

Future Imperfect: Transhumanism and the Marginalised Body in Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein: A Love Story*

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Abstract

What space do transhumanist futures make for marginalised, non-normative bodies? Reading Jeanette Winterson's transhumanist retelling of *Frankenstein*, *Frankissstein: A Love Story* (2019), for its treatment of marginalised bodies within the narrative, I will argue that the visions of new, bold models of embodiment offered by transhumanism within the novel ultimately fail to

protect those whose bodies are already marginalised by the hegemonic heteropatriarchal frameworks of sexuality and gender. For those existing outside of the norms of embodiment, transhumanist futures promise not a welcome reprieve from bodily violence, but rather an ever more targeted and efficient method of subjugation.

In times of change, bodies remain troubled. In recent decades, rapid technological advances have prompted a radical re-examination of our relationship to the body. The critical intersection of posthumanist thought and feminist theories of embodiment has allowed us to extract the plasticity and polymorphism brought out in the encounter of the body with technology. The body is thus enmeshed, relational, and porous—no longer just bodies; instead we have become “bodies in technologies” (Ihde 137). Transhumanist thinking has taken this newly grasped plasticity as an opportunity to dream beyond the human. Faced with the potential of technology for radical bodily change, thinkers have drawn up utopian futures in which humanity can learn to transcend the frailty and infirmity of bodies, elevating human consciousness to new heights (Ferrando 31). Yet, what room, if any, does the transhumanist fantasy make for marginalised bodies? In my article, I explore Jeanette Winterson’s novel *Frankissstein: A Love Story* (2019) as a meditation on this question. A contemporary retelling of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), Winterson’s novel follows the love story between trans surgeon Ry Shelley and professor Victor Stein, a transhumanist visionary concerned with the future of humanity in a post-human world. Through recourse to trans studies scholar Jay Prosser’s concept of *skin memories*, this article will read the novel from a transfeminist perspective, arguing that Stein’s transhumanism manifests in the novel as an all-encompassing desire to erase the body’s history of transition. This desire, as I will argue, is what ultimately causes Stein to be unable to accept the complexities of Ry’s relationship to their own trans body. Juxtaposing Ry’s body with another marginalised and transitory body present in the novel—that of the industrially manufactured sexbot—this article will draw on the metaphors of the palimpsest and the prosthesis to discuss the narrow possibilities of embodiment available to marginalised subjects in transhumanist fantasies, showing how the drive to negate the body’s capacity for memory not only perpetuates a destructive anthropocentrism but also further exposes marginalised subjects to new axes of subjugating violence. This reading ultimately contests the transhumanist vision of the future, arguing that a future which can truly

accommodate trans bodies necessitates that we aim to accept—rather than transcend—our bodies’ histories and limitations.

My Palimpsest Body

Jeanette Winterson is a familiar figure within feminist and queer literary criticism. Her canon of work, which spans over the last four decades, frequently engages with questions of gender, trauma, and self-identity, foregrounding the queer and female bodily experiences of living within violent patriarchal systems of subjugation. In recent years, Winterson has turned her attention to the potential for bodily emancipation wielded by new technology. In her 2021 collection of tech-focused essays, *12 Bytes*, Winterson warns us of the potential of technology to reinforce “backward-looking sexism and gender stereotyping” (155), citing the burgeoning market for robotic sex dolls as a patriarchal expression of the ‘pornification of women,’ an attempt to remove the agency of women from the matters of sex and relationships. Yet, despite such warnings, Winterson still maintains an optimistic outlook on technology, perhaps best exemplified in her stated desire for a transhumanist future. In several of the essays, she argues that transcending the body is, ultimately, an empowering act—“the transforming power humans need for the next stage of being human is in our hands” (244). For Winterson, then, the patriarchal exploitation of female and queer bodies appears to be something transhumanism can help us overcome.

Yet, what if one’s very identity and selfhood are defined by the facts of their embodiment? Winterson’s novel, *Frankissstein*, can be seen as a transhumanist meditation on this question. Like the monster of its namesake, *Frankissstein* is made of many interconnected, overlapping stories. The story this article will focus on follows Ry Shelley—a trans surgeon—who becomes romantically involved with Dr Victor Stein, a celebrated professor and the charismatic face of transhumanist Artificial Intelligence research in the novel. Their first encounter occurs at Dr Stein’s public lecture—as Ry listens to Victor speak, he cannot seem to hold back their infatuation: “I love watching him [...] he’s got that sex-mix of soul-saving and erudition” (73). Dr Stein’s

gaze, however, remains fixed on “the future of the human in a post-human world”—he is convinced that advancements in robotics and AI development are on track to render humans obsolete, and he is interested in the role humanity will take after being dethroned by AI (74, 81). For Stein, this approaching loss of power does not necessarily mean subjugation—instead, he imagines AI ushering in the breakdown of labels and power dynamics: “There will not be a division between head and heart, [between] male and female, black and white, rich and poor” (79). Yet, while Stein’s polemic appears inviting to all kinds of bodies, it is anchored by the view of the body as something to be discarded. “Humans,” he says, “can be understood as biological data-processing plants” (78)—in this view, consciousness becomes data to be extracted from the body on its way to its final form as pure, informational intelligence. The body is then separated from the mind, becoming little more than a vessel for the mind. Such dualist thinking has long been charged by posthumanist scholars as reproducing a transcendent humanist self—an idea built upon the premise of the cohesion of the category of the human as such. Historically, however, the very definition of such a category has privileged certain kinds of bodies (often white, male, able-bodied) at the cost of the exclusion of others (Hayles 5).

Such fantasies of disembodiment follow Stein into his private practice. Imitating the grisly nature of his ur-text namesake, Stein secretly experiments with reanimation: later in the novel, when Ry visits Dr Stein’s lab located somewhere under Manchester, they encounter swathes of severed human hands moving “senselessly, incessantly” around their enclosure (*Frankissstein* 169). As Victor explains, these hands, powered by prosthetic motors, are neither alive nor sentient—they are simply “experiments in motion” (169). However, the hands are but a prelude to his main project: the attempted reincarnation of his mentor, Dr Jack Good. Before his death, Dr Good entrusted Victor with his cryogenically preserved head, “with a view of returning him to consciousness someday” (203). Dr Good’s return to life, however, is not a return to the body: as part of his resurrection later in the book, Dr Stein removes Jack’s brain from his head and attempts

to upload it to the cloud by slicing the brain up and scanning it, layer by layer (280). Removing the body from the equation turns the process of uploading into an act of erasure: after the experiment, Dr Stein mysteriously disappears, taking with him all traces of his work and leaving no bodies as evidence (339).

If Stein presents the reader with a fantasy of disembodied humanity, Ry's marginality makes them experience their subjectivity as fundamentally shaped by their body. Ry is transgender: their gender manifests through an inherent doubleness—they define themselves as a “hybrid,” “fully female [and] partly male,” “[both] a woman [...] and a man” (85, 97, 122). Ry's transition follows the convention of many trans narratives in being presented as a journey of making oneself comfortable in their skin: they confess that they “didn't feel comfortable as a woman,” instead forging a self-made sense of belonging: “it really is my body,” Ry explains to Dr Stein, “I had it made for me” (85, 122). Their masculinising transition, however, does not seek to fully erase “the past”—it is instead written over, reinscribed for the goal of greater affinity with one's body: “I didn't do it to distance myself from myself. I did it to get nearer to myself” (122). Such an understanding echoes trans critic Paul B. Preciado's conception of the trans body in *Can The Monster Speak?*, as Ry understands their body as a site of memory, a surface upon which change is recorded. His trans body, as per Preciado, becomes a “living political archive,” a “city in which contemporary trans buildings, postmodern lesbian architecture [...] coexist” (Preciado 34).

Stein is invested in the act of re-inscription and self-making. To him, Ry's body is a representation of the ideal of “designing our own evolution” (154). He venerates and exoticises Ry's body—to him, Ry is simultaneously “exotic and real,” “the here and now, and the harbinger of the future” (154). Ry's body, re-inscribed and re-made, can be read as a kind of palimpsest—an object which Sarah Dillon defines as a “writing-material written upon twice, the original writing having been [imperfectly] erased and rubbed out to make place for the second” (12). The palimpsestic nature of Ry's body imbues itself with an alternative temporality: “the ‘present’ of the palimpsest is only

constituted in and by the ‘presence’ of texts from the ‘past,’ as well as remaining open to further inscription by texts of the ‘future’” (Dillon 37). Such openness to the possibility of future inscription makes the palimpsest body always incomplete, always open to change and to the shifting of its borders. When applied to bodies, said incompleteness and openness can unsettle the liberal humanist fantasy of fully realised sovereign subjecthood, imbuing the palimpsest body with the subversive potential to fulfil the posthuman goal of ‘decentring the human.’

Yet the palimpsest’s inherent multiplicity and openness to re-inscription do not render it illegible to humanist conceptions of the subject as a self-contained, complete, and singular agent (Bennett 29). On the contrary, historical accounts of palimpsest manuscripts emphasise that “in a palimpsest manuscript the chief, and perhaps the sole object of interest is the first or the more or less completely obliterated writing [...] the second writing has no direct interest” (Russell 110). In his work on palimpsests, literary critic Charles Russell invites palimpsest editors to “[concentrate] all [their] energy upon the effort to recover, as far as possible in their integrity, those relics of the ancient world of letters which lie beneath” (110-11). Similar readings of the palimpsest flatten the multiplicitous possibilities of the text into its initial meaning, a manoeuvre that renders the palimpsest agreeable to reappropriation into humanist conceptions of subjecthood. Through this reappropriation, the palimpsest’s subversive potential is negated and the palimpsest body instead becomes a container for a hidden, yet always there singularity.

Such a re-appropriated understanding of the palimpsest makes no space for change nor evolution and is inherently exclusionary to trans bodies. Ry’s palimpsest body, then, remains by design vulnerable to readings that discard their multiplicitous trans identity in favour of a hidden, originary femaleness. Yet it is this reading that ultimately gets adopted by Stein’s transhuman futurism. Discussing their relationship, Dr Stein flattens the queerness of having sex with Ry’s non-binary body through the emphasis on their body’s originary inscriptions. “You don’t feel like a man to me when we make love,”

Dr Stein argues, “[because] you don’t have a penis” (*Frankissstein* 156). The encounter with Ry clearly “unbalance[s] the equation” of Dr Stein’s own heterosexual identity, but through the emphasis on the palimpsest body’s ur-text, Dr Stein reinterprets their relationship through a normative lens (158). Stein’s transhumanist perspective neuters the subversive potential of the palimpsest—any queer imagining of the body and of desire ultimately fails to stand up to the pressures of normative heterosexuality (158).

Dr Stein’s quest for reincarnation can similarly be read as an excavation of originary meanings from a palimpsest body. When, in Dr Stein’s underground lab, we encounter Dr Good’s cryogenically frozen head, we see a body overwritten by death: “the face was shrunken [...] the hair, wispy [...] the lips were sunken and invisible” (268). Ry struggles to see Dr Good’s remains as human—in describing the head, they hesitate, switching the pronouns from the human “he” to the dehumanised “it,” further remarking on the “waxwork” quality of Dr Good’s remains (268). Yet Dr Stein believes that inside Dr Good’s cryogenically frozen brain is the “pure, informational intelligence” of consciousness, which only needs to be extracted from the body and uploaded to a new vessel to regain life (115). The palimpsest body, then, is a necessary archive through which reanimation is made possible—buried behind the body’s “ghastly” appearance are the information sequences of the original, singular Dr Good (268).

While the body’s capacity for storage keeps open the possibility of Dr Good’s reincarnation, it is this very same archival capacity that must be overcome in transhuman visions of the future. In “Skin Memories,” Jay Prosser argues that a body’s skin serves as a “visual biographical record,” a surface which remembers the “detailed specificities of life’s histories” (Prosser 52). Prosser reads transsexual body modifications, such as sex reassignment surgery, as attempts to interject into the skin’s record-keeping by realigning and reassigning its meanings in order “to re-member through skin a sexed body that should have been” (52). This interjection, however, leaves traces on the body: the skin’s biographical record post-surgery bristles with scar tissue alongside other evidence left by the complicated processes

of bodily recovery. If, for Ry, acceptance of their body's capacity for memory enables them to feel at home in the gender "doubleness" they seek to embody, for Stein it inserts irresolvable difficulties into his image of humanity's future. Skin ages, weathers, bruises, sags, keeping open at all times a palimpsestic possibility of one's past and present being read, their meanings brought to the surface and exposed. The body's palimpsestic nature, its capacity to remember change, represents a threat to Stein's transhuman philosophy of human enhancement with its drive towards the "next stage of the human," striving for "radical life extension and digital immortality" (Ferrando 35).

The palimpsest body holds itself open to a queer multiplicity, yet its capacity for record and self-inscription render it open to violent interpretations which flatten the body into an ordinary, singular essence. The first time Victor and Ry have sex, Victor literally "reads" Ry's skin by tracing their face, their body, and their surgery scars with his finger (*Frankissstein* 119–20). Ry's trans body inserts an irresolvable contradiction into Stein's self-perception, built within a framework of normative heterosexuality. However, rather than succumbing to the openness that such contradiction engenders, Stein instead doubles down on the transhumanist dream of abandoning the body altogether. But who can choose to leave one's body behind? The transhumanist future imagined by Stein leaves no space for Ry, unless they agree to abandon the very body that shapes their subjective experience.

Perfect Prosthesis

What to do with the body's capacity for memory? Exclusion and erasure of existing palimpsest trans bodies, bodies that remember their transition, is only one method for solving the problem of bodily memory within the transhumanist fantasy—yet another is the creation of brand new, perfect bodies and body parts whose capacity to remember has been rendered void from the very start. Within the novel, such creation occurs through prosthesis. Among other occupations, Dr Stein also serves as "an advisor to Railes Prosthetics on how 'smart' artificial limbs might become integrated body parts" (111). Stein's

interest in prostheses is focused on their potential for transhumanist enhancement and the “overcom[ing] of our biological limitations” (73). In a conversation with Ron Lord, a crude and licentious owner of a company producing female sexbot companions, Ry imagines Dr Stein’s “computer controlled prosthetic limbs” as filling in for a lack that he as a surgeon creates through the act of amputation (88). Ry intones that some of the amputated limbs, too, “have a future”—as part of their agreement with Dr Stein, Ry passes them on to Stein for research into the very prosthetics that will replace them (87). In the act of hacking off a limb, Ry creates the possibility of prosthetic embodiment.

However, unlike Ry’s bodily record of transition, Ry’s acts of dismemberment seem not to trouble Dr Stein’s transhumanist framework of the human as a unitary, sovereign agent. In her research on the humanist perspectives on the disabled body, feminist bioethics scholar Margrit Shildrick argues that “procedures that disassemble, cleave, suture or augment the body” have only a “limited effect” on the transcendent humanist self (28). In her reading, such interventions, regardless of their severity, exist alongside “a belief that it is within the power of biomedicine to restore not just health but the well-Being of a subject temporarily disarrayed by corporeal breakdown” (28). Once the body has recovered, the “core” sovereign self reemerges unscathed, with access to enhancements and add-ons it was not privy to before (28).

Phenomenological accounts of prostheses, however, trouble their humanist perception as mere enhancements and add-ons. In her account of her leg amputation, along with the struggles with feelings of “phantom limbs” and the subsequent transition to living with a prosthesis, phenomenologist Vivian Sobchack tackles the contradictory feelings evoked by prostheses: “although [her] sense of [her] bodily morphology was newly incorporated in form and thus inaugurated ‘new sites of projection and identification and new bodily possibilities,’ [...] it was also familiar in function” (63). In her experience, her phantom limb gradually “grew into the hollow of [her] prosthetic socket,” “occupying, thickening and substantiating it,” and finally “grasping it

so that it made sense to [her] and became corporeally integrated and lived as [her] own body” (63). Sobchack’s phenomenological account makes no functional distinctions between her amputated limb, her phantom limb, and her new prosthetic—the difference between them, to her, “is [merely] one of degree, not of kind” (63). Not as an add-on or stand-in for the missing appendage, Sobchack’s account of her body rather integrates technology as a fully realised and naturalised part of the body itself, blurring the boundary between organic and prosthetic. Prosthetics, therefore, contain within them the possibility of embodied experience.

Those who receive prostheses in the novel are, however, decidedly non-human. In his advertising spiel, Ron Lord describes the manufacturing process of his sexbot girls as follows: “torso comes through first [...] complete with two holes, user-ready, and F-cup moulded tits. I am working on a model with detachable tits, for variety [...] See how they attach the arms? [...] Then the legs [...] Hair goes on last, after the eyelashes” (*Frankissstein* 37). The sexbot body is inherently modular and modifiable to specification. Its parts frequently need replacing: “bring her in for a service once or twice a year, depending on wear and tear [...] online you can order spare parts, if any of her gets damaged or too messy” (38). The sexbot parts, or prostheses, manage to fulfil the yet unrealised transhumanist dream—they carry no evidence of wear and tear and are, in every way, identical to the parts of their original body. The sexbot’s originary body, then, amounts to nothing more than a combination of prosthetic parts without a core.

Winterson herself nudges the reader to take robot subjectivities seriously—in the universe of the novel, Sophia, a particularly advanced model of robot “with a sense of humour,” has been awarded citizenship of Saudi Arabia, granting her “more rights than any Saudi woman” (74). If the inhuman space of robot selfhood is glibly mentioned by Winterson to draw attention to the lack of agency of Saudi women, it is also of interest on its own: it provides an escape from the overbearing presence of humanist subjectivity. It is in this space that new imaginaries of the body can be theorised.

Approaching robot subjectivities, however, requires new theoretical frameworks of embodiment. In her reading of Deleuze and Guattari, Shildrick notes how the theorists depart from the conception of an embodied self as “singular and possessing intentionality,” instead conceiving it as “a network of flows, energies and capacities that produce never-ending transformations” (Shildrick 31–2, Deleuze & Guattari 30). Such a conception allows Deleuze and Guattari to understand embodiment as “productive, excessive to the singular self and unfixed,” resulting in a model of selfhood that focuses on “fluidity, not containment” (Shildrick 32). Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of embodiment is a radical rejection of the autonomous humanist self, instead “rel[ying] on the capacity to make connections across nature/culture, between organic and inorganic, and [the capacity] to enter into new assemblages, which, being provisional, are in turn disassembled. [Deleuze and Guattari] promote a queering of all bodies to the extent that putative boundaries no longer function as limits” (32).

Sexbot bodies are assembled, they are assemblages. The bots arrive at your door in parts—in recalling the building of his first sexbot, Ron Lord ruminates on the gruesome nature of its disembodiment: “all her parts arrived in bags like a chainsaw massacre” (*Frankissstein* 36). Every sexbot body must go through the process of initial assembly (in Ron’s case, “with one screwdriver and the instruction video”), drawing attention to the fact they are made of detachable, replaceable parts (36). If undamaged, the replaced parts are also able to clip into other robot bodies: hands, legs, and heads can be screwed off one model and onto another in one fluid motion. The replacement of a part or the whole of a sexbot’s body does not violate its perceived selfhood: in service, damaged and worn parts are replaced by identical ones and returned to the client. The robot body is separable, interchangeable, and always already prosthetic. Through ports, adhesion strips, screws and hooks, the parts of the robot body are always open to new connections and membership in new assemblages.

The prosthetic assemblage of the robot body carries within itself a radical blurring of the boundaries between self and body, between part and whole. Such an environment offers no purchase

to humanism's Cartesian mind/body dualisms and imposed sovereign subjecthood. The prosthetic assemblage, unlike the palimpsest body, cannot be reduced to a singularity, because it troubles the very concept of singularity itself. Its illegibility to humanism, however, does not preclude it from the harm that comes from assuming a humanist lens—instead it renders sexbot bodies as fundamentally and inescapably marginalised. An object outside humanity, the sexbot is left vulnerable to the violent whims of its owners: as Ron remarks, “a lot of the XX-BOTs get their faces bashed in. Get thrown at a wall or something. [...] Sex can get a bit rough, can't it?” (51). The modular nature of the sexbot bodies rids them of the capacity to remember their own mistreatments. Violence committed against the sexbots can truly be never-ending—if broken, parts can be replaced, again and again. As such, any guilt that a sexbot owner would feel at being faced with the consequences of their violence is only ever transitory and fleeting—after all, sexbot bodies are meant to be used, not lived in.

If Ry's body is made marginal by its capacity to remember, the sexbot bodies are made marginal by their very lack of that same capacity. The prosthetic assemblage bodies of *Frankissstein* presents us with a world of possibility for future disassembly and reassembly, resisting sedimentation and remaining open to queer, boundary-defying newness. However, their existence within a heterosexist hegemony neuters their radicality while amplifying their vulnerability. The sexbots, with their endlessly replaceable prosthetic bodies, should be the perfect representation of the transhumanist vision of the future, yet their marginality and their status as feminised subjects foreclose such futures, leaving them only with a promise of violence. The issue with transhumanist futures, then, is not only the fact that our bodies remember, but also that technological progress does not rid us of the fundamentally flawed ontological frame of the human. Without letting go of our attachment to the human, to the sovereign self, transhumanism cannot produce an escape from violence against marginalised bodies—it can only make that violence ever more targeted and efficient.

Conclusion: What Future for Bodies Like Mine?

Jeanette Winterson's novel is keenly aware of the need for a new understanding of embodiment to account for the rapidly shifting notions of what constitutes human and non-human bodies in the increasingly technologised contemporary landscape. In our move to trans- and post-human futures, however, we must be aware of how inherited ontologies of humanist subjectivity, providing us with an insufficient, skewed account of the human body and self as fixed, singular, and superior to other modes of being, skew the futures made possible for us. Both the palimpsest body and the prosthetic assemblage body present us with radical reconfigurations of existing approaches to embodiment, yet neither conception can escape the gravitational pull of the human. Both conceptions quickly become subsumed into the dominant humanist discourse, which leaves the marginalised bodies, thus reconfigured, open to new axes of normative and regulatory violence. Reading *Frankissstein*, it is clear—transhumanism can only fail marginalised bodies. New, futuristic bodies, new, radical reconceptualisations of embodiment, cannot be the means to an end for a trans politics, for a feminist politics, for a politics that stands up for any kind of non-normative bodies. Instead, to truly imagine a future for bodies like ours, we must couple new and fresh somatic subjectivities with the work of undermining and discrediting humanist narratives of embodiment, with the work of rooting out the liberal humanist currents within our body politics. Only then will we be able to make peace with our bodies' capacities to remember the storied and contradictory lives we have lived.

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Biography

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