

From image to sign: Queering the 'lesbian' in Jeanette Winterson's academic reception

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Abstract

Some literary works are particularly open to and 'invite' (Belsey 2005, p. 163) lesbian and queer interpretations. Jeanette Winterson's work has proved particularly fertile for these interpretations, even as it has initiated a reappraisal of the categories of lesbian identity and fiction. The reception that has greeted Winterson's work illustrates how debates on lesbian identity have shifted from those which are grounded in political considerations to those which are textually dispersed and function as a sign. However, this queering of lesbian meaning has not led to the annihilation of its political stance. Winterson's postmodern-lesbian and queer interpretations draw attention to the political implications of gender performance and transcendence even as they advocate a fluid lesbian identity. Thus, both critics who consider lesbian fiction to engage in the complexities of lesbian existence and critics who search in the text for a 'lesbian sensitivity' that queers the heterosexual matrix share a strong commitment to political reading and a belief in the subversive power of the lesbian text.

Keywords: academic reception, authorship, Jeanette Winterson, lesbian fiction, political stance, queer fiction

Introduction

Within the corpus of literary theory, terminology and definitions have always engendered debates that have frequently concluded with terms acquiring new organs of meaning that, on occasion, have been introduced at the expense of removing their vestigial counterparts. Even the field's main term, 'literature', poses difficulty as our understanding of what constitutes literature has shifted throughout the ages (Eagleton 1983). 'Lesbian fiction' is also amongst the contested terms, as critics have difficulty agreeing on what constitutes it and which elements ought to be prioritised in their study. Is lesbian fiction determined by the sexuality of the author and/or the plot? Should lesbian fiction necessarily promote lesbian identity politics by creating positive role models? How does the reader contribute towards shaping and defining lesbian fiction? Can a queer reading empower a literary text with the characteristics of a lesbian fiction? How does a text capture 'lesbian sensitivity' (Faderman 1995, p. 51)? How does postmodernism reconfigure lesbian fiction? To evoke Paulina Palmer (1990, p. 45): 'What precisely is a lesbian feminist novel? Is it one written by lesbians, for lesbians or about lesbians?'

All these questions thwart, even as they inform, the task of defining lesbian fiction. Equally, they resonate within the academic reception of Jeanette Winterson's work. Thus, the lesbian feminist interpretations of her work allow us to engage with the rhetoric and polemics of conceptualising lesbian fiction. In my analysis, I signal the extent to which critical responses to Winterson's fiction

have been mediated by various conceptions of the term. Concomitantly, challenged by Winterson's text and self-representation, these responses have also facilitated a revision of the term 'lesbian fiction'. Yet, with one leading the other, the concept remains in continual flux.

Expectations from and aspirations of 'good' lesbian fiction

Winterson's work raised the interest of lesbian-feminist critics right from the start, as the topic of her first novel, *Oranges are not the only fruit* (1985) conforms to the tradition of lesbian coming-out narratives. This semi-autobiographical novel presents how the young protagonist, Jeanette, discovers her lesbian desire and the social consequences she suffers because of her sexual orientation. After *Oranges*, however, Winterson started to depart from strictly lesbian topics. Her subsequent novels, such as *The passion* (1987), *Sexing the cherry* (1989), *Art & lies* (1994) or *The powerbook* (2000), focus primarily on the postmodern issue of writing and story-telling. Nonetheless, writing and story-telling entail the narration of sexual identity and the performance of sexuality. It can thus be argued that each of her novels gives space to a 'lesbian sensibility' through the writing of a fluid sexual identity. In *The passion*, we have the story of Villanelle, the cross-dressing Venetian woman, and the mysterious female lover who steals her heart. The twelve princesses of *Sexing* rewrite the heteronormative endings of fairy tales by each finding their happily-ever-after with another woman. The ungendered narrator of *Written on the body* (1992) opens up the space for Winterson to experiment with the clichés of gendered love. *Art & lies* contains the rewriting of the story of Sappho, and *Gut symmetries* (1997) ironically entangles the female lover and the male protagonist's wife in a love story. Gender performance continues in the cyberspace of *The powerbook*, as the narrator of the novel, Ali, fabricates new identities to fulfil the requests she receives via Internet messages. *Lighthousekeeping* (2004) thematises the love of reading and telling and re-telling stories, including the story of the love of the narrator, Pew, for another woman. *Weight* (2005) retells the story of Atlas and Hercules from Greek mythology. It is the single novel that is not connected to the topic of lesbianism and gender performance. In her last novel, *The stone gods* (2007), Winterson returns to the topic of lesbian love.

Winterson's work has been disparaged by some lesbian-feminist critics for its departure from lesbian issues towards an engagement with postmodern topics of self-reflexivity. According to Rachel Wingfield (1998, p. 67), Winterson's work 'retreated from lesbianism' and she 'shift[ed] into an increasing focus on the theoretical concerns of the (male) literary world'. Wingfield's criticism is formed by a particular understanding of lesbian fiction that focuses on the political and social implications of the literary work of art. The social responsibility of the lesbian writer lies in the presentation of positive images as she participates, through her fiction, in the construction of a lesbian culture. The necessity of positive images can be understood in light of the history of discrimination against lesbians.

Not only were lesbians marginalised and viewed as outcasts, they also frequently internalised these negative images. Radclyffe Hall's *The well of loneliness* (1928), one of the classics of lesbian literature, constructed the lesbian hero based on the sexual inversion theory of Havelock Ellis and Magnus Hirschfield. According to Faderman (1981), women writers such as Renée Vivien, Djuna

Barnes and Anaïs Nin, incorporated in their work the destructive bohemian image of the lesbian presented in the poetry of Baudelaire. The anti-feminist reaction of the 1950s led to the appearance of a trend of novels in which the lesbian was seen as a spinster vampire living on the blood of young women. The security of the heterosexual world was re-established at the end of these novels by punishing the lesbian 'vampire' either by exclusion or by death. The heterosexual norm was enforced as the spell of the lesbian over her young victim vanished and she was rescued through marriage to a young gentleman.¹

Rachel Wingfield's (1998) criticism of Winterson's work draws attention to the importance of the theoretical perspective of the literary critic. She evaluates Winterson's work in light of her own expectations of 'good' lesbian fiction that Winterson's fiction fails to deliver. Wingfield's perspective, however, represents just one position within the changing scene of lesbian-feminist criticism.

In the 1980s and 1990s, but especially during the first half of the early 1990s, two major debates took place in the field of lesbian-feminist discourse that have influenced the readings of lesbian fiction and thus the readings of Winterson's work. The first debate was concerned with defining the parameters of lesbian-feminist fiction. The major question addressed by several lesbian-feminist theoreticians (Faderman 1995; Griffin 1993, 1994; Palmer 1990; Stimpson 1982; Zimmerman [1990]1992) was the formulation of the notion of 'lesbian' in connection with texts and writers. The second debate (Doan 1994; Farwell 1995; Griffin 2000; Lanser 1996; Palmer 2005) centred on the incorporation of poststructuralist methodology and postmodern ideas into the field of lesbian theory.

The political definitions of the lesbian in the 1970s and 1980s raised certain expectations about lesbian fiction that involved requiring positive lesbian images from these novels. As the definition of the lesbian shifted from definitions grounded in political considerations towards a textually dispersed understanding of lesbian as a sign, the evaluation of lesbian fiction also shifted from the analysis of lesbian images towards an examination of lesbian sensibility and lesbian narrative spaces, sexualities and bodies. In an overview of the lesbian-feminist reception of Winterson's work, we can see that with the dispersal of the meaning of lesbian in the field of lesbian-feminist theory, lesbian-feminist literary critics' interest shifted from analyses of the construction of lesbian images in fiction towards more diverse subjects such as lesbian narrative space (Farwell 1995), lesbian sensibility (Faderman 1995), the writing of lesbian erotics and the body (Allen 1996; Duncker 1998; Gilmore 1997; Lindenmeyer 1999; Moore 1995; Stowers 1998) and the postmodern lesbian (Doan 1994; Farwell 1996; Langland 1997; Palmer 1995, 1997, 2005).

The debate that influenced Winterson's reception at the very beginning of her work, mainly the reception of *Oranges*, was influenced by the debate over the conceptualisation of lesbian fiction. The need to define lesbian fiction can be attributed to the aim of giving certain coordinates upon which lesbian fiction can be evaluated besides the aesthetic values of literary theory or the required political correctness prescribed by a politically conscious leftist discourse for representations of (sexual) minorities. The second debate over the postmodern lesbian that I consider to be a key discussion of lesbian-feminist discourse in the 1990s, incorporates the postmodern lesbian readings

of Winterson's work. Besides its connection to her work, the theoretical considerations of the lesbian postmodern are connected to the debate on the definition of lesbian fiction in the way theorists who are engaged in this debate, such as Gabriele Griffin, Paulina Palmer and Bonnie Zimmerman, manage to deconstruct their own previous definitions of lesbian fiction. I shall place the lesbian-feminist reception of Winterson's work within the framework of the debates that constitute a shift in the lesbian-feminist discourse, from lesbian as image to lesbian as dispersed sign.

The lesbian image

The construction of the lesbian image(s) in lesbian fiction is the main topic of the analyses of many lesbian-feminist literary theorists. Each of them, before engaging in the analysis of lesbian images in their chosen novels, introduces her field of investigation with an elaborate definition of lesbian fiction. That definition includes the sexuality of the author, the topic of the novel, the protagonist's sexuality, the sexuality of the reader and even the orientation of the publisher (as some publishing houses focus solely on feminist, lesbian and feminist-lesbian writers). All these elements form part of the understanding and the reception of lesbian fiction, but at the same time they are also points of scrutiny and criticism. What about novels that do not explicitly have a lesbian storyline, but are still regarded as part of the lesbian canon? Faderman (1995, p. 51) asks whether 'we [can] identify a lesbian sensibility in literature that may not be concerned specifically with lesbian sexuality and attendant matters'. Literary works such as Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* or Alice Walker's *The color purple* do not have a lesbian storyline driven by a narration focusing on a lesbian protagonist. While the characters in these novels are gender ambiguous, they are not identified as 'lesbian'. The novels do not present such lesbian issues as coming out or battling homophobia, yet they are considered to be lesbian novels because they convey a certain 'lesbian sensibility' due their 'the fascination with androgyny and concerns (...) with feminist protest' (Faderman 1995, p. 52).

Lesbian-feminist critics' definition of lesbian alternates between (and sometimes combines) political, erotic or postmodern formulations. Catherine R. Stimpson's (1982) analysis of lesbian fiction is based on a 'conservative and severely literal' understanding of the lesbian. She accentuates the political potentiality of the lesbian body and desire. In her understanding, lesbianism entails and requires more than 'lesbian sensibility':

She is a woman who finds other women erotically attractive and gratifying. Of course a lesbian is more than her body, more than her flesh, but lesbianism partakes of the body, partakes of the flesh. That carnality distinguishes it from gestures of political sympathy with homosexuals and from affectionate friendships in which women enjoy each other, support each other, and commingle a sense of identity and well-being. Lesbianism represents a commitment of skin, blood, breast and bone. (1982, p. 244)

The privileging of sexuality over 'political sympathy' in the understanding of lesbian leads Stimpson towards a preference for lesbian fiction that engages in the complexities of lesbian existence, rather than a politically correct construction of a lesbian image. Thus Stimpson (1982, p. 258) defends

Bertha Harris against her critics who disapprove of *Lover* as being 'inaccessible'. Her defence rests on a critique of the 'positive images' that fail to capture the complexity of lesbian existence:

Part of the huge popularity of *Rubyfruit Jungle* is due to its ebullient self-admiration. Such easy hedonism and heroism, is, of course, didactically helpful and politically worthwhile, but it also 'prevents a deeper look into the nature of things and the nature of lesbianism'. (1982, p. 258)

Paulina Palmer (1990, p. 44) also considers the possibilities of whether 'lesbianism [is] to be defined solely in terms of sexual practice and orientation, or experiences of woman-bonding and feminist camaraderie [are] also to be included'. Her understanding of lesbian fiction is based on a preference for a political definition of the lesbian rather than an erotic one, as she regards one of the aims of lesbian fiction as challenging prejudiced stereotypes of lesbians. The political preference is suggested not only by the formulation of the aim of lesbian fiction, but also by the insertion of feminism into the term 'lesbian fiction':

The category *lesbian feminist fiction* is necessary to challenge these examples of bigotry with a fairer representation of the topic. While not necessarily presenting all lesbian relations in a positive light, writers should aim to deconstruct prejudiced myths and stereotypes, not endorse and perpetuate them. (Palmer 1990, p. 46, emphasis in the original)

It is difficult to assess whether or not the requirement for positive images of the lesbian in lesbian fiction has the expected outcome of changing stereotypes and of working towards an acceptance of lesbianism in society. Since lesbian fiction usually has a specific, well-defined readership, this widespread effect of positive lesbian images is difficult to achieve. The main affirmative use of these positive lesbian images is the possibility for lesbian readers to find role models. Identification with the main lesbian protagonist is a very important element in the assessment of a lesbian novel by a lesbian reader. Palmer, working at the Cambridge Lesbian Line, tells of her experience in using lesbian fiction on helplines and in support groups. Identification with the main protagonist is a mode of reading in which the reader recognises herself in the novel, and sees her own thoughts and feelings in the protagonist's emotional turmoil. The problem with positive images and identification, however, is that on the one hand it might help some readers not to feel isolated, as Palmer suggests, and on the other hand positive images might be far from the reader's experience. If there is a huge discrepancy between the positive world of the lesbian fiction and the reality of the everyday life of the lesbian reader, the lesbian world of the fiction can become alienating to the reader.

Bonnie Zimmerman ([1990]1992, p. 19) recognises the pitfalls of political correctness that 'can be a straightjacket for the lesbian writer', as well as others. Political correctness can also circumscribe the analysis of lesbian fiction by the lesbian-feminist literary critic. Positive images of lesbians do not necessarily guarantee 'good' fiction. Winterson was criticised for not continuing with the presentation of the lesbian she created in *Oranges* (Wingfield 1998). If considered from the point of view of political correctness, Winterson's first novel, *Oranges*, delivers a positive image of the lesbian since it advocates an attitude of self-acceptance (Griffin 1993, 1994). The protagonist of

the novel, Jeanette, has no problem acknowledging her lesbianism, and even considers it ‘natural’. Only those in her environment try to convince her otherwise, considering it to be sinful and unacceptable. In subsequent novels Winterson’s interest shifted. While most of her novels have a lesbian scenario or storyline, she does not use the storylines to present lesbian existence. The protagonists’ lesbianism is not at the core of the novel, nor is it discussed or problematised. Like Jeanette in *Oranges*, Winterson regards lesbianism in her later novels as ‘natural’, and not an issue to be discussed. Any commitment to lesbian issues is replaced by an investigation into postmodern gender performances. This naturalisation of lesbianism is analogous with the universalisation of lesbian love that Winterson achieves through her postmodern reworking of the genre of romance.² The best example of this from among her novels is *Written*, since the gender-free narrator lifts the weight of gender from the story of love. Reflecting on the play with gender stereotypes in *Written*, Kauer (1998, p. 50) concludes that this play on love clichés ‘underlin[es] that love is a more universal phenomenon than we are taught to believe, neither restricted by gender nor exclusively reserved for heterosexual relationships’. Kauer reads the novel against the grain by not accepting the gender-free narrator and arguing for the presence of a woman narrator. Through a close textual analysis of the narratological construction of the narrator’s point of view, she concludes that ‘the narrator’s point of view is a woman’s point of view’ (Kauer 1998, p. 47). As the novel is full of sensual and erotically charged passages, Kauer’s proposed ‘woman’s point of view’ is dominated and overcome by the desire for a woman’s body. Still, Kauer identifies it as a woman narrator and not a lesbian one. Another critic who has searched for the gender of the narrator of *Written* is Patricia Duncker (1998), who argues that the novel would have been even more outstanding if written from an overtly lesbian point of view, and believes it could have followed in the footsteps of one of the most important canonical lesbian texts, Monique Wittig’s *The lesbian body*:

Written on the Body is a text full of lost opportunities. Winterson refuses to write an ‘out’ lesbian novel. Why should she? Fair enough. But I think she is losing more than she gains, because the wonderful echo of *The Lesbian Body* stands at the centre of the book, and glitters like an obelisque, a monument to what the text might have been. (1998, p. 85)

While both the lesbian-feminist critics, Kauer and Duncker,³ provide textual evidence for their gender-ing readings of *Written*, I would argue that there is a subtext to these readings that is formed by the desire of the lesbian-feminist critic to see the narrator of the novel as lesbian. This subtext is most evident in Duncker’s critique as she sees the novel as a lost opportunity for another great lesbian novel. The subtext is also influenced by Winterson’s sexuality, by her lesbianism, and this classification raises certain expectations. One such expectation is to write an overtly lesbian novel, not one that merely hints at lesbianism. Thus, the interpretation of *Written* becomes entangled in a network of factors that go beyond the text. Besides, expectations of Winterson’s work based on her previous novels, her private life and her image as a public lesbian persona, also influence the reading of *Written* as a lesbian novel.

The reader’s knowledge of Winterson’s sexual orientation might invite a lesbian reading of the novel. However, it is not only that knowledge that can influence the reading of *Written*, but also the knowledge of her refusal to be known as a lesbian writer. The reader has to negotiate with

Winterson's self-definition as a writer when deciding whether to read this novel as a lesbian novel, or whether to resist the temptation to gender the narrator. Reading *Written* as a lesbian novel is actually not playing along with Winterson's intention.

The sexuality of the author can (pre)determine the definition of a text as lesbian. Zimmerman ([1990]1992, p. 15) mentions it as the first factor, since 'the nature of lesbian fiction makes it impossible to separate the text from the imagination that engenders it', and in her view, lesbian writers 'identify themselves in some way with the lesbian community'. This identification is performed in their creative writing, biographies or interviews. Furthermore, the writer's choice of publisher, writing for lesbian journals, 'giv[ing] readings at lesbian bookstores and centers, or attend[ing] lesbian panels at conferences' ([1990]1992, p. 15) also express her commitment to the lesbian community.

Griffin (1993) identifies the problematics of automatically ascribing lesbian fiction to lesbian writers by indicating that not all lesbian writers necessarily write fiction with lesbian topics. Patricia Duncker (1992), similarly to Winterson (1994), completely rejects the implication that the sexuality of the writer influences his or her writing.

So far as writing is concerned, I believe that it must remain irrelevant to the reader whether the author herself lives as a Lesbian, committed in 'blood, breast and bone' to the other women. It is writing itself which reveals or conceal [*sic*], is successful or not, on its own terms. For writing has its own rules, and can be remote from a writer's life, a life lived on different terms and in different ways. (Duncker, 1992, p. 171)

The contribution of the writer's lesbianism in defining a text as lesbian fiction can range from acknowledgement (Zimmerman), a neutral standpoint (Griffin), to a complete rejection of the idea (Duncker, Winterson). Regardless of which is chosen, it influences the reader's approach to the text. In the end it is the critic's choice whether she denies the impact the author's sexuality has on writing, or acknowledges its influence on her interpretation.

The second characteristic of lesbian fiction, the choice of topic, is similarly a contested area. Zimmerman ([1990]1992, p. 15) requires a lesbian novel not only to have a lesbian character as the protagonist, but also that the character 'understands herself to be a lesbian'. Thus, in her selection, Zimmerman ([1990]1992, p. 15) eliminates those novels 'that inscribe relationships between women through codes and allusions', instead demanding a self-conscious political lesbian fiction. For her, thus, the overt centrality of the lesbian topic is a necessary requirement for a text to qualify as lesbian.

Faderman (1995) considers definitions of lesbian fiction, such as Zimmerman's, as having a negative effect on the formation of the lesbian canon. This kind of orthodox definition limits the canon and excludes valuable works from the past, such as Gertrude Stein's poetry, but also contemporary writers such as Jeanette Winterson, Sarah Waters, Emma Donoghue and Ali Smith. Faderman is concerned with finding a mode of definition that breaks up the strict connections between lesbian fiction and the chain of characteristics through which lesbian-feminist critics try to define it. The lesbian author, topic and readership are all important elements which, in some sense,

form lesbian fiction, but it is also necessary to recognise what is beyond these categories and how they change over time. As Griffin (1993, p. 3) states, ‘the drawing of the boundaries between what is and what is not lesbian writing is a problematic exercise, highlighting the provisional nature of such categorization’.

Zimmerman ([1990]1992) and Griffin (1993) refer to style as another category to be considered in defining lesbian fiction. Style is problematic because lesbian fiction incorporates different styles, ranging from realist texts to postmodern, avant-garde experimentation with language and narrative forms. Certain lesbian writers such as Monique Wittig, however, consciously attempt to use language as a formal means to produce lesbian writing. In her case, style predominates over all the other characteristics of lesbian fiction and is connected to her lesbian philosophy. Patriarchal language producing binarisms that subjugate the lesbian should be overcome through a continuous evasion of its language structure. Wittig may be seen in terms of poststructuralist feminists such as Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, who advocated a style of writing, *écriture féminine*, that escapes ‘the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system’ (Cixous, 1981, p. 253). Experimentation with narrative techniques such as plot and time, multiple narrators and the suspension of the ending, is not confined to lesbian, feminist or *écriture féminine* writing, as they form part of postmodern narrative practices. Lesbian fiction also incorporates ‘realist’ novels. The realist style is common among those novels that Paulina Palmer (1993) calls ‘political fictions’.⁴ The feminist critique of society is achieved in these novels by a realistic depiction of the challenges facing lesbian feminists.⁵

In her interpretation of lesbian fiction, Faderman (1995) marginalises the issues of the author’s sexuality, the centrality of the topic of lesbianism in the novel, the protagonist’s lesbianism and the lesbian reader’s identification with the protagonist. She evades these restrictions by proposing to approach lesbian fiction through a ‘lesbian sensibility’ encoded in the text.

Can we identify a lesbian sensibility in literature that may not be concerned specifically with lesbian sexuality and attendant matters? For example, if a work (especially written before Hall broke the ice in 1928) criticizes heterosexual institutions, focuses on women apart from their erotic connection with men, and presents romantic friendships between women (which fall short of genital sexuality), is it lesbian? (Faderman, 1995, p. 52)

Faderman opens up the definition of lesbian fiction as wide as possible. Her term ‘lesbian sensibility’ echoes Rich’s ‘lesbian continuum’ as she considers lesbian fiction as encompassing all kinds of relationships between women and having a political edge through its critical standpoint towards heteronormativity. The literary examples she uses are Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*, Alice Walker’s *The color purple*, Gertrude Stein’s work and Jeanette Winterson’s *Oranges*, all of which share a lesbian sensibility, despite each using it in a different way: *Orlando* does so with its interest in androgyny and feminist protest; *The color purple* by depicting the erotically charged relationship between Celia and Shug; and *Lifting belly* through a secret language of lesbian lovemaking that the reader needs to decode. In these ways, they invoke lesbian sensibility that makes them valuable members of the lesbian canon. *Oranges* is of interest to Faderman because she regards it as a lesbian

novel that succeeded in 'avoid[ing] the restrictions imposed by its genre' (1995, p. 57). As Stein does in *Q.E.D.*, Winterson presents 'the problems of a human being who is a lesbian' (1995, p. 57). Thus, in *Oranges*, Winterson depicts lesbianism from a universal and not a minority standpoint. Faderman regards these novels as 'revolutionary', not least because they escape Zimmerman's restrictive definition of lesbian fiction.

They are truly revolutionary because, instead of involving themselves in the debates of their day, which show the lesbian as a victim of, or victor over, congenital or social forces, they show the lesbian as a person coping with a panoply of a life's problems. (Faderman, 1995, p. 56)

Faderman (1995, p. 56) acclaims *Oranges* for 'present[ing] a complex study of a character who has functions that transcend her lesbianism'. Paulina Palmer (1993) discusses Winterson's work (*Oranges*, *Sexing* and *Written*) as part of a new development in contemporary lesbian fiction which, from the second half of the 1980s to the beginning of the 1990s, is characterised by the predominance of fantasy and sex in lesbian fiction. In the case of *Oranges*, fantasy plays an important role in the construction of Jeanette's subjectivity. Fairy tales and fables are employed to show Jeanette's inner struggle. She confronts the challenges she has to face in real life by acting out different roles in this fantasy world. In the tale of Sir Perceval, Jeanette is a knight who commences a spiritual quest. The tale of the Sorcerer's Apprentice helps her to re-enact her stormy relationship with her mother. Palmer (1993, p. 101) sees Jeanette as a postmodern character, as she 'constructs for herself a series of shifting, fluid selves by means of the acts of storytelling and fabulation in which she engages'. The complexity of Jeanette's character is illustrated by her particular ability to immerse herself in her fantasy world.

Faderman considers Winterson as transcending lesbian fiction because she measures that author's work according to a restrictive definition of lesbian fiction. What might differentiate *Oranges* as a coming-out novel from its predecessors is the use of fantasy, postmodern narrative techniques, intertextuality, parody and humour, but not its departure from lesbianism. Faderman thus understands the 'transcendence of lesbianism' as a departure from political lesbian fiction, where fiction is submitted to political correctness and activist purposes. I contend that what Winterson manages to transcend is not lesbianism as such, but a particular genre of lesbian fiction – the coming-out novels of the 1970s. This transcendence is precipitated by postmodern narrative techniques driven by or created for the imagining of the queer lesbian.

Queering Winterson's lesbian: The postmodern lesbian

Postmodernism's questioning of identity generated the dispersal of the lesbian. The subversion of identity is connected to topics such as the dismantling of heterosexual binarisms, the questioning of gender roles, gender performance, excessive bodies and sexual fluidity. Queer, according to Duncker (1998), is embedded in postmodern discourse:

Queer undermines fixed, settled, heterosexual discourses. The binary opposition between masculinity and femininity is fluid and stable. It always was. And that is why it has been so carefully policed. The pastiche dress codes of queers signal our engagement with and refusal of heterosexual binary divisions.

Gender is performance. The body becomes ambiguous. [...] Queer is a gender game. [...] Queer is an attitude, a look, a style. Queer calls attention to itself. Queer is cheeky, provocative, subversive. (Duncker, 1998, p. 85)

The same topics that characterise postmodernism define queer. Queer undermines heterosexuality. It plays with gender roles. Queer gains its theoretical strength from the postmodern aim of deconstructing master narratives. Queer is interested in the dismantling of one particular master narrative, that is heteronormativity. In the light of this liaison between queer and postmodernism, the queering of the lesbian leads to the formation of the postmodern lesbian. Many critics, by engaging in postmodern lesbian-feminist interpretations of Winterson's work, articulated the terms 'postmodern', 'lesbian' and 'queer' in relation to and within Winterson's novels.

Paulina Palmer (2005) identifies excess as the connection between the lesbian and the postmodern in the field of lesbian fiction. According to Palmer, the lesbian – and most of all lesbian desire – signifies excess as it overflows the boundaries of phallogentric sexuality. The postmodern narrative is excessive since it does not limit itself to traditional linear grand narratives. Instead, it employs a myriad of storylines and 'depict[s] identity [...] in terms of narrative' (Palmer 2005, p. 189). Another characteristic attributed to the postmodern narrative is its excess of historical and aesthetic categories as it juxtaposes different generic forms. Lesbian and postmodern theory also share a common interest in undermining the centrality of the concept of identity in Western thinking, as lesbian theory assails the heteronormative gender system and postmodernism works towards a fluid understanding of subjectivity that does not confine itself to one role model. It is questionable, however, whether we can regard these similarities between lesbian and postmodernist theories as connection points that show how lesbian theory adopts postmodern theory, or view lesbian theory of the 90s postmodern in itself. In the case of lesbian fiction, it would mean that in the term 'postmodern lesbian fiction', postmodern denotes narrative techniques and lesbian refers to the topic of the fiction. Does the postmodern lesbian signify more than a juxtaposition of these terms? Has postmodernism infiltrated lesbian theory? As Palmer (2005, p. 190) suggests, 'lesbian theory and fiction, rather than merely reflecting the influences of postmodern theoretical and representational trends, have been in the vanguard and contributed to their formation'.

The aforementioned questions addressing the issue of the connection between lesbian and postmodern and the need to elucidate the meaning of the lesbian postmodern influence the formation of the postmodern position of the lesbian-feminist literary critic analysing lesbian fiction. Winterson's postmodernism, according to Palmer (2005), is created by the novels' specific narrative techniques. The literary interpretations in which literary critics (Faderman 1995; Farwell 1995; Griffin 2000) focus on the dispersal of the sign 'lesbian' within the narrative space, have close affinity to a postmodernist approach.

Palmer's analysis focuses on the superimposition of postmodern narrative technique upon the lesbian topic. This kind of analysis does not go beyond the description of how these techniques are used in the novel. In the interpretation of *The passion* and *The powerbook*, Palmer evokes the novels' postmodernist character by referring to their self-reflexive elements and their emphasis on storytelling and intertextual references. She includes the rewriting of past love stories 'in the

light of present day lesbian concerns', 'the subject's multiple identities', 'a gay aesthetic of role-play and artifice' and 'the performative dimensions of gender' (2005, p. 190) among those traits that make these novels postmodern. Amongst all these trademarks, 'a gay aesthetic of role-play and artifice' and 'the performative dimensions of gender' are those elements that are particularly characteristic of queer or postmodern lesbian and gay texts.

Palmer mainly attributes the gay aesthetic of role play and artifice to the novel *The passion*, as one of the main protagonists, Villanelle, has a closeted lesbian relationship with the Queen of Spades. Winterson puns the term 'closet' in the scene when Villanelle asks Henry to rescue her heart from the house of the Queen of Spades. The pun involves taking literally the expression 'she lost her heart to her', as Henry finds Villanelle's heart in the closet of the Queen of Spades, fetches it and reinserts it into Villanelle's chest. Performativity and masquerade are associated with Villanelle's cross-dressing in *The passion*, while in *The powerbook* they are achieved through the 'representation of subjectivity through narrativity' (Palmer 2005, p. 195), as the narrator of the novel, Ali, reinvents herself and Tulip by rewriting different stories such as *Paolo and Francesca* and *Lancelot and Guinevere*, in which Ali and Tulip become the main protagonists. Identity and gender are thus turned into some sort of garment one tries on and wears until one gets bored with it. In conclusion, Palmer (2005, p. 198) asserts that Winterson, in these two novels, 'construct[s] two imaginative lesbian love-stories that transform and subvert the heterosexist connotations of the romance genre'.

Gender performativity and masquerade are regarded as subversive elements as, by pointing out the artificiality of gender roles, they undermine the natural status of the heterosexual matrix. Heterosexual hegemonic discourse, however, can incorporate these subversive elements in its framework, thereby diminishing their undermining effect. It becomes questionable whether the rewriting of heterosexual narratives into lesbian ones is sufficient for a subversion of the heterosexist genre, particularly in cases where the rewriting involves only the insertion of a lesbian in the role otherwise occupied by a man. Such lesbian narratives may simply reproduce the heterosexist economy of the narrative, leaving gender roles intact.

However, Laura Doan (1994, p. 138) finds Winterson's lesbian postmodernism to have a strong political stance, as she

constructs her narrative by exploiting the techniques of postmodern historiographic metafiction (such as intertextuality, parody, pastiche, self-reflexivity, fragmentation, the rewriting of history and frame breaks) as well as its ideology (questioning 'grand narratives', problematizing closure, valorizing instability, suspecting coherence, and so forth) in order to challenge and subvert patriarchal and heterosexist discourses and, ultimately, to facilitate a forceful and positive radical oppositional critique.

What is most visible from this quotation is the abundance of postmodern narrative techniques employed by Winterson. The question is whether postmodern narrative has the subversive power to undermine patriarchal and heterosexist discourses, or whether it merely constitutes a textual play engaged in the continuous deferral of meaning. Even if postmodernism constitutes a tool for the subversion of hegemonic discourses this does not automatically incorporate the subversion of

gender roles. Doan acknowledges Linda Hutcheon's (1989, p. 139) argument about the political ambiguity of postmodernism which makes it difficult for it to be incorporated into a feminist political agenda, arguing that the metafictional writing practices of postmodernism go only as far in the disruption of the patriarchal discourse as 'to pose challenging questions'. However, she still envisages a lesbian postmodern that incorporates 'a politicization of the postmodern cultural domain by collapsing binaries and boundaries, demanding the reconfiguration of gender constructions and deregulating heteronormativity through the genesis of pluralistic sexual identities' (Doan 1994, p. 141), calling this form of representation, which undermines the grand narrative of heterosexual hegemony, the 'reconceptualiz[ation] (of) the sexing of the postmodern'.

Winterson takes the first steps towards 'the sexing of the postmodern' in *Oranges* as she redefines lesbianism as the norm, the natural. The issue, however, with this redistribution of the binary natural/unnatural to homosexuality and heterosexuality is that it fails to articulate postmodern subversivity, because instead of disrupting the binarism, it recreates it. As 'the task, the political agenda if you will' of the lesbian writer 'is to displace and explode the binary' (Doan 1994, p. 147), in *Oranges*, Winterson fails to 'transcend the condition of binarism' (1994, p. 147) since the act of naturalising lesbianism is caught within a binary logic in which homosexuality is regarded as natural and heterosexuality is regarded as unnatural, filthy.

Discussing Winterson's lesbian postmodernism in other two novels, *The passion* and *Sexing*, Doan hails *Sexing* as one of the novels in which 'what is imagined is nothing less than a wholly new genesis of gender' (1994, p. 150). In *The passion* gender blurring is signified by Villanelle's cross-dressing and the attribution of her body with a mark, the webbed foot, that belong to male bodies in Venetian culture. However, cross-dressing is 'only a temporary strategy to facilitate a break from imposed restrictions' (Doan 1994, p. 151). It is only a parody that does not go beyond the surface of social gender construction. *Sexing*, however, becomes the novel in which Winterson, in using the process of grafting⁶ for sexual reproduction, creates a third, hybrid sex that is 'relatively free of binarisms' (Doan 1994, p. 153). Doan attributes great importance to the act of grafting used in the novel, concluding at the end of essay that

Winterson's project, then, encapsulated in the act of grafting the cherry, envisions the contours and logic of the lesbian postmodern that collapses binarisms and creates a space not just for lesbians but for productive, dynamic, fluid gender pluralities and sexual positionings. (Doan 1994, p. 153)

In her analysis of *Oranges* and *The passion*, Doan presents the novels' methods for undermining the heterosexual narrative by situating lesbianism at the centre as the norm, and using cross-dressing and drag to signify gender fluidity. At the same time she reflects on the limitations of these narrative strategies. In the case of *Sexing*, however, she attributes subversive power and political importance to the process of grafting in shattering the heteronormative system.

Many feminist-lesbian critics (Judith Butler, Teresa de Lauretis, Diana Fuss, Judith Roof, Linda Hutcheon) struggled with the idea of dismantling lesbian identity. Their concern was that the fluidity of (lesbian) identity proclaimed by postmodern theory would make the political agenda of feminism/lesbianism based upon identity politics difficult to pursue. Contrary to this (theoretical)

concern – how to combine the subversion of identity with identity politics – postmodern lesbian and queer interpretations of Winterson's novels regard the fluidity of lesbian identity in itself as political. The political stance of Winterson's *Oranges* (Duncker 1998), *The passion, Sexing* (Doan 1994) and *Written* (Lanser 1996) lies in their queering of the lesbian because this entails the dismantling of the heterosexual system and is seen as an attack on the patriarchal system. The topics that make Winterson's novels queer/postmodern lesbian – subversion of lesbian identity, instability of gender, gender performance/drag/cross-dressing, lesbian sexuality and the powerful/excessive female body⁷ – are threats to the patriarchal constitution, as they disrupt heteronormativity. A fluid lesbian identity cannot be contained within its own category and can therefore overflow and penetrate heterosexual identities. Gender performance questions the universality/normality and natural-ness of heterosexual gender roles. The excessive/grotesque female body represents menace and danger for patriarchy and heteronormativity because it disrupts the patriarchal female image, the image through which patriarchy controls femininity. Lesbian sexuality is a danger since it proves that masculinity is dispensable and inessential after all.

The political stance: The common ground of lesbian fiction

The debates within the field of Winterson's lesbian-feminist reception are generated by critics' different approaches to the term 'lesbian fiction'. According to Moore (1995, p. 122), 'Winterson's fiction installs a particular lesbian narrative space at the centre of the novels and their understanding of history, sexuality and identity'. Critics such as Wingfield (1998) and Duncker (1998) contested 'this narrative space' as it lacked the political depth they would have liked to see manifested by lesbian narratives. Many critics, however, discovered in Winterson's fiction the transcending and transformative power of storytelling. This subversion is created by stories that play with and undermine gender constructions by questioning heteronormative structures and patriarchal omnipotence. The common ground that unites those who criticise Winterson's lesbian fiction and those who acclaim her universalisation and queering of lesbianism (her 'lesbian sensitivity') is the issue of political stance. Whether the critics argue for a lesbian fiction that engages in the complexities of lesbian existence or search for a 'lesbian sensitivity' that queers the heterosexual matrix, they regard, I would argue, its subversive power as the most important characteristic of the lesbian text. This political implication reverberates not only in readings, but also in teaching lesbian fiction. As Ann Smith (2000) demonstrates in her article entitled 'Queer pedagogy and social change: Teaching and lesbian identity in South Africa', courses on lesbian fiction based on transformative pedagogical practice empower students and develop their critical thinking, as they comprehend 'how various kinds of texts can be seen to play out, endorse, and/or interrogate, in different ways, their sociopolitical theoretical underpinnings' (2000, p. 265).

As I have argued, the writer's and the protagonist's sexuality, the topic of the novel and the reader's desire to queer her reading, all contribute towards the creation of a lesbian text. Critics debate their importance and contribution. However, the subject of the text's sexual politics lies behind all these different definitions of lesbian fiction. The question is what elements of the text create and put in motion this sexual politics: The politically correct positive images, the illustrations

of the social intricacies of lesbian existence, the queer rewriting of the heterosexual stories, or the playful weaving of fluid sexual identities?

Some novels manage to encompass all or most of these characteristics. The lesbian-feminist and queer approaches to Winterson's first novel, *Oranges*, for example, range from interpretations that acclaimed its construction of the lesbian through the creation of a complex protagonist and readings that regarded it as a queer novel questioning lesbian subjectivity. The reception of *Written* also contained opposing interpretations of the novel: It was either debunked for not being an 'open' lesbian novel (Duncker 1998; Kauer 1998) or hailed as 'a queer novel with a queer plot' (Lanser 1996, p. 255).

Wingfield (1998) has criticised Winterson for no longer writing lesbian literature. The normalisation and universalisation of lesbian relationships in Winterson's novels can impel this kind of criticism. The universalisation of the lesbian novel performed by Winterson and the postmodernist theory in the feminist-lesbian/queer approach could have erased the political power of Winterson's fiction. However, her postmodern-lesbian and queer reception proved otherwise, as many of these interpretations draw attention to the political implications of gender performance and transcendence, and fluid lesbian identity. This political view is also due to the standpoint of those feminist-lesbian critics who hold that giving a political character to their reading is an important feature of their methods of interpretation. Thus, Winterson's fiction is political and is politicised through the readings of feminist-lesbian and queer academics.

Notes

- 1 For a presentation of the changes in the definition and the image of the lesbian from the 19th century to the 1980s see Faderman (1981).
- 2 For a detailed analysis of postmodern romance, see Heidi Hansson's (1998) examination of the use of postmodern narratological devices in the genre of romance.
- 3 These two critics represent a dominant approach to *Written* that focuses on the issue of the narrator's gender. According to Carol Guess (1995, p. 32), however, this question is irrelevant because 'Louise's excessive femininity becomes (literally) the center of the book'.
- 4 In the chapter 'Political fictions', Palmer refers to lesbian-feminist fictions between 1970 and 1980. She focuses on novels such as May Sarton's *A reckoning* (1978) and Joanna Russ' *All that false instruction* (1975).
- 5 Apart from 'realist' novels, feminist science fiction is another genre that formulates a feminist critique of society.
- 6 Grafting, as defined in *Sexing*, is a replication process 'whereby a plant, perhaps tender or uncertain, is fused into a hardier member of its strain, and so the two take advantage of each other and produce a third kind, without seed or parent' (*Sexing*, p. 78). Critics read 'grafting' in a variety of ways. For Doan and Stowers (1995) it is a symbol for a 'new gender'. Lord (2003, p. 153) considers it 'a metaphor for the practice of cross-fertilizing one text with another'. In Smith's (2005, p. 37) interpretation, the 'hybrid cherry of the novel embodies and metaphorizes its historical practice, a process of translating a remote history into the present in a way that illuminates that history's relevance and immediacy'.
- 7 Several critics discuss 'the representation of the grotesque body and its significance in terms of gender

and sexual orientation' (Palmer 2003, p. 81) in Winterson's work: Martin (1999), De Zordo (2000), Russell (2000), Palmer (2003), Haslett (2007). Winterson's bodies are explored from postmodern and modern perspectives. Thomas Fahy (2000, p. 106) regards Winterson's 'fragmented bodies' in *The passion* as representative of postmodern resistance to 'totalizing ideologies and narratives', while Evelyne Ender (1999) reflects on Winterson's modernist body in *Written*.

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