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**AN AGENTIAL REALIST APPROACH TO POSTHUMANIST RELATIONAL  
SUBJECTIVITY IN JEANETTE WINTERSON'S *THE STONE GODS***

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**Abstract:** This paper examines, through the lenses of agential realism, the uncanny sense of posthumanist relational subjectivity that Winterson's utopia evokes through the twofold romantic encounter between female scientist Billie Crusoe and humanized she-robot Spike. This same-sex cross-species futuristic love affair that develops across two different space-times succeeds in blurring the boundaries between humans and machines, thus prompting readers to overcome their anthropocentric worldview and to abandon the deep yet narrow concern for the moral and cognitive implications of the humans' fate at the end of the de-centring process brought about by the posthuman turn, urging them to consider, instead, more significant and wider issues such as accountability and responsibility. Thus, it can be viewed as a fictional narrative embodiment of Karen Barad's theoretical reconfiguration of materiality as discursive and of performativity as a dynamic process of constraining iterative intra-actions rather than of determining interactions.

**Keywords:** agential realism, performativity, non-anthropocentric standpoints, posthumanist relational subjectivity

Considerable scholarly discussion in fields such as philosophy, sociology, political ecology and anthropology has been given to the idea that a radical re-examination of the

relationships between bodies' materiality and discursive practices is bound to usher in an onto-epistemological turn that favours the modern relational approach relying on notions such as networks and assemblages, rather than the traditional dialectical divide between matter and meaning. Building on the works of prominent representatives of feminist theory such as Judith Butler and Donna Haraway, and on the influential theories of Michel Foucault, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Niels Bohr and Richard Feynman, in her 2007 study entitled "Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning," Karen Barad articulates an inherently relational conceptualization of matter and discourse, and her agential realist "elaboration of performativity" views matter as "an active participant in the world's becoming, in its ongoing intra-activity" and offers a clear-cut explanation of "how discursive practices matter" (Barad 136). Abandoning the humanist view of the subject, spoiled by the false premise of human exceptionalism – as in "man is the measure of all things," Barad embraces a posthumanist stand that does not "presume the separateness of any-thing, let alone the alleged spatial, ontological and epistemological distinction that sets humans apart" (Barad 136), whilst admitting that what indeed matters is difference, more precisely evolving difference patterns that reflect space-time as "an enactment of differentness, a way of making/marking here and now" (Barad 137). In 2007 there also appeared the second edition of Lucy A. Suchman's widely acclaimed book, *Human-Machine Reconfigurations: Plans and Situated Actions*, enriched by the author's embracement of the justified concerns expressed by feminist scholars with regard to the way in which agencies are "figured at the human machine interface" through practices and rhetorics that aim "to obscure the performative nature of both persons and things" (Suchman i). Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods*<sup>1</sup>, published in 2007 as well, is primarily a parable about the human species' environmental negligence, prominent in all of its three distinct spatio-temporal settings; it features amounts of fierce philosophical debate, lively exposition, vivid description and, by rendering in parts one, three and four the geminated affair between a female scientist and a she-robot, it cleverly outlines some possible implications of a posthuman existence. Grounded on

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<sup>1</sup> Jeanette Winterson. *The Stone Gods*. London, Hamish Hamilton, Penguin Books, 2007. All subsequent references to this book will appear in parentheses in the text of the article as (SG page number).

Barad's theory of agential realism, and on Suchman's innovatory human-machine configurations, this article explores Winterson's novel in an attempt to show that it can be regarded as a fictional encompassment of the theoretical construction of posthumanist relational subjectivity.

With the advent of posthumanist culture there came the incisive urgency for a paradigmatic shift able to replace the humanist model of thought with a non-anthropocentric set of practices. Since promoting Man as the single unitary autonomous model of human identification was obviously erroneous, especially because this master of all natural things was portrayed as the young white European healthy cisgender heterosexual intellectual man, the need for more accurate functional alternatives had to be met, giving rise to interdisciplinary research undertaken by specialists in fields as diverse as anthropology, philosophy, cultural studies of society, religion and science, media ecology, quantum physics, artificial intelligence and artificial consciousness, critical animal and plant studies, environmental science, computational social science, cognitive literary studies, environmental literary criticism, etc. Thus, posthumanism brought forth the erosion of human exceptionalism and fostered a more objective assessment of the relational, discursive and performative dimensions of power. The act of stepping outside the box of anthropocentric orthodoxies allows for wider views of the universe, emphasizes the various states of "differential becomings" that mark our existence (Barad 185) and facilitates a more holistic understanding of our "worlding" – both human and non-human entities in the process of our "becoming and being in the world" (Oppermann 28).

Serpil Oppermann posits that the new conceptualization of the posthuman "calls upon a relational ontology that announces itself in an affirmative fashion," steering clear from an anti-humanistic stance bent on destruction, and opening the way to a more appropriate reading of the human "in terms of an evolutionary co-emergence within a shared field of existence marked by the interdependency of life" (Oppermann 25-26). Whilst social theory (Francis Fukuyama, 2002; Giovanna Borradori, 2003; Jürgen Habermas, 2003; Peter Sloterdijk, 2009) manifests deep concern for the moral and cognitive implications of the fate of the human at the end of the de-centring process brought about by the posthuman turn, which is viewed as a threatening prospect, posthuman ethical theory favours complexity, as Rosi Braidotti expounds in the

interview given to Cosetta Veronese, having overcome such negativity regarding “the displacement of the centrality of the human” (Veronese 99). Posthuman subjectivity is “non-unitary” and characterizes “a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity,” constructed on “the ethics of becoming,” based on a more elaborated sense of “inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or «earth» others,” and on a more robust sense of “collectivity, relationality and hence community building” (Veronese 99). Once Spinozist monism is embraced at the expense of the Hegelian dialectics, the vitality of the new brand of materialism, explains Braidotti, summons “a mutation of our shared understanding of what it means to think at all, let alone to think critically;” the mutation can occur because monism endows us with “conceptual tools and a terminology to address humans as being part of a continuum with all living matter” (Veronese 100). Assuaged by the realization that, as Katherine Hayles insisted as early as 1999, the posthuman turn is not tantamount to the demise of humanity but shall simply usher in “the end of a certain conception of the human” (Hayles 286), Braidotti points out that the posthuman “recomposition of human interaction” she proposes “is not the same as the reactive bond of vulnerability, but it is an affirmative bond that locates the subject in the flow of relations with multiple others” (Veronese 99).

In *The Stone Gods*, grafting fantasy and historical events, Winterson uses a highly imaginative *Orlando*-inspired technique, to forge an existential odyssey through landscapes governed by Thanatos, Éros and Agápe, in three different space-times, populated by lead characters bearing the same names and forming (oddly) affectionate (cross-species) same-sex couples, whose love embodies a redeeming power and upholds a flicker of hope that it might eventually be possible to escape the encroaching spectre of death in this recursive story about places destroyed by humanity’s irresponsible greed. By mapping out similar possible universes on the brink of disaster, Winterson urges readers, with unfailing eloquence, to extend solidarity and empathy beyond the boundaries of difference, be it geographical, racial, sexual, ethnical, religious, cultural or biological, to lead a responsible existence and thus avert a cataclysmic ecological and/or technological collapse. Moreover, the novel gears a neoteric techno-scientific recalibration of love in which humans and robots are entangled “in a dynamic co-evolutionary spiral” (Hayles 164), thus emphasizing that “the other-than-human-agency

in the posthumanist vision is not a biological category only” (Oppermann 25), since intelligent machines feature significantly among the Earth’s “posthuman co-shapers” (Oppermann 29).

Love has always been, for Winterson, a mystery worth exploring, given its potential to become a *panacea universalis* for this world endangered by forces of destruction looming over its inhabitants from outside or preying on them from within. In this novel, love becomes a means of “bridging differences” by transgressing the traditional confines of time and space, fostering a connection among the three narrative strands: “this sense of love becomes a framework that brings together the separate chapters of *The Stone Gods* that are set in different times and places” (Sönmez and Kılıç xxii-xxiii). The first location, yet not the initial moment in the evolution of mankind, is Orbus, a planet teetering on the edge of destruction 65 million years ago; the second is Easter Island, an ecosystem that was on the verge of extinction in the eighteenth century; the third is Planet Blue, which used to be populated by carnivorous monsters, the dinosaurs, later destroyed by colonists from Orbus in an attempt to make themselves a new home. Now, Planet Blue is in a state of devastation following a nuclear war, known as World War 3. The sense that the novel as a whole conveys is that of the *devolution* (as opposed to an *evolution*) of mankind: anthropocentrism is tantamount to self-destructiveness since, in tandem with capitalist patriarchy, such a worldview is instrumental to the systematic exploitation of resources leading to environmental devastation. The stories recounted by the crew of Captain Handsome’s spacecraft, the Starship *Resolution*, hired to take Orbus colonists to the newly discovered planet, suggest that humans are toxic for any environment – there is talk of a world whose weight is “its own despair” (SG 52), a formerly inhabited place sharing the same sun as Planet Blue; this white planet used to boast forests and oceans, cities and roads, an advanced civilization. However, having been depleted of water, dried of resources, suffocated by the soaring levels of CO<sub>2</sub>, and having gotten too close to the sun, this world is now “a white-out” (SG 52):

There had been oceans on the white planet. We found a sea-floor, ridged and scooped, and shells as brittle as promises, and bones cracked like hope. White, everything white, but not the white of a morning when the sun will pour through

it, nor the white of a clean cloth; (...) This was the white at the end of the world when nothing is left, not the past, not the present and, most fearful of all, not the future. There was no future in this bleached and boiled place. (...) Without armour of a kind, anyone would be crushed. Without oxygen, no one here can breathe at all. Without fireproof clothing, you would be charred as the rest of what was once life. And yet there was once life here, naked and free and optimistic (SG 52).

Orbus is a dying red planet gutted by corporatist culture, a planet whose rainforests have been destroyed, whose ice-caps are melting and whose inhabitants are running out of time to find a new planet to live on: “The desert advances every year, but the duststorms are not just sand, they are the guts of the fucking planet” (SG 56). The state of Planet Red, reminiscent of the fate of Planet White, poignantly demonstrates the dire consequences of such harmful practices which oppress the environment, eventually leading to the desecration of any planet. That human nature epitomizes the agency of destruction becomes clear once Planet Blue ends up partaking in the fate of its predecessors:

There was a polar bear stranded on an ice-floe. There were hurricanes, flooding, melting, landslides. (...) Catholics were instructed to abandon Green politics and prepare for Holy War. And (...) while we were all arguing about whether it was Christian or Pagan, Democratic or Conservative to save the planet, and whether technology would solve all our problems, and whether we should fly less, drive less, eat less, weigh less, consume less, dump less, carbon dioxide in the atmosphere rose to 550 parts per million, the ice-caps melted and Iran launched a nuclear attack on the USA. (...) The rest, as they say, is history. But this isn't history, this is Post3 War (SG 131).

These heart-rending accounts of the desolation and ruin brought about by humans' compulsion to engage, time and time again, in similar patterns of destruction, are built around pairs of lead characters bearing strikingly similar names. In part one, Billie Crusoe, a female scientist from Orbus, is sent to administer a final interview to Spike, a highly advanced female Robo sapiens, as the latter is to be dismantled for data-

protection purposes. In part two, Billy, one of Captain Cook's sailors, accidentally left stranded on Easter Island in 1774, meets Spickers, the son of a Dutch sailor who had landed on the island two years earlier with Captain Roggeweins. In parts three and four, Billie, having survived World War 3 on Planet Blue, inadvertently embarks on a journey to Wreck City in search of Spike, a robot head, both seeking to escape the unbearable autocracy of Tech City, the former city of London, rebuilt by MORE, a massive global corporation that had taken over all power in the post-nuclear holocaust world. Throughout the novel, all the Billies fall in love with the respective Spikes and, thus, the use of "multiple levels of temporal and spatial markers reinforces the theme of overreaching the bounds of gender, class, and species" (Sönmez and Kılıç xxiii).

An amazing virtuoso, Winterson displays a unique combination of intelligence, talent and humour in her rendering of the relationship(s) between Billie and Spike. Waves of irreverent purple prose, backed with emotionally powerful explorations of the rich tapestry of connections made possible by such a cross-species affair, are occasionally broken by incursions into the not so easily traversed terrain of intensely fuelled political discussions:

"My theory is that life on Orbus began as escaping life from the white planet – and the white planet began as escaping life from ... who knows where?"

Pink was visibly moved by the story. "Y'know, it would make a great movie. It has a human feel."

Ignoring the cinematic possibilities of global disaster on a galactic scale, I said, "But it's so depressing if we keep making the same mistakes again and again..."

Pink was sympathetic. "I know what you mean – every time we fall in love."

"I wasn't thinking personal," I said.

"What's the difference?" she said. "Women are just planets that attract the wrong species."

"It might be more complex than that," said Spike.

"They use us up, wear us out, then cast us off for a younger model so that they can do it all again" (SG 56).

Recalling Stephen Hawking's radio talk in which he insisted on the need for humans to colonize space if they are to survive, Winterson wondered on her web-page whether "it's

a boy thing, this infatuation with rocket ships and rocky worlds,” being quick to add that she would rather “stay here and honour the earth” (“Books”)<sup>2</sup>. She explains that “men are always trying to escape from home, but we, women, are «home»” and warns that this boyish fantasy, “like not tidying your bedroom because your mother will do it – trash the place, then leave it” (“Books”), can, on a global scale, breed dangerous expectations and worldviews, fostering the unrealistic hope that science will fix all our problems, getting rid of pollution and providing new kinds of fuel, a mentality that needs to be replaced by a more realistic and responsible attitude. The novel she wrote is meant to prompt us to environmental action in order to avoid, while it is still possible, the apocalyptic scenario we are facing if we continue to take for granted and even to abuse Mother Earth.

But the impressive breadth and scope of this creative endeavour becomes apparent only once we make our way out of the tornado formed by spiralling strands of narrative DNA and pierce through Winterson’s fascination with artificial intelligence to access the larger picture of posthumanist relational subjectivity that a careful examination of the loving relationship(s) between Billie and Spike eventually develops. Their interaction turned intra-action creates a fictional framework in which the erroneous views of *the machine* and *the human* as solidly separate ontological realities and of *the material* and *the social* as utterly distinct categories are challenged while the readers explore “the natures, matters and cultural agents that determine the existence of the human and accompany it in its biological and historical adventures” (Iovino 11-12):

Spike came behind me and put her hand on my neck. Her skin is warm. “You are upset,” she said. “I can feel the change in your skin temperature.”

“The thing about life that drives me mad,” I said, “is that it doesn’t make sense. We make plans. We try to control, but the whole thing is random.”

“This is a quantum universe,” said Spike, “neither random nor determined. It is potential at every second. All you can do is intervene.”

“What do you suggest I do – to intervene?”

Spike leaned forward and kissed me. “Bend the light.”

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<sup>2</sup> Jeanette Winterson regularly posts on her webpage comments on her recently published books for the readers to delight in the author’s witty annotations and enlightening commentary. These notes were selected from one such installment from the “Books” section dedicated to *The Stone Gods*. “Books: *The Stone Gods*.” *Jeanette Winterson Website*. Retrieved on 14 March 2008.



“You’re a robot,” I said, realizing that I sounded like Pink McMurphy.

“And you are a human being – but I don’t hold that against you.”

“Your systems are neural, not limbic. You can’t feel emotion.”

Spike said, “Human beings often display emotion they do not feel. And they often feel emotion they do not display” (SG 62).

When the natural and the cultural forms of life are “so deeply entangled across the spheres of human and other biotic forces and material agencies,” we witness the production of “posthuman choreographies linking the biosphere with the technosphere” (Oppermann 28). Winterson’s novel is the fictional staging of such a choreography, and it illustrates how, once anthropogenic factors disrupt the “networks of complex crossings and interchanges with other beings and material forces” that characterize our relations with(in) the environment, “the posthuman condition becomes an entanglement in many antagonistic forces with formidable efficacy and humans are not immune to their material effects” (Oppermann 27). This happens because the human being is “an open horizon” – “an unfolding, shifting biography of culturally and materially specific experiences, relations, and possibilities inflected by each next encounter” (Suchman 281):

Spike moved away into the shadows as Pink McMurphy appeared in the doorway (...).

“What are you girls talking about?”

“The fact that Spike isn’t a girl,” I said. “We’re trying to work out the differences between *Robo sapiens* and *Homo sapiens*.”

“You think too much,” said Pink. “I’ll get you a drink. It’s obvious – cut me and I bleed.”

“So blood is the essential quality of humanness?” said Spike.

“And the rest! The fact is that you had to be built – I don’t know, like a car has to be built. You were made in a factory.”

“Every human being in the Central Power has been enhanced, genetically modified and DNA-screened. Some have been cloned. Most were born outside the womb. A human being now is not what a human being was even a hundred years ago. So what is a human being?”

“Whatever it is, it isn’t a robot,” I said (SG 63-64).

Suchman’s “questions surrounding the possibilities and limitations of «mutual intelligibility» in human-machine interaction are focused on and through the interface (although taken as a multiplicity of encounters, rather than as a singular object)” (Barnick 348) as she insists that what limits the capacity of machines to “adjust for contingencies” is the asymmetry in positioning with regard to “the available resources for meaningful communication or interaction” (Barnick 346). Winterson’s narrative advances new possibilities of human-robot interaction by including this central component of communicative endeavour, namely the mutual intelligibility characteristic of human-to-human interaction, thus allowing the reader a glimpse into how new instantiations of the machine, more specifically socio-material assemblages, impact upon the making of worlds and on “worlding” itself. Once readers see both the human and the nonhuman and the social and the material as “mutually constitutive and continually enacted «effects»,” they eventually move beyond the traditional representational paradigm, understand “why articulations of similarity and difference at the human-machine interface matter” (Barnick 345) and become open to consider “a critical recalibration of the human sphere aimed at dissolving the desire to exploit the coexisting sphere of the nonhuman” (Oppermann 27): “«There are many kinds of life,» said Spike, mildly. «Humans always assumed that theirs was the only kind that mattered. That’s how you destroyed your planet»” (SG 65). Reductionist accounts of oppositional-value dualisms are dismantled, as “we witness the *Robo sapiens* assume an individualised self with a transversal inter-connection or an «assemblage» of human and nonhuman actors, not unlike that described by Bruno Latour in his object-oriented ontology” (Diamant 106):

“I don’t want to get personal,” I said, “but I’ll say it again – you are a robot. Do you want to kiss a woman so that you can add it to your database?”

“Gender is a human concept,” said Spike, “and not interesting. I want to kiss you.” She kissed me again. “In any case,” she said, very close, very warm, and I am responding, and I don’t want to, and I can’t help it, “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.” (SG 63)

The traditionally tiered structure, wherein *human* trumps *non-human*, *subject* reigns supreme over *object*, and so does *mind* over *matter*, undergoes a process of reconfiguration as this relationship stresses the need “to hold on to a notion of subjectivity understood in terms of the capacity for experience, on account of which sentient being is exposed to suffering,” which implies giving prominence to “the passive dimension of subjectivity rather than merely the active dimension of matter” (Braunmühl 2017) whilst demanding a “radical rearticulation of what qualifies as bodies that matter, ways of living that count as «life,» lives worth protecting, lives worth saving, lives worth grieving” (Butler 16):

Spike wasn't giving up. “But I want to know how you are making the distinction. Even without any bioengineering, the human body is in a constantly changing state. What you are today will not be what you are in days, months, years. Your entire skeleton replaces itself every ten years, your red blood cells replace themselves every one hundred and twenty days, your skin every two weeks.”

“I accept that,” I said, “and I accept that you are a rational, calculating, intelligent entity. But you have no emotion.”

“So your definition of a human being is in the capacity to experience emotion?” asked Spike. “How much emotion? The more sensitive a person is, the more human they are?”

“Well, yes,” I said. “Insensitive, unfeeling people are at the low end of human – not animal, more android.”

“I am not an android,” said Spike.

“I didn't mean to insult you. I've worked with androids – they're pretty basic, I know, but . . .”

“I am a Robo sapiens,” said Spike, “and perhaps it will be us, and not you, who are the future of the world” (SG 63-64).

Winterson's narrative discursively embodies what Barad calls an apparatus, namely a phenomenon “constituted through particular practices that are perpetually open to

rearrangements, rearticulations, and other reworkings” (Barad 170). Peeling off the anthropocentric layers of Niels Bohr’s account of apparatuses, Barad redefines them as “open-ended practices” rather than “bounded objects or structures,” to allow for the endless reconfiguring of a world whose agential, intra-active matter is characterized by “inexhaustible, exuberant, and prolific” generative dynamism (Barad 170). On the basis of relational realism, which breaks the fixed boundaries of material determinism in an attempt to refine, redefine and reconfigure the relationships between ideas and the physical world, Barad defines apparatuses as “material-discursive practices” or “causal intra-actions through which matter is iteratively and differentially articulated, reconfiguring the material-discursive field of possibilities and impossibilities in the ongoing dynamics of intra-activity that is agency” (Barad 170). De Freitas points out that Barad’s approach is based on the rejection of “the ontological dualism between matter and meaning,” being meant to “engage with the *conceptual* on the material plane,” since “concepts are material and matter is conceptual” (de Freitas 1). The result of material-discursive phenomena, what Barad terms “agential agency,” is marked by intra-action rather than by mere interaction, since the representationalist metaphor of “reflection,” too limiting in scope, due to its focus on sameness, has given way to a more complex one: it was Haraway’s philosophical reworking of the term “diffraction” that Barad appropriated as the newer and richer optical metaphor, better suited for tracing entangled patterns of difference, since it “provides for the mutual engagement (entanglement) of subject and object,” thus eradicating “the need for a «medium» or intermediary between our knowledge and the world” (Dolling 214). Diffraction, Haraway had explained, is “a narrative, graphic, psychological, spiritual, and political technology for making consequential meanings” (Haraway 273), so the anticipated outcome of “diffractive reading” is that it will foster “an ethical, respectful, and constructive means of engagement” (Schweber 881). In the agential realist account, the material configuration of the world comes from specific intra-actions of differentially constituted humans and non-humans whose dynamic structuration of the “world-body space” (Barad 171-172) continually shapes the performative reconstitution and reconfiguration of apparatuses. Thus, accountability and responsibility cease to be “the exclusive right, obligation, or dominion of humans” (Barad 172). Barad’s assumption of ontological unity leads to the collapse of binary separations and to an open-minded

exploration of the ways in which boundaries between nature and culture, human and non-human, animate and inanimate are “actively configured and reconfigured” (Barad 136). From this perspective, an acute sense of urgency begins to make its presence felt: since beliefs inform actions, actions have consequences and the consequences can be deeply and unnecessarily devastating, a change in mentality that fosters eco-friendly responsible behaviour becomes mandatory, for survival to be even possible:

We are responsible for the cuts that we help enact not because we do the choosing (neither do we escape responsibility because “we” are “chosen” by them), but because we are an agential part of the material becoming of the universe. Cuts are agentially enacted not by willful individuals but by the larger material arrangement of which “we” are a “part”. The cuts that we participate in enacting matter. Indeed, ethics cannot be about responding to the other as if the other is the radical outside to the self. Ethics is not a geometrical calculation; “others” are never very far from “us;” “they” and “we” are co-constituted and entangled through the very cuts “we” help to enact (Barad 178-179).

Given that agency, freed “from its anthropocentric moorings” (Barad 334) is no longer considered to be confined to the human sphere, as neither are knowledge and intelligence, phenomena constitute the elemental units of existence, being “ontological entanglements,” the outcome of “the ontological inseparability of intra-acting agencies” (Barad 139). Thus, Barad claims, we all are “*of* the universe – there is no inside, no outside. There is only intra-acting from within and as part of the world in its becoming” (Barad 396).

In *The Stone Gods*, both characters make informed or passionate choices, aptly adapt to circumstances, promptly adjust to change, struggling to survive. Their connection is real, it does not lack mutual intelligibility, their propensity for self-sacrifice is great and their love unconditional. Together, against all odds, they accept shared responsibility for their actions, denounce humanity’s insatiable greed and pernicious outlook on life, make and implement plans as they actively fight to withstand the pressure of the manifestation of a hostile environment they themselves have inadvertently brought about. Employing the framework of ethnomethodology, Suchman

defines plans as “artefacts,” the products of “our reasoning about action” (Suchman 60), explaining that they are neither a priori “determinants of action,” nor abstractions “originating in an actor’s head,” since they actually “emerge as resources in action” (Barnick 348). By using the term “situated action,” Suchman (70) draws attention to the ways in which “all courses of action depend on their material and social circumstances” (Barnick 348).

Winterson’s narrative is, itself, a “situated action” of sorts, since it de-stabilizes normative assumptions about the nature of robots, showing how Spike materialises as agent and becomes human-like. The most poignant scene in this respect is presented at the end of part one, and features Spike’s endearing attempts to preserve energy by removing her own limbs, one by one, with Billie’s help, at times, until her torso is all that is left. Once her lover, Billie, finally detaches Spike’s head from her torso and they kiss, readers cannot help reframing the dismantling process as a love-making scenario, where the robot’s chest is just a breastplate and her whole body is merely “a piece of armour she has taken off” (SG 91) in order to be unfixed and free. In her efforts to protect Billie and to enhance her chances of survival even at the expense of her own, Spike – the sensual robot that is willing to sacrifice herself for her lover is, thus, a machine that has clearly developed ardent feelings and a profound understanding of the human mind. The two lovers are moving towards a posthumanist state, entangled in a relationship based on collaborative sensuality. The characters’ journeys, adventures and affection constitute much more than mere interactions; they are “agential intra-actions” or “causal enactments” through which “cause and effect emerge,” due to which “marks are left on bodies,” since “bodies differentially materialize as particular patterns of the world as a result of the specific cuts and reconfigurings that are enacted” (Barad 176).

Due to the contribution brought by the concept of “figuration” as employed by Haraway and used by Suchman to emphasize that discourses, through tropes and metaphors, are essential means of enacting specific types of human-machine associations able to “re-inscribe existing social orders or to challenge them” (Suchman 227), works of literature can “offer a far more radical potential for altering traditional imaginaries of the human” (Barnick 347). Since “the discursive traffic and socio-material practices across the human-machine boundary” work to bring about “the subjectification of objects and objectification of subjects” (Barnick 348), it is hardly

surprising that the human being “is always already *plotted*; interlaced with the nonhuman in a warp and woof of intricate, joint performances of «storied matter»” (Iovino 12). Serenella Iovino pertinently points out that the posthuman constitutes “the ontological *narrative* of the human in its infinite paths of entangled becoming with its others” (Iovino 12), and that from an evolutionary point of view *culture* is “the outcome of a process of hybridization with an otherness” (Marchesini 15, translated by Iovino 14) and, consequently, displays layers of “complex predicaments of material entities and discursive practices” (Iovino 14).

In an attempt to capture the sensibilities of the twenty-first century, in this “intricately structured, emotionally lucid, time-traveling novel of discovery and survival” (Seaman, “Review”), the eclectically adventurous Winterson travels beyond the confines of everyday thought by evoking a sense of posthumanist relational subjectivity through the twofold romantic encounter between female scientist Billie Crusoe and humanized she-robot Spike. This same-sex cross-species futuristic love affair develops across two different space-times and impressively succeeds in blurring the boundaries between humans and machines, thus prompting readers to rethink the assumption of human exceptionalism, to re-configure their view of the human as a completely autonomous rational agent, to overcome their anthropocentric outlook on life and to abandon the deep yet narrow concern for the fate of the humans in the wake of the posthuman turn, urging them to consider, instead, more significant and wider issues such as responsibility and accountability. Winterson’s emphasis on the astounding possibilities of reconfiguration with regard to categories such as human/machine, subject/object, social/material, male/female, nature/culture, matter/discourse and interaction/intra-action enables a reframing of accountability issues and a relocation of agency from the separateness of realms (human agency versus machine agency) to an intra-active field of commonalities where on-going socio-material practices come into effect as the boundaries between humans and machines are negotiated, disrupted and transgressed, produced and re-produced, configured and re-configured, constructed, de-constructed and re-constructed. Therefore, *The Stone Gods* can be viewed as a fictional narrative embodiment of Karen Barad’s theoretical reconfiguration of materiality as discursive and of performativity as a dynamic process of constraining iterative intra-actions rather than of determining interactions.

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