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***Traversing the Feminine: The Reclamation  
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## **Traversing the Feminine: The Reclamation of Women's "Immense Bodily Territories" in Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body* and *The Passion***

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Historically, women's bodies have been a territory appropriated by men for their own sexual pleasure and aesthetic appreciation. The female body has consistently held a special function in the symbolic realm of literature, both as a dismembered and fetishized object of the Petrarchan gaze, [2] and as the postmodern theoretical figuration of gaps and holes in discourse, or a feminized "space of dispersion" (Salvaggio 271). [3] In each case, the female figure functions as an entity to be manipulated by men for their own impressions, robbing women of their subjecthood. In recent decades feminist theorists and writers have dedicated much of their work to re-appropriating both the female body and women's sexuality. Julia Kristeva describes how a new generation of female writers have begun to display the female body in ways which challenge its "careful disguise" by patriarchal culture: "they invite us to see, touch, and smell a body made of organs" (Sellers 1991, 111). These women draw attention to the fact that women's bodies, for all of their metaphorical utilizations by men, have rarely been explored in a natural, organic sense. Hélène Cixous asserts that there is an opportunity for a new type of writing that will "give [woman] back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories that have been kept under seal" (Cixous 1993, 338). For Cixous, much of the exploration of women's bodies needs to occur in the sexual arena. Referencing female sexual organs, Cixous encourages explorations of the bodily territory by women: "trips, crossings, trudges, abrupt and gradual awakenings, discoveries of a zone at one time timorous and soon to be forthright" (342). Luce Irigaray echoes this call, noting that for a long time men "have appreciated what [women's] suppleness is worth for their own

embraces,” and that it is time for women to learn to enjoy their bodies for their own pleasure (Irigaray 1985, 216). This essay will first discuss how Jeanette Winterson takes on the formidable project of reclaiming the female body from literary, medical, and scientific discourse; secondly, it will explore her sublimation of women’s *jouissance*; and thirdly, it will examine her configuration of love as a transformative space that contains aspects of both abjection and redemption. [4]

### **The Bodily Territory**

*Written on the Body* is the story of a passionate love affair with a woman named Louise. The sex/gender of Louise’s lover, who is the narrator/protagonist, remains undisclosed throughout the novel, preventing the construction of the binary normatives of man/woman and narrator/sexed body. Kristeva describes the effect that the absence of a protagonist’s identity has on the reader: not allowed to make assumptions about the character/text and judge them accordingly, the reader faces the text from a point of unease and fragmentation, which forces them to question their own constructions of sex, gender, and identity (Sellers 1991, 103).

Once Winterson has placed her reader within this transformative narrative space, she engages in a narrative experiment which draws attention to the inadequacies of scientific and medical discourse in describing the human, and in particular the female, experience. [5] Towards the middle of the narrative, the protagonist finds out that his/her lover, Louise, is dying of Leukemia. S/he sets out to study everything s/he can about the human body, its functions, and its response to the ravages of Leukemia. A thirty page segment of narrative ensues which is split into four scientific/medical headings: THE CELLS, TISSUES, SYSTEMS AND CAVITIES OF THE BODY; THE SKIN; THE SKELETON; and THE SPECIAL SENSES (actual size). [6] Each of these main headings is split into subsections, also set out in scientific/medical terminology. The monolith of the meta-language of scientific and medical discourse is illustrated by the sheer size of Winterson’s capitalization of medical terms in relation to the body of the text. Winterson is, however, prepared to rival the strength of scientific and medical discourse with

the force and lyricism of her language, following each of these subheadings with an intensely personal, poetic exploration of Louise's body.

Western society is strongly influenced by the fields of science and medicine, which seek to inform nearly every aspect of our lives. Historically, these are male dominated fields, and the language of scientific and medical discourse reflects this patriarchal control. Like the Vulgate Bible, scientific/medical terms are predominantly in Latin and Greek, languages which have been historically inaccessible to women. Scientific/medical discourse as well provides a striking example of symbolic language, with militantly correlative signifiers and signifieds; every organelle has a specific name and classification. Monique Wittig explains the implications that symbolic linguistic systems have for the Other. She writes that discourses of power, such as History, Philosophy, Science, Religion, and Psychoanalysis, "fit into one another, interpenetrate one another, support one another, reinforce one another, auto-engender, and engender one another," and that this cohesive unit of discourses serves to oppress the other, preventing the other from speaking unless they speak in the terms of the dominant discourse (Wittig 1992, 25). This has serious implications for women, whom society has long endeavored to control via scientific/medical discourse, which has a history of being used to regulate women's activities, and, consequently, their role in society by classifying them as the delicate, weak, and hysteric sex. For example, in ancient Greece, Hippocrates postulated that the womb rendered women hysteric, a myth which pervaded medical discourse through the Victorian period. Although the medical field eventually refuted this claim, it is notable that the term hysteria re-entered Western culture via another form of dominant discourse: Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory. Though much has been done to refute the notion of women being the weaker sex (in mind and body) in the medical and scientific communities, these ideas continue to prevail in the other dominant discourses of Western society.

For Winterson, scientific/medical discourse not only has a history of oppression and exclusion, but fails to translate the emotional aspects of the human

experience, which she believes are of the utmost importance. The linguistic failure of medical discourse is addressed specifically when the narrator tries to describe his/her lover's face. S/he writes: "frontal bone, palatine bones, nasal bones, lacrimal bones, cheek bones, maxilla, vomer, inferior conchae, mandible . . . those words don't remind me of your face" (Winterson 2001, 132). [7] These anatomical blazons are too impersonal; they both rob Louise of her individuality and alienate her lover. The narrator seeks to move in the opposite direction, insisting on Louise's unique traits and bodily history. [8] In addition to being cold, objective terms, anatomical blazons have a disturbing link with the history of dissection and taxonomy which fragment and label a necessarily dead body. The protagonist emphasizes this relation, writing:

If I come to you with a torch and a notebook, a medical diagram and a cloth to mop up the mess, I'll have you bagged neat and tidy. I'll store you in plastic like chicken livers. Womb, gut, brain, neatly labeled and returned. Is that how to know another human being? (120)

Medicine, Winterson infers, views living human beings like cadavers, robbed of both individuality and vitality. By fragmenting and classifying the body into a list of organs, one reduces a being into quantifiable parts; this reduction of a life force is opposite Winterson's endeavor, which is to infuse "emotional specificity into the objective vocabulary of medicine" (Harvey 2002, 339). Her choice to specify "Womb" in her list of organs notably points to its dubious history in scientific/medical discourse, contesting the idea that the essential qualities of a woman are linked to this organ. Winterson chooses to attack the scientific/medical tradition of dividing and separating the body in a novel, yet not uncontroversial manner, as she allies her protagonist with the troubled history of exploration.

The narrator describes him/herself as an aviator, a cartographer, an archaeologist, and a spelunker (Winterson 2001, 117-20). This problematically ties the protagonist to the patriarchal tradition of exploration, which has a history of being rapacious in regards to borders, women, and indigenous peoples. Land is

classically gendered feminine, yielding the hierarchical binaries of land/explorer and colonizer/colonized. As an explorer, the protagonist is engaged in an invasive endeavor, which I would argue Winterson emphasizes rather than subverts. For instance, she writes, “I have had you beneath me for examination” and “let me penetrate you. I am the archaeologist of tombs” (117, 119). A feminist reading of such passages could be to accuse the explorer of objectification of the female body. Winterson’s narrator, however, subverts this tradition, as s/he is not interested in colonizing and controlling Louise in the traditionally exploitative manner.

The world that the protagonist discovers within Louise is not mapped out in the classical fashion, nor is it separated into medical or Petrarchan segments: it is presented as an organic entity mapped in the lover’s mind, rather than catalogued for others to view. “I have flown the distance of your body from side to side of your ivory coast,” writes Louise’s lover, “I have mapped you with my naked eye and stored you out of sight” (117). Louise is mapped for memory, not for conquest. Elizabeth Harvey provides a useful analysis of this passage, noting that the reader see the eyes of the speaker here, not the body that is naked and dissected; in this case, “vulnerability is transferred to the speaker” (Harvey 2002, 338). In another passage which emphasizes the disruption of the land/explorer binary, the narrator states:

‘Explore me,’ you said and I collected my ropes, flasks and maps, expecting to be back home soon. I dropped into the mass of you and I cannot find my way out . . . I turn a corner and recognize myself again. Myself in your skin, myself lodged in your bones . . . (Winterson 2001, 120)

Rather than discovering an exoticized object of difference, the narrator finds themselves in Louise. There is no Other in this scenario, only an emphasis on the universality of the human experience. Thus, protagonist subverts the classical structural split between narrator/sexed body, physician/patient, lover/beloved,

male/female, colonizer/colonized and land/explorer. [9] Winterson continues to subvert these hierarchical oppositions throughout her bodily narrative.

The juxtaposition of medical and poetic language provides the strongest disruption of symbolic discourse in Winterson's narrative. For example, the medical subheading THE SKIN IS COMPOSED OF TWO MAIN PARTS: THE DERMIS AND THE EPIDERMIS is followed by an ode to Louise: "Your skin tastes salty and slightly citrus. When I run my tongue in a long wet line across your breasts I can feel the tiny hairs, the puckering of the aureole, the cone of your nipple. Your breasts are beehives pouring honey." (123) In another example, the subheading of TASTE: THERE ARE FOUR FUNDAMENTAL SENSATIONS OF TASTE: SWEET SOUR BITTER AND SALT is followed by a celebration of Louise's jouissance:

My lover is an olive tree whose roots grow by the sea. Her fruit is pungent and green. It is my joy to get at the stone of her . . . a strong burst of clear juice that has in it the weight of the land . . . The sun is in your mouth. The burst of an olive is breaking of a bright sky. (137)

The juxtaposition of cold medical terms with the evocative, sensuous descriptions of a lover's body highlights the inadequacy of scientific/medical language in describing the female body. In the face of Winterson's erotic descriptions of a lover's body the scientific and medical language falls flat: Louise cannot be quantified by medical terminology. The narrator rejects the terms of "sweet sour bitter and salt" to describe the taste of Louise's body, opting for strong poetic metaphors that evoke an overwhelming rush of interrelated sensations, tastes, and smells. Finally, the scientific/medical language is blown up by the poetic, as breasts become "beehives pouring honey" and bodily fluids have the power to tear open the skies.

Although these passages are highly sexual, they do not objectify Louise. When the narrator visualizes Louise, s/he doesn't see her in a classically sexual way. Describing Louise's breasts, for instance, the narrator mentions "tiny hairs" (123).

Describing her body, s/he writes: “[Louise’s] body was transparent. I saw the course of her blood, the ventricles of her heart, her legs’ long bones like tusks. Her blood was clean and red like roses” (154). Passion, rather than being described in terms of her sexual organs, is defined as Louise’s “heartbeat deepening, quickening,” her “blood vessels swelling” and “pores expanding” (124).

With passages such as these, Winterson wrests the fetishization of certain parts of the female body from her male predecessors, reconstituting it as an organic entity comprised of bones, tissues, blood, and hairs. It is interesting that although Winterson clearly takes issue with the historical associations of scientific/medical language in regards to women, she uses this language to subvert classical sexual metaphors. Winterson also forcefully re-appropriates female bodily fluids, which as demonstrated by Kristeva in her seminal work *Powers of Horror*, have historically rendered woman abject. [\[10\]](#) “When she bleeds the smells I know change color,” writes the narrator, “there is iron in her soul on those days” (137). Here menstrual blood is poeticized and sublimated, instead of metonymic for defilement. In sum, rather than being fragmented or condemned as unclean, Louise is celebrated as an organic entity of desire and *jouissance*.

Abjection plays an integral role in *Written on the Body*. Winterson is an author that Kristeva would describe as a “devote[e] of the abject” who does not cease looking “for the desirable and terrifying, nourishing and murderous, fascinating and abject inside of the maternal body” (Kristeva 1982, 54). Symbolically, the narrative of *Written on the Body* is abject due to its locus within the female body. The language of abjection, however, is never explicitly linked to the feminine. Rather, it arises continually from the association that Louise’s terminally cancerous body holds with death and decomposition. For example, the protagonist states that, “Death . . . slowly pulls down the skin’s heavy curtain to expose the bony cage behind. The skin loosens, yellows like limestone . . . the bones themselves yellow into tusks” (Winterson 2001, 132). This passage evokes the



narrator's struggle with the imminence of Louise's death, and what s/he views as the terrible reality of decomposition.

Winterson ultimately re-appropriates and sublimates the abjection of Louise's cancer-riddled body in *Written on the Body*. After all of his/her meditations on death, decomposition, and the ravages of cancer, the narrator equivocally states: "there is nothing distasteful about you to me; not sweat nor grime, not disease and its dull markings" (124). Instead of rejecting the abject body of Louise, the narrator praises, "you are a fallen angel . . . body light as a dragonfly, great gold wings cut across the sun" (131). The body narrative, significantly, does not end with a meditation on Louise's death; rather it finishes with passages dedicated almost wholly to the cosmic scope of Louise's *jouissance*. Simultaneously dazzling and macabre, the narrator's hymn to Louise's body highlights the inadequacy of scientific and medical language in relating the human experience. In a fascinating twist, the narrator, however, is willing to admit what the omniscient fields of science and medicine are not: his/her ultimate failure to know Louise. S/he ultimately recognizes that despite his/her intensive exploration of Louise, s/he will never truly understand or possess her, stating: "I have held your head in my hands but I have never held you. Not in your spaces, spirit, electrons of life" (120). Thus, the desire of the narrator, which was to come to know Louise, "more intimately than the skin, hair, and voice" s/he craved, has not been realized; s/he has failed, albeit gloriously (111). Most importantly, by acknowledging that Louise has an identity separate from his/her impressions, the narrator gives Louise the autonomous subjecthood that patriarchal discourse has historically denied women.

### **Re-visioning Female Sexuality**

In 1976 Hélène Cixous asserted that "about everything is yet to be written by women about their femininity," including their sexuality in its infinite complexity, their eroticization, and the adventures of their sexual drives (Cixous 1993, 342). Just as symbolic discourse has fragmented women's bodies, the patriarchal tradition has engaged in the limitation and derision of women's sexuality. Irigaray

discusses how women's sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters (Irigaray 1985, 23). In this figuration, the clitoris is "conceived as a little penis" and the vagina is "valued for the "lodging" it offers the male organ" (23). Women's erogenous zones are thus viewed as subordinate to the "noble phallic organ": in contrast to the male phallus, women sexual organs represent lack, atrophy, penis envy, absence of form, and "the horror of nothing to see" (23, 26). Because the vagina and the clitoris, in particular, are viewed as inferior, women's orgasms are metonymically assumed to be weaker and limited as well.

Not only is woman's sexual capacity viewed as inferior to man's, but woman's sexuality carries the stigma of shame and sin in Western religious tradition. Kristeva explains that women are only associated with the symbolic community in the Christian tradition provided they keep their virginity or atone for their *jouissance* with their martyrdom (Kristeva 2002, 145-6). Marriage does not offer an easement on this sanction, as sex within marriage was initially intended for pro-creational purposes only (146). Though Western society has largely broken away from the Judeo-Christian tradition in a religious sense, these mores still pervade modern society. Kristeva asserts that part of the collapse of the symbolic order lies in women denying identification with the father/phallus and learning to identify with the mother/vaginal body, at which point women and their *jouissance* move from being repressed to sublimated (150). Winterson's writing is dedicated to women and their *jouissance*, containing provocative explorations of love and pleasure which are always centered around the vaginal body.

Winterson's narratives attack the idea of the tradition of marriage being a holy institution which offers women the only appropriate sphere for their sexual activity, relegating extra-marital sex to the arena of inner defilement. In *Written on the Body*, Louise is married to Elgin, an Orthodox Jew with a proclivity for masochistic sex so deranged that Louise ceases to engage in sexual acts with him, at which point he turns to prostitutes (Winterson 2001, 34, 68). *The Passion's* Queen of Spades is married to an adventurer who leaves her alone for months,

even years at a time. In each case, the woman is left without the children, friendship, and respect which supposedly characterize the sanctified union of marriage. Both women consequentially turn to relationships outside of their marriages for emotional and sexual fulfillment. The beauty and intensity of their love affairs, which Winterson describes in the Biblical marital terms of “one flesh,” are a foil to their empty marriages. [\[11\]](#) With this inversion, these women’s passionate extra-marital relationships, or “fornication” and “adultery”, become sacred, while marriage is illustrated as anything but a holy sacrament of mutual love and respect (Mark 7.21-3). Rather than being defiled and ashamed, Louise and the Queen of Spades experience freedom, pleasure, and joy. Winterson highlights the fallibility of believing simply that marriage is good and pure, and that sexual acts outside of marriage are evil and sinful; her configuration of erotic love resists these hierarchical binaries. She does not, however, assert that all sexual encounters are sacred, only those that occur in a relationship characterized by true love.

Luce Irigaray provides an engaging point of departure for examining Winterson’s depictions of pleasure. Irigaray envisions an erotic love that transcends hierarchical power structures which leave one partner dominated by the other. Irigaray states, “when you say I love you – staying right here, close to you, close to me – you’re saying I love myself” (Irigaray 1985, 206). This is a love of proximity and equality, not distance and opposition: I/you is collapsed into a body “shared, undivided” where neither “you” nor “I” is severed (206). Irigaray’s ideal vision of erotic love is “two lips kissing two lips” (210). By eliminating the phallus from this vision of sexual intercourse, she removes the object of penetration and difference. “Kiss me,” she writes, “Openness is ours again. Our ‘world.’ And the passage between us, is limitless. Without end. No knot or loop, no mouth ever stops our exchanges. Between us the house has no wall, the clearing no enclosure, language no circularity” (210). The act of love becomes a form of open communication where “several voices, several ways of speaking

resound endlessly back and forth” (209). The active phallus/passive vagina binary is transcended in this vision, where the lips remain open in a mirror image.

Winterson explores an extreme version of this type of sexual interaction in *The Passion*. Villanelle and the Queen of Spades agree that they will not engage in sexual intercourse, but will only kiss. This act, which was engendered as a form of discipline and mildly sadistic denial of pleasure, ends up yielding a result which neither party expected: it magnifies the sexual experience. “Just as the blind hear more acutely and the deaf can feel the grass grow,” Villanelle regales, “so the mouth becomes the focus of love and all things pass through it and are re-defined” (Winterson 1987, 67). Villanelle and the Queen of Spades experience the vision of erotic love that is set out by Irigaray. In a text where every other sexual encounter is an overt power play, this love stands out as a pure form of pleasure. [\[12\]](#) The theme of mutuality in love recurs throughout Winterson’s novels, if not as explicitly as in this kissing-only relationship.

In recent decades feminist theorists have actively engaged in disabling the myth that male pleasure is paramount and female pleasure is limited and subordinate. The cosmic nature of woman’s pleasure is something that is emphasized continually throughout French feminist theory, and a theme which is taken up by Winterson as well. For example, Irigaray notes that women’s “horizon will never stop expanding . . . stretching out, never ceasing to unfold”; Cixous asserts that woman is “a cosmos where eros never stops traveling, a vast astral space”; and Kristeva writes that women’s experience and bodily rhythms are aligned with “cosmic time” versus the linear, or “monumental” temporality of the symbolic order (Irigaray 1985, 213; Cixous 1991, 87; Kristeva 2002, 191). By presenting female sexuality as plural and never-ending, these women forcefully transcend the borders that have been constructed to limit their sexuality.

Another powerful metaphor continually used by French theorists for women’s pleasure is the ocean, which represents a rhythmic force that cannot be controlled by man. [\[13\]](#) Winterson often compares women’s bodies with water and the

ocean. For example, she writes: “I began a voyage down [Louise’s] spine, the cobbled road of hers that brought me to a cleft and a damp valley then a deep pit to drown in” (Winterson 2001, 82). Louise’s lover metaphorically drowns in her sex, an image of total saturation and submersion. Here the lover is subject to the overwhelming vastness of the vaginal body, rather than the vagina being rendered passive by the active, dominant phallus. In another passage, the protagonist recalls that his/her ex-lover Bathsheba, “opens and shuts like a sea anemone. She’s refilled each day with fresh tides of longing” (73). Bathsheba’s “tides of longing” connote the expansive and powerful nature of women’s *jouissance*. Winterson thus removes the vaginal body from its repressed position, highlighting its prominence rather than its inferiority in relation to sexual pleasure.

While Winterson does provide sublimated images of woman’s *jouissance*, her conceptualizations of sex and love are not wholly peaceful and nourishing. The liminality of love is something Winterson articulates continually throughout her novels. She writes that passion is “somewhere between the swamp and the mountains,” “somewhere between fear and sex,” and “somewhere between God and the devil” (Winterson 1987, 55, 68). Passion, in essence, is an elsewhere which is not ruled by society’s laws. There are no clear demarcations in this land of loving, Winterson emphasizes, and this lack of marked borders lends an element of danger to love and pleasure. Unlike Irigaray, who writes, “there is no need for bloodshed between us,” Winterson views erotic love as a mutual invasion and wounding of the lover and beloved (Irigaray 1985, 206). This wounding is not meant to be physically harmful; she conceives it as a transformative emotional experience. Love, which “in all its aspects, opens the self so fully” creates “open, vulnerable place[s]” in our hearts and lives (Jaggi 2004, 3). These fissures have the power to break down the walls and obstacles that we have constructed in order to cement our identity: it “shatters our selves” and is thus a “renewing force” (Pauli 2000, 2). In sum, like the textual experience, love contains the possibility of forcing the subject to reconstitute their subjecthood in relation to the surrounding world.

Winterson illustrates the invasive nature of love by describing it in strong, often abject language. In one instance, the protagonist states that Louise is “the L that tattoos me on the inside” (Winterson 2001, 118). The image of needles piercing one’s inner organs is not only abject, breaching the borders between the inside and outside, but connotes agonizing pain. A theme of violent penetration is echoed as the protagonist, referring to the sexual act, inveighs: “nail me to you. I will ride you like a nightmare” (131). The element of danger associated with the violent and surreal nature of these passages is an integral part of Winterson’s figuration of sexual intimacy. These images illustrate Winterson’s sentiment that sex should not be a passive act, but a venture which demands the complete engagement of one’s mind, body, and soul. By opening oneself so fully to another person, one inevitably faces the pain of renunciation of the ego, as well as the threat of harm that is implicit to vulnerability. Finally, these passages emphasize the stimulating nature of pain: “pleasure on the edge of danger is sweet,” she writes (Winterson 1987, 137).

Winterson articulates the fragile border between arousal and agony most clearly in the following passage: “I . . . mak[e] you cry out with pleasure close to pain. We’ve bruised each other, broken the capillaries shot with blood . . . those ramified blood vessels that write the bodies longing” (Winterson 2001, 124). Here the desire is written in bruises, the wounds of love taking on a distinctly linguistic dimension. Winterson further develops this metaphor as she describes a lover engraving themselves into their beloved’s flesh:

Articulacy of fingers, the language of the deaf and dumb, signing on the body body longing. Who taught you to write in blood on my back? Who taught you to use your hands as branding irons? You have scored your name into my shoulders, referenced me with your mark. The pads of your fingers have become printing blocks . . . tap[ping] meaning into my body.  
(89)

This love language resonates with abjection, as the lover scores and brands themselves into the beloved's body. Winterson has created a vision of love that literally transcends the beloved's corporeal borders, as the skin is, significantly, "the body's envelope and territorial boundary" (Harvey 2002, 340). This transgression of boundaries notably creates a new "meaning" of life for the beloved, thus yielding a transformation of self.

It is significant that this language of longing is not impressed on an inferior beloved by a dominant lover, but is rather exacted upon each lover respectively. "Neither of us had the upper hand," stipulates the narrator, "we wore matching wounds" (Winterson 2001, 163). Instead of one lover inflicting harm on the other, it is as if the lovers are grafting themselves into one body: the ultimate border crossing. [\[14\]](#) The complete transgression of bodily limits is highlighted in the narrator's proclamation that, "we were equally sunk ... in each other" (91). This conflation of lovers into one being illustrates Irigaray's ideal vision of sexual relations; there is no other in this relationship, only one body of love. Echoing Irigaray's ideal of oneness in love, Winterson writes, "your hand prints are all over my body" and "your flesh is my flesh" (106). The recognition of one's self within one's lover is, notably, the antithesis of Kristevan abjection, where "nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory," and which "is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin" (Kristeva 1982, 5). Thus, although Winterson recognizes the abject capacity of passion, she ultimately views love as the most elevated state a human can attain. The opposite of the separation and dejection of abjection, true love results in an intense, invigorating union of mind, body, and soul.

Winterson believes that individuals have the ability to alter their relationship to the symbolic order, and that women thus have the power to move into a position of equality with men. Art plays a fundamental role in the realization of this cultural revolution for Winterson, who finds "enormous power" in the agency of literature, which she believes "offer[s] ways of seeing yourself and yourself in the world" (Winterson 2006). Her novels are a testament to the self-reflexive

experience that the best writing provides, insisting that her reader question their identity, sexuality, and the entire social order. With *Written on the Body* and *The Passion*, Winterson plows through the symbolically constructed borders which surround sex, gender, and the body. By subverting the tradition of fetishizing and fragmenting the female body via scientific, medical, and literary discourse, Winterson provides her female characters the autonomous subjecthood that women have historically been denied - one that is not predicated on man's impressions. Her vision of erotic love transcends the hierarchical binaries of man/woman, dominant/inferior, lover/loved, symbolic/abject, and sinful/righteous that have long pervaded sexual relations. Without the division and oppression implicit in these oppositions, love becomes a holy and transformative union. Finally, Winterson's unashamed hymn to women's *jouissance* defies the culture of shame and subordination that surrounds female sexuality.

### Endnotes

[1] Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Kieth Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Feminisms*, ed. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP) 338.

[2] Petrarch engendered a code of beauty with an "obsessive insistence on the particular", which "generated multiple texts on individual fragments" of women's bodies, as well as causing readers "to view the fetishized body as a norm". Cf. Nancy Vickers, "Diana Described: Scattered Women and Scattered Rhyme," *Feminism and Renaissance Studies*, ed. Lorna Hutson (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1999) 234, 244.

[3] Alice Jardine explains that in postmodern literary theory, "newly contoured fictional spaces, hypothetical and unmeasurable" are "free coded as feminine". For example, Jacques Derrida employs the word "invaginated" to describe the "inward refolding" of a narrative, and the word "hymen" to signify that which is "undecided". Cf. Alice A. Jardine, *Gynesis* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1985) 69, 204, 170.



[4] “*Jouissance*” is defined as enjoyment, or pleasure. Leon Roudiez emphasizes that *jouissance* is “sexual, spiritual, physical, and conceptual,” connoting “total joy or ecstasy (without any mystical connotation)” as opposed to *plaisir* (pleasure), which means simply sensual or sexual pleasure. For more on this, see Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980) 15-16.

[5] Let me make clear that I am not inferring that scientific language is inadequate in the clinical arena, where its specificity and objectivity is necessary, but that it is limited in its ability to translate the aspects of emotion and imagination that are an integral aspect of our daily lives.

[6] I conflate the terms “scientific” and “medical” because although the field of medicine historically preceded that of science, and although the anatomical blazons Winterson employs are commonly viewed as medical terminology, Winterson writes during our contemporary age, in which the two fields are inextricably tied, if not synonymous.

[7] I use the phrase “s/he writes” because Winterson has constructed *Written on the Body* as a narrative that is actually written by the first person narrator/protagonist.

[8] As noted in Elizabeth Harvey, ““Anatomies of Rapture: Clitoral Politics/Medical Blazons,” *Signs* 27.2 (2002): 339.

[9] Binaries as noted by Elizabeth Harvey, 338.

[10] Kristeva argues that the hygienic and dietary sanctions of the Old Testament permeate contemporary Western society. She explains that the sacred nature of the purification rites (ritual cleansing and blood sacrifice) that are required to cleanse a defiled/unclean subject extracts the concept of defilement from the secular order and aligns it with the sacred (65). Filth, which has gained an amplified significance by its alignment with the sacred, becomes “a non-object of desire, abominated as ab-ject” that is positioned outside of the “self and clean” subject

(65). Kristeva turns to the anthropologist Mary Douglas for a further explanation of how unclean substances become a demarcation of an abject subject. Douglas asserts that “filth is not a quality in itself,” but applies “only to what relates to a boundary,” and, more particularly, “represents the object jettisoned out of that boundary, its other side, a margin” (69). Thus, any matter issuing from the body (spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears) is immediately marginal, having physically traversed the boundary of the corporeal body (69). Because such substances were metonymic for the impurity of the individual who touched them, women, whose menstrual flow and breast milk were conceived as ritually unclean substances, became derided as a locus of impurity, and were both literally and symbolically excised to a sphere of defilement. Hence, a significant association is established with the abject and the feminine, although any subject who does not make a successful identification with the father, and therefore the symbolic order, is at risk of entering abjection. Cf. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York and Guildford: Columbia UP, 1982) 65-9.

[11] Winterson’s narrator writes of Louise, “your flesh is my flesh,” echoing Genesis: “therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh”. Cf. Jeanette Winterson, *Written on the Body* (London: Vintage, 2001) 106; Genesis 2.24.

[12] I am not inferring that the relationship between Villanelle and the Queen of Spades does not involve a power play, only that their sexual encounters do not. The nature of their kissing is in stark contrast to Villanelle’s rape, forced prostitution, and willing prostitution.

[13] For example, Cixous writes, “unleashed and raging, [woman] belongs to the race of waves”. Cf. Hélène Cixous, “Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays,” *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis and Oxford: U of Minnesota P, 1991) 90-1.

[14] A similar point is made by Harvey; cf. Elizabeth Harvey 340.

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### **First Response**

It is pleasing to see that Winterson's work is not only used to confirm feminist theory but to interrogate it, particularly with respect to the transformations of abjection and danger. What is meant by 'sublimation' could be further specified in future work, since it is a term used in disparate ways across aesthetic, psychoanalytic and feminist theory, while this constitutes a promising engagement with Winterson's texts.