

LITERARY SPECULATIONS:
POSTMODERN DYSTOPIA AND THE FUTURE OF BOOKS

by

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Abstract

This thesis identifies a trend in recent postmodern dystopian fiction for writers to metafictionally dwell on the place of literature in a future context. This trend springs from similar concerns present in the two most influential dystopian novels of the 20th century, *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Yet, unlike Huxley and Orwell, for whom the marginalization of literature is merely one symptom of the hegemonic control oppressing these future societies, the postmodern writers I identify situate the book's future disappearance at the epicenter of culture's demise. In Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010), electronic technologies have virtually eradicated print literature and the novel's protagonist, Lenny, mourns the changes in social interactions he sees this shift in technology bringing about. In Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* (2007), marginalized book-lovers see the devastation humanity continuously wreaks on the environment as a product of culture's disdain for literature.

List of Abbreviations Used

SF Science Fiction/Speculative Fiction

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Introduction

If art teaches us anything ... it is the privateness of the human condition. Being the most ancient as well as the most literal form of private enterprise, it fosters in a man, knowingly or unwittingly, a sense of his uniqueness, of individuality, of separateness—thus turning him from a social animal into an autonomous “I”. ... Aesthetic choice is a highly individual matter, and aesthetic experience is always a private one. Every new aesthetic reality makes one’s experience even more private; and this kind of privacy, assuming at times the guise of literary (or some other) taste, can in itself turn out to be, if not a guarantee, then a form of defense, against enslavement.

- Joseph Brodsky, Nobel Lecture, 1987.

“It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen” (Orwell 3): so begins George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), one of the most famous, most oft-quoted, and perhaps most pessimistic speculations about the future ever published in novel form. Winston Smith is a man against his world: conscious of the lies his government forces on its citizens on a daily basis, and desirous of a more meaningful, more genuine life beyond the totalitarian regime of Big Brother. What sets Winston apart from his brainwashed comrades is his particular attraction to books, and his belief in an underground resistance headed by (the possibly fictional) Emmanuel Goldstein. Literature has been banned in Orwell’s future, except for government-issued pamphlets and formulaic novels that are produced by Big Brother to promote the requisite political solidarity and conformity. Owning books or writing in a journal is punishable by death. Yet one of the very first decisions Winston makes in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is to take out a “pen holder, a bottle of ink and a thick, quarto-sized black book” and hide himself in an alcove of his apartment where he is shielded from the all-seeing, all-knowing, telescreen that monitors his every move for signs of possible dissidence (7). The book, we learn, was a recent purchase from a black market junk shop and it is specifically the tactility of

its “smooth creamy paper” that attracts Winston to it and provokes him to write his subversive thoughts in it: the book holds a sacred power for Winston, and he feels as if it “deserve[s] to be written [in]” (8). What Winston writes, when he allows his mind to wander and his hand to travel across the paper, are the words “*DOWN WITH BIG BROTHER* over and over again, filling half a page” (20). Thus, it is the book that first defines Winston as an outsider in this culture, and it is when he surrenders his inhibitions to it through writing that he reveals his true feelings about the society in which he exists. It is this momentous act of recording his innermost thoughts and creative inspirations that sends Winston into the thrilling search for truth that takes up the rest of the novel and provokes him to increasingly question his place in society. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the book represents the counter-hegemonic freedoms Winston craves, the true and genuine, and the hope for a better, more fulfilling life. Winston describes “whispered stories of a terrible book, a compendium of all the heresies, of which Goldstein was the author and which circulated clandestinely here and there. It was a book without a title. People referred to it, if at all, simply as *the book*” (15).¹ This book occupies a central place in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. It is the last remaining true record of history and Orwell devotes countless pages to its narration. It is after Winston acquires “the book” that he feels most liberated and fully conscious. But his possession of it also results in his imprisonment and eventual brainwashing because, Winston and the reader discover, the book is, itself, written by the Inner Party so as to curtail and control any possible dissidence in the citizens of Oceania. Despite, on the one hand, causing Winston to feel liberated, the book

¹ The book’s anonymous name indicates Orwell’s intention to comment on literature more generally. Yet, as Winston discovers when he finally acquires a copy of the book, it does indeed have a name: *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism*.

is used as a powerful tool to oppress citizens in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Indeed, O'Brien, who is an influential member of the Inner Party and Winston's sole torturer in Room 101, "had the air of a doctor, a teacher, even a priest" (257), and his signature gesture—to reset his spectacles on his nose—identify him as an intellectual. Clearly, Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is fueled by anxieties about social and cultural *control* by totalitarian forces, and literature is presented as one form of such oppression.

Aldous Huxley's equally groundbreaking dystopian masterpiece, *Brave New World* (1932), is also interested in the role books play in culture and, especially, in a future pleasure-seeking culture. John,² a visitor to London from a "Savage Reservation" on the North American continent, may be said to represent the reader because his own culture is much like our own, and England's culture is utterly alien to him. When he was a child, he was given a collection of Shakespeare's works so that he might learn how to read. After his first taste of Shakespeare, John is overawed: "What did the words actually mean? He only half knew. But their magic was strong and went on rumbling in his head" (119). Shakespeare becomes, for him, his window onto the world, and his source of all knowledge. Yet, when he is brought to England, John discovers that the citizens of this culture do not know anything about Shakespeare; or even read books at all. Humans in this culture are bred, raised, and conditioned according to their caste, and all of their thoughts, desires, ideas, and proclivities are decided for them even before they are born. The only actions a human is ever permitted to take are ones that benefit society as a whole, and don't disrupt the system: "Our library," explains a doctor in charge of hypnotizing young children as they sleep, "contains only books of reference. If our young

² John is more often called "The Savage".

people need distraction, they can get it at the feelies. We don't encourage them to indulge in any solitary amusements" (147). Yet, there *are* works of literature in this culture. The World Controller, Mustapha Mond, keeps a "whole collection of pornographic old books" locked safely in his office where only he can read and study them (210). Thus, literature has not been wiped off the face of the earth, but simply extricated from certain parts of it and not available to certain people. Citizens are forbidden from taking an interest in literature, art, or anything grounded in history. When John (The Savage) asserts that *Othello* is far more praise-worthy than the "feelie" he has seen,³ the Controller reveals: "that's the price we have to pay for stability. You've got to choose between happiness and what people used to call high art. We've sacrificed the high art. We have the feelies and the scent organ instead" (201). So, much like in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, literature is explicitly used as a form of social and cultural control in Huxley's dystopia. If citizens must read, they're permitted to read only texts pre-selected by the current political regime, and any person who shows an interest in other literature (like John, The Savage), is exiled, or, like Winston Smith, re-conditioned so that he fits comfortably into a place within society.

Books About Books

This thesis identifies a trend in recent speculative postmodern novels that springs from Orwell's and Huxley's similar tendency to privilege literacy and literature in a dystopian, post-print future. In recent years, there has been an explosion in works of high postmodern speculative fiction that examine the future of print through a dystopic and

³ A form of entertainment that takes film to the next level: as well as stimulating viewers' sight and hearing, "feelies" use smell and touch to provoke in the viewer an all-encompassing emotional reaction.

often nostalgic lens. Although I discuss only two of these novels at length—Gary Shteyngart’s *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010) and Jeanette Winterson’s *The Stone Gods* (2007)—in this thesis, the list of these 21ST century novels is far more expansive and indicates not a coincidence but a *bona fide* literary phenomenon or burgeoning subgenre. Douglas Coupland’s *Generation A* (2009), Michael Cunningham’s *Specimen Days* (2005), Will Self’s *The Book of Dave* (2006), and David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* (2004), are all similarly concerned with discussing the role print might have in the future. While all of these novelists come to different conclusions, their novels are all self-reflexive and preoccupied with situating the book within a dystopian future world that is impacted in compelling (and overlapping) ways by the presence or absence of certain types of texts.

Douglas Coupland’s *Generation A* describes a world that could easily be our own in just a few years. The five characters from different corners of the globe—USA, Canada, New Zealand, France, Sri Lanka—whose individual narratives comprise the novel are representative of a tendency toward increased technological globalization that has continued apace in the near future of Coupland’s book. What most notably distinguishes this world from our own is the recent disappearance of bees and the many effects of this disappearance on the environment.⁴ The bees’ disappearance is a preoccupation for all of the characters, but more of a nuisance and a hindrance on their lives than a genuine concern. And yet, when all five characters are mysteriously stung by supposedly-extinct bees, and they each immediately become media sensations as a result, it isn’t just electronic communications that bring the characters together. Their encounters with nature provoke them to meet together to share their experiences and they find

⁴ The fact that our world’s bee populations are in steady decline demonstrates how close Coupland’s future is to our present.

themselves sitting around a fire on the remote island of Haida Gwaii off the coast of British Columbia telling stories to each other for days. As they tell stories, they become more friendly and more intimate—they connect in ways that they have not ever experienced through electronic communication. And the one feature that links all of their stories is that they are self-reflexive and concerned with the very acts of reading, listening, and narrating. In *Generation A*, story-telling retains a level of intimacy that electronic communication does not have and connects people together in a way that they cannot otherwise experience.

In Michael Cunningham's *Specimen Days*, three historical periods of New York—past, present, and future—are linked by a metafictional preoccupation with literature. Yet novels or other print materials are not found in any of these societies: poetry is all there is, and Walt Whitman is practically a god. The first section, "In the Machine," takes place during the Industrial Revolution as characters Simon, Catherine, and Lucas confront poverty and struggle with adapting to life in the de-humanizing machine age. In the second section, "The Children's Crusade," Cat, a police officer, and her boyfriend, Sam, pursue a terrorist group that has been bombing the city. Cat and Sam discover that the terrorists are mere children and they adopt one of them, Luke, and flee the city. In the third section, "Like Beauty," New York City is now a future-scape of flying vehicles, green-skinned extraterrestrial refugees called Nadians, and cyborgs. Human (Luke), cyborg (Simon), and Nadian (Catareen), join forces and together traverse the post-nuclear American landscape in search of safety and a sense of origin.⁵ What

⁵ Several of the texts that are part of this phenomenon are preoccupied with the postmodern question of what makes us human, and often do so using literature as a gauge.

links all of these seemingly incompatible narratives together, other than the recurring characters, is Walt Whitman: Lucas has an uncontrollable urge to spurt out Whitman's verse regardless of the situation; the terrorist group follows Whitman's poetry as if it were the teachings of a holy text; and Simon, the cyborg, has been programmed to quote Whitman because his creator believed he would "be better able to appreciate the consequences of [his] actions" (Cunningham 281) if he was aware of the work of poets. As a poet who praises American nature and the communion one is capable of having with all forms of life, Whitman's poetry perfectly ties together a novel that is concerned with the relationship between man and his machines and has broader connections with the concerns of this thesis. In *Specimen Days*, literature is regarded, as in *1984*, as inherently counter-cultural: it is the psychologically-unstable Lucas, the bomb-throwing Luke, and the not-quite-human Simon who read and quote Whitman's verse and believe in its artistic and humanistic values. And it is these characters who stand outside mainstream culture, wary of the machines that are steadily taking it over. In *Specimen Days*, Whitman's poetry represents a longed-for way of life; a unified America in contrast to the alienating, machine-filled one of the characters' realities.

Will Self's *The Book of Dave* is an interesting departure from other speculative fiction concerned with the future of print and preoccupied with stressing its ennobling capacities. While Self's novel is equally concerned with situating print within a future context, albeit negatively, his imagined future is one far beyond flying vehicles and fancy electronic gadgetry. Instead, *The Book of Dave* takes place in present day London. Its narrator is Dave, a London cab driver who is disenchanted with his life and sick to death of his choice of career. Yet the novel also takes place in a future world where London as

we know it no longer exists. In this future, all infrastructure has been demolished, people hunt and fish and live in small earthen huts, the English language has (d)evolved to the extent that it's nearly a different language altogether,⁶ full of mangled Cockney slang. As his diary was amongst the first texts to be discovered in the wake of some (unnamed) apocalyptic event, people worship Dave as a god, and his journal writings, which are the unstable, dim-witted rantings of a manic depressive, as divine teachings. The same impulse that provoked Winston Smith to record his life in a journal at the beginning of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is, ultimately, what preserves Dave. In Self's future, the book is celebrated as the centre-piece of society, yet in an ironic way by virtue of Dave's crude "teachings."

David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* is, like many of these other novels, divided into different historical periods. In this novel, there are six narratives beginning in the 19th century and reaching far into the future. While the relationship among the narratives is unclear, they are threaded together by a self-reflexive preoccupation with story telling and by their own textuality. The two speculative sections of Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, "An Orison of Sonmi~451" and "Sloosha's Crossin' an' Ev'rythin' After," are most relevant to this thesis. Closely linked to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the futuristic sections of *Cloud Atlas* depict a protagonist, Sonmi, a fabricant clone, who becomes conscious of the intense hierarchy of the consumer culture in which she works only after she discovers a forgotten book of fairy tales in a supply closet. Much like the societies depicted in *Super Sad True Love Story* and *The Stone Gods*, this society is fueled by an obsessive, all-encompassing consumerism to such an extent that its citizens' "souls" have become

⁶ Indeed, Self includes a dictionary as an appendix to his novel to aid the reader in his/her understanding of this difficult language.

microchip credit cards and they are slaves to commodities, to the newest of the new. In “An Orison of Sonmi-451,” humans shuffle in and out of the fast food cafeteria “Papa Song’s” like cattle, and their thoughts are much like the fabricant servers’: drone-like, and safely conforming to social expectations. Sonmi’s “ascension” from slavery to full self-awareness at the instigation of literature is reminiscent of Winston’s intellectual awakening in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, but it is also through her introduction to literature that Sonmi discovers the economic and environmental destruction rampant in her society and ultimately becomes an activist for change, risking her newly found “life” to challenge the perverse underpinnings of her fully corporatized world. Thus literature is linked with economic and environmental ethics, connections that Orwell (understandably) does not make in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Like in *The Book of Dave*, it is Sonmi’s life story and written declarations that survive history so that, in “Sloosha’s Crossin’ an’ Ev’rythin’ After,” which occurs far in the future following a massive apocalyptic event, Sonmi has been elevated to god-like status and her writings into scripture. In this far-future, just like in *Self’s*, an apocalyptic event has completely leveled all social infrastructure and technology and humans have returned to a life of hunting and gathering. Again, like in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *The Book of Dave*, it is Sonmi’s written testimony that is transformative and liberating and, while the writing of it leads to Sonmi’s death, it ultimately immortalizes her.

Post-Print Realities

The two novels that this thesis will focus on at length, Gary Shteyngart’s *Super Sad True Love Story* and Jeanette Winterson’s *The Stone Gods*, have many themes,

concepts, and preoccupations in common with the novels I've just discussed regarding the role of texts in giving shape to particular kinds of dystopias. Both novelists construct futures in which print is not only marginalized but actively distrusted by mainstream society. Yet, both novels also feature a main character (or characters) who privilege print, and regard it as valuable and humanizing, in contrast to the electronic technology that replaces it. In *Super Sad True Love Story*, this technology is the *äppärät*, a tiny tablet that handles all banking, shopping, and communication—it is so pervasive in society that the one character who does not have one is quickly extinguished by government forces. Lenny, who nostalgically clings to nearly-extinct books, sees the *äppärät* changing the way he and his friends interact with one another, and regards the slow, deliberate way of thinking that his books provoke in the reader as being a more genuine and more human way of interacting with the world. In *The Stone Gods*, Billie also sees electronic technology changing the way her fellow citizens interact with the world around them—not only with one another, but also with the natural world. She, like Lenny, is a book-lover in a society that does not value books. Books, for Billie, are connected with history, with time, and with the natural, physical world. They represent a return to the earth, and a groundedness in traditional ways of thinking, being, and behaving.

Shteyngart and Winterson are not alone in their anxieties about the destruction of print, and their fears are also not unfounded. In 2004, The National Endowment for the Arts published a study titled “Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America” headed by Mark Bauerlein.⁷ Using census data, the study finds that “literary reading”⁸ in

⁷ Bauerlein has since published his own study on the effects of the Internet on specifically young minds, rather unsubtly titled *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future (Or, Don't Trust*

America has not grown since 1982” (21) and that despite increases in citizens’ education levels in the past two decades, “literary reading rates decreased for men, women, all ethnic and racial groups, all education groups, and all age groups” (22). The slow disappearance of literature is indeed a reality. Yet what is most interesting about the study, and what preoccupies Shteyngart, Winterson, the postmodern writers I’ve previously listed, and this thesis, is the link made between literature and humanism. What Bauerlein finds is that people who read are far more likely to engage in communal activities such as attending and participating in arts and sporting events: “literature readers are nearly three times as likely to attend a performing arts event, almost four times as likely to visit an art museum, ... over one-and-a-half times as likely to attend sporting events, and over one-and-a-half times as likely to participate in sports activities” (5). Even more intriguing, though, is that literary reading seems to coincide with compassionate actions: “about 17 percent of those who did not read literature did charity work; more than 43 percent of literary readers did. Almost half of literary readers who also read 50 or more books in 2002 (i.e., “avid readers”) did charity work” (2). Evidently, the link Shteyngart and Winterson make between reading for enjoyment and having a compassionate interest in other people who occupy their world, and a desire to connect with them on a genuine level is grounded in data.⁹

Anyone Under 30) (2008) although Bauerlein’s curmudgeonly attitude about (seemingly) all young people and all electronic technology often detracts from the book’s merits.

⁸ The study does not privilege any type of reading over any other. “Literary reading” refers to a wide range of reading from poetry and novels to cookbooks and magazines.

⁹ In my first chapter, I introduce Sherry Turkle’s groundbreaking work *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other* (2011), which demonstrates that social networking technologies do indeed affect users’ empathetic actions towards other people.

Yet theorists have feared the end of print in the face of electronic technology for decades. Neil Postman, for instance, in his influential work *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (1985), fears the effect the television will have on politics, education, religion, and print media. However, Shteyngart, Winterson, and the many other postmodern writers currently examining the future of print are not simply voicing the same concerns that many other theorists have done before them at the advent of any new technology. The Internet, being text-based, offers something fundamentally distinct from previous electronic technologies; it is, by design, the most genuinely threatening to print because it refashions and reinvents tasks and actions that are normally done at a much slower pace: writing letters, paying bills, reading newspapers and books, looking up words in the dictionary, etc.. Because the Internet is multi-directional, it offers instantaneous solutions to real-world, daily problems unlike, for instance, television, which does not permit the viewer to interact with the information being broadcasted. Indeed, in “Reading at Risk” Bauerlein reveals that in 2002, people who did not read literature and people who did read literature regularly watched television for almost exactly the same amount of time on average per day (15, 29). Only avid readers watch slightly less television per day than non-readers or light readers—possibly simply because they haven’t as much time to spend doing so. Clearly, what the television offers is something *different* from literature, for the one cannot be replaced by the other. Yet, as Bauerlein discovers, during the time period when literature-reading rates declined most significantly, the Internet became a sensation and a cultural staple (29). Shteyngart, Winterson, and many other postmodern writers see books being steadily

replaced by the Internet and they explore their anxieties about the social, cultural, and environmental impact of the book's disappearance through the speculative fiction genre.

In *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*, Margaret Atwood suggests that science fiction and speculative fiction¹⁰ provide the ideal space for discussing the consequences of new technologies. By projecting political or cultural ideas into the future, SF can “explore the consequences of new and proposed technologies in graphic ways by showing them as fully operational” (Atwood 62). By depicting new and different living beings, SF can “explore the nature and limits of what it means to be human ... by pushing the human envelope” (62). Because SF is, in essence, travel fiction, in which a narrator describes to the reader on *this* earth at *this* point in time the differences she or he sees in a future culture, SF is, Atwood writes, dependent on information systems and is often preoccupied with them: “[t]here are diaries and journals left by the literary descendants of Robinson Crusoe in the hope that someone in the future may read them; there are strange manuscripts found in copper cylinders; there are metal books, and crystal encoding systems, and hieroglyphs that need deciphering” (73). *Super Sad True Love Story* and *The Stone Gods* are no exception to this rule. They are metafictional in the sense that they are both concerned with the recording of stories and information, including the stories of which they themselves are constituted. At the end of *Super Sad True Love Story*, the reader discovers that everything she/he has read thus far is a book

¹⁰ The labels “science fiction” and “speculative fiction” are often sources of confusion. Atwood defines science fiction as “those books that descend from H.G. Well’s *The War of the Worlds*, which treats of an invasion by tentacled, blood-sucking martians shot to Earth in metal canisters—things that could not possibly happen—whereas, for me, ‘speculative fiction’ means plots that descend from Jules Verne’s books about submarines and balloon travel and such—things that really could happen but just hadn’t completely happened when the authors wrote the books” (6). For the purposes of this introduction, I will refer to both genres as “SF” because both genres, while perhaps distinct, are ultimately interested in doing the same things.

within a book: a compilation of Lenny's diary entries and Eunice's Internet correspondence published after the fact as the best-selling sensation *Super Sad True Love Story*. In *The Stone Gods*, Billie discovers a manuscript—which the reader has just finished reading—called *The Stone Gods* that has been abandoned on a seat on the subway. *Cloud Atlas*, too, is preoccupied with writing, film, and music and each distinct historical section is linked to the one preceding it through some artistic artifact. For example, the first section, “The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing,” is comprised of the titular character's journal entries as he travels around the Pacific Islands in the mid-nineteenth century. In the second section, “Letters from Zedelghem,” Robert Frobisher discovers half of Adam Ewing's journal in a chateau library in Belgium nearly a century later. Evidently, the journal Frobisher reads is exactly the same as the one the reader reads because Frobisher complains that the journal is incomplete and the first section of *Cloud Atlas* ends mid-sentence. True to Atwood's depiction of SF as being preoccupied with information systems, these novelists are clearly concerned with the place of literature in the future to the extent that *their own* artistic work is featured in their respective imagined futures.

Postmodern Preoccupations

[T]he balance between fiction and reality has changed significantly in the past decade. Increasingly their roles are reversed. We live in a world ruled by fictions of every kind—mass-merchandizing, advertising, politics conducted as a branch of advertising, the instant

translation of science and technology into popular imagery, the increasing blurring and intermingling of identities within the realm of consumer goods, the pre-empting of any free or original imaginative response to experience by the television screen. We live inside an enormous novel.

- J.G. Ballard

Shteyngart's and Winterson's anxieties about the end of print and the changes in social and cultural interactions they both see its disappearance bringing about are testament to a broader postmodern nostalgia about a loss of a sense of reality and a desire to reclaim it. Brian Nicol writes that "our age, has, since the 1950s and 1960s onward ... been shaped by significant alterations in society as a result of technology, economics and the media" and that "this has led to significant shifts in cultural and aesthetic production as a result, perhaps even ... changes in the way people who exist in these changed conditions live, think, and feel" (1-2). As our lives become increasingly dominated by media and saturated with information, we lose our concept of reality and authenticity: "we spend most of our time at our desks in front of a computer screen processing 'information' of one kind or another, engaging with symbolic representations rather than real, tangible objects. Much of our leisure time is spent engaging in simulated experiences or consuming more information. Existence has become more 'virtual' than real" (4). Of course, this concept that "the real" has become displaced by mere simulation is most famously articulated by Jean Baudrillard, who argues that our understanding of reality and history has no basis in fact. We consume reality like any other commodity. So, for example, for Baudrillard, our cultural memories of 20th century warfare are *representations* of the actual wars, not the wars themselves: with Vietnam, "the war became film, the film becomes war, the two are joined by their common haemorrhage

into technology” (qtd. in Nicol, 5). This cultural loss of a sense of “the real” causes us to nostalgically desire to recreate and rediscover the existential security of material reality.

Fredric Jameson similarly argues that as the “postmodern city-dweller” increasingly lives a commodity-centred, information-rich life, he or she becomes “alienated, living in an hallucination,” and reality “evaporat[es]” into “depthlessness” (Powell 37). In “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” Jameson writes that we are trapped “in a perpetual present” (554); that “we are unable today to focus our own present, as though we have become incapable of achieving aesthetic representations of our current experience” and that this “is a terrible indictment of consumer capitalism itself ... an alarming and pathological symptom of a society that has become incapable of dealing with time and history” (547-548). Like Baudrillard, Jameson suggests that we nostalgically cling to an *idea* of history that is grounded not in reality itself, but in a multitude of *representations* of reality:

one of the most important cultural experiences of the generations that grew up from the ‘30s to the ‘50s was the Saturday afternoon serial of the Buck Rogers type—alien villains, true American heroes, heroines in distress, the death ray or the doomsday box, and the cliffhanger at the end whose miraculous resolution was to be witnessed next Saturday afternoon. *Star Wars* reinvents this experience in the form of a pastiche: that is, there is no longer any point to a parody of such serials since they are long extinct. *Star Wars*, far from being a pointless satire of such now dead forms, satisfies a deep (might I even say repressed?) longing to experience them again: it is a complex object in which on some first level children and adolescents can take the adventures

straight, while the adult public is able to gratify a deeper and more properly nostalgic desire to return to that older period and to live its strange old aesthetic artifacts through once again. (547)

Thus, according to Jameson, the nostalgic film or book does not resurrect an actual historical reality but rather what was, itself, always a fabrication and an *idea* of reality. The same can perhaps be said of the nostalgic attempts made by Shteyngart's and Winterson's main characters to reconnect with a previous point in history via literary lineage. In *Super Sad*, Lenny privileges print over electronic communication and travels to Italy so that he might feel a deeper connection with his European heritage and more broadly with the European intellectual tradition. Although Lenny's parents immigrated to America from Russia, Lenny was himself born in America and his journey to Italy is simply a product of his romanticization of a culture and a time period to which he has no actual ties outside of those ideas created by centuries of literary representation. His idea of Europe is not grounded in reality but an *idea* of reality. In *The Stone Gods*, the Billie of the first section is immediately identified as an intellectual outlier since she unfashionably rejects urbanity and lives on a farm surrounded by wilderness. Her farm is one of the last of its kind that exists in her culture. Yet, like Lenny, Billie does not actually have any personal connection to a rural life or the agrarian tradition. Agriculture has evidently been non-existent in her culture for enough years that Pink McMurphy, who is fifty-eight and is the archetypal citizen of this hypermodern culture, has never actually tasted real meat because she has consumed lab-grown meat for her entire life. Thus Billie's residence on her farm springs from her desire to resurrect a previous,

pastoral period of human culture that she has never actually witnessed for herself and that, as far as she knows, never even existed in the first place.

Although the nostalgic literary concerns that fuel Shteyngart's and Winterson's speculative novels might be distractingly regressive or one-sided for some readers, and ignorant of the many possible advantages of technology that replaces print, they are, nevertheless, distinctly postmodern. As Christopher Butler writes, "in our new 'information society', ... most information is apparently to be distrusted, as being more of a contribution to the manipulative image-making of those in power than to the advancement of knowledge. The postmodernist attitude is therefore one of a suspicion which can border on paranoia" (3). In *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Marshall McLuhan writes that our new technologies are always an extension of the human body. Thus, our technologies necessarily reflect ourselves and, as we become increasingly used to using them, we become more like them: "Physiologically, man in the normal use of technology (or his variously extended body) is perpetually modified by it and in turn finds ever new ways of modifying his technology. Man becomes, as it were, the sex organs of the machine world, as the bee of the plant world" (55-56). This blurring of the distinction between man and his machine is precisely what worries Shteyngart and Winterson. In each of their novels, it is near-future articulations of the Internet and social networking technologies that replace print and, while these electronic technologies are meant to enhance the human body and the mind, and promise to bring about better and more democratic societies, Shteyngart and Winterson dwell on the negative effects these technologies have on culture despite the obvious improvements they have made on culture in some cases.

My second chapter examines the nostalgic and anxious concerns evident in *Super Sad True Love Story* by exploring Nicholas Carr's recent work *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (2010). Deeply influenced by Marshall McLuhan, Carr argues that media changes the "stuff" and "process[es] of thought" (6). Because the Internet supports non-linear methods of reading, especially when compared to printed books and, specifically, novels, Carr suggests that it fundamentally changes the way we understand and integrate information, the way we communicate with and think about the world, and, consequently, the way we use language and write literature. I also use Sherry Turkle's study *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other* (2011) to examine the changes the *apparat* has on inter-personal relationships. Shteyngart's speculative fiction is intensely interested in the technology that replaces the book within a dystopian America that is experiencing complete economic and social collapse. In contrast to the techno-crazed society around him, our protagonist, Lenny, nostalgically favours the physical, material, sensual world of books over the digital technology of his present: he is a citizen of a different era. In contrast, his young, hip, media-savvy girlfriend, Eunice, has embraced the *apparat* wholeheartedly. Thus social networking technologies and the book are explicitly placed in opposition to one another. The book represents the past and a slower, more focussed and intimate style of communication that is championed by Lenny, while the *apparat* represents a fast-paced, disembodied form of interaction through which relationships are compressed to a commodity represented by digits. As Carr discusses, the Internet, and especially social-networking technologies, cultivate obsessive ranking and a desire for celebrity. If a user stops participating in this digital reality, she or he "risk[s] becoming invisible" (118), and

this fear is precisely what fuels social interactions in *Super Sad True Love Story* to the extent that personal, intimate exchanges shift to become disembodied digital ones.

My third chapter draws from Sven Birkert's *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (1994) to discuss the connection Winterson makes in *The Stone Gods* between print and history. Birkert suggests that a cultural loss of a sense of history is connected to the rise of electronic technology. Because such technologies feature fast-paced information in a steadily-moving stream, they privilege what happens *right now* over what has already happened or what might happen in the future. History is erased as soon as it has occurred in favour of newer information. Books, in contrast, Birkert suggests, cause the reader to become aware of history as he or she develops a linear sense of narrative time. In *The Stone Gods*, this incapacity to understand and grasp history and a sense of time that is brought about by a culture's disregard for print is connected to a waning interest in attending to the needs of the environment. In all three narrative sections, humans destroy their respective environments with evidently no idea (or at least, no concern) that their actions will affect the future of human civilization and the planet. Yet, some book readers do still exist, and they are each more aware of humanity's toll on nature. I suggest that the connection Winterson makes between an awareness of history and a tendency toward environmental consciousness is representative of Henry David Thoreau's influential ecological thinking published in *Walden: Or, Life in the Woods* (1854). Thoreau regards nature as an interconnected web, and when he immerses himself in it he becomes fully aware of this interconnection and his place within the world. For Thoreau, no part of nature—rock, tree, horse, man—is more important than any other part because they are all interdependent. This idea is very

important for Winterson because it is precisely what her nature-wrecking human characters don't understand.

Combined together, these chapters will, I hope, indicate the burgeoning interest in the future of print, and, specifically, literature, within postmodern fiction. But they will also demonstrate how conflicted writers and theorists are about this topic. In his 1987 Nobel Prize acceptance speech that I quoted as an epigraph to this introduction, Joseph Brodsky demonstrates a belief that art gives the reader a sense of autonomous selfhood: a sense that artistic inventions are created by and for the individual, and that therefore the individual is the supreme, heralded being. It is only in this private, isolated state, according to Brodsky, that one can, as *Nineteen Eighty-Four* also suggests, withstand oppression and become a free, liberated, entity. The similarities between Brodsky's, Shteyngart's, and Winterson's arguments will become increasingly evident as this thesis progresses. Yet these writers' concerns also reflect the same thinking that fuels Stephen Marche's ideas, who recently argued that isolation is not necessarily a healthy state for the human to be in. In writing about Facebook in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Marche writes that "within this world of instant and absolute communication, unbounded by limits of time or space, we suffer from unprecedented alienation. We have never been more detached from one another, or lonelier" (n.p.). Like the *apparat* featured in *Super Sad True Love Story*, Facebook allows us to simultaneously communicate with millions of people around the globe, yet even while we are in constant virtual connection with so many people, our bodies still sit isolated behind glowing computer screens. While Brodsky regards privateness as being essential to our becoming autonomous individuals, Marche sees the privateness that social networking technologies like Facebook force on

users as hindering rather than helping our individuality. We don't become empowered by our isolation, but rather enslaved by our loneliness. As we sit isolated and lonely, we fail to make genuine interpersonal connections with other people, and, as a result, culture suffers and shrinks to accommodate only one alienated, disinterested, and unengaged human.

Chapter Two

Social Networking and Social Disconnect in Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story*

What makes us most human ... is what is least computable about us—the connection between our mind and our body, the experiences that shape our memory and our thinking, our capacity for emotion and empathy. The great danger we face as we become more intimately involved with our computers—as we come to experience more of our lives through the disembodied symbols flickering across our screens—is that we'll begin to lose our humanness, to sacrifice the very qualities that separate us from machines.

- Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows*

Creative thinking, working with your mind, that's my number one prescription for longevity. If you stop thinking, if you stop wondering, you die. That simple.

- Gary Shteyngart, *Super Sad True Love Story*

In *Super Sad True Love Story*, Gary Shteyngart imagines a world that is ruled by the *äppärät*—a device very similar to today's iPhone, on which users can shop, send messages, chat, stream videos, catch news, and immediately view the digital profile of any other person in the world. When a character enters a room, the character's *äppärät* instantaneously broadcasts to everyone else in the room his or her personal and professional histories and proclivities, credit ratings, and erotic preferences. The *äppärät* thus mediates all social interactions: before even meeting, people express their interest in each other by digitally ranking each other according to their aesthetic, stylistic, sexual, and economic attractiveness. The *äppärät* figures in society to such an extent that lives are lived almost exclusively in the digital world and the printed word has been almost completely erased by pixels. Our bookish protagonist, Lenny Abramov, is the

much-maligned “last reader on earth” (90),¹¹ and is also coincidentally among the last people on earth to attain an *äppärät*, and can barely figure out how to use it.¹² Lenny mourns the quick and mysterious cultural obliteration of books and it is through his eyes that the reader experiences this fast-paced future that has no time or patience for the aged or the outdated.

The text is narrated by Lenny and also by his young, super-hip sort-of girlfriend Eunice, whose fragmented, emoticon-filled online conversations often reflect her mounting horror at Lenny’s old-fashioned, Luddite notions. Although Lenny’s narrative dominates the majority of pages in *Super Sad*, it is presented as an utterly alien perspective compared to the rest of this society and one that romanticizes the historical, material, sensual, and printed artifact of the book and that revels nostalgically in its aura. Of course, it is Lenny who reflects the novel’s reader—and seemingly Shteyngart as well—because we, like him, are readers of printed texts and therefore invariably find value in the preservation of them. In an interview aired on CBC radio on Dec. 5th 2010, Shteyngart commented, “I think of [Lenny] as an immigrant ... not an immigrant from another country ... but an immigrant from a different civilization” (Shteyngart 2010) and it is not a stretch to think of him as a citizen of *our own* civilization. Lenny’s preoccupation with the *äppärät* and with the changes in social interactions he sees it

¹¹ Lenny’s status as the “last reader one earth” is surely an homage to *Nineteen Eighty Four*, the working title of which was “The Last Man in Europe”. Both Lenny and Winston regard themselves as being *alone* conscious of the oppressive political regime within which they dwell and wistful for a more literary period of history that, they both believe, begets individuality.

¹² Indeed, at the beginning of *Super Sad*, Lenny’s “dated *äppärät*, with its retro walnut finish and its dusty screen blinking with slow data” (15) is often the subject of ridicule. Upon seeing the device, Howard Shu, Lenny’s supervisor, (amusingly) screeches in horror, “Good fucking Christ. What is this, an iPhone?” (69).

bringing about are testament to larger contemporary anxieties about the potential and as-yet-unknown social and economic destruction new information technology may bring about. The novel is a cautionary tale about the cultural collapse and financial and social enslavement made possible in a society comprised of people with no sense of a collective past or future and who care only about themselves.

Shteyngart's future America is in a state of complete economic and cultural collapse. His speculative visions stem from contemporary anxieties about the current state of economic affairs and the ever-accelerating move in our world towards globalization and privatization. Increasingly, over the period of the novel, America becomes more and more of a police state. It is run by Rubenstein, the leader of the Bipartisan Party, which is, despite its name, the only political party existing in America. Like a real-life *Nineteen Eighty-Four*,¹³ Lenny is repeatedly stopped at checkpoints as he moves about New York City and characters watch what they say over GlobalTeens¹⁴ messages for fear of being tracked by government authorities. Government itself has become corporatized. In this future, London is now referred to as "HSBC London," the US embassy in Rome has been sold to "StatoilHydro, [the] Norwegian state oil company" (7), and New York City's transit system is "run on a for-profit basis by a bunch of ARA¹⁵-friendly corporations under the slogan 'Together We'll Go Somewhere'" (103). American citizens are urged to consume. As the political system becomes more perilous,

¹³ Indeed, Lenny meets an aging American sculptor at a party in Rome who makes the connection between the state of his society and Orwell's famous book: "New York is finished these days. American is history. And with those fuckers in charge now, I'm never going back. Fucking Rubenstein. Fucking Bipartisan Party. It's *1984*, baby" (19).

¹⁴ GlobalTeens is the novel's equivalent of Facebook

¹⁵ The American Restoration Authority works as a shady Department of Homeland Security-type office.

the government instructs Americans through a CrisisNet apparatus message, “NOW IS THE TIME FOR SPENDING, SAVING, AND UNITY” (161). Yet, government-authorized consumerism is not enough for this ailing economy. As Joshie Goldman, Lenny’s boss, asserts, “[t]his country makes nothing. Our assets are worthless” (179). He explains:

The dollar has been grossly, fantastically, mismanaged. . . . The ARA has tried a dozen different economic plans in as many months. Privatization, deprivatization, savings stimulus, spending stimulus, regulation, deregulation, pegged currency, floating currency, controlled currency, uncontrolled currency, more tariffs, less tariffs. And the net result: *bupkis*. . . . As we speak, in HSBC London, the Chinese and the EU are in final partnership talks. We are finally no longer critically relevant to the world economy. The rest of the globe is strong enough to decouple from us. We, our country, our city, our infrastructure, are in a state of freefall. (180-1)

As the American economy has steadily fallen into disarray, the country has become increasingly dependent on massive loans from China. After America’s debt to China exceeds 100 trillion dollars, China withdraws its support and threatens to attack (238). America does indeed get targeted by a “Nonnuclear Electromagnetic Pulse” (251)—referred to by characters as the Rupture—which wipes out all electronic communication and renders apparatusi useless, but the identity of the attackers is unknown. The “thirtysomething Media wizards” predict that it was Venezuela or China who attacked America (251), yet Joshie informs Lenny that “[t]his is a controlled demise for the country, a planned bankruptcy. Liquidate labor, liquidate stocks, liquidate everything but real estate. . . . All that stuff about Venezuelan and Chinese warships is all bunk” (256).

Regardless of the source of the attack, the Rupture sends America into complete disorder. Without *āpārāti* in this society that is so completely dependent on satellite communication, regular civilian life ceases and people have difficulty acquiring the basic human necessities of food, water, and shelter. Characters who were once wealthy, successful online personalities and celebrities are forced to find manual labour in any of the public works projects that have cropped up around New York and daily life for citizens becomes a struggle. In Lenny's words, "It's the fall of the Roman Empire" (256).

Yet, while regular citizens are forced to alter their means of existence, Joshie is hopeful for "great possibilities" due to the Rubenstein/ARA/Bipartisan regime collapse that results from the Rupture. His company, Post-Human Services—part of a high-profile company called Wapachung Contingency—survives the Rupture and moves in to take a key role in the future vision of the country as "American 2.0"; a vacation hotspot for European and Asian tourists:

The idea is to rebuild New York as a kind of "Lifestyle Hub" where wealthy people can do their thang, spend their money, live forever ... So every inch of space is going to be accounted for, and the prices are going to be absolutely PREMIUM. And the rest of the country's going to be carved up between a bunch of foreign sovereign wealth funds, with Wapachung Contingency taking over what's left of the National Guards and the army and doing security support (yay for us!). (280)

So, if the one-party police-state wasn't unstable enough, the American government has been virtually absorbed into yet another branch of the Wapachung Contingency and America becomes a playground for the company's own selfish purposes. It is easy to see

America's future as an extension and over exaggeration of our present state of affairs. Lenny, as the novel's central narrator, regards the recent cultural loss of literature as a primary cause of this social collapse on both the national and the personal level. Despite being personally affected by his country's political and economic calamity, Lenny is consistently more concerned with his personal life and the health of his personal relationships than with the health of society as a whole, and what he mourns, much more than the collapse of America, is the tragic state of his own relationships at the hands of the dehumanizing and globalizing apparatus.

In his brilliant and expansive study *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (2010), Nicholas Carr characterizes a shift in his capacity and desire to read books. He connects this shift to his continued exposure to the Internet: "I used to find it easy to immerse myself in a book or a lengthy article. My mind would get caught up in the twists of the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I'd spend hours strolling through lengthy stretches of prose. That's rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration starts to drift after a page or two" (5). What Carr describes is precisely what Marshall McLuhan theorized in his much-quoted concept "the medium is the message".¹⁶ Carr writes, "[a]s McLuhan suggested, Media aren't just channels of info. They supply the stuff of thought, but they also shape the processes of thought and what the net seems to be doing is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation" (5). The Internet, with its many windows, short bursts of text, photos,

¹⁶ In *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, McLuhan counters the popular opinion that the medium or machine itself has no bearing on the message or meaning it creates, that it "was not the machine, but what one did with the machine, that was its meaning or message" (23). Contrarily, McLuhan suggests that, in fact, the medium is what is important because "the 'message' of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs" (24)—that is to say, the "message" of any medium is precisely how it changes the way we think and act.

videos, and plethora of hyperlinks, is specifically designed for multi-tasking. Like the *apparat*-users in *Super Sad*, Internet users can shop, listen to music, catch up on news, and reply to always-arriving emails instantaneously. The Internet is, Carr writes, “an interruption system, a machine geared for dividing attention” (131), and the more we use it, and the more comfortable with multi-tasking we become, the more we beg to be interrupted by the continuously-new information available to us at every moment.

Much like Lenny, Carr connects the shift from reading books to reading text on the Internet to a shift in the level of intimacy that characterizes our relationships with other people. Reading books (and specifically novels), he writes, necessitates that we be meditative, attentive, and undistracted. Reading novels is a solitary and contemplative exercise and, because we must “read deeply” to engage with the text, we begin to think deeply as well, making many difficult connections between ideas spread out across hundreds of pages (65): “[t]o read a long book silently requires an ability to concentrate intently over a long period of time, to ‘lose oneself’ in the pages of a book” (63).¹⁷ In *Super Sad*, Lenny experiences the same difficulty with focusing on a book that Carr describes. The more he becomes immersed in digital culture and preoccupied with his *apparat*, the less likely he is to read a book for entertainment and relaxation or for “deep thinking.” Eunice, who is younger and thus has been exposed to the fast-paced *apparat* for much of her life—and has no experience reading books—is utterly lost and incapable of focusing her attention for long enough to fully engage with a book. After the Rupture, when all satellite communication has ceased and *appara*ti no longer work, Lenny tries to

¹⁷ Of course, Carr’s terminology reveals his romanticization of reading: to “lose oneself” suggests that the book grants the reader an other-worldly and out-of-body experience. Yet, to undistractedly read a book means that the reader is, at the same time, entirely distracted from everything else going on around him/her and focusing narrowly on only one thing.

read to Eunice in bed. He selects Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*—a book Eunice had timidly expressed interest in previously.¹⁸ But the experience is different for Lenny than it is for Eunice. While Lenny recognizes this familiar book and reminisces about his previous experiences reading it, Eunice's "gaze had weakened" (276) and she cannot connect. Several times he repeats the famously erotic scene of Tomas and his mistress standing in front of the mirror in their underwear and a black bowler hat but, as Lenny realizes in this re-reading, "Kundera had put too many words around the fetish for her to gain what her generation required from any form of content: a ready surge of excitement, a temporary lease on satisfaction" (275-6). Books are a foreign language for Eunice. But Lenny, too, admits his own frustration with reading when he tells Eunice: "Even I'm having trouble following this. It's not just you. Reading is difficult. People just aren't meant to read anymore. We're in a post-literate age. You know, a *visual* age" (277). Just like Carr describes, the more time Lenny spends in the digital world playing on his *apparat*, the harder it becomes for him to concentrate on print media.

Carr suggests that although we each read more now than we have ever before because the Internet and our mobile phones are text-based, these digital texts necessitate a completely different style of reading than "deep novel reading" does. Keeping with McLuhan's focus on the importance of the medium itself, Carr suggests that even a book that has simply been digitized affects the reader in different ways than a printed, bound book so that it "turns into something very like a website" and in consequence "[t]he linearity of the printed book is shattered, along with the calm attentiveness it encourages

¹⁸ The selected text is fitting, given that it also depicts doomed love triangles set against the backdrop of revolutionary social and cultural upheaval.

in the reader” (104). Carr argues that the Internet demands a new style of reading and thus of thinking. Rather than reading a page from left to right in a strictly linear fashion, the web is read in fits and starts, in small chunks and samplings. Our minds, then, are easily distracted as we shift our thinking from one topic to the next very quickly. Instead of concentrating on large blocks of text, we scan the text for relevant information and then move on and our engagement with the material is consequently less intimate (7).

Although Carr acknowledges that novels are a relatively recent invention in human history and that our natural animal state is one of distraction and alertness more akin to what web browsing demands (63), he suggests that as we shift away from reading books to reading digital text, the depth of our thinking changes as well. Because our brains are malleable and can adapt to new learning situations, the more time we spend on the Internet rapidly sifting through information, the more our brains will begin to tackle all information in the same rapid, shallow way. “When we go online,” Carr writes, “we enter an environment that promotes cursory reading, hurried and distracted thinking, and superficial learning. It’s possible to think deeply while surfing the Net, just as it’s possible to think shallowly while reading a book, but that’s not the type of thinking the technology encourages and rewards” (115-16). As our depth of reading and of thinking changes, Carr argues, our human relationships change as well: “It’s not only deep thinking that requires a calm, attentive mind. It’s also empathy and compassion. ... the more distracted we become, the less able we are to experience the subtlest, most distinctively human forms of empathy, compassion, and other emotions” (220-221). Carr’s idea is not unfounded. Antonio Damasio, director of the Brain and Creativity Institute at USC, headed a study titled “Neural Correlates of Admiration and

Compassion” in 2009. Damasio discovered that higher emotions, like admiration and compassion, are “inherently slow” and that “[l]asting compassion in relationship to psychological suffering requires a level of persistent, emotional attention” (Marziali 2009). Without such calm, sustained focus, the study suggests, people might never experience compassionate emotions because their minds are simply not capable of developing them at a quick rate. Clearly, Carr’s anxieties over the shift from print information to digital information, and the change in social interactions and intimate relations he sees such a shift bringing about, are not unfounded or particularly unique. They, like Shetyngart’s own anxieties in *Super Sad*, are testament to broader cultural anxieties about the disappearance of print and the consequent ever-accelerating rise of fast-paced digital information media, and the change in human relations this technological shift will potentially bring about.

In *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other* (2011), Sherry Turkle comes to many of the same conclusions that Carr does. Her anxieties over the breakdown of social interactions are similar to those of Lenny in *Super Sad*. Turkle argues that our machines, especially communication technology like instant messaging, texting, and Internet discussion boards, alter our interactions with other people to such an extent that our face-to-face relations change as well—and, in the most extreme instances, no longer even take place. Our technologies make it possible for us to limit the number of genuine, in-person, intimate exchanges we have with other people. Turkle suggests that this tendency has been building over a long period of time:

People have long wanted to connect with those at a distance. We sent letters, then telegrams, and then the telephone gave us a way to hear their voices. ...

By the 1970s, when I first noticed that I was living in a new regime of connectivity, you were never really “away” from your phone because answering machines made you responsible for any call that came in. Then, this machine, originally designed as a way to leave a message if someone was not at home, became a screening device, our end-of-millennium Victorian calling card. ... In the next step, the voice was taken out of voicemail because communicating with text is faster. E-mail gives you more control over your time and emotional exposure. But then it, too, was not fast enough. With mobile connectivity (think text and Twitter), we can communicate our lives pretty much at the rate we live them. But the system backfires. We express ourselves in staccato texts, but we send out a lot and often in large groups. So we get even more back—so many that the idea of communicating with anything but text seems too exhausting. (207)

The *äppärät*, like our own digital communication technology, begs the user to be continuously connected. Eunice and Lenny are constantly sending GlobalTeens messages to their friends and family, and indeed, much of the narrative that comprises *Super Sad* appears in this format. Characters are far more likely to converse and interact through short bursts of chatting rather than actually meeting face-to-face.¹⁹

Alone Together includes countless case stories about people of all ages who use their computers and mobile phones as a protective layer between them and the world. Turkle interviews one young woman whose friend had recently passed away. The woman revealed that she was glad that she heard the news through instant messaging because she

¹⁹ Eunice and her sister Sally, for instance, only meet in person three times throughout *Super Sad* yet they converse with each other over Global Teens nearly every day.

was able to compose herself and keep her emotions in check: “I didn’t have to get upset in front of someone else” (205). Through digital communication, Turkle argues, “you hide as much as you show” (207); you can construct an identity to share with Internet friends that is potentially completely different from your actual identity, so that Internet life often becomes nothing more than carefully maintaining a certain image. Just as the characters in *Super Sad* are ever-occupied with checking and re-checking their triglycerides and stress levels and with flaunting and perfecting their “fuckability” and personality rankings, which are always on display, Turkle reveals that as we become more invested in our social technologies, we become increasingly obsessed with the identity that we display to the world. Maintaining this identity crowds out time spent actually experiencing life so that, as we snap photographs, record videos, collect and share trinkets and stories, “[w]e may end up with a life deferred by the business of its own collection” (300). Our Facebook profiles—and especially Timeline, which was launched in 2011 and is designed to replicate a virtual “timeline” of a person’s life—promote the gathering and subsequent display of information.²⁰ Like profiles on the *äppärät*, they are specifically *created* for the purpose of showing off the events in one’s life. Yet, as Turkle writes, though we are connected to others more now than we have ever been before, “we seem to have damaged ourselves in the process” (293). Rather than becoming more interested in each other, and more intimately connected, social networking technologies potentially bring about “a dramatic decline in interest in other people” (293). Even after spending hours digitally communicating with friends, Turkle

²⁰ Timeline displays uploaded information in a searchable, linear format. The idea is that information, pictures, and events will be displayed about a person’s life from their birth, throughout their life, and until their death. The result is a digital, searchable, edited replica of an individual’s life.

reveals that many people often feel like they have not communicated anything at all. Evidently, replacing face-to-face interaction with digitally-mediated interaction changes the meaning, depth, and effectiveness of these exchanges. For example, Lenny fears that the disappearance of his beloved books is connected to the collapse of social and cultural engagement that he sees taking place all around him. What replaces the book in *Super Sad* is the *äppärät*, and thus Lenny's fears are akin to Carr's and Turkle's own fears about the potentially negative ways in which digital media affect genuine human interaction.

For Lenny (and thus, largely, for the reader), the end of the world and the end of the book go hand in hand. What Lenny mourns in the passing of the printed book is not unlike Walter Benjamin's concept of "aura" famously articulated in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In Lenny's world, the printed book is one of the only material pieces of art left.²¹ As Benjamin writes, what is "authentic" about something is the "history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence," which "includes the changes it may have suffered in physical condition over the years" (22). Thus, aura is grounded in the physicality and materiality of an object. It is specifically his *own* books that Lenny prizes, and the comforting, nostalgic memories that he experiences when he opens their covers. When he reads from his copy of Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Lenny, prompted by his scribbles in the margins, is reminded of his adolescent musings about mortality (275). The scribbles, the underlined text, and the creased pages make this book personal and therefore valuable

²¹ Although the book is itself a reproduction, Lenny privileges the material artifact of the book above the non-material, digital *äppärät*: the book is, in a sense, *more* of an original because it is something that does not intrinsically change and that he can hold in his hand. The *äppärät* is, of course, also held in the user's hand but the information that it projects is digital information that changes at such a rapid rate that the *äppärät* must always be upgraded for a newer and faster model.

to him. Embedded in the material artifact of the book is a history and a record of his interaction with it.

Suffice it to say, Shteyngart's future is cruelly unsympathetic to this way of thinking about the written word. In *Super Sad*, the book not only displays its unique history through the physical changes it has undergone but also its olfactory ones: in this future, books stink (although for Lenny this aroma is what makes books unique). Eunice mocks Lenny's fascination with books, and strangers do too. When Lenny flies from Rome to America, he attempts to pass the time by reading from a book of Chekhov's stories but is interrupted by his seat mate, who complains, "Duder, that thing smells like wet socks" (37). Lenny is forced to return the book to his bag and instead turn to the more tolerated pastime of playing on his odor-less *äppärät*. Later, when he is back home in his Manhattan apartment, Lenny sprays his Wall of Books with Pine-Sol in preparation for his crush, the young and tech-savvy Eunice Park, and her impending visit. He fears that she will be disgusted by the books' old-world smell (52). What clings to books in *Super Sad* is a repellant reminder of history and of age: books only develop a smell over time, and thus their aroma reveals that they are outdated physical artifacts and representative of earlier ways of thinking and of gathering information. Unlike the Internet, which is an arena for consuming information at such a rapid rate that it becomes "a battle to distribute the newest of the new" (Carr 158), books are static and become stale with age. But it is this age and the smell that it produces that Lenny most prizes because it is what makes his books "sacred" (Shteyngart 52). Unlike digital information that constantly changes and betrays no history, books, because they are physical artifacts,

maintain a particular presence. They are, in a sense, more human because they, like us, deteriorate over time.²²

Lenny's romanticization of the physical properties of a printed book is a product of his romanticization of the old world of concrete, non-electric communication that he sees being displaced by the new world of the *apparat* and digital communication. The printed book is a physical artifact that, once procured, maintains its shape, becoming more intricate and meaningful as it ages and as the reader, through scribbles and page-creasings, records history on its surface. The *apparat*, however, hosts digital information that is always shifting and changing, and wipes out history as soon as it has been recorded in favour of an even newer history. What Lenny privileges is the contemplative, solitary, static absorption of literature that is grounded in tradition. Lenny makes an explicit comparison between the old world of books and the new world of the *apparat* in his description of the two women in his life, Fabrizia and Eunice. After a party in Rome, he walks away from his old love, Fabrizia, with his new girl, Eunice, on his arm:

Fabrizia. The softest woman I had ever touched. ... Her body conquered by small armies of hair, her curves fixed by carbohydrates, nothing but the Old World and its dying nonelectronic corporeality. And in front of me, Eunice Park. A nano-sized woman who had likely never known the tickle of her own pubic hair, who lacked both breast and scent, who existed as easily on an *apparat* screen as on the street before me. (21)

Lenny's relationship with the Italian Fabrizia is a product of his romanticization of the literary tradition that rose out of Western Europe. Fabrizia is, like him, a relic from the

²² Although Lenny is employed at a company that allows the superrich to subvert the aging process altogether through various dubious biomedical interventions, Lenny himself, like his books, is wearing down just like the rest of us.

past: she is “nonelectronic.” His description of her reveals that she is a woman of real proportions: she has hair,²³ she has curves, she has a corporeal softness. Like the material artifact of the book, Fabrizia’s body reveals a history. It is her skin that he misses; the feel of her in his hand. After the sensuousness of Fabrizia, Eunice is cold and smooth like a machine. She does not have body hair nor know what it is like to have it. The scent which makes Fabrizia corporeal is absent in Eunice and she is more digital than real. She is so like the technology that she represents that Lenny can only describe her in digital terms: she is not life-sized but “nano-sized.” In his estimation of these two women, Lenny equates the old world with history and the European intellectual tradition, with the physical, sensual, feminine, material world of the body, and the new world with consumerist America, with the young and ever-new, with the cool and disembodied world of the digital. In *Super Sad*, technologies have an indelible effect on their users to the extent that characters begin to resemble them physically as well as psychologically.

Lenny is preoccupied with recording the effect the *äppärät* has had on his friends’ social interactions. He notes that Eunice, for instance, constantly has her *äppärät* in front of her face as she shops for clothes or “GlobalTeens” her friends. Whenever she and Lenny have a fight, he mourns the fact that she immediately descends into the digital world at the first sign of confrontation rather than communicating with him to work through the issue. She, like the young woman Turkle interviewed, would rather hide her

²³ Lenny’s own hairiness is a constant preoccupation for characters. His parents, boss, and girlfriend are always running their hands through his hair, commenting on its colour and its abundance, and the fact that it makes him look like a monkey. For Eunice, Lenny’s hairiness greatly distinguishes him from her other romantic partners: his hairiness is what she finds endearing and is what makes him seem more earnest and more like a “real human being” (75). Lenny’s body is, like his books, more sensual and more *bodily* than the sleeker, hairless and odorless bodies of his contemporaries.

emotions behind a screen than share them with another human being. Even when she is out with Lenny's friends at their local club, Eunice is more absorbed in digitally communicating with people around the globe than interacting with the people sitting immediately next to her. But, as Lenny admits, "[t]here wasn't anything particularly antisocial about this" (153). All of Lenny's friends—and indeed all of the people at the bar—no longer interact face-to-face with their acquaintances for more than a few moments without the mediation and the distraction of the *äppärät*.

If books are, for Lenny, representative of the body and of the materiality of reality, and if what he delights in most is the sensual experience of reading and holding them, then the *äppärät* represents just the opposite. Just as Carr theorizes, with the decline of books comes the decline of meaningful, deep, human interaction and thought. In Lenny's world, inter-personal relationships lack intimacy and depth: Lenny and Eunice, after all, only consummate their relationship a handful of times over the five months of their partnership. The *äppärät* reduces sex to a commodified transaction while, at the same time, it also sexualizes everyone. Lenny receives a new *äppärät* from his boss and is instructed to "[l]earn how to use this thing *immediately* ... [e]specially the RateMe part. Learn to rate everyone around you. Get your data in order. ... Get your mind in the right place" (70). Lenny soon discovers that the new and exciting feature of this *äppärät* with RateMe technology is FACing which means to "Form a Community" (88). Lenny's connection to the material, sensual world and total alienation in this digital one is evident in the fact that he mistakes his friend Vishnu's suggestion "Let's FAC," for "Let's fuck." FACing, while resembling the intimate, physical sexual act, is a digital simulation of it. The *äppärät* affords the user knowledge of all of the intimate details of another person but

in a distant and abstract way. Vishnu explains, “you press the EmotePad to your heart, or wherever it can feel your pulse. ... Then, ... you look at a girl. The EmotePad picks up any change in your blood pressure. That tells her how much you want to do her” (88). The FACer’s äppärät calculates data against the äppärät belonging to the person FACed and delivers an outcome of the engagement. Lenny tries the technology on a girl in Onionskin jeans:²⁴ “The girl across the bar laughed immediately without even turning my way. A bunch of figures appeared on my screen: ‘FUCKABILITY 780/800, PERSONALITY 800/800, ANAL/ORAL/VAGINAL PREFERENCE 1/3/2’” (89). Though Lenny protests that he doesn’t even know the girl, and certainly doesn’t know anything about her personality, his friends explain that “personality,” when it comes to FACing, isn’t anything like what Lenny understands it to be. This “personality” is formed by the amount of data and information a person has uploaded about themselves. Like the Facebook profiles that Turkle discusses, which can be constructed by a user to present a certain image of themselves to the world, profiles on the äppärät can be altered so that personality rankings change. As Lenny becomes more enamored by his äppärät and by the idea of FACing, he uploads more content onto the device, begins wearing different clothing so as to present a different image to the world, and his personality rankings steadily rise. Through FACing, sex is reduced to mere digits, far removed from the intimate, physical, fleshy encounter whose disappearance—like books—Lenny mourns.

Not only does FACing reduce sex to an abstract, digital exchange, but it makes it a commodity that can be ranked and ordered. After this experience, Lenny becomes

²⁴ Onionskin jeans are the current fashion trend among young women. They are exactly what they sound like: transparent, skin-tight jeans that cling to a girl’s body and reveal “all of [her] shaven secrets” (88).

obsessed with analyzing how he is ranked in comparison to the rest of the people who surround him. Carr argues that all social networking technologies cultivate this kind of obsessive ranking when he writes, “[b]ecause we’re often using our computers in a social context, to converse with friends or colleagues, to create ‘profiles’ of ourselves, to broadcast our thoughts through blog posts or Facebook updates, our social standing is, in one way or another, always in play, always at risk” (118). Teens and young people specifically, he writes, who “send or receive a message every few minutes throughout their waking hours,” are intensely preoccupied with staying in the know and in the spotlight: “If they stop sending messages, they risk becoming invisible” (118). In *Super Sad*, this fear comes to fruition. After the Rupture and the subsequent media black-out, Lenny writes in his journal,

Four young people committed suicide in our building complexes, and two of them wrote suicide notes about how they couldn’t see a future without their äppäräti. One wrote, quite eloquently, about how he ‘reached out to life,’ but found there only ‘walls and thoughts and faces,’ which weren’t enough. He needed to be ranked, to know his place in the world. (270)

The suicide victim reveals precisely what Carr suggests: without his virtual social network and the rankings that it confers on him, he is lost in life, and in death he becomes invisible. The äppärät harnesses the user’s desire to be a celebrity. The more information the user uploads about him or herself, the more famous he or she becomes. No longer is it mandatory that a famous person be beautiful or talented or lucky: like reality television, the äppärät brings fame easily within anyone’s grasp. Even Lenny, shaped by the äppärät that he has adopted and learned to love and obsess over, admits that because his äppärät

can't connect during the black-out "I can't connect. It's been almost a month since my last diary entry," and he apologizes, "I can't connect in any meaningful way to anyone, even to you, diary" (271). The *apparat* urges the user to interact with other users in abstract ways that reduce human intimacy to a commodity represented by mere digits. Without these digits, users are lost in the world, unable to function without knowing how they stand in comparison to everyone else.

One of the most glaring consequences of the shift from printed text to the digital world of the *apparat* is that language has changed. Lenny constantly notices signs posted by the American Restoration Authority that have spelling or grammatical mistakes, indicating that a new kind of literacy has become institutionalized: "Together We'll Repare [sic] This Bridge" (100), "Don't Write Us Of [sic]" (179), "America Celebrates It's [sic] Spenders" (208). As Carr suggests, "[b]ecause of the ubiquity of the text on the Net and our phones, we're almost certainly reading more words today than we did twenty years ago, but we're devoting much less time to reading words printed on paper" (88). He continues, "[o]ur indulgence in the pleasures of informality and immediacy has led to a narrowing of expressiveness and a loss of eloquence" (108).²⁵ This "loss of eloquence" is precisely what Lenny grieves when he writes in his diary in a poetical, poignant way only a lover of (old) language could craft:

A month ago, mid-October, a gust of autumnal wind kicked its way down Grand Street. A co-op woman, old, tired, Jewish, fake drops of jade spread across the little sacks of her bosom, looked up at the pending wind and said one word: "Blustery." Just one word, a word meaning no more than "a period

²⁵ Carr's romanticization of literary language is fully evident in his choice of phrase.

of time characterized by strong winds,” but it caught me unaware, it reminded me of how language was once used, its precision and simplicity, its capacity for recall. Not cold, not chilly, blustery. (304)

Inspired by this style of language rather than the new, abbreviated one he sees being adopted all around him, Lenny’s own writing and his own speech mimic the language found in the books that he reads. Although this literary diction and eloquence must be practiced and learned, Lenny considers it natural because language is still what children are first exposed to before descending into the realm of the digital. Watching some children playing one day, Lenny muses, “I relished hearing language actually being *spoken* by children. Overblown verbs, explosive nouns, beautifully bungled prepositions. Language, not data. How long would it be before these kids retreated into the dense clickety-clack *äppärät* world of their absorbed mothers and missing fathers?” (53). In his estimation, the *äppärät* replaces both written and spoken language with a new degraded language. The children’s tentative experiences in the world of language will ultimately be silenced by the mechanical, onomatopoeic form of communication that is championed by the *äppärät*. This is a sentiment that Carr also acknowledges when he suggests, “as the time we spend scanning web pages crowds out the time we spend reading books, as the time we spend exchanging bite-sized text messages crowds out the time we spend composing sentences and paragraphs,” the “circuits that support those old intellectual functions and pursuits weaken and begin to break apart” (120). Just as our depth of thinking changes as we are increasingly exposed to the fast-paced information realm of the Internet, the *äppärät* favours a new, abbreviated language and consequently a user’s own language begins to adopt these same characteristics.

In *Understanding Media*, Marshall McLuhan writes that any new medium of technology is an extension of the body, “an amplification of an organ, a sense or a function” and that this extension “inspires the central nervous system to a self-protective gesture of numbing of the extended area” (157). The *äppärät* in *Super Sad* is not only carried close to the body, a near-invisible pebble worn around the user’s neck, it also amplifies and mimics the body’s functions—and specifically the brain’s. Like our own Internet and computers, the *äppärät* readily stores memories and information so that the user need not exert much mental effort in collecting them—with a click of a button, any information can be accessed and thus the brain need not house such information itself. The *äppärät* is, in a sense, the brain’s external hard drive. Though this extension of the mind is convenient, Lenny, Carr, and Turkle all fear the long-term effects it will potentially have. Carr writes that reading a printed text does not simply draw on our sense of sight but also on touch; reading books is a multi-sensory, physical experience, and the loss of this sensual element has untold effects (90). For Lenny, this physicality of books is precisely what makes them special and unique. Books, unlike the sleek and ephemeral *äppärät*, have a certain smell, a feeling under the fingertips, an element of humanness that surrounds them and ripens with age. The loss of this human dimension is put on display in *Super Sad*. In this dystopic future, America’s economy has collapsed, and the country has been privatized and taken over by a few corporate giants. Urged to become disengaged, well-behaved consumers by their government and by their ever-present *äppäräti*, Americans have become disinterested and meek: “[their] passive heads bent, arms at their trousers” (130). On the personal level, interactions rarely occur face-to-face anymore, and emotions are muted to the extent that characters reveal that they feel lost,

“floating” (46), and insensitive. Emotions are no longer a genuine physical out-pouring of the human mind but a digitized bit of information, “streamed” to millions of viewers (93). Lenny fears that this destruction of human connection is associated with the disappearance of his beloved, bodily books, and his anxieties parallel the reader’s own nostalgia in the face of the inevitable and looming post-print future.

Chapter Three

Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods*: What "Foam of Frog Spawn," John Donne, and the Easter Islands Have to do With the End of the World

[T]he whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind.

- Ralph Waldo Emerson "Nature"

Language is the soul's ozone layer and we thin it at our peril.

- Sven Birkerts *The Gutenberg Elegies*

Planting cabbages and beans is good for you. Creative work is good for you.

- Jeannette Winterson *Why Be Happy When You Can Be Normal*

In Jeanette Winterson's first excursion into science fiction, *The Stone Gods* (2007), recurring characters, appearing in three different time periods and on potentially three different planets, repeatedly make the same mistakes, over and over again: they keep destroying the(ir) world(s). What Winterson depicts is a world (or worlds) in which people are detached from the real—from history, the future, nature, each other, and from themselves. In all three time-periods and on all three planets, characters mourn their incapacity to connect with others and each constantly (and vainly) searches for an elusive "landing place"; a place (or time) to call home. The entwining narratives that comprise *The Stone Gods* can be confusing and difficult to separate, and not only because the main characters in each section have the same names. In the first section, "Planet Blue," Billie Crusoe describes the environmental, political, and economic destruction of her planet, Orbus, which the reader learns is red-coloured and has no history of dinosaurs. The inhabitants of Orbus have just recently discovered another habitable planet, which they

call Planet Blue because of its abundance of water and lush vegetation.¹ Because they have not managed the environment of Orbus properly, and the planet is thus becoming hostile to human life, the inhabitants are hopeful that Planet Blue can become their new home—that is, until Billie and a couple of other space travelers make Planet Blue, too, temporarily uninhabitable by sending a huge asteroid to its surface and triggering a massive ice-age that wipes out not only the dinosaurs that inhabit the planet but all chances of human immigration to it as well. In the second section, “Easter Island,” Billy, a male² shipmate on Captain Cook’s vessel, becomes stranded on a desolate island that is stripped of all vegetation. After meeting and becoming friends with another stranded European man, Spickers, Billy discovers that the island was once lush, heavily forested, and beautiful, “so that no man could want who could stretch out his hand” (110), but that the island’s natives have mismanaged the island’s resources and left it nothing but a treeless, barren rock. In the final two sections, “Post-3 War” and “Wreck City,” which take place on Planet Blue at some point far in the future after the ice-age-inducing asteroid collision that occurs in section one, Billie reveals that her civilization has brought about exactly the same environmental collapse that caused her ancestors to escape the red planet and travel to Planet Blue in the first place: the ice-caps are melting, the atmosphere has become increasingly hostile, and nuclear war has broken out and left what little natural environment still exists radioactive. Clearly, each of these sections illustrates the same human incapacity to understand consequences and treat the environment with

¹ The reader surmises that this planet is Earth—especially after a gigantic asteroid hits the planet and wipes out the dinosaurs, all prehistoric life, and ushers in a planet-wide ice age.

² As is always a concern in Winterson’s writing, gender distinctions are brought into question by this gender shifting. In the first and last sections, Billie is a woman, while in the second section Billy is a man.

respect, but on different scales. Like this novel, which constantly turns back on itself and makes reference to the same characters, the same events, the same ideas, and the same words and phrases, the narratives are continuously repeating. While the reader herself is aware of the pattern, and can understand the situation as a whole, the characters are trapped in a continual, transient present, and are not able to engage with either the past or the future.

In *The Stone Gods*, Winterson links environmental destruction with this disconnection from history. If characters cannot see or imagine a time beyond their present one, they do not have the tools or the vision to preserve the natural environment. Henry David Thoreau's *Walden: Or, Life in the Woods* (1854), a classic and groundbreaking ecological study that virtually created the scholarly genre of eco-criticism, is an obvious precursor to *The Stone Gods*. Thoreau, like Winterson more than a century after him, establishes a connection between nature and humanity, and his ideas are some of the very first in the American literary tradition to esteem nature so highly and recognize the effect it has on the creativity, subjectivity, and inspiration of the human mind. In *Walden*, Thoreau demonstrates that it is through an engaged relationship with nature that humans can witness the depth and interconnectivity of all things and it is *only* in nature, when the mind is quiet and open, that humans can access and experience this wisdom: "not till we are completely lost, or turned around ... do we appreciate the vastness and strangeness of nature. ... Not till we are lost—in other words, not till we have lost the world—do we begin to find ourselves, and realise where we are, and the infinite extent of our relations" (Thoreau 152-3). In *The Stone Gods*, the destruction of

the environment is part of a positive feedback³ loop: characters destroy the environment because they have no concept of (or care for) time beyond the present, but because they destroy the environment they also destroy their chances (according to Thoreau) of grasping the interconnectivity of life and time that is displayed in nature and of gaining a genuine, enlightened, sense of self.

Thoreau's ideas are clearly reflected in Sven Birkerts' *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (1994). Birkerts suggests that a cultural loss of a sense of history is connected to the rise of electronic technology and the decline of print media. While electronic technologies are ephemeral and always changing, print media are, by design, *more* permanent, and reading them promotes an understanding of the depth of time—not only because they are dust-collecting material artifacts, but because reading requires that the reader be attentive to the linear progression of words, sentences, meanings, and narratives. Birkerts suggests that print media promote in the reader a sense of time beyond the present. As readers turn pages and progress down each page, they develop a sense of time that allows them to make connections between narrative events “with earlier contents at every point serving as a grounds for what follows” (122). Understanding a narrative thus becomes an exercise in understanding cause-effect relationships. Birkerts writes: “[t]hrough the process of reading we slip out of our customary time orientation, marked by distractedness and superficiality, into the realm of

³ In *The Environment: Principles and Applications* Chris C. Park defines “positive feedback” as follows: “this exists when the feedback serves to further change the element that originally changed, in the same direction. It amplifies or reinforces the initial change within the system, which was triggered by external factors, so the changes get bigger and bigger” (79). Positive feedback is most easily understood in relation to the melting of the ice caps. As Peter Douglas Ward explains in *The Flooded Earth: Our Future In a World Without Ice Caps*, “as ice melts, rocks are exposed that warm faster than ice does to sunshine, and the world warms. Then ice that previously was just cold enough to stay frozen begins to melt, exposing more rocks, and on and on, growing ever warmer” (127).

duration. Only in the duration state are we prepared ... to question our origins and destinations, and to conceive of ourselves as souls” (32).

The book or printed matter is itself, of course,⁴ a physical artifact that ages as time passes.⁵ History is written on its surface and thus the concept and reality of time is always present because the book is a permanent, material item. As Birkerts writes, as books accumulate in libraries we “form a picture of time past as a growing deposit of sediment” (2). Revealed in Birkert’s choice of phrase is a connection between books and the physical environment—books are part of the natural world and, like geological sediments, reveal a historical record.⁶ Thus, in the pre-literate culture living on Easter Island, history can easily be forgotten or even changed because it is never recorded and it is not shared orally either. The two factions of islanders, the followers of the Araki Mau and the Bird Man, are constantly in disagreement—though it seems the reasons for their disputes are often unclear and they are too distracted by the very idea of fighting to consciously reflect on the source of confrontation. What is clear, however, is that the islanders have managed to completely wipe out all vegetation from the once-lush island over a relatively brief period of time. Apparently, the islanders are not familiar enough with even their short-term history to understand the consequences of such wide-spread tree-felling: they cannot see the pattern of increased environmental destruction that they

⁴ See Chapter 1.

⁵ Indeed, like Lenny in *Super Sad*, characters in *The Stone Gods* associate books with tactile senses: when Billie sees a shelf of books in Friday’s shack she immediately touches them (162) and when Friday brews *real* coffee and the aromatic smell wafts to Billie, she is provoked to pick up Cook’s journals (163).

⁶ Of course, speech is clearly more natural than print, and similar arguments have been made about the rise of print technology as Birkerts makes about the rise of electronic technology.

have created, or, at least, they are too preoccupied with religious commitments to contemplate their real, material world. Although the islanders do have their own script, “Rongorongo,” which uses signs to express full words or phrases, knowledge of the script is not widely dispersed throughout the population; because Spickers has mastered the script, he holds “ceremonial power” (112) on the island. Without a widely recognized written or shared oral tradition of their cultural narrative, the islanders lack an awareness of history and of time.⁷

Birkerts divides reading into two categories: vertical reading, which is narrow in scope but promotes deep thinking and understanding; and horizontal thinking, which is broad in scope but promotes shallow, superficial thinking. He fears that as a product of our new reading patterns, “[w]e are experiencing in our times a loss of depth—a loss, that is, of the very paradigm of depth. A sense of the deep and natural connectedness of things is a function of vertical consciousness” (74). In *The Stone Gods*, the *Robosapiens*,⁸ Spike,

⁷ I am not suggesting that Winterson regards the Easter Islander’s lack of writing as the sole contributor to their island’s environmental degradation or that if they had their own literature they would not have made the same or similar ecological blunders. Winterson makes this clear by juxtaposing the Easter Island society with two future societies taking place on different planets. While the future societies *do* have a rich base of literature, written history, and scientific knowledge, their planets are no better cared for than Easter Island is. Evidently, Winterson is not suggesting that environmental consciousness can be nurtured simply by having access to historical narratives, given that the future societies on Orbus and Planet Blue maintain a vast knowledge of such things yet (like in our own culture) humans choose not to heed this knowledge and continue to selfishly damage their environment. Similarly, the Easter Islanders can obviously *see* the disappearance of vegetation on their island, but they are too preoccupied with religious ritual and inter-cultural strife to actually do something about it.

⁸ The *Robosapiens* has been designed by the Central Power on the red planet and by MORE Industries on Planet Blue to act as an informed, passive, and entirely neutral party when it comes to making important decisions. In the “Planet Blue” section, the robot travels to Planet Blue to gather information about the new planet and assess its capacity to sustain human life. In “Post-3 War” and “Wreck City,” the *Robosapiens* is in the early stages of its development and Billie is employed to talk with it and teach it about the world so that it might interact with other people in a believable way.

who appears in the first and last two sections, ultimately fails to do what her⁹ makers designed her to do. Although she is a storehouse of limitless information and is expected to make neutral, information-based, accurate decisions for the good of humanity, she still manages to send an asteroid into Planet Blue and render the pristine planet uninhabitable: the robot, like the humans she was designed by, has no conception of consequentiality or interconnectivity. As Birkerts writes, “[w]isdom can only survive as a cultural ideal where there is a possibility of vertical consciousness. Wisdom has nothing to do with the gathering or organizing of facts—this is basic. Wisdom is seeing *through* facts, a penetration to the underlying laws and patterns” (75). The cultures on Orbus and Planet Blue take great care to educate Spike about “what it means to be human” (135) and to implant in her limitless facts so that she might, in the future, accurately manage information. Yet, Billie questions her project: “[s]he has all the information, all the education, but if you are not a human, how do you begin?” (135). Clearly, simply “gathering and organizing” information is not good enough. Spike can analyze the atmospheric attributes of a new planet and decide if it is habitable, and she can calculate the distance between an asteroid and said new planet, but she does not conceive of the environmental waste and wreckage strewn throughout humanity’s history, or grasp the part she plays in the continuation of that wreckage on the previously pristine Planet Blue.

As consequences of the cultural shift from print media to electronic media, Birkerts sees three developments likely taking place: “[l]anguage erosion,” “[f]lattening

⁹ The robot, while a machine, is referred to as “her,” and an incredibly sexy “her” at that. Despite being designed to assess information and make important decisions, she, like all things in the cultures which produced her, is hyper-sexualized. Billie discovers that Spike’s beauty is not entirely unnecessary; the robot was also designed to provide sexual relief for the (male) space travelers aboard the *Resolution*. Clearly, beauty is more important to these cultures than truth.

of historical perspectives,” and “[t]he waning of the private self” (128-130). In *The Stone Gods*, all three of these developments are explored. Winterson’s future, like Shteyngart’s future, has moved almost exclusively from print-based to electronic-based technology: there are no longer any books, and the few people left who read or collect them are considered outsiders. Billie is one such book-reader, and when she takes out a real, paper-filled notebook to take notes during a speech, her supervisor, Manfred, expresses his distaste and reveals the same mainstream ideas as the culture in which he exists:

“Billie, if you weren’t so eccentric, you’d fit in better here. Why are you writing in a notebook? Nobody reads or writes any more—there’s no need. Why can’t you use a SpeechPad like everybody else?”

“Notebook. Pencil. They have an old-fashioned charm that I like.”

“And I like the present just as it is. You still living in that bio-bubble thing?”

“You mean the farm? Of course I am.” (8)

Implicit in this exchange is a connection between the shift in language, historical perspective, and private selfhood that Birkerts sees electronic media bringing about. Billie, a book-reader, privileges print, and the slow, deliberate language characterized through it, over the fast-paced, more easily-accessible language that is expressed through the SpeechPad. When questioned about her quirky use of a real notebook, she admits that it is the historical validity of the writing utensils that appeals to her: their “old-fashioned charm.” Manfred’s shift in topic from history to Billie’s “bio-bubble” farm serves to connect language with history and history with nature. Language, history, and nature are all one of a kind, and they represent a previous, simpler way of life. This early conversation sets Billie apart from her contemporaries as an independent, free-thinking,

counter-cultural being: she, in contrast to them, privileges material language, the physical environment, and a previous, historical life that these things remind her of despite such a lifestyle being deemed aberrant by her mainstream contemporaries. Yet, Billie, and her similarly eccentric friends Handsome and Friday, also clearly romanticizes the past. Rather than living in the present, she dwells on a patch of farmland that is, as she herself describes, like a step back in time (11). Handsome, too, nostalgically dwells in the past, leading a fairytale life as a self-described space pirate while he surrounds himself with seventeenth and eighteenth century travel literature. And Friday lives in Wreck City, a place where inhabitants attempt to scratch out a living with out-of-date currency and vintage brands of food, while his own name is explicitly taken straight from Robinson Crusoe, a novel which he clearly romanticizes for its championing of the solitude and self-sufficiency that is necessary for the castaway to endure. Though these characters are at once presented as being more genuine and self-aware because they choose to live a counter-cultural life, they are, at the same time, obviously nostalgic for a romanticized life that may not have ever existed.

Beyond Language and the Literate

Like many others, Birkerts worries that as culture moves from being based on print to being dominated by electronic communication, language will drastically change:

The complexity and distinctiveness of spoken and written expression, which are deeply bound to traditions of print literacy, will gradually be replaced by a more telegraphic sort of “plainspeak.” Syntactic masonry is a dying art. ... Simple linguistic prefab is now the norm, while ambiguity, paradox, irony, subtlety, and wit are fast disappearing. (128)

While languages are, of course, always in flux and always adapting new words into their vocabularies, Winterson's anxieties in *The Stone Gods* about the destruction of language are similar to Birkerts'. In the first section, our narrator, Billie, reveals that "[s]ingle-letter recognition is taught in schools" so that, as she describes her culture's vehicles, she explains that "S is for Solo—a single-seater, solar-powered transport vehicle. L is for Limo, a multi-seater hydrogen hybrid. S is for short-distance. L is for long-distance" (10). In Winterson's imagined future, language has been reduced to such an extent that not only are words shortened to single letters, but street signs are no longer word-based but picture-based.¹⁰ When Billie drives in her Solo in search of Belle Vue Drive, the street sign displays not the name of the street but rather a picture of a bell. Billie explains: "Etymology was one of the victims of State-approved mass illiteracy. Sorry, a move towards a more integrated, user-friendly, day-to-day information and communications system. (Voice and pictures, yes; written words, no)" (13). Her obvious sarcasm solidifies her position as an outsider in this culture; rather than simply accepting this new, abbreviated language, she negatively compares it to a style of communication that has since passed out of daily use. Clearly, Billie represents Winterson's anxieties about the future of language and literature, and her position as an outsider in this culture mirrors Winterson's own nostalgia for a previous, more literate, period of history.

Not only has language shifted in Winterson's futures, but reading habits have changed as well. Print books no longer have a place in the future cultures depicted in *The Stone Gods*. As Billie reveals in the final sections of the novel, "[b]ooks had been lost like everything else in the War, and Post-3 War we hadn't returned to print media.

¹⁰ This move in written language mimics a regression to pictographs.

Natural wastage was the economic argument: why go back to something that was on the way out anyway? You can order books from Print on Demand, but most people use Digital Readers now, or don't read at all" (162). In all three time periods that comprise *The Stone Gods*, it is the free-thinking Billie and her outcast friends Handsome, in the first section, Spickers, in the Easter Island section, and Friday, in the final section, who read and value literature. Never are books found at the centre of culture but rather always on the fringes. Billie keeps books in her house on the aptly-named Cast Out Farm among her cows, and dog, Rufus, who are "real-life out-of-date animal[s]" (42), and her farmhouse table with "messy real food on it: a brown loaf, butter, eggs" (43) and pastureland and her beloved "broad, active stream with watercress growing in the fast part, and flag iris on the bank, and a willow bending over the water, and a foam of frog spawn, and a moorhen sailing the current" (39-40). Here, books are part of nature, simplicity, and history, and far removed from the busy technological culture in which Billie works. Handsome, too, has a library of books on his starship, *Resolution*. He acquired the books "in a strange part of the sky" when his ship flew through a "bookstorm" of "encyclopedias, dictionaries" and poetry and Shakespeare anthologies (49). As well as Billie's secluded farm, it is only in space (and, indeed, a "strange" part of it), in a limbo state in No-man's land, where books can survive. On Easter Island, Billie and Spickers keep books in their cave, which is set apart from the dwellings of the rest of the islanders. These two men are outcasts on the island: European, white, literate, and alone conscious of the irreparable environmental destruction that has been wreaked on the small sea-bound rock. In the final sections of the novel, books appear again at the margins of society: here Billie finds them in Friday's shack in Wreck City, a place with

“no laws, no rules, no quotas ... real life, not some puppet show” (153-4). The “city” is a place “where you want to live when you don’t want to live anywhere else. Where you live when you can’t live anywhere else” (151), and books, not welcome elsewhere in mainstream society, find their home at the margins of it with the counter-cultural weirdos. Again and again, the reader discovers books scattered across space and time in places and spaces where they are least expected. They are not rationally and meticulously ordered in state-funded libraries but hidden in caves, hoarded in rickety tin shacks, and collected like garbage in the black void of inter-planetary space. Books are strange and alien and even dangerous. And after repeatedly coming across them in such ceaselessly bizarre and compromising situations, the reader questions whether it is mainstream society that has pushed the book-lover to the margins of society or if it is the book itself that has dragged the book-reader there. Perhaps, in fact, the books do not belong with the weirdos because they don’t belong elsewhere, but rather it is the books that have created the weirdos in the first place.

Birkerts writes that as language becomes increasingly “impoverished,” literature will become harder and harder to find, and “[f]ewer and fewer people will be able to contend with the so-called masterworks of literature or ideas. Joyce, Woolf, ... not to mention the masters who preceded them, will go unread, and the civilizing energies of their prose will circulate aimlessly between closed covers” (129). Underwriting Birkert’s anxiety is his romanticization of the humanistic powers of literature to “civilize” readers: literature unquestionably affects readers positively, and inherent in the “masterworks” is some aspect of genuine human wisdom that is otherwise missed by non-readers. In *The Stone Gods*, Winterson displays similar romantic ideas about how print positively

changes a reader's life to the extent that literature is actually seen to *save* lives:¹¹ Billie survived nuclear war because, she explains to Friday, "I had been in the British Library, researching the history of artificial intelligence. It was the books that saved my life. As the building collapsed I fell on to a raft of books, and stacks of books fell on to me, knocking me unconscious but casing me from further damage" (164). In the first section of the novel, after Billie, Handsome, the *Robosapiens*, and their ship have become trapped on a rapidly-cooling and darkening Planet Blue, Spike pledges to stay with the ship. She won't be alone, she explains, because she has Handsome's expansive library to keep her company. Handsome loses his faith slightly and suggests that books didn't save them from their present peril, and Spike asserts that books have saved them "[n]ot once, by many times. ... It was never death you feared: it was emptiness" (78). But Spike, though she claims that literature fills a void within our being, and though she, too, finds comfort in literature's society, is herself not capable of understanding the intricacies and meanings of literature. Though Handsome has read John Donne's "The Sun Rising" to her countless times, and though she can recognize the beauty of Donne's words, she does not grasp the poem's significance: "I can read several languages and I can process information as fast as a Mainframe computer, but I did not understand that single line of text" (66). It is Billie who must explain to Spike that the poem is about love (an emotion that Spike cannot, herself, experience). Thus literature is represented as a distinctly *human* creation—it speaks to the genuinely and distinctly human aspects of our being.

¹¹ The obvious counter-argument here is that if books truly were at some point part of the collective cultural memory, and if the romantic, more literate period of history that Billie and her book-loving friends mourn did, indeed, exist, then it was those very books and that very habit of book-reading that led culture to make the horrific and terrible mistakes that it has made. Books are, quite possibly, the *cause* (or at least one cause) of the mess that culture has found itself in.

Clearly, literature for Winterson is life-giving: it literally saves lives but also enriches them and makes them fuller, more human, and more grounded in the tactile, material world.

Historical Ignorance and Natural Negligence: Why a Perpetual Present Destroys the World

Like books, nature is seen as quickly disappearing in *The Stone Gods*, and uncoincidentally the same characters who nostalgically cling to books also privilege nature. Literature and nature are ascribed the same civilizing qualities. If Billie is regarded as one of the only sane, fully conscious, and self-aware inhabitants of her culture, it is as much the literature that she hoards in her farmhouse that elevates her to that level as the pristine patch of nature that she retreats to at the end of every day. In *The Shallows*, Nicholas Carr describes how he increasingly finds it difficult to concentrate on writing his book while living in the information-rich, buzzing world of Boston: he is too preoccupied with checking his email and mobile phone countless times per hour. Like Henry David Thoreau's move to the Concord woods over a century before him, Carr moves to rural Colorado in an effort to concentrate fully on his work. The move effectively removes him from his electronic distractions: his new home does not receive cellular service and has only a very basic Internet connection. And in this more natural, slower-paced setting, Carr witnesses a change in his concentration and work ethic: "I started to feel generally calmer and more in control of my thoughts—less like a lab rat pressing a lever and more like, well, a human being. My brain could breathe again" (199). His own personal experiment has results similar to Marc Berman's psychological study conducted at the University of Michigan in 2008 and published in a report called "The Cognitive Benefits of Interacting with Nature." In the experiment, Berman and his

team performed cognitive tests on university students. Students were asked to remember random digit sequences and repeat them backwards. After completing the tests, half of the students were instructed to walk for an hour in nature, in a park-like setting away from traffic or other people, and the other half were instructed to walk through downtown Ann Arbor. After the walk, the students were again given the cognitive tests. A week later, the experiment was repeated but the students who walked in nature were instructed to walk in the city, and vice versa. After completing the experiments with several groups of volunteers over several months, Berman found the results were extremely interesting: “performance on backwards digit-span significantly improved when participants walked in nature, but not when they walked downtown” (1208). The results did not change depending on the participant’s mood or different weather conditions. In fact, Berman found that nature affected participants’ cognitive functioning to such an extent that simply *looking* at a photograph of nature improved test results while looking at photographs of urban settings did not (1209). Berman concludes his report by asserting that “simple and brief interactions with nature can produce marked increase in cognitive control” (1211). The mind needs nature, it seems, to function at its highest capacity.

Carr’s and Berman’s concept that the mind is most at ease when immersed in nature is not altogether new, but rather representative of a phenomenon in the American literary tradition that dates back to at least the mid-nineteenth century. As Roderick Frazier Nash remarks in *Wilderness and the American Mind*, it was the “literary gentlemen wielding a pen” who were first to consider American nature something that

should be praised and protected (44). Even as early as 1818, Estwick Evans,¹² a Thoreau-like character and lover of nature, exclaimed: “[h]ow great are the advantages of solitude!—How sublime is the silence of nature’s ever-active energies! There is something in the very name of wilderness, which charms the ear, and soothes the spirit of man” (Nash 44). Perhaps most famously, Thoreau moved to Walden Pond on July 4th, 1845 to “live a primitive and frontier life” so as to “learn what are the gross necessities of life” (11). The move was an Independence Day of Thoreau’s own; like Carr’s move away from Boston and the high-tech conveniences he found there, Thoreau chose to move to the woods and away from all modern conveniences and entrapments because, he claimed, “[m]ost of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind” (13). It is only after shedding such material possessions and returning to a more primitive, simple lifestyle, that Thoreau believes man can regain his genuine selfhood. Indeed, Thoreau discovers the very same clarity of thought in nature that Carr and Berman also describe. His residence in the woods of Walden, he reveals, “was more favourable, not only to thought, but to serious reading, than a university” (88). The quiet and solitude Thoreau finds in nature help his mind to relax and focus on deeper thoughts.

Provoked by Ralph Waldo Emerson, who believed that “in the woods we return to reason and faith” (Emerson 17), Thoreau proclaims,

¹² In 1818, Estwick Evans walked west from New Hampshire to Detroit in the dead of winter with few possessions but for the barest of necessities and his two faithful dogs. In *Evans’s Pedestrious Tour: Concord, New Hampshire, 1819*, he explains: “I wished to acquire the simplicity, native feelings, and virtues of savage life; to divest myself of the factitious habits, prejudices and imperfections of civilization; to become a citizen of the world; and to find, amidst the solitude and grandeur of the western wilds, more correct views of human nature and of the true interests of man” (102)

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. ... I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms. (80)

Fleeing from the shackles of money, work, and social expectations all revolving around material possessions,¹³ Thoreau immerses himself in nature and defines himself by her cyclical rhythms. He sees himself as being truest and most subjective when he experiences time naturally: “[m]y days were not days of the week, bearing the stamp of any heathen deity, nor were they minced into hours or fretted by the ticking of the clock” (100). Time for Thoreau is marked by the seasons; by a deep and profound connection with nature. Indeed, natural time is so important to Thoreau that he organized *Walden* around the turn of the seasons and the book takes place over one year ending with the physical and spiritual awakening of “Spring.”¹⁴ Thoreau praises the cyclical aspect of nature, regarding the progression of seasons, the progression of the days, the weather that decides his actions, with the utmost respect because this cycle, he believes, reveals a master hand at work and thus the innate goodness and perfectness of the natural world. Similarly to Thoreau, Birkerts writes that calm and genuine self-awareness is not possible in an electronic culture that privileges the present and artificially measures time:

¹³ Amusingly, a woman once offered Thoreau a doormat but he refused it, claiming he had no place to keep it or time to shake it out and concluded that “[i]t is best to avoid the beginnings of evil” (59).

¹⁴ Thoreau’s preoccupation with natural time is particularly evident in the fact that his book occurs over one rounded year but his actual residence in the Concord woods lasted two years. *Walden* itself reflects this cycle of nature as the sections fluctuate between finite descriptions of nature and abstract philosophical musings.

Electricity and inwardness are fundamentally discordant. Electricity—and the whole circulatory network predicated upon it—is about immediacy; it is in the nature of the current to surmount impedances. Electricity is, implicitly, of the moment—*now*. Depth, meaning, and the narrative structurings of subjectivity—these are *not* now; they flourish only in “duration.” Duration is deep time, time experienced without the awareness of time passing. . . . Time not artificially broken, but shaped around natural rhythmic cycles; time bound to the integrated functioning of the senses, the perceptions. (219)

Thus, according to Birkerts, the mind is most at ease (and effective) and most genuine when one is immersed not in the immediacy of electronic time, but in the vast circuitry of *natural* time.

As a result of his experience, Thoreau demonstrates a belief that nature is the point of access to the divine: a divine that exists as much in the self as in the external world. For Thoreau, nature symbolizes all that the self ought to ultimately strive for—beauty, harmony, order, balance. Reflecting Emerson’s belief that (as quoted earlier) “in the woods, we return to reason and faith,” Thoreau assumes that such states do exist; that humans are, intrinsically, reasonable and faithful beings, but that these characteristics have been displaced by a stifling society that counters man’s natural state. Thoreau sees nature as in harmony with the human’s natural state, and suggests that by dwelling in and with nature, we can finally access the divine. For Thoreau, all of nature is interconnected and all life within it is no more or less important than any other life. Similarly, in *The Stone Gods*, life is represented as being so inescapably interconnected that worlds

continuously repeat, lives are lived over and over, and the same events keep happening. Billy sees Spickers' body plummeting from the sea cliff during the egg race as "a star out of its orbit and coming to earth" (115), and, as Susana Onega explains in "The Trauma Paradigm and the Ethics of Affect in Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods*," this realization "reinforces the idea that, at the moment of their physical deaths, the souls of Billie and Spickers, like Handsome's books, have transcended the material world and become one with the cosmos, where they will stay in harmonious unison until the next cosmogonie cycle" (140). Life, in *The Stone Gods*, is interconnected and interdependent just as it is in *Walden*. Dwelling in nature, becoming one with it, Thoreau believes, makes us aware of this interconnection, and displaces us from the centre of our own universe—we become aware of the depth and humbling vastness of the world. Like Birkerts, Carr, and Berman, Thoreau considers nature vital for genuine human selfhood.

In *The Stone Gods*, Winterson displays an identical attitude toward the natural world. When she walks through the eerie, radioactive forest in the Post-3 War world, Billie begins to muse about nature, and about her memories of it. She thinks of beech trees and her thinking reveals the depth that she ascribes to nature: "[b]eech trees are easy to climb, and in their tops is a green and secret world. At their bottoms, under foot is the crunch of the sharp-shelled beechnuts, and a different world, lower, mysterious, the micro-tunnels of mice and weasels" (169). For Billie, a beech tree is not simply a one-dimensional object but rather a microcosm. Different plant and animal species dwell on different physical levels of the tree and her contact with them provokes different tactile responses: the entire experience is unique and representative of the interconnectivity of all of nature. She, like Billy on Easter Island, is aware of the consequences of

mismanaging the environment and sadly muses, “My country, the British Isles, was a wooded place, a place so wooded that when the Romans rowed up the Thames they could find no landing-place. Now I can’t find any landing-place either, not for the woods but for the loss of them. I scan the shoreline, search, settle, then there’s a car park coming, or another road” (168-9). Nature on the British Islands, like on Easter Island, has been mismanaged by short-sighted entrepreneurs and ultimately and irreparably destroyed. Humans on both past and future islands have not understood or grasped the long-term effects of their actions—on Easter Island because they are blinded by religious zeal and continuous warfare, and on Orbus and Planet Blue because they selfishly desire material wealth and neglect the masses of information available that reveal the destructive toll humanity has had and continues to have on the environment. But Billie privileges nature and, like Thoreau, recognizes that it represents a more interconnected, vast conception of time than humans are used to. In the first section of the novel, Billie returns to her “bio-bubble” farm and her description of it reveals her Thoreauvian sentiments:

[I]n the middle of this hi-tech, hi-stress, hi-mess life, F is for Farm. My farm. Twenty hectares of pastureland and arable, with a stream running through the middle like a memory. Step into that water and you remember everything, and what you don’t remember, you invent. My farm is the last of its line—like an ancient ancestor everyone forgot. It’s a bio-dome world, secret and sealed: a message in a bottle from another time. (11)

Her choice of words demonstrates that nature, for Billie, is connected with history: the stream is like a “memory”; its water makes one “remember” or “invent”; and the farm is a forgotten “ancestor”—history sealed in a bottle. Her home is not only a physical refuge

from the high-tech culture in which she works, but a temporal refuge as well: it represents time immemorial.

In contrast to Billie's astute and sensitive experiences in nature, Pink McMurphy, a traveler to Planet Blue on the *Resolution*, and perfect product of her culture,¹⁵ is horrified by the natural world she discovers on the pristine and as yet un-developed Planet Blue: "I'd rather be in a bar overlooking an artificial lake—one where the fountain comes on every hour, and where the trees are all pollen-free, and where you can get a great steak and go dancing at midnight" (71). For Pink, nature is not something to become immersed in like it is for Thoreau and for Billie, but something to contain and exploit like any other material resource. It is not deep but rather one-dimensional. But even Pink can't help but be positively affected by nature as she spends more time in it (out of necessity; not choice). She learns to cook a fish—what she once called "Fossil Food" out of disgust and fear—and is "astonished by the taste and freshness of what she had made" (73). The fresh air and fresh food of this new, wild planet allow Pink to distance herself from her life back on the red planet with her abusive, disrespectful husband who abandons her for newer, younger, sexual partners. She begins to question her decision to genetically revert to age twelve for his sake and admits that she hasn't even missed him since being away (74). By becoming immersed in nature, Pink begins to think more clearly, separate herself from her society, and gain an element of genuine

¹⁵ She is fifty-eight in biological years, the reader discovers, but she has genetically "fixed" in her 20's and is currently in legal arguments with Billie and her department at Enhancement Services because she would like to genetically revert to age twelve so that she can look like the pop star Little Sinorita and as such "win" her husband's affections back. Interminably clothed in pink school girl uniforms, her body sculpted more out of plastic than out of flesh and blood, Pink is a product of her culture. She is a perfect consumer; not asking questions but blindly desiring and buying whatever new, hot item is on the market.

selfhood that she has not experienced before. Nature, for Winterson, as for Carr, Birkerts, and Thoreau, is a refuge; a place where the brain can relax and the mind can think clearly; a place where one becomes aware of the vastness of time and the interconnectivity of all things.

In Place of Subjectivity

Birkerts' third source of anxiety as we move into an age based more on electronic technology than print technology is a fear of "[t]he waning of the private self" (130). He worries that "[w]e may even now be in the first stages of a process of social collectivization that will over time all but vanquish the idea of the isolated individual," yet, he clarifies, "I am not suggesting that we are all about to become mindless, soulless robots, or that personality will disappear altogether into an oceanic homogeneity. But certainly what it means to be a person living a life will be much changed" (130). As we are increasingly dependent on the "system," and our computers and cell-phones and GPSs are constantly switched on, the time we spend as isolated, subjective individuals drastically shrinks. "The self must change as the nature of subjective space changes," Birkerts writes, "[a]nd one of the many incremental transformations of our age has been the slow but steady destruction of subjective space" so that "[t]here are no more wildernesses, no more lonely homesteads, and ... no more emblems of the exalted individual" (130).¹⁶ Birkerts reveals the same tendency to connect subjectivity with nature and isolation that Thoreau himself reveals in *Walden* and that Winterson also displays in *The Stone Gods*. Much of the first section of the novel is comprised of Billie's explanations about the technological advancements of her culture and the extent to which

¹⁶ Birkerts's romanticization of isolation is clearly in opposition to Stephen Marche's idea that privateness is not healthy but actually hindering to the individual.

humans rely on different types of robots to drive, to clean, to read, and, ultimately, with the advent of the *Robosapiens*, even to think. Switching off is virtually impossible because human life has become so completely integrated into the electronic system. Indeed, humans have become so used to robots making their lives more simple that they have begun to actually *become* part robot: they genetically “fix” their age so that they can remain ever-young and ever-beautiful; they sculpt their bodies out of silicon and plastic so that beauty becomes a competition over how unique one can be (translucent people, giantesses, grotesques, and, to Billies’ dismay, children are the current sexual fads on Orbus); and “everyone is young and beautiful” but also “bored to death of sex” (19). Winterson’s anxiety over a hyper-technologized future cannot be more evident than in a population of humans whose bodies are actually part machine and whose level of genuine human connection has shrunk to such a state that people are no longer attracted to each other. On Planet Blue, too, Billie describes the increased infringement of electronic technology on her life and its role in the resulting nuclear war:

Identity cards. Tracking devices in vehicles. Compulsory fingerprint database. Guilty until proven innocent. No right of appeal for convicted terrorists. ... Stop and search. Police powers extended to ‘reason to believe...’ End of dual citizenship. Curfew Zones. Routine military patrols in ‘areas of tensions’. CCTV on every street. CCTV compulsory in mosques. ... No demonstrations, on-line protests shut down, those responsible cautioned. ... Right to enter homes and businesses without a warrant. (130)

As the human society on Planet Blue hurtles toward complete social, economic, and environmental collapse, it is the “waning of the private self” that is represented as being a

large part of the problem. People have stopped thinking for themselves and are instead being fed ideas and thoughts by whatever political party or corporation is currently in power.

In contrast to mainstream society, it is again Billie who stands on the outskirts and resists the collectivizing powers of electronic technology and it appears that a respect for nature and love of literature are two necessary aspects of her individuality. On Orbus, she is one of a very few individuals who have not genetically “fixed” her age and as such she is labeled a terrorist and sent on a dangerous mission into outer space. She dwells on a piece of the last remaining wilderness, separated from the rest of society by a strip of protected forest and pasture land. She has consciously and deliberately made the effort to extricate herself from mainstream society and stand on the outskirts, looking in. While other characters—and indeed all of society—desire to live a celebrity life under the limelight, Billie shrinks from any spotlight and retreats in solitude. It is clear that she regards herself as being more fully conscious than her contemporaries. She defines herself simply: “I am human. I am thirty. I am alone” (25). Revealed in her description is a privileging of age and of solitude. She defines herself as being *alone* human and thus implies that the humans who surround her on Orbus are *not* human in the same way or to the same extent that she is. “Humanness” in *The Stone Gods* is innate only to those few individuals who seek it by rejecting mainstream society and the electronic entrapments society depends on, and becoming single, solitary, and fully conscious.

Time in *The Stone Gods* is not a linear trajectory but a circle of continuous return. Over and over again, inhabitants of Orbus, Easter Island, and Planet Blue make the same environmentally-destructive and selfish mistakes. What characterizes all of the cultures

depicted in *The Stone Gods* is an ignorance of even short-term history. Characters fail to grasp the potential consequences of their actions, and cannot see the ever-repeating pattern of their past mistakes. Without a shared oral or printed record, history vanishes. Yet not all of the characters in this novel are out of touch with history: Billie, Handsome, Spickers, and Friday privilege books and the history and vastness of time that print represents. As the inter-stellar “bookstorm” through which Handsome’s spacecraft flies demonstrates, books are permanent; they do not simply disappear when they are no longer read. Books are a historical record and serve to connect different periods of time together. Indeed, books play a key role in unifying the different time periods of *The Stone Gods*. In the first section, Billie discovers Captain Cook’s journal aboard the *Resolution*. She keeps the book with her throughout the asteroid collision and, in the final moments of her life and in the final pages of the chapter, she revisits the journal and reads from it and with her dying breath voices a belief that “[t]his is one story. There will be another” (92). It is Captain Cook’s journal that links the second section with the first: Billie is now Billy, a shipmate on Captain Cook’s vessel, the *Resolution*. The third section, too, is linked to the preceding sections through a book. This time, Billie discovers a forgotten manuscript of *The Stone Gods* on an empty seat on the London tube. The book is thus very clearly at the centre of Winterson’s conception of time and history.

Sven Birkerts suggests that it is books specifically that provoke us to conceive of a time beyond the present; they make us aware of what he calls “deep time,” and humble us in the face of the vastness of eternity. For Henry David Thoreau, this awareness of time comes through an immersion in the natural world and a rejection of the material comforts and possessions of mainstream culture that distract us from discovering our true

and genuine self. Winterson's *The Stone Gods* clearly demonstrates an intersection of these two theories. Trapped in a continuous loop, characters are ignorant of time beyond the present and consequently mis-manage the environment because they haven't the capacity to conceive of the future effects of their present and past actions. However, the more they destroy the environment and become increasingly estranged from it, the less they are able to understand the depth and interconnectivity of all things and, thus, of treating the environment with respect and forward-thinking care. In writing about *The Stone Gods*, Winterson connects her novel with the real world when she explains,

I have said many times that I believe our time to be unique in the history of the world. Either we face our environmental challenges now, or many of us will perish, and much of what we cherish in civilisation will be destroyed. I am sorry to sound apocalyptic, but this is what I believe. *Stone Gods* isn't a pamphlet or a docu-drama or even a call to arms, it is first and foremost a work of fiction, but I am sure that change of any kind starts in the self, not in the State, and I am sure that when we challenge ourselves imaginatively, we then use that challenge in our lives. I want the *Stone Gods* to be a prompt, but most of all, a place of possibility. (2008)

Revealed in her words is a privileging of imagination, of creativity, of personal and genuine inspiration. Of all of the characters in *The Stone Gods*, it is Handsome, the "space privateer ... a swashbuckling freelance predator with semi-official sanction" (46-7), believer in love and actual procreation (in a culture that practices "womb-free" reproduction), and reader of literature, who, alone, grasps the pattern of environmental destruction taking place throughout human history. Handsome recognizes that the world

is constantly repeating, and that humanity has left a string of broken, angry, desolate planets in its wake. Sadly, despite his singular ability to recognize humankind's mistakes, Handsome commits the very same closed-minded and selfish blunders as the rest of his species when he sends an asteroid into the pristine Planet Blue and abuses even this evolutionarily young planet. So, perhaps merely an understanding of history and literature is not enough. Perhaps it can only be, like *The Stone Gods* itself, a "prompt" for further genuine, selfless acts; a push in the right direction.

Chapter Four: Conclusions

This thesis has, I hope, demonstrated the escalating amount of postmodern creative and theoretical scholarship produced in recent years that is concerned with the place of literature in the future. While I have not, in the least, exhausted the subject, or even come close to a definitive “answer” as to why this phenomenon exists, I have provided an interpretation of the concerns explicit in two novels by Gary Shteyngart and Jeanette Winterson. I have selected these novelists’ works to discuss at length because their novels exhibit many of the same anxieties and share these anxieties with many of the other novels I mentioned in the introduction to this thesis. While Shteyngart’s and Winterson’s preoccupations are representative of this phenomenon, these novelists are each, as the preceding chapters have demonstrated, interested in different aspects of print and its future (potential) disappearance. Similar explorations of other novelists’ postmodern dystopias could yield interesting results and develop a more thorough and finished picture of this literary phenomenon and I hope that other scholars will continue this examination in the coming years.

In my second chapter, I argued that Shteyngart’s *Super Sad True Love Story* considers the book nearly extinct. In this near-future dystopian America, print has been virtually sidelined by electronic technologies and especially the all-pervasive *äppärät*, which citizens carry on them at all times. As I demonstrated, Lenny’s anxieties about the changes in social interactions and personal relationships he sees this shift in technology bringing about are representative of broader postmodern concerns.

My third chapter examined Jeanette Winterson’s *The Stone Gods* and drew many parallels between it and *Super Sad True Love Story*. Again, the book is central to

Winterson's novel, yet it maintains a marginal place within her imagined societies. Again, Winterson presents main characters who privilege the book and the history and tradition that it represents. Yet, as I argued, interpersonal relationships are not the focus of Winterson's anxieties. Rather, this novel draws connections between the rampant consumerism and self-absorption that characterize these post-print futures and a total disregard for environmental stewardship that results in nature's continued, repeated destruction. Winterson juxtaposes the historical events that transpired on Easter Island with imagined future events to demonstrate that when humans (pre-literate, literate, *or* post-literate) become so immersed in material entrapments, religious ritual, celebrity gossip—anything beyond Henry David Thoreau's concept of lived, present, *reality*—they neglect the natural world around them.

As I briefly demonstrated in the introduction, David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* is similarly invested in questioning the future of books. In "An Orison of Sonmi~451," Mitchell explores the humanizing powers of literature. Sonmi~451, a fabricant clone, works in a cafeteria in Nea So Copros (future Korea). While clones are normally prevented from advancing their intelligence by imbibing a mind-numbing drug called Soap (so that they will remain happily and ignorantly enslaved by the consumer culture which produced them),¹ Sonmi is singled out for research and she is allowed to "ascend" from her sleep-like state into full intelligence. It becomes clear that her work partner, Yoona~939, has already begun her own ascension and the changes Sonmi first notices in Yoona are telling: Yoona's speech changes so that it becomes more complex and has a

¹ The parallels between the intelligence-numbing drug "Soap." in *Cloud Atlas*, the drug "Soma," in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, and the drug "Solon," in Douglas Coupland's *Generation A* are clearly not coincidental.

richer vocabulary. Clearly, Mitchell regards complex language as heightening intelligence. The two ascending fabricants, thirsty for knowledge in their hermetically-sealed underground world, discover a supply closet that is stocked with treasures: trinkets and clothing that have been left by diners but, greatest and most important of all, “was a book, a picture book” (192). The fact that Yoona and Sonmi mistake the book for a broken “Sony” (the äppärät-like device that preoccupies this culture) proves that books and Sonys resemble each other in both looks and function. It also, however, represents the glaring difference between Mitchell’s future and the nostalgic dystopias presented by Shteyngart and Winterson: for Mitchell, books and the technology that digitizes books are interchangeable. Whereas Shteyngart and Winterson are both clearly anxious over the disappearance of print, and their characters privilege the tactility of books and mourn the alienating, de-humanizing function of electronic technologies, Mitchell does not regard print as something that needs preservation in and of itself. Counter to Marshall McLuhan’s idea that it is the medium itself that matters, Mitchell regards the medium as superfluous but the content that it projects as very important indeed. When Sonmi is liberated from her life at the Papa Song’s eatery and taken to the university where Postgrad Boom-Sook (the student responsible for triggering Sonmi’s ascension) studies, she meets another ascended fabricant, Wing~027, who informs her that if she wants to begin understanding and grasping the enormity of the outside world, she “must learn how to read” (207). And for months on end, this is all Sonmi does—she reads every text available in the library for download including, no less, George Orwell and Aldous Huxley. Reading, in *Cloud Atlas*, is what elevates Sonmi above her unconscious, enslaved existence and causes her to become a fully-conscious, autonomous being and an

activist for sweeping social change. The fact that Sonmi's "mind traveled the length, breadth, and depth of ... culture" (211) while reading electronic texts rather than printed ones matters little to Mitchell: it is the ideas present in literature that liberate Sonmi, not the medium by which they are expressed.

I sketch this small detour into Mitchell's fascinating novel to emphasize, finally, that while the same self-reflexive preoccupations with literature fuel each of these postmodern novelists' dystopian futures, their conclusions are not identical. They do not all see a decline of print affecting social interactions, or environmental preservation, or economic health; indeed, they do not all even mourn the decline of print per se. Yet each novelist does see literature—in some printed or electronic form or another—playing an undeniably central role in future societies. In *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan write that language is central to dystopian fiction because its importance to culture allows language to be a key tool of either oppression or liberation: "the process of taking control over the means of language, representation, memory, and interpellation is a crucial weapon and strategy in moving dystopian resistance from an initial consciousness to an action that leads to a climactic event that attempts to change society" (6). Each of the novelists featured in this thesis imbue literature with the same ennobling, liberating, powerful qualities, and while their respective works flirt with nostalgia and luddite tendencies regarding new forms of communication and expression, they are each hopeful that literature can now, and in the future, change individuals and societies for the better. And I am too.

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