

*Alina Preda*

## **“New Planets for Old”: A Posthumanist Ecocritical Approach to Jeannette Winterson’s Ustopia**

---

**Abstract:** Jeannette Winterson’s 2007 novel *The Stone Gods* reflects its author’s propensity for experimental writing in both form and content, as well as her unwavering commitment to anti-corporatism, ecological praxis, posthuman ethical theory and non-anthropocentric post-humanist models, revealing her compulsion to whimsically interrogate dominant conceptions of what it means to be human. This paper offers a clearly-articulated analysis of this Wintersonian ustopia performed through the lenses of recent theoretically interconnected fields such as environmental literary criticism and contemporary critical posthumanism.

**Keywords:** Dialectical Otherness; Categorical Otherness; Non-anthropocentric Posthumanist Models; Ecocriticism.

**ALINA PREDA**

Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania  
alinapreda74@gmail.com

DOI: 10.24193/cechinox.2018.34.11

“They knew that, over an infinitely long span of time, all things happen to all men.”

Jorge Luis Borges<sup>1</sup>

An importunate outcome of the topical scientific, technological and philosophical turn to inter- and trans-disciplinary modes of investigation has been the growing, albeit reluctant, recognition that humans must renounce their illusion of grandeur in the natural realm and their arrogant claim to exceptionalism, as well as the traditionally anthropocentric humanist standpoint in favor of alternative posthumanist approaches. Despite the fact that social sciences and humanities are deeply rooted in anthropocentrism, a significant number of literary critics and fiction writers who show an interest in the scientific discourses and in the development of technology have been embracing the opportunity to reflect, in their works, on the profound far-reaching implications of technological progress and on the fascinating insight provided by scientific investigations and breakthroughs. That contemporary English author Jeanette



Winterson is one of these audacious experimenters should come as no surprise to those familiar with her distinctive outlook on life: hailed by Laura Miller as “England’s literary outlaw,”<sup>2</sup> Winterson leads an alternative lifestyle, loathes descriptive constraints, identifying as post-heterosexual<sup>3</sup> if she is forced to use a label, admits to being “a fitness freak,”<sup>4</sup> owns a neighborhood deli called *Verde’s* in Spitalfields Market, London, which, regretfully, faces closure due to the new business rate revaluation imposed by the British Government,<sup>5</sup> views Donald Trump’s election as “evidence that humanity is ‘struggling for its soul’”<sup>6</sup> and manifests deep concern for the state of the world today and for people’s propensity to violence, both towards other beings, human or non-human, and against the natural environment. Winterson’s up-to-dateness, her ecological preoccupation and her penchant for cross-genre fiction yielded, in 2007, a utopia<sup>7</sup> entitled *The Stone Gods* in which, harmoniously weaving together lived experience and theoretical insight, the writer imparts a caustic rethinking of humanity’s history and renders a far-from implausible future to serve as timely reminders that humanity will soon be due for its comeuppance unless the current unwieldy recklessness gives way to willingly assumed responsibility. Building on the groundbreaking work of Katherine N. Hayles, Rosi Braidotti, Donna J. Haraway, Serpil Oppermann, Serenella Iovino, Francesca Ferrando, Wendy Wheeler and Karen Barad, this paper offers a clearly-articulated study of *The Stone Gods*, an analysis performed through the lenses of recent theoretically interconnected fields such as environmental literary criticism and contemporary critical posthumanism.

Postmodernity allowed for the emancipation of the *others*, thus challenging critical theory to diligently trace the neoteric sexualized and racialized “formations of subjectivity that have emerged from the radical epistemologies of continental philosophy in the last thirty years.”<sup>8</sup> Postmodern cultural discourse now acknowledges that the paradigmatic shift from the humanist dualism and idealism to the non-anthropocentric posthumanist models and theories constitutes the driving force behind much of the recent scientific research and many of the contemporary philosophical perspectives that account for the recent proliferation of interdisciplinary fields such as galileon cosmology, exo-meteorology, exo-oceanography, exo-geology, climatology, bioethics, bionics, bioinformatics, nanobiotechnology, synthetic biology, quantum biology, systems biology, xenobiology, computational biology, nutrigenomics, neuroparasitology, neuroengineering, computational neuroscience, artificial intelligence and artificial consciousness, artificial neural networks, computer-brain interfaces, organic electronics, clidynamics, cybernetics, quantum physics, quantum computation, recombinant memetics, cognitive and behavioural economics, environmental science, computational social science, Darwinian literary studies, cognitive literary studies, environmental literary criticism, etc. It is, therefore, mandatory to abandon the redundant “protocols of institutional reason” based on an outdated view of scientific endeavor and to urgently move forward to the budding vision informed not merely by interdisciplinarity but by transversal modes of investigation that foster “boundary-crossing among a range of discourses” or transdisciplinarity, and lead



to “higher degrees of disciplinary hybridization” by enacting “a rhizomatic embrace of conceptual diversity in scholarship.”<sup>9</sup>

In her interview with Cosetta Veronese, Rosi Braidotti reveals how the humanities can become post-anthropocentric: rooted in the works of Gilles Deleuze, Paul-Michel Foucault, and Luce Irigaray, Braidotti's concept of posthumanism rests on the rejection of the claim that an entity so specific from points of view such as class, race, culture and gender, like *Man* (aka the intellectual healthy young white European heterosexual man), can accurately represent the whole humanity, especially given the “hierarchical organization of difference as negative.”<sup>10</sup> According to Braidotti, the crisis at the center of which human and social sciences find themselves, as “the most anthropocentric fields of scholarly research,” is not a terminal but a rejuvenating one, since it has uncovered “global, eco-sophical, posthumanist and post-anthropocentric dimensions for the Humanities,” generating new areas of study: globalization studies, cultural studies of society, religion and science, internet studies, software studies, game studies, success studies, disability studies, celebrity studies, fat studies, media ecology, eco-criticism, critical animal and plant studies.<sup>11</sup> Another essential point is that, by successfully enlisting “techno-scientific reconceptualizations of life,” posthumanism obscures the demarcation lines between humans and machines, “as the other-than-human-agency in the posthumanist vision is not a biological category only.”<sup>12</sup> To actualize these issues in her fiction, Winterson evokes a sense of posthuman subjectivity by gathering, in *The Stone Gods*, love stories between female human scientists and humanized she-robots that,

far from ushering in the much-feared technological mayhem, offer a glimmer of hope for the deliverance of the human civilization. Through “discarding the dogma of exceptionalism – an exceptionalism which is connected to various forms of mastery,”<sup>13</sup> among which species and gender, Winterson's novel succeeds in promoting

viewpoints that not only delegitimize the central position of the human among other species by acknowledging the permeable boundaries of species in the naturalcultural continuum, but also recognize the profound interconnections between different forms of life in the composite world where previously we had seen separations.<sup>14</sup>

Nature and culture are closely intertwined, entangled, co-constructed; a mere juxtaposition fails to do justice to the co-emergence and confluence of these dual partners engaged in a continuous process of hybridization which Haraway termed *natureculture*. An expressive “force of collective life”<sup>15</sup> underlies our dynamic existence, which, on the one hand, is marked by the constant “negotiation of our bodily boundaries in relationship to other bodies and the surrounding matter in the environment”<sup>16</sup> and, on the other hand, is characterized by a required performativity of “ontological categories” that are not simply given, since the world is “a communitarian space,” “a constellation of beings, things, events, concepts, and signs.”<sup>17</sup>

Winterson's ustopia reveals how, throughout our history, prompted by the fear of the natural world, we humans have been trying to dominate it, to subdue it to our desires, inspired by the belief that we



are a glorified species, the pinnacle of creation, utterly distinct from and obviously superior to any individual belonging to the nonhuman environment. Science has, however, proven that we are not inherently separated ontologically from the rest of the universe we inhabit, that our kinship with other living beings extends far beyond the limits that we had at one time imagined, that our existence, as featured in Winterson's rendering of *Wreck City*, amounts to "a landscape of encounters where [...] there is information and communication within every fragment of existing materiality,"<sup>18</sup> as "the organism-environment coupling is a form of conversation."<sup>19</sup> Since humanism has adopted a discourse of "verticality and power,"<sup>20</sup> it is the duty of post-humanism to "move beyond the paradigm of humanist condescension,"<sup>21</sup> to promote a "bioegalitarian turn,"<sup>22</sup> to address the "alleged self-sufficiency of the human" and the "purported subsidiarity of the nonhuman."<sup>23</sup> As Barad pertinently argues,

we do not uncover pre-existing facts about independently existing things as they exist frozen in time like little statues positioned in the world. [...] Rather, we learn about phenomena – about specific material configurations of the world's becoming. The point is not simply to put the observer or knower back in the world (as if the world were a container and we needed merely to acknowledge our situatedness in it) but to understand and take account of the fact that we too are part of the world's differential becoming.<sup>24</sup>

In *The Stone Gods*, Winterson employs a Robinson Crusoe theme and recursively

depicts worlds brought to ruins by their human colonists, as a result of harmful political attitudes motivated by power hunger, dangerously distorted perceptions rooted in obtuse financial interests and exclusionary egotistical ways of conceptualizing reality that obscure understanding, breed pernicious behaviors and muddle political decision making. In this sample of Ballardian speculative fiction, profoundly heartbreaking meditations on "the devastation of the planet and the human compulsion to repeat patterns of destruction"<sup>25</sup> are mixed with strands of purple prose depicting the juicy details of a futuristic lesbian love affair – an interspecies romance between a woman and a female robot, in a narrative that, just like the world it depicts, "constantly threatens to come adrift."<sup>26</sup> The novel opens with the timely discovery of a life-supporting haven, after hundreds of years in which the impending doom of destruction had loomed over the human civilization captive on a planet depleted of resources, no longer able to host and nurture its recklessly parasitic population. Its description brings to mind the ruinous future of Mother Earth, although the name of this planet in distress is Orbus. This planet's fate is marred by a plethora of deleterious factors astoundingly similar to those affecting *our own* alarming prospects, such as *the obsession with corporate autocracy and invasive law enforcement*:

"Oh, you should move your Solo. Enforcement just gave you a ticket."

"But I have a permit!"

"Take it up with Enforcement."

"Manfred, this has been going on for a year – I clear them, they start again. I'm not paranoid, but if someone is out to get me, I would like to know."



"No one is out to get you. But move the Solo. I would if I were you."<sup>27</sup>

These work to strengthen *the gravitational pull of the red tape* flourishing in a highly technological world where technology claims to be able to account for every human need, thus enabling "the modern tyrannies of parking meters"<sup>28</sup> we, on Earth, are equally familiar with:

On one of the long line of vehicles, – and only one, mine – a bright yellow laser-light is covering the windshield. That's my penalty notice. Unless I press the yellow button on the parking meter next to it, I will not be able to drive away because I will not be able to see out of my glass. It's a clever system – you have to accept guilt before you can drive away and protest your innocence.<sup>29</sup>

They also capacitate *the over-en-croaching reign of computer technology*, as the complex computational infrastructures that constitute the "technological unconscious"<sup>30</sup> diligently take over the controlling positions in ever more areas of life:

The meter then photographs your licence plate, connects to your Parking Account, which you must keep in credit at all times, and sends a digital receipt to your Home Screen or your Work-Screen, whichever you have nominated. That's all there is to it, unless you run late, in which case the meter will laser-light your windshield in such a way as to make it impossible for you to drive off without accepting the penalty.<sup>31</sup>

This maintains the addiction to technologically mediated activities, encourages the exclusive reliance on electronic information channels, steeling the passivity fostered by the omnipresence of visual stimuli emerging from a screen, at the expense of active critical thinking skills and real communication abilities, thus contributing to *the furtherance of the mass illiteracy* promoted through relentless campaigns that discourage reading:

"Billie, if you weren't so eccentric, you'd fit in better here. Why are you writing in a notebook? Nobody reads and writes any more – there's no need. Why can't you use a SpeechPad like everybody else?"

"Notebook. Pencil. They have an old-fashioned charm that I like."<sup>32</sup>

The *diet culture* dictates absolute faith in the *lab-produced cloned meat* and in the *genetically altered food*, obtained in highly technologized greenhouses built below ground, although their subterranean location allows only for unnatural growth processes in the absence of natural light. Bio-agriculture and farming have been almost entirely eradicated, being considered flawed, unsafe or downright dangerous:

"And I like the present just as it is. You still living in that bio-bubble thing?"  
"You mean the farm? Of course I am. If I'd been able to make it pay I wouldn't be working for you. But a world that clones its meat in the lab and engineers its crops underground thinks natural food is dirty and diseased."  
"It is."

“Yeah. And pigs are planes. So the farm is leased to Living Museum and I am enslaved to you.”<sup>33</sup>

There is the familiar *manifest obsession with celebrities*, which causes a *hunger for stardom and fame*, as well as a tendency towards *sexual perversion*, given that *Genetic Fixing* is readily available and allowed at ever younger ages:

Little Senorita is a twelve-year-old pop star who has Fixed herself rather than lose her fame. She sees no point in growing up when she is famous for not being grown-up. Understandably, as she has no talent, she wants to live in the moment for as long as she can. Her parents support her. Her boyfriend says he’s delighted.<sup>34</sup>

The craze of widespread genetic modifications and the *narcissistic artificiality* leading to an omnipresence of advanced cosmetic surgery procedures steadily nurture the *infatuation with youthful appearance* and standardized beauty, with silicones, Viagra and sex:

Manfred is one of those confident men who have had themselves genetically Fixed as late-forties. Most men prefer to Fix younger than that, and there are no women who Fix past thirty. “The DNA Dynasty,” they called us, when the first generation of humans had successful recoding. Age is information failure. The body loses fluency. Command stations no longer connect with satellite stations. Relay breaks down. The body is designed to repair and renew itself, and most cells

are only about a third as old as our birth years, but mitochondrial DNA is as old as we are, and has always accumulated mutations and distortions faster than DNA in the nucleus. For centuries we couldn’t fix that – and now we can.<sup>35</sup>

Similarly, on Earth, “the bio-technological developments of the last decades also embed the promise of a solution to rectify the biological drawbacks characteristic of human nature.”<sup>36</sup> *Overpopulation* is a burgeoning problem, accelerated by the ever youthful inhabitants of a superannuated world and, consequently, “the question of transcending biological limits [...] extends its political implications by fueling an ideological shift away from individualism and towards the ethos of the collective and its attendant ethical and moral systems,”<sup>37</sup> especially on this withering planet where the gas, oil and drinking water supplies are running short, *the lack of resources* being bound to breed *conflict*, likely to escalate into *genocide*:

“But we have taken a few wrong turnings. Made a few mistakes. We have limited natural resources at our disposal, and a rising population that is by no means in agreement as to how our world as a whole should share out these remaining resources. Conflict is likely. A new planet means that we can begin to redistribute ourselves. It will mean a better quality of life for everyone – the ones who leave, and the ones who stay.”<sup>38</sup>

The *political demagoguery* of the *autocratic state* and the caustic *corruption posing as*





*democracy* are easily recognizable in each of the three political power-groups pretending to peacefully coexist whilst, in all actuality, fighting for supremacy:

The President's cavalcade has reached the Circle. Flags, carpets, flowers, hitmen, pressmen, frontmen, back-up, support, medics, techies, crew, lights, sound, real-time, archive, relay, popcorn, polish, makeup, ready, green – go. [...] The President is making a speech. Unique moment for mankind... unrivalled opportunity... war averted... summit planned between the Central Power, Eastern Caliphate, and our friends in the SinoMosco Pact. Peaceful compromise promised. New planets for old. New colonizing mission being made ready.<sup>39</sup>

The illusiveness of the so-proclaimed democracy is fully exposed in *the euphemism-laden rhetoric of warring civilizations*:

The new planet will be home to the universe's first advanced civilization. It will be a democracy – because whatever we say in public, the Eastern Caliphate isn't going to be allowed within a yatto-mile of the place. We'll shoot 'em down before they land. No, we won't shoot them down, because the President of the Central Power has just announced a new world programme of No War. We will not shoot down the Eastern Caliphate, we will robustly repel them.<sup>40</sup>

*Pollution, global warming, the unregulated consumption of fossil fuels and the continuous irresponsible exploitation of the*

*environment* are inexorably pushing the planet to the point of failure:

The last hundred years have been hell. The doomsters and the environmentalists kept telling us we were as good as dead and, hey presto, not only do we find a new planet, but it is perfect for new life. This time, we'll be more careful. This time we will learn from our mistakes. [...] The way the thinking is going in private, we'll leave this run-down rotting planet to the Caliphate and the SinoMosco Pact, and they can bomb each other to paste while the peace-loving folks of the Central Power ship civilization to the new world.<sup>41</sup>

Since this is a ustopia, the similarities between Orbus and Earth are not accidental, although it soon becomes apparent that what looked like a glimpse into a bleak future was rather a peek into the grim past. The newly discovered Planet Blue seems identical to Mother Earth, 65 million years ago. For humanity, this is the opportunity of a lifetime: among "all the bright-formed rocks that jewel the sky," there is a hospitable planet, with plenty of oxygen, fresh water and minerals, white sand, tall grass, trees "like skyscrapers," moss "concentrating on being green" and no apparent intelligent life, apart from "scaly-coated" monsters with "metal-plated jaws" and bodies "the size of a stadium"<sup>42</sup> that leave "long-toed clawprints as deep as nightmares."<sup>43</sup> Of course, there are also insects, birds "the size of light aircraft," land mammals, marine fauna, forests, inland lakes, rivers and seas, land regions as well as frozen areas.<sup>44</sup>

Billie Crusoe, an Orbus scientist forced to flee, because her past as a protester



against the system caught up with her, and Captain Handsome, a well-travelled “space privateer” begin their journey towards the brave new world, their mission being to swiftly do away with the dinosaurs in the wake of the relocation of the wealthy elite from the nearly destroyed Orbus to Planet Blue.<sup>45</sup> They are accompanied by Spike, a highly advanced Robosapiens, on the run in an attempt to escape the imminent dismantling to which robots are destined once they have completed a mission, so as to prevent leaks to enemy forces, and by Pink McMurphy, a married woman who feels pressured into undergoing genetic reversal procedures to look twelve years old, as her husband is obsessed by prepubescent schoolgirls. This party of four (plus Rufus, Billie’s dog) will board Captain Handsome’s privately owned ship to ensure that the newly discovered planet’s fauna is trimmed down to size, so the new inhabitants will not have to lead a nomadic existence: “No settlers can live among the dinosaurs. Best you could do is keep moving, then maybe you could make it – but can you imagine the richest people in the world wanting to spend the rest of their lives as Bedouins?”<sup>46</sup> Consequently, the monsters must be “humanely destroyed, with the possible exception of scientific capture of one or two types for the Zooeum.”<sup>47</sup>

On Orbus, three major powers are trying to reach a peaceful compromise: the Central Power, whose President exerts military and economic supremacy, the Eastern Caliphate, governed by religious fanatics, and the communist Sino-Moscow Pact. Billie Crusoe, who lives on the domain of the Central Power, a lone ecologist voice on Orbus, the owner of the only farm on her planet, is a rebel with a cause, who

rejects her society’s values, criticizing people’s obsession with “genetic fixing” as it leads to sexual perversions, and castigating their destructive behavior that is ruining the planet. But Billie’s planet is dying, or as Manfred, Billie’s boss, says, “Orbus is not dying. Orbus is evolving in a way that is hostile to human life,” which causes Billie to reply: “OK, so it’s the planet’s fault. We didn’t do anything, did we? Just fucked it to death and kicked it when it wouldn’t get up.”<sup>48</sup> Consequently, its wealthier citizens are planning to relocate on Planet Blue, after getting rid of the ferocious dinosaurs inhabiting it.

Of course, the Central Power is determined to keep the newly discovered planet for themselves so, under the command of Captain Handsome, a ship called *Resolution* is sent to the new world. The freelance mercenary was hired since, unlike the Central Power Space Force, he would not use polluting methods to exterminate the dinosaurs directly, but would cause a special kind of dust storm and use an asteroid to complete his mission. Things do not work out as planned because, when the course of the asteroid is altered and redirected into Planet Blue’s path in order to obliterate the dinosaurs, an ice-age is triggered, which delays the colonization of Planet Blue by the Orbus population: every species on Planet Blue is going to evolve or disappear “to make way for something better adapted,” as they are all “at the experimental stage” and the “mini ice-age” brought about by the Orbus mission is bound to have a significant impact.<sup>49</sup> As the *Resolution* crew’s intervention causes more damage than expected, delaying the conquest of the new territory, the first traveller’s tale comes to an end: “It will be a long time before





anyone comes back to Planet Blue. [...] This is one story. There will be another.”<sup>50</sup>

The mishap also changes the destinies of the four characters manning the spacecraft-with-a-mission, who separate in an attempt to survive: Captain Handsome and Pink McMurphy use the Landpods to reach the colony where the Central Power forces can land and rescue them, whilst Billie decides to stay behind and keep Spike company, since the robot needs the energy only the Ship can provide. Initially rescued by Captain Handsome, who was in love with her, the female robot Spike developed, instead, uncanny feelings for Billie, who soon reciprocated. Their fate remains unclear at the end of this first part, which opens the gates to another space-time, via James Cook's *The Journals*, Captain Handsome's present to Billie, where from she starts to read.

Employing the *mise en abyme* technique, Winterson places the second story in a different location, the Eastern Island of the 1770s, the southeasternmost point of the Polynesian triangle in the Pacific Ocean, one of the world's most isolated inhabited islands. It was named by its first recorded European visitor, the Dutch explorer Jacob Roggeveenn, who landed there on Easter Sunday, in 1722. Recognized by ecologists as a distinct eco region, Easter Island has witnessed famines, epidemics, civil war, slave raids and colonialism, and the crash of its ecosystem, its population having declined precipitously more than once. In 1774 on Easter Island, Billy, one of Captain Cook's sailors, haphazardly left stranded, meets a half-European called Spikkers, the son of a Dutch sailor who had landed on the island two years earlier with Captain Roggeweins. A romance

ensues between the two men, as they witness the disastrous consequences of the fight for supremacy between tribes indigenous to the island. Winterson's choice of location is warranted since, as Diamond pointed out, Easter Island is “the most extreme example of forest destruction in the Pacific, and among the most extreme in the world: the whole forest gone, and all of its tree species extinct.”<sup>51</sup>

Easter Island is famous for its monumental statues, called *moai*, created by the Rapanui people, but fame came at a high price: the native Easter Islanders deforested the island in the process of erecting their statues, because wood was needed to haul the stone gods, monumental statues ranging from 10 to 40 feet in height. Thus they lost the means to construct fishing vessels, caused birds to lose their nesting sites, while the heavy soil erosion due to lack of trees drastically altered the vegetation of the island and many native plants became extinct. The stone giants were all that was left, more than a thousand, according to Wright, one for every ten islanders,<sup>52</sup> hence the book's title, symbolizing the devouring of the whole island.<sup>53</sup> Merritt points out that as a microcosmos Easter Island is perfect. Since Orbus outlined our past, “the origin of a species condemned to repeat its mistakes,” the Easter Island chapter suggests that in virtually any setting humans (or, to be more exact, *men*) “are doomed to rape the planet and destroy one another.”<sup>54</sup>

The third part is set in the city of London in an apocalyptic near future, and Billie Crusoe, a scientist training a super Robo sapiens (in the form of a head) to understand what it means to be human, describes the tragic situation of the world in the Post3 War period, and how



it all happened. Billie, whose mother was born in World War 2, had come into the world in the third quarter of the twentieth century:

World War Two. Another war to end all war. Freedom

And then ...

Identity cards. Tracking devices in vehicles. Compulsory finger-print database. Guilty until proven innocent. No right of appeal for convicted terrorists. [...] Diplomatic-style immunity from investigation and prosecution for all elected politicians. Stop and Search. Police powers of arrest extended to "reason to believe..." End of dual citizenship. Curfew Zones. Routine military patrols in "areas of tension." CCTV on every street. CCTV compulsory in mosques. Chip implants for prisoners on probation and for young offenders. No demonstrations, on-line protests shut down, those responsible cautioned. New Public Order laws, the Freedom Act, to be signed by all citizens and including the requirement to "report any person or persons who appear to be acting contrary to the rights and responsibilities of ordinary citizens as outlined in the Act." Right to enter homes and businesses without a warrant.

To distract from all this, the Government built a super-casino in every city, licensed twenty-four hour-drinking, legalized prostitution and lowered the Age of Consent to fourteen.<sup>55</sup>

Billie is a survivor of World War 3, the beginning of which can be traced to the 1980s, when materialism took over,

rendering null all the other previously valued aspects of existence. Besides the harsh critique of crass materialism taking the form of people's unrelenting obsession with financially feasible policies, to the extent that the need for environmental protection is ignored or even refuted, a further point being made is that any attempts to destabilize long-held misconceptions or to unsettle prevailing modes of thinking tend to be eschewed in political and religious discourses, which harness a divisive mentality intimately linked to the policies subsequently implemented and help to legitimize religiously or politically motivated violence. Decidedly anthropocentric, dominant religious conceptions often become means of denying the reality of climate change, and such dogmatically entrenched thought patterns eventually become part of an inherently political process through which the destructive practices of a vicious and genuinely mindless population are encouraged. Billie laments the desecration of the planet by the people whose pointless shifting of the environmental consciousness burden from one party to the other caused irreparable harm; thus, on this terminally ill planet drained of resources, conflict is foreordained.

There was a polar bear stranded on an ice-floe. There were hurricanes, flooding, melting, landslides. [...]

Catholics were instructed to abandon Green politics and prepare for Holy War.

And [...] while we were all arguing about whether it was Christian or Pagan, Democratic or Conservative to save the planet, and whether technology would solve all our problems,



and whether we should fly less, drive less, eat less, weigh less, consume less, dump less, carbon dioxide in the atmosphere rose to 550 parts per million, the ice-caps melted and Iran launched a nuclear attack on the USA. [...]

The rest, as they say, is history. But this isn't history, this is Post3 War.<sup>56</sup>

In the aftermath of World War 3, a global company opportunely called MORE rebuilt London as Tech City, made currency obsolete by paying its employees in food, light and shelter, in an attempt to control them in Orwellian fashion. It also closed its gates to isolate the only zone where freedom of thought had survived, Wreck City, and used the Dead Forest as a dump site for the mutants permanently scarred by the nuclear attacks. As Merritt puts it, “[c]apitalist society, counterculture and untouchables, neatly geographically segregated.”<sup>57</sup> It is to Wreck City, this post-apocalyptic no-man’s land, that Billie brings Spike, the robot head, in the fourth part of the novel. In this space of defamiliarization and difference, where the misfits can find a landing-place, real community life becomes possible. Outside the borders of Tech City, whose repressive mechanisms of control crush all attempts at creating a site of self-acceptance and self-reinvention, as these would undermine the status quo, all those who are different gather together, refusing to have their lives pre-defined and to lead a pre-packaged existence. Here we find individuals that the anthropocentric morphological normativity deemed pathological, deviant, anomalous or monstrous, representatives of “dialectical otherness (nonwhite, nonmasculine, nonnormal,

nonyoung, nonhealthy)” or of “categorical otherness (zoomorphic, disabled, or malformed).”<sup>58</sup> Winterson’s most arresting account of the potentiality that may spring even from a tenebrous area such as Wreck City signals that our “historic” solitude can be overcome by “relocating the human into a wider web of connections” spun into being through threads of narrative-producing types of con-sociability: “All matter [...] is a ‘storied matter’. It is a material ‘mesh’ of meanings, properties, and processes, in which human and non-human players are interlocked in networks that produce undeniable signifying forces.”<sup>59</sup>

The novel’s Orwellian overtones echo throughout its last two parts, as they did all through the first, with ominous physical and mental landscapes of a world devastated by nuclear holocaust and the “degree of urgency and prophetic angst” permeating the work “is a reminder of Winterson’s evangelical origins, explored in her first novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, and of her familiarity with the idea of apocalypse.”<sup>60</sup> Since this is “a Borgesian parable about history and repetition and a liberal’s *cri de coeur* about what we have done and go on doing to ourselves,”<sup>61</sup> it is not surprising that both Orbus and Planet Blue, despite being historically and geographically distinct, remind us of the current state of affairs on Earth and their level of degradation serves as a fair warning – humanity is doomed to destruction as long as instead of starting to learn from its mistakes, it persists in carelessly exploiting each habitable planet, condemning it to environmental ruin: “And my tears are for the planet because I love it and because we’re killing it.”<sup>62</sup> Accountability is a key issue in the new posthuman ethics, since *anthropos*,



deemed agent of destruction, finds himself in a crisis that opens his position to trenchant criticism. Thus, the former self-appointed master of the natural world, now carrying a heavy burden of responsibility on his shoulders, is being dragged off his pedestal of exceptionality: the fact that we call our geological era the *anthropocene* points both to “the technologically mediated power acquired by *anthropos*” and to its “potentially lethal consequences for everyone else.”<sup>63</sup> As Ferrando explains, the posthuman “refusal of the ontological primacy of human existence invites a review of practices such as uncritical omnivorism, overharvesting, and the unrestricted consumption of nonrenewable resources.”<sup>64</sup>

The novel’s structure and characters echo the words of narrators from two other Wintersonian works, *The Power Book* – “I keep telling this story – different people, different places, different times – but always you, always me, always this story, because a story is a tight rope between two worlds”<sup>65</sup> and *Weight* – “[a]ll we can do is keep telling stories, hoping that someone will hear. Hoping that in the noisy echoing nightmare of endlessly breaking news and celebrity gossip, other voices might be heard.”<sup>66</sup> Each of these narrators is, like the posthuman, “a restless and sociable agent,” “ontologically full of stories,” who cannot be said to be living at any specific address, in any particular type of building and who, instead, like a “biocultural Picaro,” dwells in an open mobile space of “matter and meanings” but never for long; it endlessly crosses elusive boundaries and transgresses furtive limitations “in an ontological dance whose choreography follows patterns of irredeemable hybridization and stubborn entanglement.”<sup>67</sup> In

*The Stone Gods*, Winterson’s characters are joined together as Hayles envisioned, “in a dynamic co-evolutionary spiral with intelligent machines as well as with the other biological species” inhabiting the planet.<sup>68</sup> Given that fictional stories “present situations that are grounded in highly personalized experiences and feelings,” they foster a process of “deeper learning” by “exploring difficult or sensitive political situations” in ways that enable “closer engagements with how issues, problems and points of view impact upon or influence people’s everyday lives,”<sup>69</sup> this kind of literary writing qualifies as what has been called “disruptive”<sup>70</sup> from a rather general perspective, or “dissident”<sup>71</sup> from a more particular one, and it helps us “understand the significance and depth of our interactions with the earth’s variously uncanny nonhuman players, and the complexity of the earth’s posthuman co-shapers.”<sup>72</sup>

Tracing the transformative journey of environmental literary criticism from ecocriticism, through its material stage, to its posthumanistic condition, Oppermann points out that what unites posthumanism and ecocriticism, these two fields that seem to be overlapping rather than stretching along parallel lines, is their concern with biological change, as well as their approach to the way in which “materiality, agency, and nature are conceived.” Oppermann’s conceptual outline of posthumanism posits it as the site of merging “threads of new materialisms,” such as agential realism, prismatic ecology, strands of material feminism, material ecocriticism and eco-materialism, epistemic stands informed by a plethora of study domains, ranging from ethics to physics and from biological to environmental sciences.<sup>73</sup> The converging



spirals of fictional narrative that weave up Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* seem to be braided with precisely these fresh threads of posthuman materialism. Thus, the novel lends itself to more than one analytical perspective, reflecting its author's propensity for experimental writing in both form and content, as well as her unwavering commitment to anti-corporatism, ecological praxis, posthuman ethical theory, non-anthropocentric posthumanist models, and revealing her compulsion to whimsically interrogate dominant conceptions of what it means to be human.

## WORKS CITED

- Adams, Tim, "Stranger than science fiction," *The Observer*, September 30, 2007, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/sep/30/fiction.sciencefictionfantasyandhorror?INTCMP=ILCNETTXT3487> (Accessed May 2, 2008)
- Amberson, Deborah and Elena Past, "Introduction: Thinking Italian Animals," in Deborah Amberson and Elena Past (eds.), *Thinking Italian Animals: Human and Posthuman in Modern Italian Literature and Film*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 1-20
- Barad, Karen, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Durham & London, Duke University Press, 2007
- Bleiker, Roland, *Popular Dissent, Human Agency and Global Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000
- Borbély, Carmen-Veronica and Petronia Popa Petrar, *Our Heteromorphic Future: Encoding the Posthuman in Contemporary British Fiction*, Cluj, Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2014
- Borges, Jorge Luis, *The Aleph and Other Stories*, London & New York, Penguin Books, 2000
- Braidotti, Rosi, "Animals, Anomalies, and Inorganic Others," *PMLA Theories and Methodologies*, vol. 124, no. 2, March 2009, pp. 526-532.
- Capp, Fiona, "Jeanette Winterson tackles the big contemporary issues in this return to form," *The Age*, November 26, 2007, <http://www.theage.com.au/news/book-reviews/the-stone-gods/2007/11/26/1196036796615.html> (Accessed May 1, 2008)
- Diamond, Jared, *Collapse. How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, New York, Viking, 2005
- Dacey, Alan "Ronald Wright explains why this is our last chance to save the planet," repost from *Sunday Herald*, August 28, 2005, [http://www.omega-news.info/why\\_this\\_is\\_our\\_last\\_chance\\_to\\_save\\_the\\_planet.htm](http://www.omega-news.info/why_this_is_our_last_chance_to_save_the_planet.htm) (Accessed October 27, 2008)
- Ferrando, Francesca, "Towards a Posthumanist Methodology. A Statement," *Frame: Journal of Literary Studies*, Special Issue on *Narrating Posthumanism*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2012, pp. 9-18
- Geertz, Clifford, *Life among the Anthros and Other Essays*, edited by Fred Inglis, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2010
- Haraway, Donna, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*, vol. 1, Chicago, Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003
- Hayles, Katherine, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999
- Hutchison, Emma, "Unsettling Stories: Jeanette Winterson and the Cultivation of Political Contingency," *Global Society*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2010, pp. 351-368
- Iovino, Serenella, Roberto Marchesini and Eleonora Adorni, "Past the Human: Narrative Ontologies and Ontological Stories," *Relations. Beyond Anthropocentrism*, no. 4.1, June 2016
- Iovino, Serenella, "Posthumanism in Literature and Ecocriticism," *Relations. Beyond Anthropocentrism*, no. 4.1, June 2016, pp. 11-20
- Iovino, Serenella and Serpil Oppermann (eds.), *Material Ecocriticism*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2014



- Iovino, Serenella and Serpil Oppermann, "Introduction: Stories Come to Matter," in Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (eds.), *Material Ecocriticism*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2014, pp. 1-17
- Jackson, Tina, "Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods*," n *MetroLife*, September 27, 2007, <http://www.metro.co.uk/metrolife/books/> (Accessed January 12, 2008)
- Jeffries, Stuart, "Jeanette Winterson: 'I thought of suicide'," *The Guardian*, February 22, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/feb/22/jeanette-winterson-thought-of-suicide> (Accessed January 12, 2011)
- Merritt, Stephanie, "To Infinity and Beyond," *New Statesman*, October 1, 2007, [http://www.redorbit.com/news/space/1086218/to\\_infinity\\_and\\_beyond](http://www.redorbit.com/news/space/1086218/to_infinity_and_beyond) (Accessed October 27, 2008)
- Miller, Laura, "The Salon Interview," April 28, 1997, <http://www.salon.com/april97/winterson970428.html> (Accessed May 29, 2008)
- Oppermann, Serpil, "From Posthumanism to Posthuman Ecocriticism," *Relations. Beyond Anthropocentrism*, no. 4.1, June 2016, pp. 24-37
- Prekup, Amelia, "The Posthuman Body in Jennifer Egan's 'Black Box'," *American, British and Canadian Studies*, vol. 25, December 2015, pp. 171-186
- Rajaram, Prem Kumar, "Disruptive Writing and a Critique of Territoriality," *Review of International Studies*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2004, pp. 201-228
- Steans, Jill, "Telling Stories about Women and Gender in the War on Terror," *Global Society*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2008, pp. 159-175
- Sullivan, Heather, "The Ecology of Colors: Goethe's Materialist Optics and Ecological Posthumanism," in Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (eds.), *Material Ecocriticism*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2014, pp. 80-96
- Thrift, Nigel, "Remembering the Technological Unconscious by Foregrounding Knowledges of Position," *Sage Journals*, February 1, 2004, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1068/d321t> (Accessed October 30, 2008)
- Urwin, Rosamund, "Jeanette Winterson on the business rates that threaten to close her Spitalfields deli Verde & Co," January 31, 2017, <https://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/london-life/jeanette-winterson-on-the-business-rates-that-threaten-to-close-her-spitalfields-deli-verde-co-a3454171.html> (Accessed December 30, 2017)
- Veronese, Cosetta, "Can the Humanities Become Post-human? Interview with Rosi Braidotti," in *Relations. Beyond Anthropocentrism*, no. 4.1, June 2016, pp. 97-101
- Wheeler, Wendy, *The Whole Creature. Complexity, Biosemiotics and the Evolution of Culture*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 2006
- Winterson, Jeanette, *The Stone Gods*, London, Hamish Hamilton, Penguin Books, 2007
- Winterson, Jeanette, *The PowerBook*, London, Vintage, 2001
- Winterson, Jeanette, *Weight: The Myth of Atlas and Heracles*, Edinburgh, Canongate Books, 2005
- [www.jeanettewinterson.com/book/boating-for-beginners](http://www.jeanettewinterson.com/book/boating-for-beginners) (Accessed January 12, 2016)
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=J5YR0uqPAI8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J5YR0uqPAI8) (National Geographic Live), published on August 13, 2012

---

## NOTES

1. Jorge Luis Borges, *The Aleph and Other Stories*, London & New York, Penguin Books, 2000, p. 14.
2. Laura Miller, "The Salon Interview", April 28, 1997, <http://www.salon.com/april97/winterson970428.html>, accessed May 29, 2008.
3. Stuart Jeffries, "Jeanette Winterson: 'I thought of suicide'. The writer tells of her shock at discovering she'd been adopted and how the breakup of a love affair left her devastated," *The Guardian*, February 22, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/feb/22/jeanette-winterson-thought-of-suicide> (accessed May 1, 2017).
4. <http://www.jeanettewinterson.com/book/boating-for-beginners/> (accessed January 12, 2016).





5. Rosamund Urwin, "Jeanette Winterson on the business rates that threaten to close her Spitalfields deli Verde & Co," January 31, 2017, <https://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/london-life/jeanette-winterson-on-the-business-rates-that-threaten-to-close-her-spitalfields-deli-verde-co-a3454171.html> (accessed December 30, 2017).
6. *Ibidem*.
7. As Carmen-Veronica Borbély and Petronia Popa Petrar explain, the portmanteau term "ustopia," coined by Canadian scholar and author Margaret Atwood, refers to a genre that springs from "the reciprocal relation between utopian and dystopian thought" and "commingles, in its dissolution of the generic boundaries between utopia and dystopia, the obverse and reverse sides the same coin." See Carmen-Veronica Borbély and Petronia Popa Petrar, *Our Heteromorphic Future: Encoding the Posthuman in Contemporary British Fiction*, Cluj, Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2014, pp. 26-27.
8. Cosetta Veronese, "Can the Humanities Become Post-human? Interview with Rosi Braidotti," in *Relations. Beyond Anthropocentrism*, no. 4.1, June 2016, pp. 97-101, p. 98.
9. *Ibidem*, p. 98.
10. *Ibidem*, p. 97.
11. *Ibidem*, pp. 100-101.
12. Serpil Oppermann, "From Posthumanism to Posthuman Ecocriticism," in *Relations. Beyond Anthropocentrism*, no. 4.1, June 2016, pp. 24-37, p. 25.
13. Serenella Iovino, "Posthumanism in Literature and Ecocriticism," in *ibidem*, pp. 11-20, p. 13.
14. Serpil Oppermann, *op. cit.*, p. 25.
15. Wendy Wheeler, *The Whole Creature. Complexity, Biosemiotics and the Evolution of Culture*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 2006, p. 30, quoted in Serenella Iovino, *op. cit.*, p. 14.
16. Heather I. Sullivan, "The Ecology of Colors: Goethe's Materialist Optics and Ecological Posthumanism," in Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (eds.), *Material Ecocriticism*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2014, pp. 80-96, p. 92, quoted in Serenella Iovino, *op. cit.*, p. 14.
17. Serenella Iovino, *op. cit.*, p. 14.
18. *Ibidem*, p. 15.
19. Wendy Wheeler, *op. cit.*, p. 126, quoted in Serenella Iovino, *op. cit.*, p. 15.
20. *Ibidem*, p. 13.
21. Deborah Amberson and Elena Past, "Introduction: Thinking Italian Animals," in Deborah Amberson and Elena Past (eds.), *Thinking Italian Animals: Human and Posthuman in Modern Italian Literature and Film*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 1-20, p. 14, quoted in Serenella Iovino, *op. cit.*, p. 13.
22. Rosi Braidotti, "Animals, Anomalies, and Inorganic Others," *PMLA Theories and Methodologies*, vol. 124, no. 2, March 2009, pp. 526-532, p. 526.
23. Serenella Iovino, *op. cit.*, p. 11.
24. Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Durham & London, Duke University Press, 2007, p. 91.
25. Tina Jackson, "Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods*," *MetroLife*, 27 September, 2007, <http://www.metro.co.uk/metrolife/books/> (accessed January 12, 2008).
26. Tim Adams, "Stranger than science fiction," *The Observer*, September 30, 2007, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/sep/30/fiction.sciencefictionfantasyandhorror?INTCMP=ILCNETTXT3487> (accessed 2 May, 2008).
27. Jeanette Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, London, Hamish Hamilton, Penguin Books, 2007, p. 9.
28. Tim Adams, "Stranger than science fiction."
29. Jeanette Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, p. 10.
30. Nigel Thrift, "Remembering the Technological Unconscious by Foregrounding Knowledges of Position," *Sage Journals*, February 1, 2004, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1068/d321t> (accessed October 30, 2008).
31. Jeanette Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, p. 10.



32. *Ibidem*, p. 8.
33. *Ibidem*, p. 8.
34. *Ibidem*, p. 16.
35. *Ibidem*, p. 9.
36. Amelia Precup, "The Posthuman Body in Jennifer Egan's 'Black Box,'" *American, British and Canadian Studies*, vol. 25, December 2015, pp. 171-186, p. 183.
37. *Ibidem*, p. 180.
38. Jeanette Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, pp. 4-5.
39. *Ibidem*, p. 5.
40. *Ibidem*, p. 6.
41. *Ibidem*, p. 6.
42. *Ibidem*, p. 4.
43. *Ibidem*, p. 3.
44. *Ibidem*, p. 74.
45. *Ibidem*, p. 46.
46. *Ibidem*, p. 70.
47. *Ibidem*, p. 5.
48. *Ibidem*, p. 7.
49. *Ibidem*, p. 81.
50. *Ibidem*, pp. 92-93.
51. Jared Diamond, *Collapse. How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, New York, Viking, 2005, quoted in Clifford Geertz, *Life among the Anthros and Other Essays*, edited by Fred Inglis, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2010, p. 159.
52. Alan Dicey, "Ronald Wright explains why this is our last chance to save the planet," repost from *Sunday Herald*, August 28, 2005, [http://www.omega-news.info/why\\_this\\_is\\_our\\_last\\_chance\\_to\\_save\\_the\\_planet.htm](http://www.omega-news.info/why_this_is_our_last_chance_to_save_the_planet.htm) (accessed October 27, 2008).
53. It was proven, five years after the publication of *The Stone Gods*, that the islanders did not actually use wood to transport the statues, but that they made them "walk" by using three teams of people pulling ropes so as to enable the statues to wobble forward whilst maintaining balance. See *Walking with Giants: How the Easter Island Moai Moved*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J5YR0uqPAI8>, National Geographic Live, published on August 13, 2012. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that, one way or another, humans contributed to the destruction of the island's ecosystem.
54. Stephanie Merritt, "To Infinity and Beyond," Copyright New Statesman Ltd., October 1, 2007, [http://www.redorbit.com/news/space/1086218/to\\_infinity\\_and\\_beyond/](http://www.redorbit.com/news/space/1086218/to_infinity_and_beyond/) (accessed October 27, 2008).
55. Jeanette Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, p. 130.
56. *Ibidem*, p. 131.
57. Stephanie Merritt, *op. cit.*
58. Rosi Braidotti, "Animals, Anomalies, and Inorganic Others," p. 526.
59. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, "Introduction: Stories Come to Matter," in Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (eds.), *Material Ecocriticism*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2014, pp. 1-17, p. 1-2, quoted in Serenella Iovino, *op. cit.*, p. 15.
60. Fiona Capp, "Jeanette Winterson tackles the big contemporary issues in this return to form," *The Age*, November 26, 2007, <http://www.theage.com.au/news/book-reviews/the-stone-gods/2007/11/26/1196036796615.html> (accessed May 1, 2008).
61. Stephanie Merritt, *op. cit.*
62. Jeanette Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, p. 201.
63. Rosi Braidotti, interview, in Cosetta Veronese, *op. cit.*, p. 100.
64. Francesca Ferrando, "Towards a Posthumanist Methodology. A Statement," *Frame: Journal of Literary Studies*, Special Issue on *Narrating Posthumanism*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2012, pp. 9-18, p. 10.
65. Jeanette Winterson, *The PowerBook*, London, Vintage, 2001, p. 119.



66. Jeanette Winterson, *Weight: The Myth of Atlas and Heracles*, Edinburgh, Canongate Books, 2005, p. xx.
67. Serenella Iovino, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-12.
68. Katherine N. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999, p. 164.
69. Emma Hutchison, "Unsettling Stories: Jeanette Winterson and the Cultivation of Political Contingency," *Global Society*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2010, pp. 351-368, p. 356.
70. See Roland Bleiker, *Popular Dissent, Human Agency and Global Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 17 and Prem Kumar Rajaram, "Disruptive Writing and a Critique of Territoriality," *Review of International Studies*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2004, pp. 201-228.
71. Jill Steans, "Telling Stories about Women and Gender in the War on Terror," *Global Society*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2008, pp. 159-175, p. 169.
72. Serpil Oppermann, *op. cit.*, p. 29.
73. *Ibidem*, p. 24.