

ROUNDTABLE 4: ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Radical and Regressive: Artificial Intelligence According to Jeanette Winterson—A Reading of *12 Bytes: How We Got Here. Where We Might Go Next* (2021), *The Stone Gods* (2007), and *Frankissstein* (2019)

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Abstract

Arguably, recent and prospective developments within artificial intelligence are a fascination within contemporary technoculture. The dawning of a new era that is characterised by the various impacts of these technological and scientific advances leads to questions about the type of subject that will inherit and inhabit the consequences of these developments. This paper will examine the role that speculative fiction plays as a site of critical engagement in investigating some of the more urgent questions posed by the intersection between humans and technology, such as the social consequences of projected technologies and the possibilities of changing embodiment, and particularly how these issues prove to be of immense importance for the gendered subject. The essays contained within Jeanette Winterson's non-fictional publication *12 Bytes: How We Got Here. Where We Might Go Next* (2021) provide a perceptive insight into both the promises and the pitfalls of AI technology for the future female and embodied experience. Winterson's thought-provoking contemplations will be read alongside her fictional novels, *The Stone Gods* (2007) and *Frankissstein* (2019), to consider how she utilises the genre of speculative fiction to explore existing representations of gender whilst working to define new transhuman subjects. A recurring theme throughout these novels is the way in which AI, despite its liberating and transcendent potential, is imagined as the inevitable perpetuation of female subjugation.

Keywords: artificial intelligence; contemporary women's writing; Jeanette Winterson; literature and science; speculative fiction

Recent developments in the field of artificial intelligence are a fascination within contemporary technoculture, with the prospect of many more developments yet to come. This leads to the dawning of the “new age of AI,” an era that is heavily characterised by artificial intelligence. The impact of the technological and scientific advances that have taken place so far within the era of the “AI boom” is the subject of much debate, raising questions about who (or what) will inherit the potential consequences of these continuing developments. One such question is the impact that artificial intelligence has and will continue to have upon gender, particularly the lived experiences of women both now and in the future.

This is the focus of Jeanette Winterson's *12 Bytes: How We Got Here. Where We Might Go Next* (2021), which sits at the intersection between literature and science. The collection of essays contained within *12 Bytes* is a series of contemplations charting the contradictory nature of women's ever-evolving relationship with technology. The book draws upon Winterson's independent research and her own lived experiences alongside those of others, all woven together through her trademark narrative style that privileges storytelling as an important mode of human communication. In particular, the chapter "How Love, Sex, and Attachment is Likely to Change As We Share Our lives with AI" provides perceptive insights into the implications of recent developments within artificial intelligence for the future of females and of lived bodily experience. This article explores some of the ideas contained within *12 Bytes* alongside examples of Winterson's speculative fiction, namely the novels *The Stone Gods* (2007) and *Frankissstein* (2019). It is apparent that Winterson engages with the genre of speculative fiction as a type of "thought experiment" to play out the social consequences of projected technologies and the possibilities of changing embodiment, especially how these issues prove to be of immense importance for the gendered subject. In doing so, she uses the genre to explore existing representations of gender whilst working to define new transhuman characters. A recurring theme throughout these novels is the way in which AI, despite its liberating potential, is imagined as the inevitable perpetuation of female oppression.

Within the *12 Bytes* essay "My Bear Can Talk," Winterson describes the many types of relationships that humans form with non-human (and even non-biological) beings. "Relationships matter to humans" and Winterson points out that one of the main arguments against building meaningful relationships with AI is that humans are essentially embodied, but she counters that this is a strange basis for such objections given that many of the important elements of modern life are not actually embodied at all.¹ She also notes the capacity of humans to develop bonds with inanimate objects through talk (think of a childhood teddy bear, for example), so questions why these bonds should not be extended towards machines:

Robots will expand our definition of what is alive-ness. And return to us what is a richer understanding of the interplay and interdependence between embodiment and non-embodiment... robots will act as transitional objects for humans as we move towards pure AGI. It may be that humans need transitional objects because our bodies are, in themselves, transitional objects.²

An example of this expanded definition of "alive-ness" is shown in her earlier speculative fiction, *The Stone Gods*. Set in a near-future repeating world, the novel explores what being human means through examining the tenuous boundaries that are used to separate humans from other forms of conscious life, using the figure of the "Robo sapiens" to question notions of identity and what it means to be human. The Robo sapiens are originally presented to the reader as AI robots that simply look and act human: "only machines" who are "nothing but silicon and a circuit board," incapable of feeling emotion because "emotions are not part of their programming."³ However, the very name "Robo sapiens" combines the concepts of robot and human as a hybrid form, and as the novel progresses it becomes clear that the Robo sapiens are evolving beyond their originally defined limits, destabilising the boundaries between human and machine.

¹ Winterson 2021, 164, 175, 176.

² AGI, artificial general intelligence. Winterson 2021, 174, 179.

³ Winterson 2007, 6–7.

This is particularly illustrated through the developing relationship between the novel's narrator, Billie Crusoe, and a Robo sapiens named Spike, which sets up substantial debate throughout the novel in posing difficult questions about the nature of humanity. Billie states, "I forget all the time that she's a robot, but what's a robot? A moving lump of metal. In this case an intelligent, ultra-sensitive moving lump of metal. What's a human? A moving lump of flesh, in most cases not intelligent or remotely sensitive"; Spike asks, "Is human life biology or consciousness? If I were to lop off your arms, your legs, your ears, your nose, put out your eyes, roll up your tongue, would you still be you? You locate yourself in consciousness, and I, too, am a conscious being."⁴ In these debates, the binaries of human/machine, material/informational, and technology/biology all come under scrutiny, and Billie (and, in turn, the reader) is made to reconsider how far these binary systems have shaped her own understanding of what it means to be human. The Robo sapiens Spike, and the debate she provokes surrounding the physical body and consciousness, reworks and expands the idea of the human subject to reveal that, ultimately, there is no definitive human subject—this opens up possibilities for reconfiguring what is interpreted as being an AI entity, as well as being a human. The fact that Spike's identity is shifting rather than a static draws attention to the way in which both human and machine are socially constructed.

Spike's physical form combined with sophisticated artificial intelligence in some ways demonstrates a transcendent potential for AI technology. However, gender is one social construct that the Robo sapiens fails to transcend. Spike refers to gender as "a human concept," implying that the potential for escaping gender lies with nonhuman beings, but Winterson's cutting use of satire clearly exposes the Robo sapiens as a reproduction of gendered stereotypes and a continuation of regressive gendered structures.⁵ Described variously as "incredibly sexy," "beautiful," and "drop-dead gorgeous," Spike has been created to embody conventional ideas of gendered feminine beauty.⁶ When the reader learns that Spike used up three silicon-lined vaginas in providing sexual services to the male astronauts during her space mission, it becomes apparent that she has also been created to conform to oppressive, regressive gender roles:

'Spike, you're a robot, but why are you such a drop-dead gorgeous robot? I mean, is it necessary to be the most sophisticated machine ever built and to look like a movie star?'

She answers simply: 'They thought I would be good for boys on the mission.' [.....]

'But you were also the most advanced member of the crew.'

'I'm still a woman.'⁷

Spike's sexual exploitation is inextricably linked with her gendered status as a woman, which highlights the limitations of technology (or at the very least, those who are in control of it) to reimagine the experience for the gendered subject; therefore, Spike fails to realise the radical potential that AI could have when embodying a utopian post-gender ideal.

⁴ Winterson 2007, 76, 99.

⁵ Winterson 2007, 76.

⁶ Winterson 2007, 6, 18, 33.

⁷ Winterson 2007, 33–4.

The issues presented in Billie's above question lead on to those explored within another of Winterson's essays from the *12 Bytes* collection entitled "Hot for a Bot," where Winterson examines the growing trend for AI-enabled sex robots. In this piece, Winterson points out that sex dolls in themselves are nothing new, but what is new is the way that they are "being marketed as *alternatives*. Alternatives to sex workers. Alternatives to a relationship with a woman. Alternatives to women."⁸ Winterson questions how men who own (as she points out here, note the verb) a sex robot will be affected by their interactions with such a compliant object: "A love doll can't say no... With a sexbot, a man can always be sure of the outcome, because it will be the outcome he wants. That is dangerous"; "For too many men, judging from the data, a compliant man-made female is preferable to a woman with a mind and a body of her own."⁹ Winterson does acknowledge the positive potential of AI-enabled sex robots—a safer sex industry compared to the current risks associated with sex work, a solution to constraints of monogamy and the prevention of otherwise-happy relationships falling apart because of a lack of sex—however, she outlines three main problems that constitute the make-up of the sex doll industry: money, power, and gender roles. She argues that the money and the power remain with men, whilst the gender roles are created and unrealistic.¹⁰ Winterson is a self-confessed enthusiast for AI, but her enthusiasm is lacking in this instance as she arrives at the conclusion that AI-enabled sexbots are "not so much about new technology as it is about backward-looking sexism and gender-stereotyping."¹¹

Returning to Winterson's fiction, this is the pessimistic future that is presented to the reader in another of her speculative novels, *Frankisstein*. The novel takes the form of a dual narrative between Mary Shelley during the time of her creation of the famous story of *Frankenstein* and a day-after-tomorrow-future, where a Dr Ry Shelley is considering how robots will affect our mental and physical health. Ry is attending a global Tec-X-Po on Robotics to interview Ron Lord, the founder of a sex-doll franchise. Ron talks Ry through the ins and outs, quite literally, of the creation of the sexbots from their production through to marketing. Through Ron's narrative voice Winterson provides a powerfully satirical exaggeration of the way in which women's bodies are objectified and commercialised, particularly through his reductive description of how the sexbots are created whereby the female form is separated down to its individual body parts: "Torso comes through first, swinging on the overhead wires... Lovely slim arms. Then the legs. Look at the length! The shape! Slightly longer than they would be if she was human. This is fantasy, not nature, so you can have what you want... Lightweight too. Makes a man feel strong."¹² The novel raises worrying questions surrounding visions of the future as created by figures such as Ron, a world where women are seen as disposable—"We also offer trade-ins and upgrades..."; a world where female companionship is viewed in terms of unrealistic body ideals and consent is taken as given—"all these beautiful girls. Girls who would never get old or ill. Girls who would always be saying *yes* and never saying *no*."¹³ As well as emphasising the importance of youthfulness when it comes to female sexual appeal, Ron's use of the word "girls" as opposed to "women" creates a patronising sense of authority that further adds to the oppression of women. Winterson draws deliberate attention to the difficult questions raised by AI-enhanced

⁸ Winterson 2021, 145.

⁹ Winterson 2021, 149, 157.

¹⁰ Winterson 2021, 152.

¹¹ Winterson 2021, 155.

¹² Winterson 2019, 37.

¹³ Winterson 2019, 38, 237.

robots, particularly regarding implications for female body image and the problem of sexual consent; in turn, this raises issues regarding the nature of human consciousness and where the boundaries of being human lie.

However, a more optimistic view of AI within *Frankisstein* is put forward through the character Professor Victor Stein, who argues that “there are no sides—that binaries belong to our carbon-based past. The future is not biology—it’s AI.”¹⁴ Victor proposes a world whereby the physical limits of our bodies become irrelevant because, using AI, human intelligence (and perhaps even consciousness) will no longer be dependent on a body; this opens up the possibility of overcoming binary gender systems that are rooted in the physical body.¹⁵ During one of his presentations, when asked by an audience member, “Will women be the first casualties of obsolescence in your brave new world?” Victor Stein replies that “AI need not replicate outmoded gender prejudices.”¹⁶ This shows that Victor does not believe that women themselves will become useless or outdated, but rather that the categories of “men” and “women” will no longer be needed as it will be possible to completely transcend the categories of sex and gender: “The world I imagine, the world that AI will make possible, will not be a world of labels—and that includes binaries like male and female, black and white, rich and poor.”¹⁷ Victor believes in the positive potential offered by AI for moving beyond these types of oppressive categories.

Victor’s philosophy demonstrates one more of the key ideas from Winterson’s non-fiction in her *12 Bytes* collection entitled “Fuck the Binary,” where Winterson returns to a theme that runs through much of her work: the importance of narrative and storytelling in shaping human experience. She argues that, ultimately, “Humans are not Nature/Nurture. Humans are narrative.”¹⁸ If this is true, then the overriding narrative of human existence does have the potential to change, and she sees technology and AI as part of that changing story: “AI, at present, is a tool. How we use our tools depends on the dominant narrative. Breaking the binary as the dominant narrative is an urgent business.”¹⁹ This radical potential does, though, come with a stark warning of the accompanying regressive pitfalls: “Unless we can change the fixed ideas in our heads, then tech and AI could easily become the dystopian disaster so many of us fear.”²⁰

The Stone Gods and *Frankisstein* demonstrate speculative fiction’s capacity for providing cautionary tales that display for the reader of the “dystopian disaster” that Winterson warns of, exposing the radical but also potentially regressive consequences of artificial intelligence. These tales complement the critical ideas contained within the *12 Bytes* essays by imagining how these ideas would play out in the future (albeit a fictional one). Through both her non-fiction essays and her speculative novels, Winterson encourages her readers towards a more active consideration of contemporary technoculture and the place of those who inhabit it.

Author contribution. Laura-Jane Devanny is currently a Senior Lecturer with the University of Northampton. She returned to study in 2012 through a fully-funded AHRC award and earned a PhD with De Montfort University (UK) in 2017. Following the completion of her doctoral studies with a thesis titled ‘Speculative Fiction by Twenty-First

¹⁴ Winterson 2019, 72.

¹⁵ Winterson 2019, 73.

¹⁶ Winterson 2019, 74.

¹⁷ Winterson 2019, 79.

¹⁸ Winterson 2021, 193.

¹⁹ Winterson 2021, 198.

²⁰ Winterson 2021, 200.

Century Women Writers', Devanny returned to a previous successful career in international secondary English teaching (Thailand and Bali), before returning to teach in the UK. Devanny's research interest lies within contemporary feminisms and literary representations of the future female, with a particular focus on the female body as the locus of choice. She has previously published on prize culture in science fiction, cloning and reproductive choice, and the figure of the posthuman in Atwood's MaddAddam trilogy. She is currently working on a monograph charting the works of contemporary UK women writers of speculative fiction.

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