

The Psychology of the Handmaid: Margaret Atwood's Novel Parables of the Possessed Canadian Character

By Holly Blackford

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Canadian writer Margaret Atwood paints her most vivid portrait of an imperial power, through the perspective of a colonized individual.¹ Along with her post-Apocalypse dystopia *Oryx and Crake*, published in 2003, *The Handmaid's Tale* of 1986 is one of Atwood's only two novels set in the United States, the imperial power that Atwood believes Canada should resist in the same way that her literary influencers Northrop Frye and Jay Macpherson sought to resist British and French imperialism by establishing the existence of a Canadian literary tradition.² In light of post-September 11 laws such as the Patriot Act, increasing threats to American women's reproductive freedom, mandates to teach intelligent design rather than evolution to American schoolchildren, and the difficulties of immigration into the U.S., it is chilling to read this passage from the handmaid's point of view:

[The Republic of Gilead was created] after the catastrophe, when they shot the president and machine-gunned the Congress and the army declared a state of emergency. They blamed it on the Islamic fanatics, at the time.

Keep calm, they said on television. Everything is under control.

I was stunned. Everyone was, I know that. It was hard to believe. The entire government, gone like that. How did they get in, how did it happen?

That was when they suspended the Constitution.³

Islamic fanaticism is an excuse to suspend the Constitution and fuel U.S. fanaticism, before which U.S. neighbors recoil in horror. A nation's unity, which Atwood worked hard to establish in her 1972 *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, can so easily become a fanaticism that erodes the individual and excludes internal diversities.⁴ Offred has only a few months to prove her reproductive value before she is sent to the toxic isles of the unwomen; thus she exemplifies the theme of which Atwood writes in *Survival*, summarized by Stanley Fogel: "Atwood asserts forcefully that survival is the dominant Canadian motif just as the dominant American motif is frontier and the dominant British motif the island mentality."⁵ Atwood uses Offred to voice a Canadian theme in a U.S. setting, a setting she wishes to make absolutely clear in her opening, when Offred describes the gymnasium that has been converted to a dormitory for the education of handmaids: "We had flannelette sheets, like children's, and army-issue blankets, old ones that still said U.S."⁶ The blankets "still" have the insignia U.S. to indicate the extremist philosophy of the 1980s religious right, which blankets and effaces individuals. The blankets are "like children's" because in the Republic of Gilead, individuals are re-made into children of the

¹ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (New York: Anchor, 1986).

² Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (New York: Doubleday, 2003); Coral Ann Howells discusses Atwood's literary influencers in *Margaret Atwood* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 12; see also Paul Goetsch, "Margaret Atwood: A Canadian Nationalist," in *Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact*, ed. Reingard M. Nischik (New York: Camden House, 2000), 168.

³ *The Handmaid's Tale*, 174.

⁴ Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972).

⁵ Stanley Fogel, *A Tale of Two Countries: Contemporary Fiction in English Canada and the United States* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1984), 100.

⁶ *The Handmaid's Tale*, 4.

State, under the control of aunts, wives, and commanders. Like children, they are both protected and incarcerated by imperial parents. The fine line between protection and imperialism is the most frightening part of this story.

Atwood's target of criticism in this story is not simply the conservative U.S. climate of the 1980s, but any type of State fanaticism that results in radical homogeneity. Offred is colonized by a Republic that ironically coalesces two extremist ideologies: the Puritanical right that denotes women's proper place in the home, as the property of men, and leftist feminist groups that protest against the objectification of women and their bodies under patriarchy. Both result in Gilead's censorship and control of reproduction and sexuality. Offred records many memories of her militant, feminist mother who would burn misogynist magazines, a militancy that mirrors the army blankets in the above passage. In fact, although Offred is male property, she is really more under the control of women, who are classed into different categories and who look down upon one another in a rigid class system. Offred reflects on this irony, "Mother, I think. Wherever you may be. Can you hear me? You wanted a woman's culture. Well, now there is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists."⁷ A highly technological society facilitated the ease with which the U.S. turned into Gilead; in an age of electronic information, all the new leaders had to do was freeze the assets on computer cards that were keyed "F" for female. Ironically, even the non-militant heroine was once employed in a library and responsible for making information electronically accessible. This is a typical Atwood irony. Her protagonists always contribute to their own colonization.

Only Atwood could twist her novelistic lens and equate patriarchal abuses with freedom. Ironically, in the Commander's perspective, the new Republic of Gilead improves the lives of U.S. women:

We've given them more than we've taken away, said the Commander. Think of the trouble they had before. Don't you remember the singles' bars, the indignity of the high school blind dates? The meat market. Don't you remember the terrible gap between the ones who could get a man easily and the ones who couldn't? Some of them were desperate, they starved themselves thin or pumped their breasts full of silicone, had their noses cut off. Think of the human misery.

He waved a hand at his stacks of old magazines. They were always complaining. Problems this, problems that. Remember the ads in the Personal columns, *Bright attractive women, thirty-five* . . . This way they all get a man, nobody's left out. And then if they did marry, they could be left with a kid, two kids, the husband might just get fed up and take off, disappear, they'd have to go on welfare. Or else he'd stay around and beat them up. Or if they had a job, the children in daycare or left with some brutal ignorant woman, and they'd have to pay for that themselves, out of wretched little paychecks. Money was the only measure of worth, for everyone, they got no respect as mothers. No wonder they were giving up on the whole business. This way they're protected, they can fulfill their biological destinies in peace. With full support and encouragement.⁸

With her incisive wit and penetrating gaze at power and human relations, Atwood makes the extreme, evil imperial power look almost innocent and well intentioned. The Commander seems

⁷ *The Handmaid's Tale*, 127.

⁸ *The Handmaid's Tale*, 220.

to be responding to Offred's memories of her mother, a character resistant to the abuse of women in a "free" marketplace. This passage is characteristic of Atwood's technique in her novels. Her protagonists tend to be politically naïve and rudely awakened by secondary characters with more extreme political sentiments. All of her novels are political parables that voice the perspective of colonized characters who are usually not paying much attention to the political landscape, or who inadvertently wander into circumstances that make them vulnerable to the machinations of others.

Offred is not specifically Canadian but most of Atwood's protagonists are, and most advance the point that extreme imperial powers "around" them color the Canadian character, which does not wish to share in the extremism but which becomes implicated by association. The protagonists of Atwood's novels are most often both Canadian and female, and their stories feature a common struggle for possession of themselves and their bodies, given various colonizing forces. In relation to her other novels, which I will explore in this essay, the handmaid is a symbol for Canada in relation to the U.S, which stands for "yet another" imperial power infringing upon the lives of Canadians. Atwood herself has stated that the States are extreme in philosophy, while Canadians are more middle-of-the-road.⁹ This middle-of-the-road-ness of her main characters gets them into trouble and makes them vulnerable to outside forces. Her protagonists are typically female because the female body itself is particularly open to possession—by pregnancy, rape, cancer, and the physicality of sex. It is quite common for Canadian rhetoric to equate Canada with a "fertile yet vulnerable woman," and imperial powers such as the U.S. with "the more masculine and aggressive hulk . . . who [seek] to rape her natural resources and colonize her culture."¹⁰ Women in Atwood's novels are also possessed by spiritual forces, including gods of the wilderness; by men who represent different nations and woo the female "territory"; and by women who represent distinct national traditions or, increasingly, the new Multicultural Canada that is displacing the British-French one. Atwood repeatedly depicts her characters as territories of others, refugees, trespassers, foreigners even on their home ground, and internally divided entities that are inhabitable by others and inaccessible even to the self. They harbor repressed memories that are foreign to their own psyches. Thus Atwood's novels undercut the Canadian nationalist project that she embarked upon with her 1972 book on a unified Canadian literature. Her novels essentially suggest that, ironically, the uniqueness of the Canadian character lies in its propensity to be possessed.

Establishing Novel Territory

Atwood's second novel *Surfacing* is generally understood as a manifesto of Canadian nationalism; it was published in the same year as *Survival* and features the same themes of wilderness, Canadian nationalism, escape from American influences, and coping with victim positions that she equates with Can/Lit.¹¹ But the protagonists of Atwood's first two novels, *The Edible Woman* (1969) and *Surfacing* (1972), are actually quite similar in that both are initially represented as complacent characters who willingly participate in forces that are actually colonizing them.¹² When they awaken to the perception of their colonization, both resist and then become taken over by spiritual forces that refuse to allow them to continue in their everyday

⁹ Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, 96.

¹⁰ Eva Mackey, "'Death by Landscape': Race, Nature, and Gender in Canadian Nationalist Mythology," *Canadian Women's Studies* 20.2 (2000): 129.

¹¹ Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (New York: Bantam, 1972).

¹² Margaret Atwood, *The Edible Woman* (New York: Bantam, 1969).

lives. These spiritual forces gain increasing control over them, forcing Marian of *The Edible Woman* to reject the consumer culture of which she is a part, and the unnamed narrator of *Surfacing* to reject the Americanization of the Canadian wilderness, for which she quests. Both characters identify with and transform into animal figures of the wild, reflecting on the national mythology that Atwood drew upon in *Survival*, but both reject being possessed by colonizing forces only to be possessed by the wilderness, demonstrating that resistance to one colonial identity can only be expressed by succumbing to another.

Marian of *The Edible Woman* inadvertently becomes part of the Canadian wilderness in two ways. At first, she is involved in the commercialization of it, as she is a market researcher; later in the novel, as if in punishment, she transforms into a hunted rabbit figure, which is a type of madness. Early in the novel, she conducts a survey of Moose beer drinkers for her job, asking men their opinions on an ad that links drinking Moose beer with hunting. Thus the heroine is implicated in marketing a consumerist and thus unmeaningful, even profane, vision of Canadian masculinity, as articulated by the ad:¹³

*Moose, Moose,
From the land of pine and spruce,
Tingly, heady, rough-and-ready. . . .*

Then a speaking voice, almost as deep as the singer's, intoned persuasively to background music,

*Any real man, on a real man's holiday—hunting, fishing, or just plain old-fashioned relaxing—needs a beer with a healthy, hearty taste, a deep-down manly flavour. The first long cool swallow will tell you that Moose Beer is just what you've always wanted for a true beer enjoyment. Put the tang of the wilderness in YOUR life today with a big satisfying glad of sturdy Moose Beer.*¹⁴

The tang of the wilderness is both an object of parody and a sinister evocation of men as hunters that will become all the more sinister to Marian when she finds herself engaged to a man Peter, who likes to hunt and who will make her subsequently feel like a hunted animal in a meat market:

She watched the capable hands holding the knife and form, slicing precisely with an exact adjustment of pressures. How skillfully he did it: no tearing, no ragged edges. And yet it was a violent action, cutting; and violence in connection with Peter seemed incongruous to her. Like the Moose Beer commercials, which had begun to appear everywhere, in the subway trains, on hoardings, in magazines. Because she had worked on the pre-marketing survey she felt partially responsible for them; not that they were doing any harm. The fisherman wading in the stream, scooping the trout into his net, was too tidy; he looked as though his hair had just been combed, a few strands glued neatly to his forehead to show he was windblown. And the fish also was unreal; it had no slime, no

¹³ Lorna Irvine observes this link between the ad and Canadian identity in "Recycling Culture: Kitsch, Camp, and Trash in Margaret Atwood's Fiction," in *Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact*, ed. Reingard M. Nischik (New York: Camden House, 2000), 204.

¹⁴ *The Edible Woman*, 19.

teeth, no smell; it was a clever toy, metal and enamel. The hunter who had killed a deer stood posed and urbane, no twigs in his hair, his hands bloodless.¹⁵

Thus the novel connects her acquiescence to patriarchy with her role in marketing a masculine Canadian image. Marian begins to object to the bloodless quality of the hunt in a modern context. The ad substitutes for an authentic relation to the wilderness in the same way that consumer images package meat and women bloodlessly. As Marian looks at an ad for girdles, she contemplates “middle-aged spread: when would I get it?—maybe I already had it.”¹⁶ Such images suggest that the female body itself is a “spread” wilderness that ads invite men to bloodlessly hunt. The subjection of women substitutes, and is a metonymy for, the exploitation of the Canadian wilderness.

Forces within Marian reject her consumer role and her place on the marriage market by forcing her to stop eating. Beginning to see all consumed items as once alive, she can no longer consume and repeatedly acts like a hunted rabbit, burrowing under beds. The tale obviously works out a feminist parable that, as Coral Ann Howells explicates in *Margaret Atwood*, responds to the growing American and Canadian feminist movement initiated by Betty Friedan’s analysis of “the problem that has no name”—the malaise of intelligent, educated women who find themselves destined for little other than marriage and motherhood. Marian is surrounded by female characters who offer her choices that not satisfactory. Her friend Clara looks to her like a “boa constrictor” whose head is constantly shrinking due to an overwhelming pregnant body, producing children at an alarming rate. Her roommate Ainsley is rather too-methodically planning to trap a man into impregnating her, pretending to be an innocent young girl so she can obtain his sperm. At work, Marian sees the “office virgins” who represent a “Sargasso-sea of femininity” when she views their bodies; the office virgins work downstairs in the company, at menial tasks, while men work upstairs and control the show. While she is hardly in control of her future before she stops eating, she experiences a complete loss of herself when she can no longer eat: “Marian put some of the dark green vegetable substance into her mouth, tentatively, as one would make an offering to a possibly angry god. It was accepted.”¹⁷ The anorectic condition of Marian can be interpreted as indicative of what Fogel calls “the anorectic condition of Canada . . . the sense of void or importation which they feel so dominates the cultural life of their country.”¹⁸ Atwood personally felt this void because she grew up surrounded by books from the U.S. and Britain rather than ones native to her country. *The Edible Woman* offers commentary that the cultural life of Canada has been reduced to beer ads of hunting and fishing in the wilderness. Marian is punished and seized by the wilderness because of her role in bloodlessly promoting it and herself.

This complete subjection, to a kind of spiritual wilderness within the female body, is identical to the problem of the unnamed narrator of *Surfacing*, who also becomes unable to eat, and who is also implicated in work that sells a particularly reductive and inauthentic vision of Canadianness. The unnamed protagonist of *Surfacing* similarly finds herself possessed by gods that embody the wilderness, to which she never had a right. The narrator begins her story by journeying back to the outback cabin of her childhood in search of her father, who has been reported missing. It is thus a quest for self-origin. She brings with her three city dwellers, her

¹⁵ *The Edible Woman*, 153.

¹⁶ *The Edible Woman*, 91.

¹⁷ *The Edible Woman*, 206.

¹⁸ Fogel, *A Tale of Two Countries*, 27.

boyfriend—an anti-American—and a married couple. The latter function as mere tourists and represent an abusive patriarchal structure, since the wife is abused by her husband and since she is a product of packaged femininity (for example, her husband has never even seen her without makeup). The narrator serves as their wilderness guide and in her journey tries to reclaim a lost connection to the land, to heal what is missing from her life. For example, she is convinced that her father has left her a map and that she will find her answers in the lake, if she just dives deeply enough. She believes that when she dives, she will find aboriginal art. This search for aboriginal art has significance because she is an illustrator and has been commissioned to illustrate a collection of Quebec folk tales for children, which are not real, and which are packaged for a U.S. marketplace. She works less and less as her journey takes her deeper into the wilderness, for obvious symbolic reasons, but her foreignness to even the land of her birth is signified by the fact that she does not speak French, the language of the residents, and her sentiments upon arrival, “now we’re on my home ground, foreign territory.”¹⁹

Surfacing blames the destruction of the wilderness on American interests; while out in her canoe, the protagonist sees men desecrating the land and believes they must be American. When she finds that they are Canadian and that they have the badge of an American sports team rather than the actual American flag, she vows that it makes no difference because they are American within. However, her sense of foreignness from the wilderness itself demonstrates that Americans are scapegoats. For, internal divisions in the land itself (French, British, aboriginal) defy any real possession of the territory, for which she herself is a symbol. The binary oppositions that the novel draws between American and Canadian, male and female, desecrator and wilderness, ultimately break down. Peter Wilkins’s article explores the breakdown of the dichotomies Atwood initially constructs in the text: “She identifies men, technology, and the logos (rationality, language) with the United States and women, organicism, and a prelinguistic animality with Canada,” but such “simple binaries in determining Canadian nationalism break down.”²⁰

In the very process of diving into the lake associated with Canada and aboriginal art, a space beyond U.S. interference, the protagonist finds a vision of what *she* has repressed—a division within, so to speak. Until that moment we believe her self-deception that she is alienated from her family-of-origin because she has left a husband and child. She reveals, while diving, a surfacing of a repressed memory—a forced abortion that she depicts as a moment of victimization. She conflates this memory with the American desecration of the wilderness. However, her reflections on this newly surfaced memory unveil her participation in violating nature, which is her pregnant body:

He said I should do it, he made me do it; he talked about it as though it was legal, simple, like getting a wart removed. He said it wasn’t a person, only an animal; I should have seen that it was no different, it was hiding in me as if in a burrow and instead of granting it sanctuary I let them catch it. I could have said No but I didn’t; that made me one of them too, a killer. After the slaughter, the murder, he couldn’t believe I didn’t want to see him any more.²¹

¹⁹ *Surfacing*, 122.

²⁰ Peter Wilkins, “Defense of the Realm: Canada’s Relationship to the US in Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*,” *REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature* 14 (1982): 206.

²¹ *Surfacing*, 146.

She begins to make reparation as a punishment for this sin; she has sex and believes herself impregnated, serving the god within. However, becoming one with nature is not healing but merely a means of becoming a territory pregnant with the colonized meaning of the wilderness.

Upon the surfacing of this memory of herself violating nature, she, like Marian, becomes possessed by wilderness laws, which demand that she re-animalize herself and stop living in enclosed human spaces such as houses. She descends into a bestial madness. Like a child having regressed to the point of being completely controlled by parents, she obsessively tries to determine what she can and cannot do—what the Power will let her do, eat, be. She is not so much returning to a liberated, pre-repressed state, even upon freeing the memory of her oppression, but is possessed by the Power of the wilderness and its laws, an irony Wilkins explores in opposition to critics who feel that the narrator's wilderness quest is healing:

In the first step of her attempt at transformation, the narrator substitutes the violently inscribed technology of 'order' with a set of intuited prohibitions that forbid human contact from the 'gods.' The 'gods' oppose technology, so she shuns all tools. If she catches a fish, she must do it with her hands, not with a line and a hook. She renounces can openers, eating utensils, toilets—anything she associates with technology—in order to get back to nature: 'I am forbidden to walk on the paths. Anything that metal has touched, scarred; axe and machete cleared the trails, order is made with knives' (200). But these prohibitions never transform into any positive affirmation of her new existence. Like the Ten Commandments, they tell her only what she cannot do.²²

With her spiritual epiphany comes dangers, loss of agency, and her recognition that there is no preconscious space called the wilderness but, rather, a series of ecological, biological laws that are just as cruel as any manmade ones, and just as inconsiderate of any individual pain. The wilderness motif is thus not really an answer to the Canadian quest for literary tradition, because the wilderness narrative is already impure, a construction of the land as territory. Wilkins interprets this as Atwood's statement that freedom from the U.S. is impossible. But indeed *Surfacing's* narrator never had a right to the wilderness in the first place; her land is French and it belonged to native peoples before that.

The internal divisions within the Canadian subject become the increasing focus of Atwood's novels. The impossibility of identifying a singular vision of the Canadian character is expressed in Joan of *Lady Oracle* (1976), a trickster and fractured character who parodies many nationalities.²³ She bears the first name of the Hollywood star Joan Crawford, representative of her mother's American-influenced, suburban middle-class pretensions. She bears the last name Delacourt, indicative of her father's French ancestry. Men of various nationalities attempt to woo her, each making of her what they will. We begin the novel witnessing her endeavors to disappear into an Italian setting (she has faked her own death in Canada), with consequent difficulties because her foreignness stands out. She has to hide her bright red hair by cutting it off and burning it, reminiscent of Canadian icon Anne of *Green Gables*, who is so discontent with her red hair that she dyes it, a comparison made by Julie Fenwick.²⁴ Joan also tries

²² Wilkins, "Defense of the Realm," 216.

²³ Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle* (New York: Bantam, 1976).

²⁴ Julie Fenwick, "The Silence of the Mermaid: *Lady Oracle* and *Anne of Green Gables*," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 47 (1992): 52.

unsuccessfully to bury the clothes that she wore in her performed drowning, but her Canadian clothes refuse to stay buried; she is left wearing a scarf with pink Mounties on it, a signifier of her ridiculous citizenship. *Lady Oracle* is a comic rendition of a Canadian identity crisis, which Atwood herself discusses as a national illness of paranoid schizophrenia, as opposed to the megalomania of the United States.²⁵ Thus “the personal schizophrenia of the protagonist has been interpreted as a national one.”²⁶ Joan perfectly answers to this nationally divided self, and it is her parentage, her suitors, and her writing styles that coalesce to make this novel a mockery of the confusion accompanying the term “Canadian.”

What is the source of Lady Oracle’s troubles? In her reminiscence, she blames her self-divisions on her mother’s pseudo-American pretensions, up to which she could never measure:

My mother named me after Joan Crawford. This is one of the things that always puzzled me about her. Did she name me after Joan Crawford because she wanted me to be like the screen characters she played—beautiful, ambitious, ruthless, destructive to men—or because she wanted me to be successful? Joan Crawford worked hard, she had willpower, she built herself up from nothing, according to my mother. Did she give me someone else’s name because she wanted me never to have a name of my own? Come to think of it, Joan Crawford didn’t have a name of her own either. Her real name was Lucille LeSueur, which would have suited me much better. Lucy the Sweat. When I was eight or nine and my mother would look at me and say musingly, “To think that I named you after Joan Crawford,” my stomach would contract and plummet and I would be overcome with shame; I knew I was being reproached, but I’m still not sure what for. There’s more than one side to Joan Crawford, though. In fact there was something tragic about Joan Crawford, she had big serious eyes, an unhappy mouth and high cheekbones, unfortunate things happened to her. Perhaps that was it. Or, and this is important: Joan Crawford was thin.²⁷

Joan’s mother’s pretensions range from putting plastic sheeting on the furniture to having Joan join a Brownies troop in a better suburb—ironically girls who abuse and torture Joan—but this passage reveals that her mother’s pretensions are based on pure fictions. For one thing, she bases the name of her child on an America seen through the eyes of Hollywood movies. Joan Crawford is not even the actress’s real name, but a constructed persona marketed for mass appeal, just as Marian markets Canadian masculinity and the narrator of *Surfacing* markets inauthentic Quebec folktales. *Lady Oracle* contains many references to American films and European folk tales, Julie Fenwick observes, but in an overdetermined fashion it does not even name the clear influence of L. M. Montgomery. It is as if the Canadian center is the inaccessible one. Further, as the passage points out, a text such as Joan Crawford is subject to the interpretation of the viewer; the heroine’s mother measures her child against this potent name without acknowledging any complexity to the “text” that is “Joan Crawford.”

Named after layers of fictions, Lady Oracle (Joan) becomes a play of fictionality. She rebels against her mother by becoming fat, and this “fat lady” becomes the fictive foundational

²⁵ Arno Heller, “Margaret Atwood’s Ecological Vision,” in *Nationalism Vs. Internationalism: (Inter)National Dimensions of Literatures in English*, eds. Wolfgang Zach and Ken L. Goodwin (Tubingen: Stauffenburg Verlag, 1996), 316.

²⁶ Heller, “Margaret Atwood’s Ecological Vision,” 316.

²⁷ *Lady Oracle*, 39.

self that follows her around throughout her other mutations into: Louisa Delacourt the costume Gothic writer, an identity borrowed from her Aunt Lou and the vague French ancestry of her father's side; wife of Arthur the Canadian nationalist, mildly ridiculed but also her greatest love; and Lady Oracle, merely a vessel through which automatic writing can pass. Her appropriation of her Aunt Lou's name is important because Aunt Lou's job is to do public relations "just for Canada"²⁸ at a company that is supposed to market feminine products but actually winds up dispensing advice to women. Aunt Lou is a model for a kind of women's writing in a nation that cannot meet women's needs for belonging. Aunt Lou takes Joan to the Canadian Expedition, a symbol for a Canadian culture in opposition to her mother's Hollywood one, and when Joan marries Arthur she makes a point of telling us that he and his radical (though ridiculous) group are protesting American cultural imperialism.

Joan herself is a product of American cultural imperialism, but her only escape is to take on a variety of different roles, some of them ridiculous, and be a refugee defined against another nation. For example, she depicts herself at war with her mother, "the disputed territory was my body,"²⁹ and calls herself a refugee when she journeys to the door of Arthur. While she blames fiction for her lack of a centered self, Lady Oracle clearly revels in the fictional personas she spins. *Lady Oracle* is Atwood's vision of an internally divided Canada, part-American, part-French, part-British, and fundamentally fictive and merely marketed. Joan's research into the depths of history for cultural remnants, which she can use in costume Gothics, demonstrates the falsity of the past and national legitimacy. A look at the various suitors for Joan demonstrates Atwood's regard for the female self as a territory with several possible colonizers. When young, Joan is wooed by an "Italian or Greek, I wasn't sure which"³⁰ waiter, who sees her (the fat lady self) as the perfect mate for his aspirations to own a restaurant. Joan even sees this version of herself in a restaurant much later and wishes she had taken such a simple path. When Joan departs for England and partially becomes her aunt by taking on her name, Joan "falls into" the arms of a Polish count who gives her another colonizing presence identified with European royalty—but one in exile. With this relationship, Atwood parodies Canada's tendency to keep European traditions alive. During their cohabitation, Joan begins her double life by writing costume Gothics; once she meets and marries Arthur, Canadian nationalist, she feels compelled to hide her authorship of cheap popular Gothics, primarily written for women and bored housewives, because of Arthur's regard for intellectually respectable writing. While with Arthur, she participates in experimenting with automatic writing, yet another commentary on Canadian literature ("where does it come from?"). The prose poetry that results is literally a pastiche of genres that achieves instant success despite its cryptic origins.

Although the Canadian nationalist Arthur represents her deepest love, Joan cannot rest with her Canadian side; she has an affair with the Royal Porcupine who represents a similar pastiche but who also revels in American popular products. It is as if her Joan Crawford side, for which she is named, cannot be completely repressed. Atwood depicts Arthur as comically fighting for nothing, pointing us toward a subtle commentary about the impossibility of standing for a nation that does not know who it is. Joan is a better symbol for Canada because she cannot rest with one tradition and is, in fact, a collection of refugees. Ironically, however, she is quite limited in perspective. Joan views the Italian (or Greek?) suitor as a warm and pleasant

²⁸ *Lady Oracle*, 81.

²⁹ *Lady Oracle*, 66.

³⁰ *Lady Oracle*, 95.

“landscape,”³¹ suggesting that *any* vision of ethnicity or nationality reduces an understanding of an individual to picturesque images of places. In fact, her post-mortem “sentence” in Italy seems to be a punishment for her reduction of this Italian-Canadian; even in Italy, she fantasizes about marrying an Italian and living what she perceives to be the simple Italian rural life. As Enoch Padolsky argues, the novel represents “totally an outsider’s comic perspective on Italian culture and all it reveals is Joan’s inability to enter into or to understand Italian reality, except in the most stereotypical way.”³² Joan’s tourist lens will be shared by Rennie in *Bodily Harm* (1981), except that Rennie will be severely punished for it.³³ Joan’s self-dividedness is a kind of Western self-centeredness that disallows recognition of the full complexity of others. Padolsky writes, “Italy and Canada are both reflected through the lens of a British-Canada mental and emotional space,”³⁴ but Atwood’s point is that British-Canada mental and emotional space is inherently unstable because that very space is fictive and slippery. As Fenwick writes, “[Joan] suffers a typically Canadian crisis of cultural identity: the movies, stories, and poems to which her autobiography refers are European and American in origin. . . . Joan turns to the writing of Gothic novels in which she recreates an English past that never really existed.”³⁵ National identity is a fiction; from beer ads to fabricated Quebec folktales for the U.S., Atwood continually parodies the very project she set out to do in *Survival*, the reclamation of a Canadian literary tradition.

The pastiche tourism of *Lady Oracle* rebounds in *Bodily Harm* with a serious vengeance. In this novel of 1981, the protagonist who writes for magazines about lifestyles and surface topics finds herself in a political Gothic. She is trying to escape (like Joan) from Canada and the personal pain of breast cancer by vacationing on a tropical island, but finds herself involved with an American who has been illegally bringing guns into the country to help overthrow the government. Rennie’s problem lies in her surreptitious belief that one can be “just a tourist,” exempt from politics. This refrain runs throughout the novel, “you are a tourist, you are exempt,” until she finds herself imprisoned by the state and realizes that a tourist is not exempt. Marilyn Patton argues that *Bodily Harm* is more political than the earlier novels, tying together as it does “through the vocabulary of cancer: threats to personal identity (especially the female body), pornography (and its connections to rape and perverse masculine use of women’s bodies), and imperialism (perverse use of third world countries by major powers).”³⁶ Patton carefully explicates the repeated image of the devoured female body as a metaphor for the U.S. and Canada’s involvement in the Caribbean and Latin America. She calls the novel “a sweeping indictment of United States foreign policy,”³⁷ in agreement with critic Leslie-Ann Hales’s argument that *The Handmaid’s Tale* can really be understood as an extension of *Bodily Harm*.³⁸

The character Dr. Minnow, a political figure on the island, continually critiques the role of Canadians in international affairs by complimenting Rennie on “the sweet Canadians” who try

³¹ *Lady Oracle*, 98.

³² Enoch Padolsky, “‘The Old Country in Your Blood’: Italy and Canada in Frank Paci’s *Black Madonna* and Margaret Atwood’s *Lady Oracle*,” in *F. G. Paci: Essays on His Words*, ed. Joseph Pivato (Chicago: Guernica, 2003), 45.

³³ Margaret Atwood, *Bodily Harm* (New York: Anchor, 1981).

³⁴ Padolsky, “The Old Country,” 46.

³⁵ Fenwick, “The Silence of the Mermaid,” 53-54.

³⁶ Marilyn P Patton, “Tourists and Terrorists: The Creation of *Bodily Harm*,” *Papers on Language & Literature* 28.2 (1992): 150-74. Accessed by EBSCO November 8, 2005, 5.

³⁷ Patton, “Tourists and Terrorists,” 9.

³⁸ Patton, “Tourists and Terrorists,” 10.

to help out third world places with ineffectual things like quantities of ham. Lorna Irvine discusses the political intentions of this novel:

The opening sentence of *Bodily Harm* thus alerts the reader to the novel's interest in Canadian nationalism and to certain of its political intentions. The refrain, "the sweet Canadians," reiterated by the shrunken Fisher King, Dr. Minnow, means different things at different points in the novel. Sometimes, it implies the naiveté of Canadians, a theme given physical representation through the character of Rennie . . . like Canada, Rennie is perceived by many different characters as naive, as politically uncomplicated, as obscurely old-fashioned . . . an old couple questions Rennie: "You're Canadian, aren't you? We always find the Canadians so nice, they're almost like members of the family. No crime rate to speak of. We always feel quite safe when we go up there" (p. 186). In this respect, then, the novel ironically attacks Canadian simplicity by dramatizing the massive involvement of Rennie in the political affairs of a country she knows so little about. Far from keeping her safe, her naiveté is responsible for her ultimate victimization.³⁹

The protagonist Rennie is like Marian, Joan, and Offred in that she lacks extreme political views; writing on surface matters such as fashion trends, she is critiqued by groups with political sentiments: "When Marxist college professors and hard-line feminist gave her a rough time at parties about the frivolity of her subject matter she would counter with a quote from Oscar Wilde to the effect that only superficial people were not concerned with appearances."⁴⁰ This is typical of an Atwood heroine who is surrounded by political forces but does not hold herself personally accountable to them. Like Joan, married to but not a real member of the nationalist Canadian group, Rennie becomes involved with politics through her involvement with men, between whom she seems to wander without a plan. Irvine views Rennie's story as a metaphor for Canada's middle-of-the-road-ness getting the nation into trouble, when up against the aggressive policies of States.⁴¹ In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred observes that the coo happened very quietly, without protests or shouts. In fact, while one friend of Offred's serves as a strong political voice of resistance, Offred herself represents a more typical citizen—not paying quite enough attention, just trying to get by. Thus Atwood continually seems to critique Canada's lack of commitment—its "sweetness."

Rennie's breast cancer and removal are metaphors for her posture as both colonizer and colonized body, a symbol for Canada's doubleness—its internal struggle for identity and the perception of it by others as part of Western domination. Rennie's missing breast is a similar metaphor to *Surfacing's* narrator's abortion, indicative of a lack of wholeness—the body turned against itself. It is also punishment for her lack of political involvement—her regard for the Caribbean island to which she goes as just a vacation resort. She is ironically in the position of the "city" dwellers who accompany *Surfacing's* narrator to the wilderness. Things like pregnancy, breast cancer, abortion, a missing breast, or the edibility/eating issues of *The Edible Woman* make it clear why the female body is ripe for imaginative representation of territory and colonization. The metaphor of cancer in this text, along with the fact that an American lover

³⁹ Lorna Irvine, "The Here and Now of *Bodily Harm*," in *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms*, eds. Kathryn VanSpanckeren and Jan Garden Castro (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 88.

⁴⁰ *Bodily Harm*, 17-18.

⁴¹ Irvine, "The Here and Now," 96.

restores her sexuality, suggests that while Atwood calls the U.S. a cancer in *Surfacing*, by 1981 she views the Canadian body as a carrier of the cancer of U.S. domination.

In the course of *Bodily Harm*, Atwood ties Canada's internal problems of violence against women, especially through pornography, to its acquiescence to Western imperialism. As Irvine points out, the novel opens with Rennie's reminiscence of how she came home one day and found the police, who informed her that an attacker with a rope had been awaiting her in her bedroom. This sinister image repeats when Rennie is asked by her editor to write "playfully" about pornography, not a playful subject so she deserts the project and walks away from her disturbing research. Dr. Minnow wants Rennie to write about the injustices she sees on the island, but she refuses. In the symbolic logic of the novel, rather than plot logic, Rennie is imprisoned and punished for shirking her responsibilities as a writer. Taken together, Atwood's feminist and nationalist parables of 1969 to 1985, the year of *The Handmaid's Tale*, mean this: basically, the female Canadian voice and character are a means for Atwood to explore the territory of Canada, which, her novels radically suggest, allows various forces to continue colonizing it because of its peculiar psychology—its lack of commitment, its divided nature, its openness to being a handmaid (consider how easily Rennie is persuaded to pick up a package from the airport). Atwood writes from the point of view of such naïve characters as negative role models, so that we perceive the problems in their perceptions. Atwood is repeatedly parodying and warning Canada about its lack of center. Yet she fears nations with strong national sentiments, which are built upon exclusions of difference and which are usually based on reductive, fictional images. *Life Before Man* (1979) and her novels after 1988, the year of Canada's Multiculturalism Act, uncover such exclusions and expose such fictions.⁴²

Canadian Multiculturalism and New Territorial Disputes

Atwood's novels turn increasingly toward depicting the seizure of "old" Canada, already disunified, by multiculturalism. Coral Ann Howells discusses the changes in Canadian national ideology:

Up until the 1950s Canada was one of the "white" countries of the British Commonwealth, though changes in its immigration laws in the 1960s allowed for a much increased number of non-European immigrants. It was in response to these demographic changes that Canada introduced its first Multiculturalism policies in the early 1970s which were codified in the 1988 Multiculturalism Act. This Act officially recognized ethnic and racial diversity as a fundamental characteristic not only of Canadian identity but of Canada's heritage as well.⁴³

Charlotte Beyer also argues that the wilderness motif of the early work, particularly in Atwood's *Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970), about a British settler, gives way to multicultural visions of Toronto in later works. This trend culminates in works like *The Robber Bride* of 1993, which is concerned with origins and crises of characters who lack unified selves, just as Toronto and

⁴² Margaret Atwood, *Life Before Man* (New York: Anchor, 1979).

⁴³ Coral Ann Howells, "Margaret Atwood's Discourse of Nation and National Identity in the 1990s," in *The Rhetoric of Canadian Writing*, ed. Conny Steenman-Marcusse (New York: Rodopi, 2002), 200.

Canada lack a unified consciousness.⁴⁴ Atwood's new vision of Canada and its literary tradition has less to do with survival in an extreme environment and more to do with the pain and play of an urban pastiche and mix of imported styles.

This "new Canada" appears in Atwood's novels in figures that compete with Anglo characters for authenticity. The increasing multiculturalism of Canada finds expression in Atwood's novels as early as 1979, in *Life Before Man*, which features a battle between Elizabeth and Lesje for Nate, Elizabeth's husband. Elizabeth is the "old guard" Anglo character while Lesje is a symbol for the new Canada. She is younger and "multicultural"—part-Ukraine and part-Jew, the product of an unlikely post-war combination. The novel focuses on the competition between Anglo and multicultural Canada for a man, and what brings the characters together is their place of employment—the museum, a symbol for the nation's cultural endeavors. The character Lesje has the most vivid engagement with the museum; for her, it represents a fantasy of belonging to the nation, as well as an escape from the complexities of relationships, since she works with prehistoric life. Lesje is puzzled by her ancestry and by the knowledge that she is perceived as exotic, and that her exoticism has value in Canada. She parodies a song, "kiss me, I'm Ukrainian," in her mind with "Kiss me, I'm multicultural."⁴⁵ She does indeed seem to be coveted by men because she is multicultural.

Lesje's two grandmothers, one Ukraine and one Jewish, represent her hybridity and the idea that she embodies a competitive spirit, for she recalls her grandmothers competing over her:

They'd infested her parents' house in relays, fought over her as if she'd been a dress at a bargain. If one baby-sat for her the other must be given a turn or there would be histrionics: weeping from her Grandmother Smylski, rage from her Grandmother Etlin (who'd kept her name, who'd refused to scurry for cover with the rest of them). Neither of them had ever learned English very well . . . The strange thing about her grandmothers was how much alike they were. Both of their houses were small and dark and smelled of furniture polish and mothballs. They were both widows, they both had sad-eyed single male boarders stashed away in upstairs rooms, they both had fancy china and front rooms crowded with silver-framed family photos, they both drank tea in a glass.⁴⁶

This passage suggests that Lesje quite ironically symbolizes competition for Elizabeth because in Canada, cultural differences are in fact eroded and even irrelevant. From the outside, from her point of view, these grandmothers look amazing alike, signifying the pointlessness of their competition. Both speak languages she cannot understand. She is internally divided between two major traditions, like Canada has always been, but finds herself to be a symbol of the foreign to Canadians themselves.

Lesje has stereotypical images of what Canadian means and what Canada is, signifying the fact that national identity is, at best, merely an image, and at worst, an exclusionary one. When she fantasizes about *The Lost World*, she ascribes meaning to the Maple White Land.

⁴⁴ Charlotte Beyer, "From Violent Duality to Multi-Culturalism: Margaret Atwood's Post-Colonial Cultural and Sexual Politics," in *O Canada: Essays on Canadian Literature and Culture*, ed. Jorn Carlsen (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1995), 106-107; Margaret Atwood, *The Robber Bride* (New York: Anchor, 1993).

⁴⁵ *Life Before Man*, 95.

⁴⁶ *Life Before Man*, 96.

Lesje has a picture of Canada in what she imagines as her boyfriend “William Wasp’s” parents. She knows her picture is fictional but retains it nonetheless:

[William]’s proud of her as a trophy and as a testimony to his own wide-mindedness. But what would his family in London, Ontario, think?

Lesje pictures this family as numerous and pinkish blond. The members of it spend most of their time playing golf, between strenuous rounds of tennis. When they aren’t doing this they gather on terraces—she seems them doing this even in the winter—and drink cocktails. . . . She knows William’s family isn’t really like this. But, like her parents, she grants extra rungs on the ladder to anyone with an authentic British name.⁴⁷

Like in *The Edible Woman*, national identity is based on a constructed fiction. Elizabeth, Nate, and Aunt Muriel do not fit this image, and in fact embody a kind of madness. The novel makes the commentary that everything, especially items in the museum, are actually inauthentic performances: “[Lesje]’s never been to Fruitland but she pictures little souvenir stands where plastic fruits are sold: grape lapel pins, magnetic tomatoes. Or probably, since it’s the United States, college students dressed up as giant peaches and apples strolling among the crowds. Like Disneyland.”⁴⁸ Places are merely images and pictures formed by souvenir stands and American-style hyperboles.

Lesje feels she has “trespassed”⁴⁹ (182) on Elizabeth by making love with Nate, on Elizabeth’s own bed, but upon what has she trespassed? Elizabeth in this novel represents a colonizer. She is haunted by and afraid of becoming her Aunt Muriel, who believes in a Great Chain of Being:

First comes God. Then comes Auntie Muriel and the Queen, with Auntie Muriel having a slight edge. Then come about five members of the Timothy Eaton Memorial Church, which Aunt Muriel attends. After this there is a large gap. Then white, non-Jewish Canadians, Englishmen, and white, non-Jewish Americans, in that order. Then there’s another large gap, followed by all other human beings on a descending scale, graded according to skin color and religion. Then cockroaches⁵⁰

Elizabeth is even self-aware of the fact that she symbolizes the colonizer. Looking at the brochure for a China exhibit that she is supposed to evaluate for the museum, she contemplates her landlord role and her tenants, foreigners of whom she knows nothing:

Elizabeth closes her eyes. It’s a catalogue, a traveling show. Peasant paintings [from China]. It’s in England right now and they can have it in a couple of years, if they want it She can’t care about the Canadian public, much less about this catalogue written by some armchair Marxist in England. From his point of view she’s a landlord. She wonders about her tenants, with their sallow faces and their abnormally quiet child, dressed always a little too neatly, a little too well. They’re foreigners of some kind, but Elizabeth doesn’t know what and it would be rude to ask. Something from Eastern Europe, she thinks,

⁴⁷ *Life Before Man*, 26.

⁴⁸ *Life Before Man*, 198.

⁴⁹ *Life Before Man*, 182.

⁵⁰ *Life Before Man*, 147.

escaped. They are unobtrusive and they pay their rent, nervously, always a day ahead. Are they fighting a long war to oust her? There are no signs of it. These paintings are from a place so utterly alien to her that it might as well be on the moon.⁵¹

Elizabeth is like William and Nate in taking a tourist stance toward ethnic others, who have value for their exoticism, in a museum sort of way, but who threaten at the same time. Elizabeth seems attracted to Chris, with whom she has had an affair, because he leads her to believe he is “part Indian and part French, Metis, that mythical hybrid; archaic, indigenous, authentic as she was not, his sense of grievance fully earned. He sneered at her, the whiteness of her skin and presumably her blood, made love as if exacting payment, and she’d let herself be bullied.”⁵² These origins turn out to be fictional, but the question of authenticity has been replaced by questions of the fashionable, and Elizabeth feels her Anglo self is “out.” The novel is fractured into the three perspectives of Elizabeth, Nate, and Lesje to demonstrate irreconcilable visions of authenticity, and the process by which everyone constructs images and fictions that interfere with their abilities to accurately see one another and themselves.

Even while the Anglo characters regard Lesje as an exotic other, she holds stereotypes of Canadianness that exclude her, and views the museum as a way to belong. The museum is the one place that both her grandmothers would take her, where she would walk between them. She sees in the museum a vision of herself melting into Canadian culture:

They’d seen an Indian woman, wearing a beautiful red sari with a gold band at the hem. Over the top of the sari was a white lab coat, and with the woman were two little girls, obviously her daughters, wearing Scottish kilts. They all disappeared through a door marked STAFF ONLY. “Gevalt,” her grandmother said, frowning, but not with fear. Lesje stared after them, entranced. This, then was her own nationality.⁵³

The museum dissolves differences into a neutralized space, a life before man: “[Lesje had] seen their lab coats as badges, of nationality, membership of some kind. She’d wanted so much to be able to go through those doors: secrets, wonders even, lay beyond.”⁵⁴ Her desire to both escape into a pre-cultural space and into the “staff only” white coat of the museum stems from her lack of belonging, her lack of center. Like *Lady Oracle*’s Joan, named after Joan Crawford and unsure why, Lesje was named after Ukrainian poet Larissa Kosach whose penname was Lesje Ukrainka, thus a text that Lesje will never understand and a person “whose poems Lesje would never be able to read.”⁵⁵ Lesje’s fantasy of escaping cultural complexity for dinosaur “life before man” mirrors the quest of the unnamed narrator of *Surfacing* to reclaim an authentic wilderness self, for both believe themselves to be foreign. Yet because nations are only imagined communities, as argued by Benedict Anderson, and because the face of Canada has changed, even Elizabeth longs for a nation to which to belong.⁵⁶ The final scene of the novel depicts Elizabeth gazing at the exhibit of Chinese peasant landscapes, with the final words, “China does not exist.

⁵¹ *Life Before Man*, 87.

⁵² *Life Before Man*, 172.

⁵³ *Life Before Man*, 98-99.

⁵⁴ *Life Before Man*, 341.

⁵⁵ *Life Before Man*, 91. For a discussion of the Ukrainian poet, see Mary K. Kirtz, “‘I am Become a Name’: The Representation of Ukrainians in Ross, Laurence, Ryga and Atwood,” *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 24.2 (1992): 44.

⁵⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991).

Nevertheless she longs to be there.”⁵⁷ Authentic nationality is only a matter of picturesque folk art after all.

The multiculturalism of Canada is an essential part of *Cat's Eye* (1988), in which the artist protagonist Elaine documents the cultural changes of Toronto and feels nostalgia for the Toronto of her childhood.⁵⁸ Like Lesje does for Elizabeth, the changing landscape of the city gives Elaine a vision of the inevitability of human obsolescence and aging. As Eleonora Roa argues, Elaine feels even in her own birthplace, “like a foreigner, where she felt and still feels out of place, isolated and excluded as if she were a member of a different culture or race.”⁵⁹ In this novel and in *The Robber Bride* (1993), Atwood explores the irony that the Canadian-born feel more and more foreign from home, while they are viewed by immigrants as an image of authentic Canada.⁶⁰ Josef tells Elaine, “I have no country,” says Josef mournfully. He touches my cheek tenderly, gazing into my eyes. ‘You are my country now.’”⁶¹ Josef of *Cat's Eye* is one of the “Displaced Persons” that interest Atwood in *The Robber Bride*, where she pursues with a vengeance the theme that Canadian-born women feel displaced by Multicultural Canada, and yet they embody an authentic image of Canada to the outsider figure Zenia, a vampire-woman who is only the incarnation of the inauthentic feelings of Canadians.

Like *Life Before Man*, *The Robber Bride* features a territorial battle for men between the Canadian-born women and the European post-war immigrant Zenia, who has multiple stories for her origins. As explored by Howells, Zenia’s border-crossing and ambiguity threaten the other women and bring out their feelings of displacement.⁶² Since it is men who are disputed territories in *Life Before Man* and *The Robber Bride*, we can conclude that a Multicultural Canada has changed the terms of Canadian symbolism and, in Atwood’s work, put women at war with one another. In fact, *The Robber Bride* uses the rather overt metaphor of war. One of the three Canadian-born women Tony is an historian who studies war; her favorite activity of staging battles serves to symbolize the actions of the women in the novel, making it an ironic truth when Tony’s male colleagues claim that she has appropriated male territory by choosing her field. The three heroines, Tony, Charis, and Roz, all feel they are Displaced Persons but rather than battle their own issues they war with Zenia, who describes herself in various ways to weasel her way into their households and steal their men. Zenia tells Tony that she is a Russian refugee, which makes sense to Tony, who views Zenia as Slavik. Zenia tells Charis she is the child of a Rumanian gypsy, and she tells Roz that she is an escaped (partial-) Jew. She obviously plays with the idea that “all foreigners look alike” to Westerners. We later find out that Zenia tells West, Tony’s husband, that she is a Greek immigrant. Zenia only hyperbolizes the sense that origins and national authenticities are a fiction for purchase by anyone.

But Zenia is only an incarnation of the internal self-divisions of the Canadian born women. As critics such as Howells and Roa argue, even the Canadian-born women feel a sense of estrangement from their home: “In [*The Robber Bride*] each one of the protagonists feels estranged and foreign from her community, her family, her home country, including Zenia, who

⁵⁷ *Life Before Man*, 351.

⁵⁸ Margaret Atwood, *Cat's Eye* (New York: Anchor, 1988).

⁵⁹ Eleonora Roa, “Immigrants and Other Aliens: Encounters in the ‘Wild Zone’ in Margaret Atwood’s Recent Fiction,” in *Intersections: La Narrativa Canadese Tra Storia E Geografia*, ed. Liana Nissim and Carol Pagetti (Cisalpino: Istituto Editoriale Universitario, 1999), 173.

⁶⁰ Margaret Atwood, *The Robber Bride* (New York: Anchor, 1993).

⁶¹ *Cat's Eye*, 325.

⁶² Howells, “Margaret Atwood’s Discourse of Nation,” 204.

is the foreigner par excellence.”⁶³ Each woman has constructed a fictional identity for herself. For example, Tony’s mother is British and despises the way Tony speaks. Tony’s mother has only a postcard vision of what Canadian means; she takes Tony to bogging because she “had only a vague idea, gleaned from Christmas cards. But it was one of her romantic English images of Canada.”⁶⁴ These romantic images of nations are problems throughout Atwood’s novels. Tony imagines herself to be “a foreigner, to her own mother; and to her father also, because, although she talks the same way he does, she is—and he has made this clear—not a boy. Like a foreigner, she listens carefully, interpreting. Like a foreigner she keeps an eye out for sudden hostile gestures. Like a foreigner she makes mistakes.”⁶⁵ Each woman ironically views Zenia as a projected part of self because she feels foreign. Tony is the product of an unhappy marriage and imagines an alternative identity that is her name spelled backwards, enjoying the Russian or perhaps Martian sound of it. Roz is half-Jewish and half-Irish Catholic but has changed her name several times. Rosalind Greenwood turns back into Roz Grunwald after the war, “But whereas once Roz was not Catholic enough, now she isn’t Jewish enough. She’s an oddity, a hybrid, a strange half-person . . . She finds herself in a foreign country. She’s an immigrant, a displaced person.”⁶⁶ The novel is preoccupied with the idea of displaced persons: “DPs meant Displaced Persons. They came from the east, across the ocean; what had displaced them was the war . . . Sometimes Roz got called a DP herself, because of her dark skin.”⁶⁷ Even the Canadian-born Shanika is perceived as a foreigner by others and articulates this pain to Charis, serving as a kind of alter-ego. Charis has metamorphosed into Charis from Karen due to extreme abuse. Each Canadian character is thus self-divided ethnically and psychologically, destabilizing any sense of Canadian-born authenticity.⁶⁸

Divisions within the women incarnate Zenia, the ambiguous foreigner. Tony views her as the mother who abandoned her, and Charis views her as a grown Karen. Zenia brings out the foreignness within them: “‘So, Tony,’ says Zenia. She says Tony as if it’s a foreign word, as if it’s in quotes.”⁶⁹ Zenia is the penultimate hybrid even when she tells one story of her birth to Tony: “My mother had several versions [of my father]—minor Greek royalty, a general in the Polish cavalry, an Englishman of a good family. She had a photograph of him, just the one man—but three stories. The story about him changed, depending on how she felt; though in all three of the stories he died in the war.”⁷⁰ The incarnation of anxiety about displaced persons, and about becoming them, Zenia represents every-where-else-ness: “Where has she been? Well, Europe, she says, gesturing towards a higher, deeper culture; and the States, where the big folks play; and the Middle East. (With a wave of her hand she invokes deserts, date palms, mystic knowledge, and better shish kebab than anything capable of being grilled in Tony’s wee Canadian oven.)”⁷¹ Zenia represents internal changes in the psyche of Canada, which has officially welcomed multiculturalism and opened itself to a universal condition of inauthenticity, this novel suggests. The restaurant at which Tony, Roz, and Charis meet has the aura of the pastiche and no focus whatsoever. Tony, like Elaine in *Cat’s Eye*, even in her own city feels

⁶³ Roa, 173.

⁶⁴ *The Robber Bride*, 151.

⁶⁵ *The Robber Bride*, 161.

⁶⁶ *The Robber Bride*, 381.

⁶⁷ *The Robber Bride*, 359.

⁶⁸ Howells, “Margaret Atwood’s Discourse of Nation,” 205.

⁶⁹ *The Robber Bride*, 142.

⁷⁰ *The Robber Bride*, 184.

⁷¹ *The Robber Bride*, 201.

“Foreign, yes. Foreign here,”⁷² as does Roz because of middle-age: “[Roz] must seem to archaic to [her daughters]. So obsolete, so foreign. She spent the first half of her life feeling less and less like an immigrant, and now she’s spending the second half feeling more and more like one. A refugee from the land of middle age, stranded in a country of the young.”⁷³ Foreignness becomes a general psychological condition based on exclusion from whatever images are fashionable and dominant. Larry, who turns out to be gay, “has an exiled look to him, the look of a lost traveler, as if he’s stuck in some no man’s land, between borders and without a passport.”⁷⁴ Of course Larry is seen with Zenia early in the novel because she *is* his exiled look. As Tony contemplates, those like Zenia need to be invited in.

Individuals in the novel are continually described as territories, displaced persons, and foreigners, indicating that beneath a rhetoric of nationalism lies the fundamental problem of conflating people with something that can be possessed. Tony calls her husband “occupied territory,”⁷⁵ when she realizes Zenia has entranced him, for example, and feels that “Zenia has reclaimed West, in the same way she might reclaim any piece of property belonging to her, such as a suitcase left at a train station.”⁷⁶ This claim on “the” West, his name, is symbolic. Tony realizes that “he was occupied territory, all along”⁷⁷ ... “He was only on loan.”⁷⁸ Ironically, it is Zenia herself who speaks the truth of the novel when she identifies the mistake of the women:

“Women like you make me sick,” says Zenia angrily. “You’ve always owned things. But you didn’t own him, you know. He wasn’t your God-given *property*! You think you had rights in him? Nobody has any rights except what they can get! . . . Did it ever occur to you that Mitch was responsible for his actions? He made his own decisions, and maybe those decisions didn’t have much to do with me, or with you either.”⁷⁹

Ironically, the “evil” Zenia points out the truth that none of the Canadian born women have a more authentic right to the territory than she, something they already know deep inside. All are involved in constructing fictions of belonging, as symbolized by Roz’s description of national identity: “Even the real thing looks constructed. When Roz saw her first Alp, she thought, Bring out the chorus line in bodices and dirndls, and let’s all yodel. / Maybe that’s what people mean by a national identity. The hired help in outfits. The backdrops. The props.”⁸⁰ The artwork in Roz’s office returns us to the Moose beer ad: “A corporate tax write-off, fortunately. Canadian Art.”⁸¹ *The Robber Bride* replays the concerns of *Surfacing* in a multicultural Canadian context. Questing into the deepest lake for Canadian wholeness, her characters find only the foreigner within.

⁷² *The Robber Bride*, 39.

⁷³ *The Robber Bride*, 84.

⁷⁴ *The Robber Bride*, 91.

⁷⁵ *The Robber Bride*, 206.

⁷⁶ *The Robber Bride*, 202.

⁷⁷ *The Robber Bride*, 206.

⁷⁸ *The Robber Bride*, 210.

⁷⁹ *The Robber Bride*, 486.

⁸⁰ *The Robber Bride*, 96.

⁸¹ *The Robber Bride*, 97.

Conclusion: The Battle for Grace and Her Alias

The problem of who belongs to Canada and to whom Canada belongs is thus an unsolvable dilemma in Atwood's novels. It becomes increasingly apparent that any particular colonizer is a scapegoat and that Atwood is pointing her finger at the Canadian character, whose internal issues mark a psychology of the colonized, a feeling of inauthenticity and thus a propensity to be possessed. As the issue of multiculturalism gains importance in the national character of Canada and in Atwood's novels, her novels seem less feminist and more concerned with rifts between women, particularly in competition for men, as pondered by Barbara Hill Rigney: "How, then, given such negative portrayals of women, can we construct a feminist ethic for Atwood, how infer a woman-centered poetic? Atwood's gender politics are trickier than her narrative style."⁸² Hill meditates on Atwood's thesis that women are responsible for their own predicaments. Since women are metonymies for Canada in her fiction, we have to conclude that Atwood has the same thesis about Canada's openness to possession by others. With her two novels set in Canadian history, *Alias Grace* (1996) and *The Blind Assassin* (2001), Atwood turns to Canadian history itself to explore the Gothic entrapment of female characters, both of whom have deeply repressed memories and horrible secrets to unfold.⁸³ Both are understood to be novels that question official versions of Canadian history that legitimate the nation. Both deploy a postmodern emphasis on the constructed nature of history and narrative accounts, interspersing historical accounts with stories from the point of view of those whose stories are told inaccurately and incompletely by others. In other words, with these two novels she advances the point of view that the foreign is always present in history for there is always an undisclosed story to tell. It is the role of fiction to question and interrogate the margins of history and excavate the perspectives of the less powerful.

Howells argues that Atwood's final historical novels are part of the changing multicultural landscape of Canada because they reach into history and challenge official versions of white colonization. The internally divided state of the Canadian character, with consequent risks of being possessed by others, could not be better exemplified than in the character of Grace Marks, of *Alias Grace*. *Alias Grace* focuses on an Irish immigrant, a servant suspected of murdering her employer (Kinnear) and his mistress-housekeeper Nancy. Grace Marks cannot remember the murder and while in prison, a psychologist Simon attempts to recover her repressed memory. Howells interprets this repressed memory as a vision of what Canadian colonial history has repressed, an interpretation furthered by the fact that Atwood intersperses her story with the version told by Susanna Moodie, an early British settler in Canada whom Atwood has written about before:

It is this connection between individual and collective memory—or forgetting—that would seem to make Grace's story emblematic in a wider historical context than that of private experience, where "the forgotten, the discarded, the taboo" are all constitutive elements in the creation of any national identity. . . . I believe that [Atwood] is foregrounding the dimension of amnesia in Canada's discourse of nationhood (such as

⁸² Barbara Hill Rigney, "Alias Atwood: Narrative Games and Gender Politics," in *Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact*, ed. Reingard M. Nischik (New York: Camden House, 2000), 161-162.

⁸³ Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace* (New York: Anchor, 1996); Margaret Atwood, *The Blind Assassin* (New York: Anchor, 2000).

forgetting the treatment of aboriginal peoples or of the Japanese Canadians in World War II) via the personal forgetting of Grace Marks.⁸⁴

Howells reads *The Blind Assassin* in a similar light. It is a Gothic tale about two sisters, Iris who married for wealth and found herself in an abusive relationship, and her sister who was imprisoned for “madness” at the behest of Iris’s husband. Both *Alias Grace* and *The Blind Assassin* depict discrepancies between personal accounts and official histories told by those in power. As Judith McCombs points out in her analysis of the artist figures in the earlier Atwood novels and short stories, many of Atwood’s characters are writers or artists and thus she is exploring the appropriate role of the artist, given conditions of the market, choice of subject, and responsibility to truth and audience. The writer is never neutral, yet any national identity depends upon the narrative of history.

In all of her later novels, there is a Zenia-like figure who crosses borders and who brings the foreign home to the Canadian born. The Zenia figure in *Alias Grace* is actually male and his name is Jeremiah. He is alternatively a peddler, a prophet, and a well-respected psychologist, a border-crosser who, like Zenia, is most able to penetrate Grace’s almost impenetrable surface. The story of *Alias Grace* is more than Grace’s story; it is also the story of an American doctor trying to recover Grace’s repressed memories of the murder. He is continually frustrated and actually driven mad by Grace’s lack of interiority and psychoanalytic complexity. Importantly, both Jeremiah and Simon are from Massachusetts, and both are in some sense competing for accurate accounts of Grace’s character. The charlatan Jeremiah, acting the part of the respected Dr. DuPont, seems to succeed in uncovering Grace’s possession by Mary Whitney, which falls into the paradigm of various possessions that Atwood’s female characters undergo. What seems noteworthy is the way in which the two Americans compete for the possession of the Canadian immigrant, who is in fact already possessed and internally divided, as signified by her dreams, repressed memories, and alter ego Mary Whitney. Mary Whitney can voice things, within Grace, that Grace cannot say. She is the angry resistance to colonization, deeply repressed in the Canadian character, Atwood suggests.

Atwood’s women all have aliases and foreign possessors within—Americans who seek to analyze them; husbands and lovers that seek to control them; gods, cancers, repressed memories, and foreign vampires that seek to consume them. Grace’s repressed memory of murder is only the narrator of *Surfacing*’s repressed memory of murder after all. It is the wilderness that Atwood set out to describe in *Survival*, but found within the Canadian psyche. In the end, Atwood’s novels suggest, lack of stable identity is not the fault of the colonizers but of the colonized, who “could have said No but didn’t.” But the ultimate irony, Atwood points out, is what saying No means. When Grace refuses the penetrating questions of Simon, she opens herself to possession by the fanatic Mary Whitney; when *Surfacing*’s narrator and Marian refuse their place on the food chain, they open themselves to possession by the Darwinian wilderness; when Lady Oracle refuses possession by her American-obsessed mother, she falls into the arms of a Polish count; when the women of *The Robber Bride* define their men as possessions, they open them to theft by another woman who comes to “claim” them. We have then a handmaid’s dilemma. There is no freedom, only choices of colonizers. There is no China, only fictions and longings. But it is, after all, having choices and longings that matter in the end.

⁸⁴ Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, 210-11.