

# Holding on to a Lifeline: Desiring Queer Futurities in Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods*

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*This paper seeks to address the question: How do we 'arrive' at queer(er) futures? To begin with, queer rethinkings of futurity need to make a radical break from logics that find their basis in heteronormativity and reproductive futurity. Sara Ahmed's concept of orientations provides a framework within which we might move beyond nostalgic narratives and the reiteration of these normative logics. Developing orientations that are critically queer (enough) will enable one to choose lines of disorientation, to remember differently, and to integrate the past and future differently in relation to the present. I also look at José Esteban Muñoz's suggestion that we put queer 'on the horizon', viewing it as potentiality for a different world. Further, I regard the element of community as an essential element in one's queer knowledge production, as 'queer' cannot exist in isolation. How to shape our bodies, lives, and worlds differently, and develop queer potentialities that might eventually materialize? In Jeanette Winterson's novel *The Stone Gods*, I examine how her characters are orientated, and how they reorientate themselves when obstacles throw them off course. What do they do with these queer moments? Do they invest in them, or do those moments just slip away, unnoticed?*

Key words: Orientations, Queer Potentiality, Queer Futurity, Utopia, Nostalgia

In my assessment, one of the central issues at stake in this project is how to reconcile historicity, and therefore agency, with the (unconscious) desire for change. The most difficult task is how to put the will to change together with the desire for the new that implies the construction of new desiring subjects.

This difficulty is due to the fact that inner, psychic or unconscious structures are very hard to change by sheer volition.

Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects* (Braidotti 1994, 38)

## Introduction

My paper seeks to address this question: How do we 'arrive'

at queer(er) futures? I take the term 'arrival' from Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology*, in which she argues that arrivals are not by chance; rather, there is work that comes before an arrival (Ahmed 2006, 16–17). This work, I argue, concerns narratives; it is about the stories people tell about themselves and others, and about that which surrounds them. This work also concerns the retelling of stories. In Jeanette Winterson's writings, she regularly insists that stories are to be told again. Can we change their

endings? My analysis here which engages Winterson's novel *The Stone Gods* is part of a larger project that explores the ideas of 'home' and queer belonging. Due to the limitations of this paper, I primarily discuss the first part of the novel, although I do incorporate textual analysis from other parts when necessary.

I will begin with a brief introduction to the novel, before moving on to discuss some of the key theoretical concepts and positionings that I will use in this paper. Secondly, I will define my use of 'queer', which follows Judith Halberstam's work, and approach the logics of reproductive time (Halberstam 2005, 4) and reproductive futurism (Edelman 2004, 2), which are key points of departure for my understanding of queer futurity. Third, I will link José Esteban Muñoz's work on queer and utopia with Ahmed's work on orientations, in order to provide the final framework within which I approach *The Stone Gods* and its characters. Utilizing this theoretical framework, I will examine how Winterson's characters are orientated, and how they manage to reorientate themselves when obstacles throw them off course. What do they do with these queer moments? Do they, can they, invest in them? Or do those moments just slip away, unnoticed?

In dealing with Winterson's work, the themes of love and belonging (among others) have been returned to time and again. Alan Sinfield re-

fers to recurring patterns such as these as 'faultline stories'; they are the 'narratives which we revisit compulsively (in literary writing and many other forms)' (Sinfield 2004, 6). In our visiting and revisiting of faultlines, Sinfield suggests that we either then stick to 'old shapes', and end up telling known stories, or we manage to break into 'new shapes' (Sinfield 2004, 6). Winterson herself insists on telling the story again, on new beginnings, on different endings (Winterson 2000, 243). *The Stone Gods*, however, is a story of a repeating world. Do Winterson's characters manage to change shape, to tell us something new in this narrative? Further, apart from this text, how do we visualise queer futurities when nostalgic narratives of 'home' abound?

The novel is written in four parts. In this repeating world, humans seem to make the same mistakes again and again, collectively sealing the fate of their doomed planet(s). Still Winterson insists that stories can be 'written again', and that human beings have the potential to change the outcome in a quantum world where things are 'neither random nor determined' (Winterson 2007, 181, 203). Part One, Planet Blue, begins on the planet Orbus. The narrator, Billie Crusoe, lives in one of the cities of the Central Power, a corporate, capitalist democracy more technologically advanced than the other two governmental systems that inhabit the planet. Orbus is dy-

ing, and the humans' only hope is to relocate to the new planet that they have found. Billie, through a turn of events, ends up leaving her farm-home on Orbus to join the exploratory trip to Planet Blue - during which she and the Robo *sapiens* Spike become lovers. Billie/Billy and Spike/Spickers appear in several different incarnations throughout the novel, and in Part Two, which takes place on Easter Island in the 1770s, they are both gendered male. In Part Three and Part Four, Billie is living in a near-future, post World War 3 scenario.

In my arguments I endeavour, as far as possible, not to set up a 'queer'/'straight' dichotomy, but to use 'queer' together with Ahmed's concepts of 'lines' and 'orientations' in a way that bypasses patterns of binary thinking. For this purpose I find it useful to focus the discussion on the concept of 'orientation' instead of 'subjectivity'. I have decided against using the term 'subjectivity' because it is too totalizing - 'queer subjectivity', for example, implies that one is either a queer subject or is not, that a line can be easily drawn somewhere between 'straight' and 'queer'. I would like to suggest that the terms 'orientations' and 'lines' as employed by Ahmed in *Queer Phenomenology* (Ahmed 2006) are located in the dynamic semantic field of a verb, and as such are potentially less essentialising than a noun which is drawn in relation to the concerns of subjectivity. In this

way 'orientation' leaves more room for ruptures, change, and imagination, in that it allows for multiple lines and trajectories in several directions at a time - some of which may be 'queerer' or 'straighter' than others. For the same reason - i.e. to avoid any essentialised constructions of 'queerness' - I use terms like 'queerer' and queer (enough) in this paper. My view is that any given behaviour, orientation, or element of being can only be termed 'queer' in relation to its given context. Hence, when I say 'queerer', or 'queer (enough)' I mean that something is relatively 'queer' in relation to something that might be more 'normative' in that given context. At the same time, I don't view 'queer elements' or orientations as occurring on a straight line; rather, there may be a range or field of 'queer things' and there is no absolute 'queer value' that can be attached to any of them.

Rosi Braidotti and Donna Haraway both argue that one needs to be situated/located enough in order to say/produce anything of general value (Braidotti 1994, 36; Haraway 1991, 196). Haraway argues that 'the only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular' (Haraway 1991, 196). One does not pursue situated knowledges for their 'own sake', rather, the point is that these types of knowledge unexpectedly produce different connections and openings, perhaps those that would have been impossible to find otherwise (Haraway 1991). Situatedness

promises a certain form of orientation. But what of disorientation, and a lack of situatedness? While Winterson's Billie is in some ways orientated 'queerly', at many other points we get the feeling that she is overly disoriented/lost. While being disoriented or 'lost' (as I will argue later) might be a prerequisite to understanding and becoming 'queer', remaining lost is not a very productive option. Billie more often than not comes across as 'just lost.' As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has demonstrated, it is all too easy to fall into the trap of producing solely paranoid or reactionary forms of knowledge (Kosofsky Sedgwick 2003, 123-124). I argue that this is the only form of knowledge that Billie is able to produce while being 'lost', and it is only when she manages to orientate later in relation to 'something else' that she is able to produce different forms of knowledge. In addition to a relative situatedness, I regard the element of community as an essential element to one's queer production - production of orientations, positionalities, knowledges, etc. Ahmed argues that 'queer' is not something that exists in any one body, but that it is 'dependent on the mutuality of support' (Ahmed 2006, 170). Challenging 'straight' time and space requires a combination of both individual and collective action.

'There are two questions,' Winterson's Billie says, 'where have you come from, and where are you going?' (Winterson 2007, 204). My

work here tries to explore how we might more effectively deal with the 'where have you come from', in a way that then better addresses the question 'where are you going?' Ahmed's concept of orientations provides a framework within which we might move beyond nostalgic narratives and the reiteration of normative logics. Developing orientations that are critically queer (enough) will enable one to choose lines of disorientation, to remember differently, and to integrate the past and future differently in relation to the present (Muñoz 2009, 27). I also look at Muñoz's suggestion that we put queer 'on the horizon', viewing it as a potentiality for a different world (Muñoz 2009, 25). The development of queer-er orientations - doing the work of walking paths less-trodden and imagining alternative futurities - is crucial. How to shape our bodies, lives, and worlds differently, and develop queer potentialities that might eventually materialize?

### **Queer, Futurity, and Nostalgia**

How do queer-er refigurations of the future begin? Where do they come from? To start with, queer rethinkings of futurity need to be radically different in at least these two ways: first, they need to move away from logics of reproductive time, reproductive futurism, and the nuclear family, in order to move in the direction of imagining models of queer kinship. By extension, secondly, they need to reject

assimilationist LGBT politics, called out by Duggan as 'the new homonormativity' - a politics, she argues, that simply serves to reinscribe the very same heteronormative structures and institutions just mentioned, instead of questioning them (Duggan 2004, 50). The rejection of these originary, normative, and limiting logics serves as the underlying structure of my argument and analysis.

Judith Halberstam, in *In A Queer Time and Place*, has defined 'queer' to mean 'nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time' (Halberstam 2005, 6). Halberstam also importantly emphasizes queer subcultural activity and cultural production, which play a large part in the production of these nonnormative logics. My use of 'reproductive time' above refers to the temporal logic described by Halberstam as the 'middle-class logic of reproductive temporality' which 'sustains conventional forms of association, belonging, and identification' (Halberstam 2005, 4). It is a logic that privileges longevity, a logic that privileges the cycle of birth, marriage, reproduction and death (Halberstam 2005, 2, 4).

By comparison, 'reproductive futurism' is a term used by Lee Edelman in *No Future*, where he describes how the figure of the Child structures and determines the framework within which all political discourse necessarily takes place

(Edelman 2004, 2). Speaking from the political context of the United States, Edelman argues that the Child is identified with 'the future of the social order' - the Child is the 'Imaginary fullness' that wants for nothing, it is the 'innocence' that is 'constantly under siege' (Edelman 2004, 21, 25). Further, he argues that reproductive futurism, which fetishizes the figure of the Child, assigns any force or element that threatens to rupture this social order as 'queer'. Queerness, then, represents a structural position; it is 'the force that shatters the fantasy of Imaginary unity' (Edelman 2004, 22). Within the Central Power of Orbus, the Resistance is one element that represents this queer force; it is an anti-government political movement that Billie has cooperated with in the past (Winterson 2007, 59). Edelman goes on to critique the 'future itself as fantasy', and seems to understand futurism as always inscribed in an impossible 'Imaginary past', linked to the construction of a future 'Imaginary wholeness' (Edelman 2004, 28, 10). In the novel this structure is made visible through this fact: 'the official line' is that 'there is no Resistance to the Central Power' (Winterson 2007, 26). The Central Power's insistence on this is necessary to maintain a present and future imaginary wholeness. While I agree with Edelman in his critique of reproductive futurism, I take a different stand on how futurism may be conceived of, a depar-

ture from his insistence that 'the future stop here' (Edelman 2004, 31).

In my view, queer futurities need to *do* things, inform our lives in new ways, and desire different objects and relations. The challenge is: how to create new logics to structure these futures, without repeating known ones that lead us again into unproductive, nostalgic narratives? Edelman's understanding of futurism, in fact, ties up with how I understand and use the term 'nostalgia'. Dictionary definitions of nostalgia tend to describe a longing for places and times of the 'past'. But the question that needs to be asked is: what kind of 'past' does nostalgia actually create? Svetlana Boym points out that nostalgia is in effect, not just about the past, but that it is a reconstruction of the past tied to present needs which can have a 'direct impact on realities of the future' (Boym 2001, xvi). She adds an important element by defining nostalgia as 'a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed' (Boym 2001, xviii). There is no straightforward way to remember the past; one reconstructs the same 'slice' of the past in different ways at different times, and as Boym points out, because of different present needs.

The logics of futurity that Edelman and Boym describe are further visible in the discourse surrounding Planet Blue. Planet Blue is repeatedly portrayed in idyllic terms; it is 'pristine' with 'abundant natural resources', it

is a '*polar-swirled, white-whirled, diamond blue*' world (Winterson 2007, 32, 30). The new planet is an image from the past, said to resemble Orbus sixty-five million years before (Winterson 2007, 30). The protagonist Billie is critical, however, of these representations, saying 'We just stay in line and get there some day. Yeah, we'll get there some day, blue planet, silver stars' (Winterson 2007, 13). In my opinion, nostalgia is risky when it 'remembers' in a way that too easily erases cracks and fissures - in this manner creating a longing for an overly idealized time and/or place. This version of nostalgia involves forgetting memories that cause cognitive dissonance while carrying forward the ones that uphold an unquestioned satisfaction with the past. It can limit rather than expand, if it rejects any excess that does not agree with its story or logic, and rejects alternative logics that may provide different narratives. Paradoxically, while Billie is critical of certain nostalgic narratives that are produced by the Central Power, she invests in her own nostalgic narratives, tied to her particular vision and knowledge of the past. For example, she uses a notebook and pencil, instead of a SpeechPad, in a world where 'nobody reads and writes any more' (Winterson 2007, 8).

For the purposes of this paper, I view nostalgia as a specific form of 'remembering', a remembering that often projects an ideologically re-

constructed form of the past into the present and future. It might be argued that insofar as nostalgia contains the force of longing/desire, it has the potential to be a somewhat productive force. Nostalgic narratives, then, are not necessarily 'unproductive', but insofar as they construct an idealized time and place, and reiterate the originary and normative logics that my argument endeavours to depart from, I do use 'nostalgia' in a somewhat negative sense. In this vein, I do agree with Edelman's argument that queerness has the ability to dismantle the logics on which these sorts of (what I term) 'nostalgic narratives' - futures that have already been foreclosed by reproductive time and futurism - are built (Edelman 2004, 24, 25).

Muñoz's queer problematization of time and space in *Cruising Utopia* is strongly influenced by the ideas of Ernst Bloch. He understands Bloch in *The Principle of Hope* to be critiquing 'straight time', which Muñoz goes on to define as that which 'tells us that there is no future but the here and now of our everyday life' (Muñoz 2009, 22). Muñoz is also very critical of reproductive time and capitalist logics; he comments that the only type of 'futurity' that is promised is that of the 'reproductive majoritarian heterosexuality, the spectacle of the state refurbishing its ranks through overt and subsidized acts of reproduction' (Muñoz 2009, 22). His criticism of this sort of reproductive futurity agrees with

some of Lee Edelman's work,<sup>1</sup> but Muñoz then goes on to position himself very differently by linking 'queer' to 'utopia'. He refigures 'queer' in essence to mean something that hasn't yet arrived, suggesting that this way of thinking queer enables 'greater conceptual and theoretical leverage' (Muñoz 2009, 22). For Muñoz, queer is a utopian impulse that can often be seen in everyday moments, in 'utopian bonds, affiliations, designs, and gestures' (Muñoz 2009, 22). He argues that:

Queerness is utopian, and there is something queer about the utopian (...) Indeed, to live inside straight time and ask for, desire, and imagine another time and place is to represent and perform a desire that is both utopian and queer (Muñoz 2009, 26).

Muñoz posits the utopian impulse as excess, as the 'extra to the everyday transaction of heteronormative capitalism' (Muñoz 2009, 22). This 'extra' might be thought of as that which is articulated outside of normative structures, logics, or representations. The 'extra', in fact, is crucial; it provides potential points of departure from these normative imperatives, and a starting point then from which alternative representations and lives that reject logics of the 'majoritarian public sphere' (Muñoz 2009, 56) might be created.

Queerness for Muñoz is ultimately about an insistence on potentiality - 'a certain mode of nonbeing that is

eminent, a thing that is present but not actually existing in the present tense' (Muñoz 2009, 1, 9). To this end, queerness needs to be seen 'as horizon', perceived as 'a modality of ecstatic time' that interrupts straight time's linear progression, encouraging 'a greater openness to the world' (Muñoz 2009, 25, 32). He argues that it is the possibility of and desire for a different world, and a complex relation to the present, which informs and drives 'queer' (Muñoz 2009, 1, 27).

### **To Arrive Somewhere Else**

I turn to Ahmed's work on orientations now; first, to provide a way of understanding how the 'majoritarian' and 'normative' social structures that Halberstam and Muñoz speak of function, and second, towards ways of developing less conventional, queer-er orientations. Ahmed explores how bodies gain orientation by the ways in which they occupy time and space (Ahmed 2006, 5). Inhabitation is a key point of her discussion, as being orientated, she argues, is really about how intimate bodies are able to be with the spaces that they inhabit, and how well they are able to extend into any given space (Ahmed 2006, 8). It is a certain 'familiarity' with the world that allows one to be orientated, but also, importantly, to 'feel at home' (Ahmed 2006, 7).

Ahmed argues that orientations shape the way in which we inhabit space, but importantly, also shape

how 'we apprehend this world of shared inhabitation, as well as 'who' or 'what' we direct our energy and attention towards' (Ahmed 2006, 3). One's orientation determines 'who' and 'what' is within reach, and in turn 'who' or 'what' is then close enough to have an effect on oneself - in a way that might then alter one's (future) orientation (Ahmed 2006, 7-8). Our orientations form and inform our worlds, directing what we see and do not see, or what we turn toward and turn away from. She suggests that a queer phenomenology might begin 'by redirecting our attention toward different objects, those that are 'less proximate' or even those that deviate or are deviant' (Ahmed 2006, 3).

Ahmed also points out that the ability to be orientated, first and foremost, depends upon taking certain perspectives and 'points of view as given' (Ahmed 2006, 14). These 'givens', which tend to disappear from sight and be forgotten, become the basis for the construction of collective (and individual) direction. If not for that which is given/unquestioned/forgotten, upholding any particular orientation is impossible. If every orientation requires that some things be taken as given, this suggests that one should pay closest attention to the different 'givens' of various ways to be orientated. Billie doesn't 'remember', for instance, the downsides to aging 'naturally' - a viewpoint which is revealed in her startling encoun-



ter with an old woman. For political reasons, Billie had (illegally) chosen not to be genetically 'fixed' - in this way running the risk of aging 'naturally'. But when she encounters the first aged person she has ever seen, she is not able to look at her. The old woman tells her point-blank: 'I am what you will become.' Billie describes her as looking like 'a thing with skin like a lizard's, like a stand-up handbag (...) Her arm was bones and stretched flesh - brown, thin skin pulled over bluish, visible tendons. I looked away' (Winterson 2007, 37-38).

At the same time, Ahmed argues that one's orientation, along with one's (past) choices determine the future choices that become available (Ahmed 2006, 14-15). Because moving in certain directions inevitably excludes certain options for us:

The lines that allow us to find our way, those that are 'in front' of us, also make certain things, and not others, available. When we follow specific lines, some things become reachable and others remain or even become out of reach. Such exclusions - the constitution of a field of unreachable objects - are the indirect consequences of following lines that are before us: we do not have to consciously exclude those things that are not 'on line'. The direction we take excludes things for us, before we even get there (Ahmed 2006, 14-15).

Ahmed then goes on to discuss how spaces are orientated, and in

this way how they become more conducive to some bodies than others. The orientation of space, for Ahmed, is always a reciprocal/two-way mutual constitution; bodies 'are shaped by their dwellings and take shape by dwelling' (Ahmed 2006, 9). Bodies also 'direct' spaces through their inhabitation of them, and 'acquire direction' through this inhabitation (Ahmed 2006, 9, 12). For example, think of the many objects and spaces in this world that are designed for right-handed people. All the right-handed people in the world - who, needless to be said, form the majority - have 'directed' these spaces and objects in this way. We can speak, Ahmed says, of 'collective direction', for example the ways in which nations or other 'imagined communities' (Anderson 2006, 6-7) move in a certain direction, or face the same way:

Becoming a member of such a community, then, might also mean following this direction, which could be described as the political requirement that we turn some ways and not others. We follow the line that is followed by others: the repetition of the act of following makes the line disappear from view as the point from which 'we' emerge (Ahmed 2006, 15).

Speaking of communities and collective direction also implies that there are certain directions and lines that are followed more than others. In effect, being orientated

entails being 'in line':

The lines we follow might also function as forms of 'alignment,' or as ways of being in line with others. We might say that we are orientated when we are in line. We are 'in line' when we face the direction that is already faced by others. Being 'in line' allows bodies to extend into spaces that, as it were, have already taken their shape (Ahmed 2006, 14–15).

The experience of dis-orientation then, is the experience of being 'out of line'. When the body does not line up with the direction of the space that it is in, or when the body does not line up sufficiently well with other bodies, it is then that the body experiences disorientation (I will discuss this point further in a moment).

Recall the contingency inherent in the way that spaces and bodies shape, and take shape, through inhabitation. Ahmed references Butler's discussion on performativity in order to elaborate on the relationship between how lines emerge, and how they are followed. She says that when we talk of the 'path well trodden', for example, the paradox is that lines are both 'created by being followed and are followed by being created' (Ahmed 2006, 16). It is only through following and treading, through a repetition of lines, that the lines themselves are reproduced. She argues that the lines that produce 'collective direction' depend on the 'repetition of norms and conven-

tions, of routes and paths taken, but they are also created as an effect of this repetition' (Ahmed 2006, 16).

This leads us into an important point of Ahmed's, which is crucial for my argument: to term lines 'performative' means that we make a way and direction only 'as an effect of work, which is often hidden from view' (Ahmed 2006, 16). Arriving at a certain place involves the previous work of following particular directions and lines; arrivals do not happen 'by magic' (Ahmed 2006, 16). To 'arrive' at alternative futures, then, we need to do work in the present that entails the work of following non-normative lines - of shaping our bodies such that different potentialities are created. To arrive differently first entails imagining differently, imagining different arrivals. With queer on the horizon, we can then engage in a "doing" that is a becoming' (Muñoz 2009, 26).

### **Intentionally Queer, 'Lost' Investments**

Although my discussion is largely concerned here with how to move in the direction of orientating more 'queerly' in order to create different potentialities, Ahmed reminds us that the question is not so much what constitutes a 'queer orientation'. It would be naïve to suppose that there is one 'queer line' that we could follow (Ahmed 2006, 171, 179). The more crucial question, she argues, is 'asking what our orientation toward queer moments of devi-

ation should be' (Ahmed 2006, 179). We might think of 'queer moments' as the 'extra', the 'utopian impulse', moments of disorientation, 'the point at which things fleet' (Ahmed 2006, 172). 'Queer', then, might open up from those points, from those moments that are inhabited, invested in, instead of being allowed to 'slip away' (Ahmed 2006, 172, 179). Queer-er orientations, ones that allow these queer moments to open up new directions and possibilities, will result in the following and creation of different lines, paths less well-trodden. This in turn will create potentialities, make available new objects and lines that might previously have been excluded or out of reach (of course, it is also possible that certain 'queer lines' might become relatively well-trodden, to the extent that the line in question might become less 'queer' - perhaps as it becomes more normatively compelling in its directionality, and harder to deviate from.)

In line with the discussion thus far, it seems to be the case that the work of sustaining relatively queer orientations requires a degree of intentionality and critical awareness. This work involves an awareness of what it means to be 'in line' and 'out of line' - which basically is an awareness of the normative logics that tend to dictate 'activity in space and time' (Halberstam 2005, 6). The intentionally queer body is more aware of how bodies get directed (Ahmed 2006, 15); necessary if one

is to create and forge alternative directions that break with dominant logics/narratives/lines. Bodies that invest in queer-er ways of being oriented in the world, that make a point of 'not following', are in effect investing in different potentialities *by accepting* the experience of 'disorientation' or 'lostness' (Ahmed 2006, 177–179). Muñoz in fact argues that queerness involves 'the intention to be lost'; Queerness is illegible to the logic of heteronormativity, the logic of straight time and space (Muñoz 2009, 73):

To accept loss is to accept the way in which one's queerness will always render one lost to a world of heterosexual imperatives, codes, and laws. To accept loss is to accept queerness - or more accurately, to accept the loss of heteronormativity, authorization, and entitlement. To be lost is not to hide in a closet or to perform a simple (ontological) disappearing act; it is to veer away from heterosexuality's path (Muñoz 2009, 73).

Committing to a 'queer politics', Ahmed argues, is committing to a certain way of inhabitation, a certain way of being (dis)orientated in the world - even if one cannot afford 'a life of deviation' (Ahmed 2006, 176–177). Disorientation comes about as an effect of 'doing' and living queer politics (Ahmed 2006, 177).

While accepting lostness/disorientation in relation to the space of

heteronormativity is crucial toward being able to invest more queerly, queerness cannot exist as 'just lost'. It is necessary for queer lives to orientate in relation to something (else) - not just in opposition or reaction to heteronormative logics - and to be situated or located enough such that one might produce knowledge that is of relative value (Haraway 1991, 196). I believe that Muñoz's view of queer as horizon, in combination here with Ahmed's work on orientation, point us in the direction of being able to conceive of what this 'something else' might be, as their ideas, even as they begin with a move away from heteronormative imperatives, open up multiple potentialities and the possibility of multiple ways/lines/trajectories to explore and move into. Ahmed's work also, importantly, reminds us that there is work that must be done, in order to be able to imagine and orientate ourselves differently.

In addition to keeping in mind the 'something else' that queer orientations might relate to, I strongly agree with Ahmed's argument that in order for 'queer' to be productive, it needs to exist in community. She argues that 'queer' depends on mutual support; it is not a phenomenon that resides 'in a body' (Ahmed 2006, 170).

When we tread on paths that are less trodden, which we are not sure are paths at all (is it a path, or is the grass just a little bent?), *we might need even more support.* (...) In refocusing our attention on prox-

imity, on arms that are crossed with other arms, we are reminded of how queer engenders moments of contact; how we come into contact with other bodies to support the action of following paths that have not been cleared (Ahmed 2006, 170).

In my analysis of the novel below, I argue how Billie's lack of community and support is a major element that halts her movement toward being more productively 'queer'. It does not do to walk a path alone, what's more an overtly nostalgic one. For queer potentiality to materialize, to re-imagine, to be creative in its representations, we need to build community networks that will sufficiently situate us, that will provide support and inspiration in the continual work of facing different directions, walking different lines, and imagining different futures.

### **Refusing the Imprint**

In the earlier sections of Part One, Billie demonstrates an overtly nostalgic disposition, one that is enmeshed largely in paranoid and reactionary forms of knowledge. She yearns for a time long gone, for a time when people still lived on real farms, read books, and wrote with pens and pencils (Winterson 2007, 8, 11). In the following sections I will look at how some of the ways in which she is orientated might still be termed somewhat 'queer'. She demonstrates some queer potentiality, which does actually result in her life moving in a completely un-

expected direction. However, her somewhat queer orientation, though it has direct impact on her life, does not appear to have much of a wider impact - it does not produce any 'queer knowledge' that is of more general value. I argue that this failure to more effectively realize her queer potentiality is due to her isolation and lack of community. It is only at certain points in the latter half of Part One, when Billie/y manages to orientate herself in closer relation to at least one other figure (the lover) that she is able to begin to produce different forms of knowledge.

I argue that that Billie's life and body on Orbus are organized according to some 'non-normative logics'. She very much rejects the 'majoritarian public sphere' of the Central Power (Muñoz 2009, 56), and frequently experiences moments of disorientation within it. Billie is overtly critical of the system, and voices disagreement with many of its given, unquestioned logics, while the characters Pink McMurphy and Manfred often serve as the voices of the more 'normative' Central Power citizens. Take, for example, the following exchange between Manfred and Billie (in which he is telling her that she either leaves Orbus or gets arrested):

'I believe in the system. You don't.'

'No, I don't. It's repressive, corrosive, and anti-democratic.'

'Then you'll be very happy on

Planet Blue. There is no system.'  
(Winterson 2007, 45)

In another instance, while engaged in a discussion of the bombing of MORE-*Futures* - the branch of MORE that enabled and introduced the practice of genetic fixing - Billie tries to draw attention to the fact that their 'democracy' is largely owned by the MORE corporation. Pink, in response, simply says, 'Can't see why you want to blow a place up for making a woman look good on a date' (Winterson 2007, 59). This particular quote from Pink also demonstrates her unquestioning acceptance of genetic science's progress - specifically of the process known as 'Fixing'. 'Science can't fix everything, though,' Billie points out (Winterson 2007, 9). No women Fix older than thirty, but men on the other hand are sometimes confident enough to Fix late-forties, Manfred being one example. In other words, 'women feel they have to look youthful, men less so, and the lifestyle programmes are full of the appeal of the older man' (Winterson 2007, 9). People no longer celebrate birthdays, instead they throw G parties that celebrate the date that they get fixed genetically (Winterson 2007, 15).

Billie, however, looks to the past and questions how 'normal' the practice of fixing is, arguing that it makes people 'fucked up and miserable.' Pink's replies by saying, 'It is normal...What was so normal about

getting old?' (Winterson 2007, 58). Her response, though at first glance a 'normative' one that is unquestioning of the current system, in actuality manages to also question what was 'normal' even 'back then' - something which Billie actually fails to do. Nevertheless, Billie questions a dominant logic of the Central Power in her present time, and in relation to this logic, Billie is a non-normative body within the system. She has illegally chosen to not be Fixed, and has had her data-chip reprocessed to hide this fact (Winterson 2007, 44). Billie's choice necessarily re-routes her life in a way that rejects the dominant temporal life narrative of the Central Power's society.

In another exchange with Manfred, where he blames the Caliphate and the Pact<sup>2</sup> for 'destabilizing the planet', Billie argues an alternative interpretation of the 'facts', reminding Manfred of the part that the Central Power had to play in global warming and the like. 'We made ourselves rich polluting the rest of the world, and now the rest of the world is polluting us' (Winterson 2007, 31). Overall, Billie's orientation - unconventional by the Central Power's standards - demonstrates a relatively critical perspective. Although she often falls into the trap of nostalgia, of romanticizing a past that she does not really know, she still manages to highlight different interpretations of the past and present.

This relatively queer potential,

however, stands in contrast to the other ways in which she is orientated in a particularly nostalgic and solitary manner. Billie seems to lead a fairly isolated life - her home is a farm, the last remaining one of its kind, a space that she inhabits with her dog. The only hint that we are given of any sort of 'community' that Billie is/was involved in, is her involvement with the Resistance - the group that she assisted in the bombing of MORE-Futures (Winterson 2007, 59). Billie's present orientation on Orbus, in which she seems to invest primarily in her farm-home-space while rejecting many elements of 'normal' life in the Central Power, demonstrates a problematic sort of isolation and lack of reflexivity. She exists in a sort of vacuum, resisting the imperative that Spike, the Robo *sapiens*, puts forth: 'The universe is an imprint. You are part of the imprint - it imprints you, you imprint it. You cannot separate yourself from the imprint, and you can never forget it. It isn't a 'something', it is you' (Winterson 2007, 87).

By comparison, the character Pink McMurphy is worth paying attention to. As an inhabitant of the Central Power who is quite 'normatively' orientated, she deals very well when confronted later with the crisis situation on Planet Blue. Billie thinks to herself, 'Who could have said that Pink would cope and Billie would not?' (Winterson 2007, 79). This example suggests that Pink had sufficient resources behind her to cope

when 'knocked off course' (Ahmed 2006, 19), more than queerly-oriented-but-isolated Billie. 'We'll make it,' Pink says confidently, even finding time to speculate about the possibility of an 'arctic romance' with Handsome (Winterson 2007, 79). Pink's use of 'we', and hint toward romance, demonstrates that it is her investment in community, mutual support, and interaction, which allows her to hope. This gathering of resources allows her to continue moving forward (into the unknown, the path not-yet trodden) despite the difficult circumstances.

While Billie's isolation here is problematic, the progression of the narrative illustrates how the following of certain lines still opens up different potentialities. If we think about Ahmed's points regarding the directionalities of bodies and spaces, and the way in which they are mutually constitutive, it is possible to view Billie's choices as having directed her body in a certain way. Her refusal to be completely 'imprinted' by the Central Power's norms and directionalities - through her resistance of genetic fixing, and investment in the inhabitation of a nostalgic-nonnormative space - has a direct impact on the lines and objects that become available and within her reach.

### **Holding on to a Lifeline**

Ahmed's discussion of lifelines is conducive to a brief analysis of an example from *The Stone Gods*, one

that reveals how one's orientation and past lines can limit, or potentially open up, the choices that are actually available to oneself. Ahmed argues how some bodies can be pressured to reproduce certain kinds of lifelines that follow narratives of familial inheritance and reproduction. She then goes on to say:

How ironic that 'a lifeline' can also be an expression for something that saves us. A lifeline thrown to us is what gives us the capacity to get out of an impossible world or an unlivable life (...) And yet, we don't know what happens when we reach such a line and let ourselves live by holding on. If we are pulled out, we don't know where the force of the pull might take us. We don't know what it means to follow the gift of the unexpected line that gives us a chance for a new direction and even a chance to live again (Ahmed 2006, 17-18).

Ahmed also speaks of lifelines as becoming possible through 'accidental or chance encounters' that happen, that might 'redirect us and open up new worlds' (Ahmed 2006, 19). When one is 'knocked off course', what happens next depends on oneself, on the resources that we have available to draw upon (Ahmed 2006, 19).

The second half of Part One takes place in outer space, and then on Planet Blue. Billie, whose relatively queer orientation has resulted

in her stepping out of line within the Central Power's system, is faced with the choice of being arrested and losing her farm, or being sent to Planet Blue and losing her farm anyway. Billie chooses to go. The chance to go to Planet Blue was a lifeline for Billie, one that she chose to hold on to. While her chosen lines thus far had been limiting in some ways and perhaps questionable in the (lack of) directionality of her motivations, they still brought her to this point where a specific lifeline opened up. At one point, after leaving Orbus, Billie says, 'One word, and a million million worlds close. One word, and for a while there's a planet in front of me, and I can live there' (Winterson 2007, 69).

Compare, for example, how Winterson's different individuals approach such chance encounters. Billie, as we have seen, grabs on to the lifeline and lets new possibilities open up. Manfred however, responds very differently when presented with a different sort of crisis. Orbus is dying, and factually speaking, the humans' only chance is to relocate to Planet Blue, quickly. Spike points out that human beings will have to 'make the best of [their] mistakes' on Orbus, and 'begin again...differently' (Winterson 2007, 32). Starting anew on Planet Blue is the human race's 'second chance', a lifeline. Manfred, however, says:

We need infrastructure, buildings, services. If I'm going to live on a different planet I want to do it properly.

I want shops and hospitals. I'm not a pioneer. I like city life, like everyone likes city life. The Central Power believes that the biggest obstacle to migration will be setting up the infrastructure in time. We can't go back to the Bog Ages (Winterson 2007, 32).

Lifelines can only save us if we choose to grab a hold of them and let ourselves be led into the unknown. Manfred seems unable to (theoretically) grab a hold of this lifeline that is Planet Blue. We could argue that his more normatively orientated body is really unable to do so—the choices that he has made thus far do not allow him to say 'yes' to this, to step into the unknown. This line, this possibility, is 'out of reach' for Manfred. He made 'investments' and shaped his body in such a way that this option - 'going back to the Bog Ages' - is a non-option, is simply impossible for him (Ahmed 2006, 17–19). Billie's queerly orientated body, on the other hand, and her previous investments, put her in a position where the lifeline was within reach.

### **Set Adrift**

Overall, lostness/disorientation is a significant theme in the novel. In this excerpt below we get a sense of Billie's disorientation:

Strange to dream in the right shape and build in the wrong shape, but maybe that is what we do every day, never believing that a dream could tell the truth.



Sometimes, at the moment of waking, I get a sense for a second that I have found a way forward. Then I stand up, losing all direction, relying on someone else's instruments to tell me where I am. If I could make a compass out of a dream. If I could trust my own night-sight... (Winterson 2007, 62)

Her thoughts suggest that she does not have sufficient resources 'behind' her, to support the path forward. It is arguable that this is due to her relative isolation and lack of community. While it might be worth noting that at this point in the narrative Billie is actually in the process of re-orienting herself somewhat differently in relation to Spike, I would argue that this bit of narration is a reflection of Billie's general orientation in Part One. Billie's inability here to believe enough, to trust her own vision(s), points again to that which is missing—she is a loner who has not gathered sufficient resources around her to support, or to ascertain the validity of her dreams. Despite her ability to hold onto the lifeline which takes her in a new direction - which was a result of her relatively queer orientation - the lack of community support and interaction meant that Billie's potentiality never managed to move beyond a non-normative, nostalgic disposition. She was never really able to imagine anything beyond her nostalgic home-space on Orbus. In her relative isolation, she was unable to

imagine a more productive queer futurity.

We see this lostness/disorientation surfacing again in Part Two where Billy says, 'Here I am, little Billy, and nothing round me but the sea.' Billy of Part Two is a crew member of Captain Cook's voyage to Easter Island in the 1770s. When he gets stranded on the island, he attempts to drown himself, only to be rescued by the character named 'Spickers'. Billy, like Billie of Part One, demonstrates the ability to hold on to the lifeline that is held out to him. He comes to accept the situation, and again, like Billie, he reorients in relation to the figure of the lover, who in this case is Spickers. The key point in Billie and Billy's stories is that they both manage to reorientate themselves in relation to 'something else' when faced with a difficult choice. In a queer moment where the 'extra' presented itself as an option, they reached out for it, and moved forward in a new direction, at the same time producing new knowledge and perspectives - rather than letting themselves be held back. In both cases too, the key perspective/viewpoint that changed was the way in which they thought of home and belonging. Their reorientations happened in relation to the (new) figure of the lover. If Billie (Part One) had managed to orientate herself earlier on in relation to a community (and not just toward a single person/*Robo sapiens*), perhaps she would have been able to

realize her queer potentiality more productively on Orbus.

Perhaps Billie's lostness/disorientation is most extreme in Part Three and Part Four. In these two sections of the novel, the character is primarily orientated by a single, profound, experience of loss:

The line that is the first line of this story – *I was born*. The line that had nothing to read between it – being only one, one only, my lifeline (Winterson 2007, 120).

The 'lifeline' that Billie speaks of here carries an entirely different meaning from 'lifeline' as the term from Ahmed. Here, rather than opening up a new direction, this line seems to be the one and only thing that Billie holds on to. Given up for adoption by her mother after a month, Billie spends her whole life unable to 'break the shape' of this loss (Winterson 2007, 127). Throughout Part Three, Billie demonstrates her inability to let go of her attachment to her lost mother - whom she places in a completely idealized, imagined narrative. She is never able to do something different with the queer moment of loss; instead it paralyzes her, binding her to an "echo" of a life:

You never stop looking. That's what I found, though it took me years to know that's what I've been doing. The person whose body I was, whose body was me, vanished after twenty-eight days. I live in an echo of another life (Winterson

2007, 124).

In Part Four Billie is presented with at least one opportunity to 'break the shape', to reach out to touch and orientate herself differently. She doesn't, however, manage to change direction:

He looked at me. I nearly touched him. There are so many things that we nearly do and they don't matter at all, and then there are the things that we nearly do that would change everything.

He looked at me. He turned to clear the plates (Winterson 2007, 167).

Ultimately, in the novel, the only points where Billie/y manages to 'arrive' differently, to create new forms of knowledge, is when s/he manages to detach from what has been lost, and walk a different path that opened up in a queer moment. The figure of the lover, in both Part One and Part Two, provides a new beginning, a new way to orientate. In Part Three and Part Four, however, when Billie is unable to detach from the loss of her mother, when her only orientation draws a line from the past to explain her present, she remains bound to a singular narrative of origins that renders her unable to invest in any 'queer moment'.

Throughout the novel, Billie shows minimal attachment to forms of community, if any, and is only ever shown to be orientated strongly in relation to one other person (plus

her dog, in Part One). The novel, in my reading, actually ‘regresses’, as Billie of Part Three and Part Four is orientated in an overtly nostalgic way - this orientation does not really develop or change, and the ending of the novel in fact reiterates some conservative logics that my argument insists against. However, we do see some potential in secondary character representations like Pink McMurphy, who showed how an investment in community enabled her to persist along a difficult path. Part Four of the novel also actually introduces some of the queer potentiality and orientations found in the space called ‘Wreck City’—the alternative communities found there include a few ‘dinosaur-friendly lesbian vegans’ and six nuns (Winterson 2007, 174–175). These subcultural communities, in contrast to Winterson’s main character, seem to have rather successfully invested in various different forms of belonging, and in queer spaces and temporalities.

### **Conclusion: Remembering That Which Fleets**

In this paper I have argued that developing queer-er ways to be orientated is essential towards producing queer potentiality, which leads to the ability to realize alternative ‘arrivals’. Further, community is a necessary element in one’s ‘queer production’; without sufficient support, it might be difficult if not impossible to realize the potentiality that might be present. Being orientated in a

‘queer’ way also entails maintaining a critical perspective on the past, remembering that which takes place before in order for something to ‘arrive’, and interrogating structures that tend to dictate that which is remembered and forgotten (Ahmed 2006, 37–42). Developing queer-er orientations that are sustained in community is a way to break with (1) normative logics that find their basis in heteronormativity, reproduction and the nuclear family, and (2) with solely paranoid/reactionary forms of knowledge (Sedgwick 2003, 123–124). Putting queer on the horizon provides us too with another way of thinking about a complex past-present-future relation; further, the imagining and desiring of a different future helps us orient in new ways towards queer moments or utopian impulses in the present.

We might orientate towards the desire, in fact, for something different. Elspeth Probyn argues that it is desire that moves bodies, that propels them into ‘forms of living with ourselves and with others’ (Probyn 1996, 23). Desire, in fact, is where we ‘start from and what we go with’ (Probyn 1996, 62); it is a point from which we might also begin again. Desiring a different future pulls the utopian into the present, directs us towards new paths that might lead to new forms of becoming and belonging. It is the desire for something else, that which is not on our current path, that renders us more likely, and more able, to choose different

ones. Probyn too, reminds us that bodies need to 'engage with others'; this is the only way that queer, and queer forms of desire, become relevant and productive (Probyn 1996, 49).

Winterson, throughout *The Stone Gods*, constructs human beings as agents with free will. Spike tells us that free will is the human capacity to 'affect the outcome' in a quantum universe where things are 'neither random nor determined' (Winterson 2007, 181). It is a universe of potentialities, and 'true stories,' Winterson tells us, 'are the ones that lie open at the border, allowing a crossing, a further frontier' (Winterson 2007, 87, 181). To get to the point where the border lies open, however, to the point where one is able to reach certain potentialities and choose to make them reality - one first has to choose lines that lead to that border, to that space of possibility. A critical awareness, an intentional disorientation, and intentional queer orientations are needed in order to realize alternative lifelines, alternative stories of space and time, different ways of being in the world, and different ways to orient oneself. The refusal to be mass-collectively-orientated keeps different objects and options within reach, and ensures that the point of how bodies get directed and pressured into certain lines more than others remains in sight (Ahmed 2006, 17).

Ahmed argues that 'queer' does not reside in any individual body

(Ahmed 2006, 170). Similarly, 'queer' collectives do not and should not reside in isolation from heteronormative worlds. Complete coherence and agreement is not the goal of collectivity; Haraway reminds us that 'the joining of partial views and halting voices into a collective subject position', and working within our 'limits and contradictions' can promise a relative situatedness - and 'views from somewhere' (Haraway 1991, 196). Our 'somewheres' should arise out of positions and orientations that are engaged and accountable (Haraway 1991, 196).

What, ultimately, should be the goal of thinking and rethinking queer futurities? What do we want to create? Ahmed argues that permanence is not the goal, and instead points us in the direction of ephemerality:

It is given that the straight world is already in place and that queer moments, where things come out of line, are fleeting. Our response need not be to search for permanence, as Berlant and Warner show us in their work, but to listen to the sounds of 'the what' that fleets (Ahmed 2006, 106).

While the work of orientating differently toward the utopian impulse might be aimed at producing queer spatialities and temporalities that stick around for a tad longer, perhaps we should always remember to pay attention to that which 'fleets' - and to remain criti-

cally aware of the 'givens' in our own orientations. In this way we might collectively cultivate queerer pasts, presents, and futures - and also move in the direction of imagining new models of queer belonging.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See Muñoz's consideration of Edelman's work on page 22, and his relationality/anti-relationality discussion on pages 10-12 (Muñoz 2009, 22, 10-12)

<sup>2</sup> The Caliphate and the Pact are the 'other' two governmental systems that share Orbus; they are also referred to as 'the Believers' and 'the Collective' (Winterson 2007, 7). I read these names as thinly-veiled references to Islam and most likely, Communism. Winterson's division of this world into these three political systems seems to be a sort of projection of our current situation into the future, and in this way is an extremely simplified and problematic point in itself. However I regret not being able to discuss this further as this point lies beyond the scope of my paper.

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