Cyberqueer Romances?
Discourses of Virtual Reality, Queer and Romantic Love in *The PowerBook* and *Nearly Roadkill*

Anna Moring

The emergence of new technologies of virtual reality and the possibilities opened up by the development of medias such as the Internet have caused an uproar of images, fears, myths and utopias to emerge within popular culture. Novels, films and television series have used these myths, for example the myth of freedom from the body, or the fantasy of freedom from all identities, to create utopist visions of future worlds.[1] According to Tapio Mäkelä, the identity-criticism in these "technomystical" conceptions of virtual reality "suggests that the mystification of technology and identity is a central feature of the popularization of the new media."[2] These myths of virtual reality[3] have been widely and critically researched, and feminist scholars especially have been cautious toward many of the more utopist constructions. Feminists have contested, for example, the idea that virtual reality would provide a possibility of freedom from embodiment and through that the hierarchic structures of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and so on.[4]

In this article I read two novels, *The PowerBook* (2000) by Jeanette Winterson and *Nearly Roadkill* (1996) by Kate Bornstein and Caitlin Sullivan, as attempts toward queer rewritings of the misogynic and heteronormative myths and utopias of virtual reality. Both novels tell stories of romantic love, found in virtual reality, and both provide queer[5]/feminist appropriations of both the discourses of romantic love and discourses related to virtual reality and the Internet. I aim to explore how the two novels use these discourses to question and deconstruct the normative structures of sex, gender and sexuality – but also want to provide a critical analysis of the outcomes of these deconstructions. The framework for my analysis could be described as queer-feminist. It maintains a critical attitude toward both the heteronormative tendencies apparent in some feminist theories *and* the reoccurring gender-blindness that some more utopic queer theories seem to uncritically reiterate.[6] I will start with a brief introduction of the novels.

Nearly Roadkill is situated in cyberspace. It tells the story of Scratch and Winc, two gender-benders in virtual reality.[7] Scratch and Winc inhabit identities that do not fit into the normative structures of sex/gender and sexuality and they use the Infobahn as a playground to experiment with all kinds of different identities and sexualities. They appear on-line in different characters and thus produce unconventional representations of femininity, masculinity and sexuality. Their adventures are told to the reader by a friend of theirs, a young boy called Toobe. Beside him, the novel has two other protagonists – Gwynyth, a bearded lady living in the Coney Island amusement park, and Jabbathehut who is a friend of Toobe's father and a person of considerable size and computer skills. The novel is composed of irc logs[8], "narrative entries" by Toobe, Gwynyth and

Jabbathehut, e-mails, news reports, and private messages. I do use the word "novel" with some caution in relation to this work.

The PowerBook is also situated in virtual reality and tells a romantic story. The protagonist, called Alix, lives in London in an old costumier called Verde. She[9] earns her living by writing custom-made stories for customers who want to "be" someone else for a while. The orders are made by email. Alix describes her business as keeping a "language costumier"[10]. She writes stories as verbal camouflages, ways to conceal one's "true" identity:

> Undress.
>
> Take off your clothes. Take off your body. Hang them up behind the door. Tonight we can go deeper than disguise.
>
> It's only a story, you say. So it is, and the rest of life with it – creation story, love story, horror, crime, the strange story of you and me.[11]

The novel centers around two characters, Alix and a customer of hers with the nickname "Tulip". Alix tells stories for Tulip, and they fall in love. Their relationship is developed in Alix's stories, especially in the serial story of "you" and "me". This story becomes the story of their love, and the reader is left wondering whether the romance "really" happens anywhere else than in Alix's head. However, the novel is built around this romance, and all the stories Alix tells become real in its context. In order to enjoy her reading experience, the reader simply has to stop wondering and let herself be captured by the stories.

Both *Nearly Roadkill* and *The PowerBook* aspire to use what Mäkelä calls "the mystification of technology and identity"[12] in order to produce possibilities for non-(hetero)normative representations of gender and embodiment. They subscribe to both queer discourses and discourses of virtual reality, and place these discourses against, beside, or interlacing each other. I call this combination *cyberqueer discourse*,[13] and analyze the ways in which the texts use this discourse to destabilize the foundational fictions of (hetero)normativity. Romantic love[14] will prove to be another significant discourse in my reading. Love seems to be the single "grand narrative" that is left untouched by the two novels, but also, and significantly, the most important context and structuring element of the stories of the novels. After analyzing this triangle discourse of queer, virtual reality, and romance, I will address the problems that the appropriation of these discourses bring out in relation to, for example, other aspects of identity, embodiment and the materiality of bodies.

Cyberqueer – the utopia of utopias?

Virtual reality has been widely theorized as a subversive space and a utopian realm of possibilities. Indeed, in many accounts the media would provide

a perfect trial ground for queer thoughts and practices.[15] However, some researchers of cyberculture, such as Donald Morton and Nina Wakeford, have written on the combination of the discourses of queer theory and cyberspace in quite critical tones. I will provide a short account of their critiques, which will be the basis of my account of these discourses in *The PowerBook* and *Nearly Roadkill*.

Donald Morton classifies virtual reality, postmodernism and queer theory as different strands of the same, anti-materialist, way of thinking.[16] He claims that "the return of queer … is actually the (techno)birth of the cyberqueer."[17] Morton blames queer theory for abandoning a "concept-based commonality" and cherishing an "uncapturable difference".[18] Most clearly this difference becomes visible in the queer-political critique of identity politics – queer groups claim that the assimilationist strategy of identity politics, such as the politics of different gay and lesbian rights organizations, will never succeed in deconstructing the hierarchical superiority of heteronormative structures. Instead of claiming that "we" are every bit as "normal" as heterosexuals, a better political strategy would, according to queer groupings, be to contest the idea of "normalcy" altogether.[19] For Morton, queer, together with discourses such as postmodernism and virtual reality, attempts to get rid of the body and materiality together with this "normalcy".

Nina Wakeford shares Morton's perspective, as she provides a critical analysis of the presumptions and starting points of cyberqueer studies.[20] Wakeford claims that cyberqueer studies often make uncritical use of Judith Butler's and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's conception of identity: "Queer can be interpreted as a way to include all non-normative sexualities and identities, and at the same time allows a blurring of any necessary links between sexuality and gender[.]"[21] In this critique, then, the problems related to queer would include both the umbrella-term problem and the problems related to a voluntarist discourse. According to Wakeford, cyberqueer-studies have also surpassed the importance of the materiality of embodiment. Embodiment is produced through signs that are constantly moving and that spring from an anonymous "no-body" situation. Thus, the "real" body outside the machine is excluded from the focus.[22]

Wakeford and Morton bring forward important political and material perspectives that are often forgotten in relation to the virtual reality discourse, and I agree with the necessity of these critiques. This said, the focus of this article is to find out whether and how myths of virtual reality can, if used metaphorically and carefully, be reiterated in subversive, queer ways and used as strategies of deconstruction of heteronormative conceptions of gender and embodiment. *The PowerBook* and *Nearly Roadkill* provide interesting angles to these questions through the ways that the authors make use of the myths of virtual reality. I will start with a reading of *Nearly Roadkill*, a novel that provides a textbook case of the structures that Morton and Wakeford criticize.

Nearly Roadkill – Cyberqueer to the Extreme

> A novel written in cyberspace, *Nearly Roadkill* is an Infobahn erotic thriller without any boundaries – virtual, sexual, legal, or otherwise. What-appears-to-be Boy meets what-appears-to-be Girl. But their world is the Net, where any persona – and any gender – can be created. They pose as a host of different personalities, switching identities and genders as quickly as they create passwords. Named Scratch and Winc, these two genderless beings cybersurf into the various worlds on the Net as they fight government intervention on this final frontier.[23]

The back cover would indicate that *Nearly Roadkill* repeats the very same features of cyberdiscourses that Wakeford and Morton have found most problematic. It would seem to subscribe to the thought of gender being independent from the body, the idea of a genderless space and the thought of constantly changing identities that can be constructed "as quickly as [users] create passwords". It describes virtual reality as a "world without boundaries". In the process it also "happens" to repeat the norm of a heterosexual romantic partnership, as it constructs the romantic story of the novel between "what-appears-to-be-Boy" and "what-appears-to-be-Girl". However, in the novel itself, these discourses become more multifaceted and problematic.

In the beginning of the novel, the government wants to force all Infobahn users to register. Through the registration process, all users have to provide one "core identity" so that the government would be able to follow the actions of every individual user. With this "core identity" securely registered, the user would then be allowed to play around as much as he/she[24] wants. According to Judith Butler, a core identity is a discursive illusion, produced by structures of compulsory heterosexuality, which aims to stabilize the idea of the existence of a primary and stable identity.[25] This is precisely what the government is after, and one central plot of the novel is a revolution that Scratch and Winc start against this process of registration.

The (gender) trouble begins, when Scratch and Winc fail to complete the registration process, because neither is willing to submit only one, immobile, definite gender. The refusal of the characters to identify to any one gender destabilizes the idea of a core identity and indicates that the stable binary gender-norms of compulsory heterosexuality fail to explain and encompass all identities. But during the course of the novel this mobility and instability of identities becomes challenged by the surprising intervention of romantic love. When the love relationship of the characters becomes more serious, the lack of a core identity becomes more and more problematic.

The story starts out with Scratch and Winc running into each other on-line and ending up having cybersex. After this initial one-time encounter, they

wander off to new adventures and take on new characters. However, their various characters keep being drawn to each other online, and eventually Scratch and Winc recognize each other from "behind" the characters. This is when they realize that they are about to fall in love. One consequence of this falling in love appears to be the end of the free play of identities that they have practiced this far, and the need to find out who or what the other person "really" is. Scratch complains:

> I've run down all the scenarios and realized it's fine whoever *you* are, I mean whoever you are is okay with me. But the idea of what each of *you* would make *me* is still tripping me out. … I'll become a queer, a straight person or a freak in some way that may not be how I was a freak before.[26]

Suddenly the identities "behind" the multiple online characters become extremely important. This is even more evident when the characters are supposed to meet off-line, in "real life"[27]. Scratch, especially, finds the idea of learning Winc's "real" identity extremely frightening. When the real life meeting finally happens, it becomes even more complicated than either of the characters could imagine. It turns out that Winc is a post-op MtoF transsexual who claims that she[28] cannot identify as a woman either, but might be something in between. Scratch turns out to be a butch woman who can have sex with both men and women, but who has spent considerable effort on becoming the sort of woman she is. The problems are associated with the question of how romantic involvement with someone affects the identity of the other. Winc is not able to define a definite gender identity for herself, and Scratch is afraid that falling in love with a person without a stable identity would render her own identity unstable as well. She claims that she has a hard time relating to a "non-gender" at the moment. This leads Scratch and Winc to engage in a prolonged and painful discussion of the structures and compulsions of identity, gender and sexuality. It is noteworthy that this discussion surfaces specifically in relation to their real life meeting. Evidently, the problems arise when identity and gender in real life are expected to fluctuate as they do in virtual reality. On the Infobahn it is already possible to disrupt the rigid relationship of body, gender, and identity, and Winc is willing to apply this model to real life as well. However, this process is shown to be problematic.

The problems are illustrated when Scratch reflects on the limits of self-identification: "If you can change, then what does that make me?"[29] And later: "And then I go to the store, to the park, the bar, to work, and I'm told: you are ____ you are ____ you are ____. Even though I was born a male/female, I'm *supposed* to belong to one gender."[30] The romantic involvement forces Scratch to think about her identity *in relation to* Winc's in a way that she has never had to do before. She feels that when Winc is changing, that would force her to change

as well – but *how* is left unclear. However, regardless of how they would define *themselves*, society and other people would still define them according to prevailing norms and presumptions. It is the relationship between body, gender, and identity that here appears as the cause of most of the problems. The changes in Winc's identity, the identity of the person with whom Scratch is romantically involved, would have a direct effect on Scratch's own identity. Thus romantic love would appear to require a stable "core" identity, but the existence of one would be against the cyberqueer political agenda of the novel. This tension is revealed when the novel approaches the limits of playing with identities.

"Liquid Gender" and the Borders of Identity

In an on-line environment, creating characters whose gender is different from the "real" gender of the person, or whose gender identity differs from norms and conventions, can, in principle, stretch the boundaries of gender. However, as Nina Wakeford[31] points out, the ability to pass as the gender one chooses online (regardless of the relation of this gender to the real life gender of the passer) depends on how well one is able to perform this gender, that is, how well one knows the stereotypes related to this gender and their often quite arbitrary relation to other user's conceptions of gender. In *Nearly Roadkill* it seems that when romantic love enters the picture, boundary stretching suddenly becomes much more problematic and the "real" genders of the characters gain importance. "Core identity" would seem to be required by romantic love, and the failure to find a core would mean a failure of the romantic discourse.

Winc considers identity play the ideal form of performing gender in virtual reality as well as in the real world, but Scratch finds it problematic to relate to this model. However, Scratch is disappointed in her own normativity and hopes to change her attitude in time. Thus the possibility of identity play, prominently represented in discourses on virtual reality, is made the ideal model of a queer identity. Susanna Paasonen and Nina Wakeford have compared identity play with the idea of voluntarism, a common misinterpretation of Judith Butler's argument in *Gender Trouble* and also a common prejudice toward queer theory.[32] In a similar manner Bernice L. Hausman has, in an article on virtual gender and transsexual discourses, compared the gender conceptions of Butler and the other author of *Nearly Roadkill*, Kate Bornstein.[33] Hausman claims that the difference between their conceptions lies in the duration of change. Whereas Butler thinks that change is a life-long process, Bornstein's "liquid gender" can change every hour.

These two conceptions of gender illustrate the difference between Butler's idea of performativity[34] and its common misinterpretation as "performance". Voluntarism, the view that gender is "liquid" and can be altered by choice, is an idea linked to the thought of gender as performance. *Nearly Roadkill* seems to claim that virtual reality could provide a space where radical

voluntarist conceptions of gender could come true, as identity play makes possible the experiencing and trying out of different identities and genders. Performativity, then again, does indeed involve the idea of existence of subversive bodily acts[35] such as drag-performances and non-normative identities. But Butler also stresses the temporary nature of these subversions and the power of compulsory heterosexuality to force subjects toward normative performances of gender.[36]

This dualism highlights the tensions between cyberqueer discourses and materialistic tendencies such as Morton's theories. Virtual reality can be conceptualized as a space where voluntarism could become the normal practice and stretching the boundaries of gender would be easy, fun and playful. Initially, *Nearly Roadkill* seems to fit well into this framework. However, toward the end of the novel the bliss of virtual reality becomes disrupted and the relationship of gender and embodiment, as well as the material dimensions of the body, surfaces.

There are two main issues that Scratch reacts to in relation to the fluctuation, or "liquidity", to use Hausman's terminology, of Winc's gender identity. One is Winc's transsexuality, to which her reaction is strong and negative. The other is the effect Winc's identity is going to have on Scratch's own identity. Scratch is afraid that the liquidity of Winc's identity will make her own identity liquid as well. When Winc's identity is revealed to Scratch, her initial comments seem extremely confused and even cruel: "Men can do any fucking thing they want to on the planet and now they even want to be women! Why the fuck do they have to take every fucking thing in sight?"[37] At the same time Scratch is also embarrassed of her reactions, through which she discovers that her thinking is not at all free from prejudice: "I'm making the wonderful discovery that I'm as bigoted and uptight as that next door neighbor I keep using as an example of a jerkoff."[38]

The multitude of characters that Winc creates on-line, both their differences and their individual identities, are not a problem for Scratch, as long as the "person behind" these characters stays stable. Identity play must remain on the level of play; it cannot be used as a model for reality. However, the characters that Winc and Scratch create on line are also formed in relation to each other. If one is a gay man, the other is a gay man as well. Or if one gets pleasure out of cannibalism, the other loves to be eaten. The characters constantly fall into the complementary categories of "top" and "bottom". Identity is thus throughout the novel, both in the real life of the text and in virtual reality, related to the normative structures of sex, gender, and desire, although the characters themselves have high hopes of surpassing this structure through the constant identity play they are practicing.

Judith Butler has described gender identity by saying that: "[T]he 'unity' of gender is the effect of a regulatory practice that seeks to render gender identity uniform through a compulsory heterosexuality."[39] Compulsory

heterosexuality aims toward an immobile relationship between sex, gender, and desire: you are a woman = feminine = you desire masculine = a man.[40] In *Nearly Roadkill* this regulatory practice is successfully deconstructed – to some extent.

Scratch and Winc desire each other in virtual reality regardless of the characters they create, and the gender and sexual identities of the characters can vary. They can also represent female masculinity or male femininity alike. Thus the female body does not automatically mean femininity or a female gender identity, nor does a male body mean masculinity or a male gender identity, and gender identity does not necessarily define the object of desire. But the force of the bond between desire, sexuality, and identity is still to some extent preserved, when the on-line characters' identities constantly mirror each other. It is also noteworthy that the problems of the love relationship culminate precisely when a core gender identity cannot be defined.

The final sequence of the novel portrays the success of the revolution and a happy ending to the romance between Scratch and Winc. However, the final real life sex scene in the end of the novel ends up confirming the importance of gendered embodiment. Scratch describes it to Toobe:

> I knew, right then, that despite all my great philosophizing, it was her [sic!] gyrl stuff that turned me on right then, hir breasts and hir smell and hir hair and hir eyes looking at me so womanly and open and ready for me. Ze was female. I wanted hir.[41]

It is important to note, and I am not sure whether this is a spelling error or a deliberate use, that Scratch uses the female person pronoun for Winc only once in the novel, in this description. Scratch thus ends up defining Winc as a female, thus also questioning Winc's right to define her own identity. Importantly, the body, which Scratch describes as female, is also a transsexual body. Thus the reader is forced to accept a transgender discourse – a former male body can become a female body – but the same move forces embodiment into a gendered dichotomy and collapses the dream of a genderless being. If we consider also the top-bottom-dichotomy, which exists between the characters throughout the novel (note also that Scratch is always playing top, Winc bottom), this last feminization becomes a renewal and repetition of the hierarchy between masculinity and femininity, where masculinity remains the defining and ultimately dominant part.

Thus the novel ends up repeating the structure that feminist theorists such as Biddy Martin[42] have criticized in queer theories: despite all critical attempts to deconstruct and redefine the rigid norms of gender and identity, femininity remains in a hierarchically lower position. In the novel, then, virtual reality is a subversive ideal space where subversions of identity are possible and everyone is free to choose identities and genders for their characters. However,

in practice, the normative bond between identity, gender and desire holds strong throughout the novel.

***The PowerBook*: Myths of Virtual Reality and Subversive Reiterations**

In *Nearly Roadkill*, the differences and problems of real life and virtual embodiment are brought forward. In *The PowerBook* they remain unarticulated and virtual reality makes possible the elision and elliptic[43] absence of gender. Gender is present in the stories that make up the novel, but it remains unquestioned and self-evident in ways that, in my queer-feminist reading, appear to emphasize the blurring of gender outside the stories. Also the genderless "you" and "me" -structure of the love-story throughout the novel is a noteworthy gesture in this sense, although in at least one of these episodes both "you" and "me" are female.[44] This structure is one that Nina Wakeford criticizes in relation to cyberqueer discourse: it forgets the "real" body and concentrates on creating queer utopias that elide the materiality of gender.[45] The structure has an important function for the politics of the novel, a function that subjects it to criticism of the kind that Wakeford offers, but also makes it a very interesting text from a queer-feminist perspective.

The difference between virtual identity play and real life embodiment that is the cause of most problems for the romantic narrative in *Nearly Roadkill* is not dealt with in *The PowerBook*. In virtual reality, that is, in the stories Alix tells, genders change and vary, but the representations of genders remain normative and obvious. Men are men, women are women, and the characters are constructed accordingly. The text does not play with gender, nor does it question the structures of normative genders. Gender is not explicitly discussed in the novel, except for a brief excerpt where the following dialogue takes place between Alix and Tulip:

> 'Male or female?' 'Does it matter?' 'It's a co-ordinate.' 'This is a virtual world' 'OK, OK – but just for the record – male or female?' 'Ask the Princess.' 'That was just a story.' 'This is just a story.'[46]

The discussion emphasizes Alix's reluctance to reveal her real life gender. It also presents the idea that reality and gender are constructions, and that these constructions are shaped by and as narratives. Alix deconstructs the boundary between "story" and "reality" when she equates the discussion she is currently having with an earlier story about a young wo/man called Ali and a pirate princess, a story that she has just told Tulip. She uses the myths related to virtual reality in a metaphorical way to show that there is no "true" or "core" identity that could be easily described. All communication is fiction, storytelling: "I cannot give my position accurately. The co-ordinates shift. I cannot say, 'Where,' I can only say, 'Here,' and hope to describe it to you, atom and dream."[47]

However, it is interesting to note that the style of Alix's stories changes when she notices that she has fallen in love with Tulip. Her will to change characters and to play with the stories disappears and she concentrates more and more on the story of "you" and "me". She also creates allegoric stories about her own childhood.[48] Alix thus seems to be attempting to describe one central person: herself. The role of virtual reality changes from a mythic media that allows change to happen to a communication device with the most important ability to function as a channel for reaching Tulip. Here *The PowerBook* repeats the structure evident in *Nearly Roadkill* – romantic love counters the cyberqueer discourse and the mythical virtual reality turns into a practical communication device: the Internet.

A difference between *The PowerBook* and *Nearly Roadkill* surfaces in relation to romantic love. In *Nearly Roadkill* the juxtaposition of the cyberqueer discourse and romantic love ended up in a happy romantic ending, but simultaneously the project of establishing a "liquid gender" went astray. Thus romantic love proved, in this novel, to require at least some sort of commitment to a heteronormative economy of sex/gender and identity. In *The PowerBook,* however, the structure of the novel opens up a reading that might be able to surpass this requirement. On the surface the novel does not even attempt to deconstruct the heteronormative structures of love – instead it uses them to its own advantage. Alix tells stories in which she uses all the conventions and lures of known romances, starting from Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere to Paolo and Francesca da Rimini. She uses them to create love letters, and in my reading these letters are posted from woman to woman. This in itself does not suffice as a deconstruction of the norms of romance – a mere turning around of the roles does not do anything to the rigid structures.[49] But what Alix does on a more profound level is to show that the conventions of romance can be used and appropriated to many kinds of identifications, and that they thus already contain queer potential. Thus the presumed heteronormativity of romantic love is shown to be an illusion and queer possibilities are revealed right there at the presumably heterosexist "core" of romantic conventions. As opposed to the straightforward strategies used by *Nearly Roadkill*, it would seem that the politics of *The PowerBook* are built on strategies of subversive repetitions. In Judith Butler's words you could say that the novel aspires to:

> [M]ake gender trouble, not through the strategies that figure a utopian beyond, but through the mobilization, subversive confusion, and proliferation of *precisely those constitutive categories that seek to keep gender in its place by posturing as the foundational illusions of identity*.[50]

The PowerBook mobilizes heteronormative romantic discourses and the great and ruinous stories on which they are based and uses them as building blocks

for a romantic story between (in my reading) two women. It also uses these discourses to cause trouble for the voluntaristic power practices of virtual reality. Thus the novel shakes the ground beneath heteronormativity and shows how queer structures coexist with it, and how even the most heteronormative structures can be applied to queer purposes.

In both *The PowerBook* and *Nearly Roadkill* the demands for more stable definitions of identities, demands which are related to romantic love gain priority at the expense of the ideas of virtual freedom and identity-play. Thus love forces identity back into discussion, not as something stable or unchangeable, but as something less malleable than the voluntarist interpretations (which Wakeford mistakenly calls Butlerian) of the cyberqueer discourse.

However, the politics of these novels read as subversive only if the novels are read from a subversive perspective. In a heteronormative reading – and this is true especially for *The PowerBook* – the anti-normative potential of the novel is not revealed and it seems only to strengthen existing norms. This structure mirrors Wakeford's concern about forgetting the "real" bodies, as well as Paasonen's fear of surpassing the questions of norms and power. It also repeats the phenomenon that has been found problematic in relation to queer theory before: when solid identity categories are questioned from an anti-normative perspective, there is a risk that the achieved potential for change is buried under normative readings. The subversion of the norm becomes visible only from a queer perspective, which is a marginal reading among many other possible readings. The following sections will deal with the consequences of this and give some critical attention to the normativities left intact by the deconstructive projects of the novels.

Freedom? Norms and the Politics of Reading

Both *The PowerBook* and *Nearly Roadkill* are texts in which considerable effort is put into deconstructing heteronormativity in multiple ways. With this in mind, it is surprising that the novels contain so many other norms that are represented as rather self-evident. Both novels leave their main characters undefined, or over-defined, in terms of gender. They also remain undefined in terms of race, ethnicity, class and age, among others, but the latter indeterminacy seems to be significantly different from the former. Throughout both novels, borders of gender and sexuality are put into play through hints and implications toward the main character's sexualities, or the constant variation of represented identities. However, there is nothing similar to be perceived in relation to these other aspects or identities. If there are exceptions from these norms, they are clearly stated, as for example the Turkish background of Ali in the story of Ali and the princess, the physical abnormality of the evil husband of Francesca, or the size of Jabbathehut and the beard of Gwynyth in *Nearly Roadkill*.[51]

The assumption of the whiteness of the characters is put into question only once, in *Nearly Roadkill*, when Scratch (Leilia) and Winc (Karn) are talking to each other, again without knowing who the other "really" is:

> **Karn:** ::rocked:: Side note: I hadn't even considered your race. Ouch.
> **Leilia:** Exactly. You probably assumed I'm white, right?
> **Karn:** ::wearily:: Yeah, sorry.
> **Leilia:** ::also wearily:: It's OK, happens all the time. One of the cool things for black folks online is they are assumed to be white, too. Not that they want to be white, but they're assumed to be "in the club," without having to prove credentials at the door.
>
> [Private message to Toobe]
> **Karn:** "She's" black!
> **Toobe:** Why are you so surprised, pal?
> **Karn:** I never ever thought about it![52]

As Scratch and Winc meet in real life, however, it turns out that Scratch is not, in fact, black. The narrative says nothing about race, but when Scratch describes herself she says: "I wish I were black because I hate my skin and probably the next week being a wolf would be even better."[53] The assumption in what Leilia says in the earlier quote is that all users of the Infobahn are read to be white. The quote also includes an assumption of the hegemonic power-position of whiteness (to be "in the club") in relation to other races. The latter quote is an example of a representation of a desirable "exotic otherness"[54], where the significance of blackness is reduced to having better skin than the present (presumably white) one. Here black skin becomes the desired quality in blackness, and all consequences related to the skin, such as racist oppression, are forgotten.

Another striking feature of the embodiments represented in both of the novels is the role that is given to characters whose body does not respond to norms of able-bodiedness and health. In *The PowerBook* the only character that is mentioned to be in any way abnormally embodied is the "strange swarthy misshapen man"[55] that Francesca has to marry in the story of Paolo and Francesca.[56] In *Nearly Roadkill*, abnormal embodiment is represented in the characters of the cyberwitch Gwynyth and "the large one"[57], Jabbathehut. Interestingly, they are the two characters most acquainted with, and skilled in, using the Infobahn and creating codes and programs for it. So in virtual reality, where bodies can supposedly be discarded and embodiment overcome,[58] these characters have developed considerable skill and authority. But as opposed to the other characters, they never take part in on-line conversations, nor do they communicate with any other users of the Infobahn except for their friends. They are never seen to develop sexual relationships with anyone, which the other

characters fiercely do. (Except for Toobe, who is juvenile and therefore represented as asexual.) Functioning sexuality and romantic love are then, in both novels, only open for characters whose bodies correspond with the norms of health and ability.

Hierarchies of Masculinity and Femininity

A persistent feminist criticism toward queer theories is that they fail to deconstruct the hierarchy between the masculine and the feminine. Biddy Martin expresses her reservations against the way that many texts considered queer work in their attempts to distort the connection between biological sex, socially constructed gender, and sexuality. According to Martin, this distortion happens through stressing the importance of surfaces on the expense of interiors and prioritizing the non-normative surface representations. This again places normative gender-representations, such as female femininity, into a subordinate position in relation to the celebration of "queer" images such as drag queens (male femininity) or masculine women. The lowest position in this hierarchy is left for the feminine women – those who perform a conventional, female femininity.[59]

Leena-Maija Rossi has analyzed representations of gender in TV commercials, and one of the methods she uses is a close reading of the kinds of "paradigmatic choices" that are made in the representations of gender. She asks, what kinds of signs, what kinds of representations of masculinity and femininity, are chosen to represent "men" and "women", of all the possible alternatives of male or female performances available. She then goes on to analyze the "syntagmatic operations", performed with the chosen paradigms, that is, how they are played against or in relation to each other.[60] This method, when applied to the broad cavalcade of characters constructed in *The PowerBook* and *Nearly Roadkill*, yields interesting conclusions about the ways in which masculinity and femininity are represented in the novels.

In *The PowerBook* the multifaceted structure of the novel supports a reading where gender and identity are in constant movement and fluctuation. However, the gendered structures of Alix's stories are both conventional and hierarchical. For example, Lancelot is the active hero, while Guinevere is the suffering queen. George Mallory conquers mountains; his wife waits at home, tending the house, the garden, and the children. And even in the story of Ali and the princess, where Ali is a girl passing for a boy, the masculine Ali is "teaching" the feminine princess the secrets of sexuality. Thus the paradigmatic choices, as well as the syntagmatic operations of the chosen signs, remain committed to a system of compulsory heterosexuality within which masculinity remains superior to femininity. Even though a closer, political reading deconstructs the heteronormativity of these structures, it does not challenge the repeated hierarchical representations of masculinity and femininity. In a heteronormative reading the book reproduces normative and conventional gender roles, and even

a non-normative reading reiterates masculinities as the holders of subjectivities in relation to feminine objects.

In *Nearly Roadkill* the hierarchy becomes evident in a similar manner. Scratch and Winc adopt different roles and appear online in different characters. But as opposed to *The PowerBook*, these roles are often other than male masculinity and female femininity. In fact, and this is an interesting occurrence, the only time they act out what they "really" should be according to their original anatomy and the rules of compulsory heterosexuality[61], Winc being the masculine heterosexual man and Scratch being the feminine heterosexual woman, the scene is portrayed as transvestism and a drag performance.

The scene takes place when Scratch and Winc are rescuing Toobe from Gwynyth's home on Coney Island. They need to pass for a heterosexual nuclear family in order to get past the security guards, who have been instructed to look for a "strange" threesome including a young boy ("strange" here of course being strange in relation to the norms of compulsory heterosexuality). As a camouflage they decide to "go normal", to pass for a normal nuclear family. To confuse things further, Toobe is dressed up as a girl.

The entire rescue episode, where all participants are extremely uncomfortable in their "drag" attires, becomes read as an exclamation of the fact that the roles inherent in compulsory heterosexuality are constructed, and that any attempt to reiterate them is deemed to fail and becomes essentially nothing more than another drag show.[62] However, there is still the need to pass for a heterosexual nuclear family, which shows the power of compulsory heterosexuality present in society. The politics of the episode thus become binary – on the other hand compulsory heterosexuality still remains the norm that needs to be obeyed, but on the other hand the inevitable failure of every reiteration to reach the ideal becomes mockingly underlined.

Unlike *The PowerBook*, where the characters of the stories often represent heterosexuality quite normatively, *Nearly Roadkill* deconstructs conventional gender roles with its choice and representation of characters throughout the novel. However, every time there is sexual tension involved, the characters are represented in relation to each other so that the constellation of the couple becomes intelligible also through a conventional understanding of identities; a gay man complements a gay man, a butch lesbian complements a femme lesbian and a cannibal complements a person who loves to be eaten. Marjorie Worthington, who has written on the gendered structures of *Nearly Roadkill*, calls this "the mechanism of interactivity".[63]

In the novel, one condition for attraction or desire to prosper becomes the top/bottom constellation of the characters. Conventional norms of masculinity and femininity are challenged by the representations of characters, for example, in the initial sexual encounter the top character is a masculine girl, the bottom character a feminine boy. Interestingly, the masculinity of the character and the top status happen to coincide in all of the constellations throughout the novel. So

it seems that even though the paradigmatic choices are decidedly deconstructive and non-normative, the syntagmatic operations that the signs are put into render these deconstructions questionable.

It seems that the critique posed by Biddy Martin would apply very well to both *The PowerBook* and *Nearly Roadkill*. Although the novels are keen to deconstruct the stability of both gender and sexual identity, they lean on normative accounts of the hierarchical relationship between masculinity and femininity in their efforts. This does not, however, necessarily imply that the novels would subscribe to a heterosexual economy of desire. Judith Butler talks about "butch desire", that is a desire of a masculine female for femininity, as an experience of "a kind of masculinity, one that is not to be found in men".[64] In opposition to those who see butch desire as "simply antifeminine" or as "disavow[ing] a primary femininity"[65], Butler claims that it can indeed be viewed as a subversive opening of both the concept of sexual difference and that of heterosexual masculinity:

> [I]f there is masculinity at work in butch desire, that is, if that is the name through which that desire comes to make sense, then why shy away from the fact that there may be ways that masculinity emerges in women, and that feminine and masculine do not belong to differently sexed bodies? Why shouldn't it be that we are at an edge of sexual difference for which the language of sexual difference might not suffice, and that this follows, in a way, from an understanding of the body as constituted by, and constituting, multiple forces?[66]

Indeed, if one takes seriously Judith Halberstam's claim that among "men in general" there exists a "conservative and protectionist attitude … toward masculinity"[67] that insists that masculinity is and should remain the property of male bodies, then representing masculinity as not always signifying male (nor femininity female, for that part) can be read as both subversive and anti-heteronormative. Moreover, the play with gender and sexuality, which the metaphoric use of virtual reality allows in both *The PowerBook* and *Nearly Roadkill*, would allow a radical rethinking of who has access to masculinity and femininity and with what consequences.

Structures of Deconstruction

The structure of *The PowerBook* can be given different meanings from different reading positions. The undefined genders of the main characters provide several possible angles and interpretations, and the reader needs to decide what to make of them. This reading is essential for the interpretation of the anti-normative potential enclosed in the novel. Thus the choice of the reader, conscious or unconscious, becomes significant also for the politics of the novel.

Only a non-normative reading reveals the deconstructive potential of the text. In a normative reading, for example a heteronormative one, the subversive potential of the text remains hidden and the novel only ends up repeating conventional representations of gender and sexuality. This problem brings forward a question that could be addressed to queer studies more generally: How can one challenge the norm, avoid repeating the normative structures as such, but at the same time also avoid making the challenging move invisible from a normative perspective? The two novels use very different strategies to tackle this challenge.

Nearly Roadkill attempts to destabilize normative structures through what I would describe as an educational agenda of writing. Whereas *The PowerBook* is multifaceted and supports many reading positions almost equally, *Nearly Roadkill* is more limited in its focus, and it presupposes a reader who is not acquainted with the discourses of queer thinking and writing. This is apparent in the way the novel chooses to articulate very thoroughly what it wants the reader to understand. While this strategy makes the politics of the novel obvious and visible, it also limits the scope of the readership that can identify with the novel to those who are willing to become educated, or who agree with the political agenda of the text.

The PowerBook, on the other hand, uses a more subtle approach. Laura Doan, who has read Winterson's works as postmodern lesbian fictions, claims that Winterson uses postmodern strategies to complicate or subvert heterosexist discourses:

> Winterson constructs her narrative by exploiting the techniques of postmodern historiographic metafiction (such as intertextuality, parody, pastiche, self-reflexivity, fragmentation, the rewriting of history and frame breaks) as well as its ideology (questioning "grand narratives", problematizing closure, valorizing instability, suspecting coherence, and soforth) in order to subvert patriarchal and heterosexist discourses and, ultimately, to facilitate a forceful and positive radical oppositional critique.[68]

Doan's analysis is accurate except for one significant point. There is one "grand narrative" that Winterson refuses to question: romantic love. Through this she, in my reading, does not "facilitate a … radical oppositional critique" but, indeed, refuses to oppose the normative structures of heterosexism and simply just uses them against themselves and thus proves them inaccurate. *The PowerBook*, then, does not attempt to move outside the norms nor oppose them. Instead it wants to disrupt the very roots of the norms, thus challenging both the norms and their internal hierarchies, and it facilitates changes by a critical reiteration of the norms. In Winterson's own words:

> I have never had much patience with the assumption that male experience, and or heterosexual experience, can stand for all of us, while, female or gay experience, is specific. The truth is much broader.[69]

This reading of Winterson's novel seems to suggest that heteronormativity is not a stable monolithic concept, but is constantly being disrupted and reiterated, both through representations of non-heterosexual subjectivities and structures, and through non-normative representations of heterosexuality itself.[70] Thus Winterson's strategy is not one of postmodern *deconstruction* nor one of identity-political *opposition*, but rather a strategy of *critical reconstruction*, a strategy, which, as far as I understand, goes past the postmodern as well as identity-politics.

Conclusion

This essay has been an effort to make a queer-feminist political reading of two novels, *The PowerBook* by Jeanette Winterson and *Nearly Roadkill* by Kate Bornstein and Caitlin Sullivan. It has centered on two central discourses, those of virtual reality and romantic love, and the queer appropriations of these discourses. The two discourses have also been juxtaposed in order to read out the contradictions that were assumed to be found between these two.

The myths related to virtual reality were used in the novels in order to escape, question or deconstruct heteronormativity and the rigid relation of sex/gender, desire, and identity. Romantic love, on the other hand, was used as a structuring element and a "grand narrative". The normative structures of romantic love proved to be in opposition to the queer project of the novels. The romantic relationships of the characters would seem to require complementary identities, or at least an effort to articulate a gendered and embodied "core" identity.

The juxtaposition of the opposing discourses of romantic love and virtual reality led to different results in the two novels. In *Nearly Roadkill,* the romance between the characters ended up being prioritized against the ideal, queer, playful identity made possible by virtual reality. *The PowerBook*, on the other hand, while subscribing strongly to the "grand narrative" of romantic love, could be read as a critical reiteration of this "grand narrative". Through applying the discourse of virtual reality in a metaphoric way the novel destabilized the conventional notions of identity inherent in the discourses of romantic love.

The deconstructive projects of the novels, while questioning norms related to gender and sexuality, did leave other norms intact. These include norms of "race" and ethnicity, the hierarchical relationship of masculinity and femininity, age, class, and ablebodiedness. The elision of these other aspects of identity correlates with the critique of discourses of virtual reality and queer theory that some feminists have brought forward.

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End Notes

1. See Paasonen 2002, 9. The most cited example of these kinds of popular cultural utopias is William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer* (1984) where the cool console cowboy Case leaves his body behind to surf the dangerous and intriguing depths of cyberspace. A more recent example on film is *The Matrix* -trilogy (1999–2003) where the confused but heroic "chosen one" Neo rescues humanity and leads a revolution against evil computer programs. These representations could be called dystopic, but also extremely male-centered. The Finnish new media scholar Tapio Mäkelä puts it well: "[v]irtual reality was mainly an omnipotent dream of young, middle-aged and male technicians, artists, soldiers, teen-players, journalists and researchers, the glory of which has quickly vanished" (Mäkelä 2000, 149).
2. Mäkelä 2000, 158.
3. The concept of Internet is not synonymous with virtual reality. However, in this article I will treat them as synonyms, as both of the novels I read use the concept of virtual reality and the myths related to it in relation to a media that closely resembles the Internet.
4. For example Balsamo 1999, 116–132; Mäkelä 2000, passim; Nakamura 2000; Paasonen 2002, 21–40; Stone 1996.
5. Queer theory is an anti-foundationalist and anti-normative theoretical strand that arose in the early 1990's from critiques and elaborations of theoretical strands such as feminism, poststructuralism, postmodernism, gay and lesbian studies, and the political movement of gay liberation (Jagose 1996). Two feminist scholars, Teresa de Lauretis and Judith Butler, are commonly nominated as its founding mothers, and Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1989/1999) is constantly referred to as the most important early queer theoretical work. In this article queer theory and thinking is used in a binary way – it is clearly to be identified as a strong influence behind both *The PowerBook* and *Nearly Roadkill*, and I will read the novels as queer texts in a multiple sense, but I will also use queer theory as a framework and a politics of reading throughout the analysis of these two novels.

Some aspects of queer theory have been criticized by some feminists, such as Biddy Martin (1996) or Robyn Wiegman (1994, 17 n 1), for deconstructing heteronormative discourses in ways that forget the existing differences between bodies and embodiments, or construct an androgynous ideal humanity that prioritizes freedom of choice and elides social differences and the hierarchies of, for example, masculinity and femininity. Freedom of choice is only available to the people who have resources to choose, they claim.
6. In her latest book *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler voices her distance from what she calls "queer methodology" (Butler 2004, 185). With this concept she refers to those appropriations of queer theory, which "insist on the division of queer theory and feminism" (Ibid., 184) that would "hold out the promise that sexuality might exceed and displace gender" (Ibid., 184–185). I find Butler's work an

excellent example of a queer-feminist work. An elaboration on the concept of queer-feminism can be found in Rosenberg 2002.
7. In the novel, virtual reality is referred to by the name Infobahn. Infobahn is a term presented by the former vice president of the United States Al Gore, who used it in a speech in UCLA to describe the development of the Internet. A synonymous expression he used was the Information Superhighway. Both of these terms are included in his program of National Information Infrastructure (NII). (See http://www.ctheory.net/text_file.asp?pick=63;
http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/2.06/attitude.html).
8. An irc log is a transcript of an online discussion.
9. The genders of the main characters are left unclear. I use the female person pronoun throughout this article based on my reading of the novel, where I interpret both of the characters to be women. I am aware that there are several other possibilities of interpretation.
10. Winterson 2001, 1. Henceforth this novel will be referred to with the abbreviation PB.
11. PB, 4. The “you” and “me” that here appear for the first time become the heroes of a romantic serial story told by Alix. I read this story as a reiteration of a “grand narrative” of romance – a story that attempts to repeat the archetypes of romance to the extreme. I also read it as allegorical to the romance between Alix and her customer Tulip.
12. Mäkelä 2000, 158.
13. I use this concept critically. I am conscious of the problems it involves in relation to, for example, gendered embodiment and the hierarchies of masculinity and femininity, and will address these questions further in the final part of this article.
14. I will analyze romantic love as a known discourse of popular culture, but also as an element that structures and constructs the narratives of the novels. Lynne Pearce and Jackie Stacey (1995, passim. Esp. 16–24) have described romance narratives as quests faced with obstacles. They have noted that especially when different oppressed groups have attempted rewritings of the (hetero)normative structures of romance, these obstacles are often found within the romantic relationship – not on the path toward romance, as usually is the case. (Pearce & Stacey 1995, 22–24). This is true also for *Nearly Roadkill*, but not so much for *The PowerBook*, which is a significant difference.
15. Paasonen 2002, 8–9.
16. Morton 1998.
17. Ibid. 296.
18. Ibid. 300, 309–310.
19. See also Jogose 1996, passim.
20. Wakeford 2000.
21. Wakeford 2000, 412. I interpret Wakeford’s critique on a “Butlerian conception of identity” as directed specifically toward the more extreme applications of Butler’s writings. In my opinion the radical potential and political core of Butler’s thinking is precisely her unwillingness to present such simplifying models of the construction of identity. Instead, she attempts to destabilize both feminist and postmodern conceptions of identity (see especially Butler 2004, 174–204). Wakeford’s account does, however, describe well the ways in which many cyberqueer-researchers have (mis)interpreted Butler’s ideas.
22. Ibid. 413.
23. NR, back cover.
24. All registered identities would naturally need to be of one or the other gender. The artificiality of this structure is shown when a male officer happens to register himself as a woman by mistake, and is frequently teased about this “drag” performance by other characters.
25. Butler 1999, 174.
26. Bornstein and Sullivan 1996, 186. Henceforth this novel will be referred to with the abbreviation NR.
27. I use the concept of real life throughout this article to designate the off-line world in both of the novels. I am using the word “real” with caution, as I agree with Susanna Paasonen, who stresses that the Internet should not be seen as a space outside of this world, but as a phenomenon of the world.

(Paasonen 2002, 9). It is also important to note that in this article, the "real life" happens inside works of fiction and is thus no more "real" than any other part of the novels.
28. I will use the female personal pronoun to refer to both of the characters. The novel uses a gender-neutral pronoun system of "ze" and "hir", but I feel that the adaptation of this into my writing would complicate matters excessively.
29. NR, 111.
30. Ibid. 111.
31. Wakeford 2000, 413.
32.Paasonen 2002, 108; Wakeford 2000.
33. Hausman 1999. Bornstein is a playwright, a MtoF transsexual woman, and also known for her more theoretical writings on gender and transsexuality. Hausman refers to Bornstein's theoretic autobiography *Gender Outlaw* (1994).
34. Butler 1999, passim. Esp. 171–190.
35. Butler 1999, 101.
36. Butler 1999, xxii.
37. NR, 200.
38. Ibid. 199.
39. Butler 1999, 42.
40. Butler 1999, 174.
41. NR, 374.
42. Martin 1996, 74.
43. An elliptic structure is one in which something is left unarticulated or unmentioned so that the reader has to fill in the text herself and conclude, guess, or interpret, what is left out.
44. PB, 173–189.
45. Wakeford 2000, 413.
46. PB, 26–27.
47. Ibid. 209.
48. At this point Alix's stories also start to include intertextual references to Winterson's autobiographical first novel *Oranges are not the Only Fruit* (1985) – an interesting move that would require further analysis.
49. See Pearce & Stacey 1995, 22–24 on this.
50. Butler 1999, 44, emphasis AM.
51. In a staging of a play that she wrote on the basis of *The PowerBook,* Winterson chose to portray Alix and Tulip as two women with a significant age-difference, the one being middle-aged, the other much younger. (See www.jeanettewinterson.com.) However, her need to mention this in relation to the play is already a sign of the fact that these features are not indicated in the novel.
52. NR, 74–75, addition AM.
53. Ibid. 195.
54. See Rossi 2003, 180–185.
55. PB, 126.
56. Ibid. 123–129. He is described as "scarcely four feet tall and as twisted in body as Paolo was straight" (Ibid. 127). This "need not have been laid to his fault, but his heart was his own making and his heart was as unformed by kindness as his body had been neglected by beauty. He cared for nothing but hunting and women, and he lashed his dogs and his whores with the same strap." (Ibid. 127).
57. NR, 156.
58. http://www.eff.org/~barlow/Declaration-Final.html; Paasonen 2002, 9.
59. Martin 1996, passim. Esp.74.
60. Rossi 2003, 17.
61. Butler 1999, 23–26.
62. Which is of course an idea thoroughly represented in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*.
63. Worthington 2002, 203.
64. Butler 2004, 197.
65. Ibid.

66. Ibid. 197–198.
67. Halberstam 1998, 15.
68.Doan 1994, 138.
69. www.jeanettewinterson.com.
70. See Rossi 2003, passim.; Butler 1999, 40–41; Rosenberg 2004, 95.