dwelt in."⁷² Winterson's text dwells in this critical space, embracing utopia as a "desire-aesthetic" that allows us to continue imagining the possibilities of transforming our world, even in the face of despair over our likely failure to do so. In other words, as the text suggests, we keep returning to utopia because: "The lost and found/found and lost is like a section of our DNA. In the spiral of us is the story we can't tell—the story we tell in single lines, separated from one another not by neat spaces but by torn-out years."⁷³

Wreck City is representative of a utopian albeit imperfect society attempting to survive and move beyond the devastation of "torn out years," and as the "Alternative" to Tech City,⁷⁴ it resists the effects of War, which always "trivializes the personal" in "the broad sweep" of grand narratives of "emergency measures [and] national identity."⁷⁵ Although Wreck City is often unstable, where survival is at the subsistence level, lawlessness seems to reign

and radioactive “mutant” children aimlessly wander its wastelands, it is a place where tolerance and non-judgment of difference prevails, where freedom is no longer commodified and dictated by corporate interests but remains an authentic expression of autonomous desires. All of this, as Billie observes, is of course “Utopian, flaky, unreal,” but in contrast to the “realistic, hard-headed practical types [who] got us to the edge of melt-down” they are at least harming no one.⁷⁶ Their utopia is founded on “the cosmic Yes,” the ecstatic insatiable *jouissance* of Molly Bloom’s “Yes, I said, and Yes,” the word that might provide a “lexicon for a new language. . . . [T]he in-the-beginning word. Yes. And then the War came. . . .”⁷⁷ Even if the reality of war is capable of deflating this yes, the text clings to the disruptive power of utopian (or feminine) desire in its potential to have not only the first but also last word, because “it hardly matters that the dead language of war repeats itself through time. The bodies that can say nothing have the last word. What is it—the last word? No. No more war.”⁷⁸ As Luce Irigaray argues, women need to learn how to say *no*, for “without a *yes* from women the world of men cannot continue and develop;” however, there always remains the problem of learning when, why and how to say this *no* as an effective critique and rejection of the patriarchal reality principle.⁷⁹ After all, MORE has co-opted the slogan of “No MORE War” in the service of its corporate interests.⁸⁰ More importantly, as the text persists in asking, if “Love is an intervention,” then “Why do we not choose it?”⁸¹

Regardless of whether *The Stone Gods* seems incapable of resolving this question, Baccolini reminds us that “utopia (in the sense of utopian hope) is maintained in dystopia only *outside* the story: It is only if we consider dystopia as a warning, that we as readers can hope to escape such a pessimistic future.”⁸² Thus, as Winterson concludes, although we might be “doomed to repetition” we nevertheless continue to “Begin again,” as long as love and free-will remain in our “capacity to affect the outcome.”⁸³ In other words, it is in our capacity to change the future as long as we continue reexamining our past by confronting our cultural myths and narratives. Although Winterson problematically locates the fulfilled dream of utopia in the recovery of the lost paradise of “a pristine place,”⁸⁴ this should be understood as part of her complex engagement with ecocriticism as a narrative that attempts to envision viable tactics for resisting and averting the destructive trajectory of the foreseeable future. The novel begins and ends with lyrical passages of Billie returning home to her farm, her own utopian enclave removed from the surrounding dystopias of ecological degradation (including Wreck City). Like the satellite signal Billie discovers at the end of the novel,⁸⁵ the farm is “a message in a bottle from another time.”⁸⁶ Its richly diverse ecosystem is the preserved space (or dream) that allows for genuine connections between humans, and between humans and their environments.

The problem with Winterson’s pastoral fantasy is that it reiterates some of the more troubling aspects of technophobic discourse, which according to Stabile often articulates “an anti-modern attitude that rejects the present in favor of a temporally distant (i.e. non-existent) and holistic natural world.”⁸⁷

Furthermore, in her representation of nature as inherently feminine or aligned with female interests, Winterson is at risk of repeating the same essentialist discourse that traps women in the mythologized space of being the bearers of embodied "truth." For instance, Winterson claims the gendered difference in men's and women's views concerning the benefits of technology derives from the supposition that men "believe in their own myths more than women do. Women are realistic probably because . . . they're still the ones who tend the children, or look after the land. It's no wonder that we call the planet 'she'. It is home: men are always trying to escape from home, but we, women, are 'home'."⁸⁸ This is of course a broadly presumptive statement, for there is no reason to believe that women are more likely to be in better touch with reality simply because they are in closer touch with nature, in itself an essentialist claim. Here Winterson herself has apparently fallen for the old (male) myth that women are "home" and thus embody a higher moral plane, which has been used as a justification for the paternalistic rationale of protecting women from the "sordid" realities of the world.

However, if we give Winterson the benefit of the doubt and read her metaphorically, "home," at least as it is represented in her text, is the imagined, utopian space where love waits for our return; it is always there as a choice we might make, as an intervention between life and death, destruction and survival; or rather, the choice of love over destruction is a voyage into the undiscovered and as yet unclaimed unknown, opening into the infinite possibilities of a future that is not foreclosed or doomed to repeat its past mistakes, and thus presenting itself as a genuine passage toward beginning again differently. Furthermore, Winterson's text illustrates how ecocriticism might offer a redeeming narrative when, as Garrard argues, it is:

attuned to environmental justice, but not dismissive of the claims of commerce and technology; shaped by knowledge of long-term environmental problems, but wary of apocalypticism; informed by artistic as well as scientific ecological insight; and committed to the preservation of the biological diversity of the planet for all its inhabitants.⁸⁹

Lastly, although *The Stone Gods* does not dream of a post-gender society, Winterson presents alternatives of gendered relations or embodiments capable of resisting the homogenizing, repressive impulses in culture through the transformative force of autonomous desires. Her Robo *sapiens* are offered as the utopian model for humanity: they can never forget the mistakes of the past and are thus always evolving toward a more perfectible, sustainable future.

End Notes

- ¹ Raffaella Baccolini, "Gender and Genre in the Feminist Critical Dystopias of Katherine Burdekin, Margaret Atwood, and Octavia Butler," in *Future Females, The Next Generation: New Voices and Velocities in Feminist Science Fiction Criticism*, ed. Marleen S. Barr (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 13.
- ² Baccolini, "Gender and Genre," 13.
- ³ Baccolini, "Gender and Genre," 14.
- ⁴ Baccolini, "Gender and Genre," 18.
- ⁵ Ursula K. Le Guin, "Head Cases," *The Guardian*, September 22, 2007, accessed February 10, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/sep/22/sciencefictionfantasyandhorror.fiction>.
- ⁶ "Science in Fiction: Interview with novelist Jeanette Winterson," *New Scientist* 195, no. 2618 (August 25, 2007): 50-51. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed January 28, 2010).
- ⁷ Le Guin, "Head Cases."
- ⁸ "Science in Fiction."
- ⁹ Jeanette Winterson, *The Stone Gods* (Boston and New York: Mariner Books, 2009), 87.
- ¹⁰ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: studies in the theory of fiction* (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1968), 82.
- ¹¹ Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, 97, 99.
- ¹² Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, 88-89.
- ¹³ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 7.
- ¹⁴ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 60, 4, 32.
- ¹⁵ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 4.
- ¹⁶ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 6.
- ¹⁷ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 32.
- ¹⁸ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 73.
- ¹⁹ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 72.
- ²⁰ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 75.
- ²¹ "Science in Fiction."
- ²² Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 107.
- ²³ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 39.
- ²⁴ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 39.
- ²⁵ "Science in Fiction."
- ²⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, ed. M.J. Valdes (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 109, 111, 487.
- ²⁷ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 49.
- ²⁸ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 50-52.
- ²⁹ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 78.
- ³⁰ Ricoeur, *A Ricoeur Reader*, 434, 436.
- ³¹ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 86.
- ³² Carol Stable, "Feminism and the Technological Fix," in *Feminisms*, ed. Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1997), 508, 511.
- ³³ Stable, "Feminism and the Technological Fix," 527.
- ³⁴ "Science in Fiction."

- ³⁵ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 39.
- ³⁶ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 9, 17.
- ³⁷ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 22.
- ³⁸ Rosi Braidotti, "Cyberfeminism with a Difference," in *Feminisms*, 527.
- ³⁹ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 63.
- ⁴⁰ Le Guin, "Head Cases."
- ⁴¹ Stabile, "Feminism and the Technological Fix," 511.
- ⁴² Stabile, "Feminism and the Technological Fix," 513.
- ⁴³ Stabile, "Feminism and the Technological Fix," 508.
- ⁴⁴ Stabile, "Feminism and the Technological Fix," 509-511.
- ⁴⁵ Stabile, "Feminism and the Technological Fix," 509.
- ⁴⁶ Braidotti, "Cyberfeminism with a Difference," 527.
- ⁴⁷ "Science in Fiction."
- ⁴⁸ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 102.
- ⁴⁹ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 109.
- ⁵⁰ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 113.
- ⁵¹ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 109.
- ⁵² "Science in Fiction."
- ⁵³ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 130-131.
- ⁵⁴ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 134.
- ⁵⁵ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 137.
- ⁵⁶ Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 193.
- ⁵⁷ Baccolini, "Gender and Genre," 18.
- ⁵⁸ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 155.
- ⁵⁹ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 158.
- ⁶⁰ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 159.
- ⁶¹ "Science in Fiction."
- ⁶² Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 68.
- ⁶³ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 68.
- ⁶⁴ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 68.
- ⁶⁵ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 90.
- ⁶⁶ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 28.
- ⁶⁷ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 91.
- ⁶⁸ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 93.
- ⁶⁹ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 92.
- ⁷⁰ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 121.
- ⁷¹ Alcena Madeline Davis Rogan, "Utopian Studies," in *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, ed. Mark Bould, Andrew M. Butler, Adam Roberts, and Sherryl Vint (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 314.
- ⁷² Rogan, "Utopian Studies," 315.
- ⁷³ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 125.
- ⁷⁴ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 172.
- ⁷⁵ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 173.
- ⁷⁶ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 175.

- ⁷⁷ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 179.
- ⁷⁸ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 197.
- ⁷⁹ Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia UP, 1993), 201.
- ⁸⁰ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 134.
- ⁸¹ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 205.
- ⁸² Baccolini, "Gender and Genre," 18.
- ⁸³ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 181, 182.
- ⁸⁴ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 87.
- ⁸⁵ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 187.
- ⁸⁶ Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, 11.
- ⁸⁷ Stabile, "Feminism and the Technological Fix," 509.
- ⁸⁸ "Science in Fiction."
- ⁸⁹ Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 182.