

INTRODUCTION

Body and Boundary

“I sometimes felt as if these marks on my body were a kind of code, which blossomed, then faded, like invisible ink held to a candle. But if they were a code, who held the key to it?”

I was sand, I was snow—written on, rewritten, smoothed over.”

—Margaret Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*

“When did the body first set out on its own adventures? Snowman thinks; after having ditched its old travelling companions, the mind and the soul, for whom it had once been considered a mere corrupt vessel or else a puppet acting out dramas for them, or else bad company, leading the other two astray. [...] It had dumped the other two back there somewhere, leaving them stranded in some damp sanctuary or stuffy lecture hall while it made a beeline for the topless bars, and it had dumped culture along with them: music and painting and poetry and plays. Sublimation, all of it; nothing but sublimation, according to the body. Why not cut to the chase?”

But the body had its own cultural forms. It had its own art. Executions were its tragedies, pornography was its romance.”

—Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*

Writing in the very beginning of the twenty-first century, Margaret Atwood foregrounds the relation between body and writing in her latest two novels: *The Blind Assassin* and *Oryx and Crake*. More than usual victimization or stigmatization, which dismisses the body either as a tractable scoreboard for excruciating inscriptions or as “a mere corrupt vessel” for the lofty mind and soul, here the body becomes parchment; it is a text “written on, rewritten,

smoothed over.” Moreover, executions and pornography are now seen as corporeal performances of “tragedies” and “romance” instead of physical violence and licentious erotica. Is this Atwood’s new manifesto for the body politics? Is this her parody on the Freudian sublimation? While the “marks” in the first epigraph derive from Iris’s husband, who “preferred conquest to cooperation” not only during intimacy but “in every area of life” (371), and the body performances in the second epigraph are actually “simulations” (83) in the futuristic cyberspace, it seems that Atwood, while drawing our attention to the onus imposed on bodies under the conventional—if not chronic—hierarchy of body and soul, also encourages us to read bodies as “code[d]” texts that tell stories in “bruises” instead of words (*Blind* 371). Indeed, the body is not simply a punching bag customized for boxing or thrashing, a fillet passively in wait for cutlery or mutilation, or a container for mind and soul. Nor is it a cesspool that decays, corrupts and goes foul. On the contrary, bodies have lives of their own—lives not subject to mentality or spirituality: they “blossom” and “fade” like seasonal plants; they have their somatic “cultural forms” different from audible music and verbal poetry. They tell stories and claim autonomy.

In fact, Atwood is not the first novelist that notices the bodies’ urge to speak their own stories. Before her, Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison and Booker Prize Winner Michael Ondaatje have called into being a body language—not through gesture, but in *Skin* (as a sort of language like English). In *Beloved*, there is a “chokecherry tree” (16) growing on Sethe’s back. A device of the Márquezian magical realism, the tree represents not only a personal record of whites’ lynching but a collective projection of whites’ fear toward blacks.¹

¹ The tree imagery in *Beloved* signifies a pejorative implant, label and projection of whites upon blacks. As the “chokecherry tree” on Sethe’s back is not a birthmark, but a “cowhide” planted by the white Schoolteacher (16, 17), the black jungle described by Stamp Paid is another planting on a racial scale:

Whitepeople believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jingle. Swift unnavigable waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for their sweet white blood. [...] The more coloredpeople spent their strength trying to convince them how gentle they were, how clever and loving, how human, the more they used themselves up to persuade whites of something Negroes believed could not be questioned, the deeper and more tangled the jungle grew inside. But it wasn’t the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable)

Accordingly, Sethe's back, a place where the whites' rancor and cruelty is *planted*, becomes a trope for the plantation history: it cannot be seen, but it is always there. While the skin in Morrison's *Beloved* is an embodiment of racism, it transforms into an inscription of imperialism in Ondaatje's *The English Patient*. As Katherine lies dying in the Cave of Swimmers, Almásy depicts her body in terms of cartography: "her whole body was covered in bright pigment. [...] Only the eye blue removed, made anonymous, a naked map where nothing is depicted, no signature of lake, no dark cluster of mountain as there is north of Borkou-Ennedi-Tibesti, no lime-green fan where the Nile rivers enter the open palm of Alexandria, the edge of Africa" (260-61). It seems that not until the *make-up* is wiped out from Katherine's eye—homophone of I—can it/she return to be what—not who—it/she is. For those who are living, cartography, with its trappings of occupation and colonization, names, marks, gauges, and assesses not only geographical landscapes but human bodies as well. As maps and legends are drawn, national borders and ownership are set in, and "international bastards" are born.

Morrison's and Ondaatje's tales are those of racism and imperialism. They add new dimensions to the discourse of body politics by shedding light on physical or verbal violence as bodily language. Both Morrison and Ondaatje nonetheless pay little attention to the relation between women and maladies like eating disorders and obsession with cleanliness or the border between human and other transgenic species. My objective here is therefore to bring to the fore these two issues under the rubric of body and boundary. On the one hand, in *The Blind Assassin* we will address the issue of female malady: Why is malady more than a physical affliction? How do female subjects regard their "diseased" bodies? How does writing reconfigure diseases, reconstruct ill subjects, and above all, re(ad)dress subjectivity?

place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them. And it grew. It spread. In, through and after life, it spread, until it invaded the whites who had made it. Touched them every one. Changed and altered them. Made them bloody, silly, worse than even they wanted to be, so scared were they of the jungle they had made. The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own. (198-99)

On the other, in *Oryx and Crake* we will explore the issue of monstrosity: What is the difference between humanity and animality/monstrosity? How will transgenics reterritorialize or deterritorialize the border between human and bioengineered being? How to define the human body when it becomes exchangeable, customized, or artificial? All in all, this thesis ventures on an investigation of bodily autonomy and bodily integrity. To borrow Judith Butler's question, "If the body is not a 'being,' but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality, then what language is left for understanding this corporeal enactment, gender, that constitutes its 'interior' significance on its surface?" (177). While my question here is not a meditation on "compulsory heterosexuality" but one on the reclaiming of female subjectivity and one on the construction of monstrosity, Butler's correlation between body and boundary is to see body as a locus of social powers, which, as will be made clear in my following discussion, is a shared tenet in my thesis.

This thesis encompasses two chapters. Chapter One—"Eating, Cleaning, and Writing: Female Abjection and Subjectivity in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*"—attempts to explicate women's emergence from the shade of abjection to the stage of subjectivity, with a focus on the physical and textual boundaries. The first section centers on the power dynamics of eating and food, particularly on three issues: food-refusing as a protest on behalf of bodily autonomy, eating as a demonstration of power, and sexist stereotypes of women through culinary metaphors. The second section analyzes the Chase sisters in terms of hygienic habits, aiming to answer the question: why can Iris outgrow her eating disorder, but Laura cannot? The third section shifts the focus from women's corporeal boundary (eating and cleaning) to the textual one (writing), by turns soaring up to the female writing in this novel and "diving into the wreck" of phallogocentricism. Where food-refusing and obsessive showers help

women claim their subjectivity by negatively drawing a line between self and other, female writing shapes subjects that do not simply counter the other but negotiate with it. While the first two sections rely on Kristeva's concept of "abjection" to draw the bodily boundary between self and other, the last section leans on Cixous's idea(s) of *écriture féminine* to reimagine, reconstruct, and re(dis)cover the self/other dialectic by "flying" across textual boundaries.

In fact, malady is not new in Atwood; ever since her first novel illness has played a leading role in her oeuvre. As noticed, in *The Edible Woman* Marian MacAlpin suffers from anorexia; in *Surfacing* the nameless narrator is torn by schizophrenia;² in *Lady Oracle* Joan Foster tackles obesity and bulimia; in *Life Before Man* Elizabeth is on the verge of breakdown while Lesje is "regressing" to the reverie of prehistory (13); in *Bodily Harm* Rennie Wilford's "protection against disease" starts with her mastectomy (8);³ in *The Handmaid's Tale* Offred is valued by the viability of her ovary; in *Cat's Eye* Elaine Risley experiences a tug of war with her girlhood trauma; in *The Robber Bride* Tony, Charis, and Roz are thrall to family histories about World War II; and in *Alias Grace* the "celebrated murderess" (3) Grace Marks claims to be afflicted with amnesia. In this case, my studies of the Chase sisters in *The Blind Assassin* can be a follow-up supplement to this copious subgenre. While the correlation between woman and malady may create a false impression that women are inclined to sickness by nature, my studies of Iris's eating disorder and her obsession with cleanliness attempt to purge women from such gynecologic pathology. If

² According to Erineç Özdemir, "Through the traumatic experiences of abortion and separation from her lover she [the narrator] came to feel amputated. Her true self left her body, becoming trapped in her mind. Her body in turn became unfeeling. [...] She is, like most schizoid or schizophrenic people, broken-hearted. Significantly, the etymological meaning of schizophrenia is 'broken' (*schiz*) 'soul or heart' (*phrenos*) [Laing 1968: 107]" (67). For a closer reading of schizophrenia under the rubric of madness in *Surfacing*, please refer to Özdemir, especially 66-71.

³ According to Karen F. Stein, "Reenie's mastectomy initiates the metaphor of disease, of both the physical and the social bodies, that structures the novel. She begins to have fantasies of her body as rotting, disintegrating, and she feels disembodied, disconnected from her body. Significantly, it is a wound in her breast, a site of her sexual identity, that initiates Rennie's crisis. Frightened by her illness, she toughens the shell she has already built around herself to hide her vulnerability" (*Revisited* 73).

sufferers of eating disorders are really mostly women, I am not satisfied to know this as a statistical, gender-based fact, but would like to go on to ask why women are more susceptible to such maladies than men are. As Atwood's female protagonists are repeatedly depicted as ill subjects, it is likely to victimize women, interpret their illness sexually, and then jump to the conclusion of biological determinism. However, the fact is that the eating disorder is not cervical cancer, and therefore not a disease specific to women. By attributing its incidence to sexual differences only, we have overlooked the influence of society on individuals.

As such, a thorough investigation of women's eating disorders should take their social situations into consideration. Yet, while things like slim models and male aesthetic are all partially responsible for the virtually morbid projection of feminine beauty, it is worth noting that the eating disorder in *The Blind Assassin* cannot be understood only in terms of what psychiatrists diagnose as anorexia nervosa (AN), which, according to Renata Strumia, is "a refusal to maintain bodyweight at or above 85% of expected weight, as defined by age-appropriate body mass index (BMI) charts" (166). While Strumia focuses on the clinical facts of patients with AN—for example, "[they] use caloric restriction or excessive exercise to lose weight, and they are terrified of becoming overweight" (166)—I am interested less in the counting of pounds or the measurements of waistlines than in the relation between food-refusing and female subjectivity. As Caroline Knapp acutely reflects upon her own problem with food, "Starving, in its inimitably perverse way, gave me a way to address the anxiety I felt as a young, scared, ill-defined woman who was poised to enter the world and assume a new array of rights and privileges; it gave me a tiny, specific, manageable focus (popcorn kernels) instead of a monumental, vague, overwhelming one (work, love)" (qtd. in Martin 59). While eating disorders, especially the refusal of food, may result from the draconian expectation from family, friends and the media, they may also stem from personal attempts at controlling one's own body—albeit in a destructive manner.

While in *The Blind Assassin* Iris and Laura develop such maladies as eating disorders and/or obsession with cleanliness at their endeavor to grapple with the self/other conflict, in *Oryx and Crake* Snowman—known as Jimmy before the calamitous plague—encounters challenges on a greater scale. Unlike the Chase sisters, whose hostile others are predators or consumers on behalf of the societal/patriarchal cannibalism, Snowman has to tackle the others of much more “inhuman” sorts. Indeed, the other in *Oryx and Crake* can be as intangible as microbes, as outré as cyborgs, or as subterranean as cadavers—all of which are more Real (in the Lacanian sense) than the concrete human beings in *The Blind Assassin*. As the other is more treacherous in this “speculative fiction” (Atwood, *Oryx* 382; “Context” 513),⁴ the threats it poses on the subject are accordingly more rigorous. While Snowman, allegedly the last man on earth, seems to be spared the harrows of societal/patriarchal cannibalism, he falls prey to super viruses, ravenous carnivores, and his own gnawing memories. As such bioengineered animals as the wolvogs and the pigeons drool at his flesh; as the plague tries to break down his immune system; as the Crakers render him impotent and inferior; and as the dead keep haunting him regardless of the demarcation between life and death, Snowman suffers from more afflictions than do the Chase sisters. On top of the problems of malnutrition and personal hygiene, he has to cope with the hazard of blood poisoning, the anguish of loneliness, and above all the meaning of humanity.

Not surprisingly, as the others in *Oryx and Crake* become more versatile than those in *The Blind Assassin*, it is thus understandable why this novel of the near future is replete with the double trope of body/boundary fortification and mortification. In respect of physical

⁴ While people tend to read *Oryx and Crake* as a science fiction, Atwood prefers the phrase “speculative fiction” for its higher possibility in real life and its greater pertinence to earthlings: “I said I liked to make a distinction between science fiction proper—for me, this label denotes books with things in them we can’t yet do or begin to do, talking beings we can never meet, and places we can’t go—and speculative fiction, which employs the means already more or less to hand, and takes place on Planet Earth” (“Context” 513). In other words, for Atwood “speculative fiction” deals with “what if” scenarios bordering on reality; unlike science fiction, “[i]t contains no intergalactic space travel, no teleportation, no Martians” (*Oryx* 382-83).

structures, there are moats, security cordons, sentry posts, isolation wards, quarantine cells, walls that tell elite Compounds and seedy pleeblands apart and sterilized pens that protect bioengineered animals from malign viruses. Bioengineeringly, the Crakers are programmed to be equipped with repugnant pees to demarcate their territory against feral predators, with fortified immune system to fend off germs, with thick skin to resist ultraviolet, and with citrus-fruit body odor to ward off mosquitoes (154, 156, 6, 102). Linguistically, the blurbs and promotions on the packages boost their products—if not materially, at least psychologically. However, despite all the ingenious contrivances, not all fortifications are impregnable. As the pigeons bred for organ transplantation and the Crakers designed for “perfect” babies are ethical transgressions themselves, the lethal epidemic “JUVE, Jetspeed Ultra Virus Extraordinary” (341) even invalidates the defense of gates and citadels. Decimating people around the world, the plague moreover leaves all buildings collapsing with age and neglect. In view of all these ruins, it seems that all manipulations of boundaries are doomed to be failures.

As the plague has disrupted all physical boundaries, my focus in *Oryx and Crake* will further elaborate on the fine line between humanity and animality/monstrosity. Namely, Chapter Two—“Transgenics and Transgression: Animality, Humanity, and Monstrosity in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*”—will address the mutable construction of monstrosity by comparing the protagonist Snowman with the pigeons, the Crakers, and the scientist Crake. The first section deals with the power relation between Snowman and the pigeons, focusing on such issues as organ transplantation and the adaptability to the environment in order to tackle the thin line between human and animal/monster. The second section centers on the power relation between Snowman and the Crakers, centering on Snowman’s gradual degeneration from human to animal and eventually to monster in comparison with the Crakers’ “perfection.” The third section turns to explore bioengineering *per se*, bringing to

the fore its imbroglia with capitalism, its correlation with *homo faber* (or instrumentalism), as well as its often neglected ethics. While the pigeons and the Crakers prove that humanity is coupled with dominance whilst monstrosity is bound up with inferiority and marginality, the genographer Crake even tells us that there is monstrosity in humanity.

It is worth remarking that while Atwood's female protagonists have been excessively discussed by feminists, Jimmy/Snowman is probably the first male protagonist in Atwood's novels that is endowed with a traumatized childhood, round characterization, and above all, the vulnerability to illness just like most of Atwood's female narrators or protagonists. However, tempting as it is to interpret Jimmy/Snowman as an effeminate eunuch—for one thing, his relegation among the “word people” is considered inferior to the “numbers people” like Crake in a technocratic society (25); for another, the Crakers believe that Snowman covers himself with bed sheet “because he's missing his man thing” (8)—the challenges these bioengineered creatures pose are actually on the whole human race. Thus, my focus on Jimmy/Snowman only is an attempt to study humankind as a whole vis-à-vis the transgenic beings rather than to reduce gender to nil.

Indeed, although the power relation between human and the other species has outweighed the sexual relation between man and woman in *Oryx and Crake*, this does not mean that gender issues can be ignored. Interestingly, the female characters here more or less parallel those in *The Blind Assassin* with regard to their eating, cleaning and writing habits. For example, Ramona's mincing consumption of the lettuce and the raw carrot, while reminding Jimmy of “an alien mosquito” that “could liquefy those hard, crisp foods and suck them into herself” (25), is a Gothicized dining etiquette. Then, as most girls at Watson-Crick have “their casual approach to personal hygiene and adornment” (203), these women scientists exemplify the “career woman” in a technocratic age, an image quite different from

that of the traditional “angel in the house.” In addition, Amanda Payne’s *Vulture Sculptures* manifest a unique mode of female writing: “The words she vulturized—her term—had to have four letters. She gave a great deal of thought to them: each letter of the alphabet had a vibe, a plus or minus charge, so the words had to be selected with care. Vulturizing brought them to life, was her concept, and then it killed them. It was a powerful process—‘Like watching God thinking,’ she’d said on a Net Q&A” (245). Clearly, these daily activities bear witness to different aspects of womanhood. As Iris’s writing in a sense contributes to her husband’s death, Amanda now even acquires the divine power of sentencing life and death through her manipulations of the four-letter words.

Overall, the gender issues in *Oryx and Crake* can be roughly addressed on the social, biological, and allegorical dimensions. Feminist activists may particularly be interested in such issues as international child prostitution, pornography on the Internet or the politics of female representations behind characters like Sharon, who deserts her son Jimmy and joins the anti-Happicuppa protest group (181); the “*pyromaniac*,” “fundamentalist vegan” Bernice (189, 188; original italics); and the woman who conceals some Ebola or Marburg splice in a hairspray bottle (53). General readers may ponder over the gender bias behind the alleged biological difference between men and women: “[w]omen always get hot under their collar” while men do not (16), and those who enjoy Atwoodian fairy tales may be intrigued by the inchoate patriarchy among the Crakers. Even though the animalization and objectification of women recur in Jimmy’s depiction of Oryx—“Oryx was so delicate. Filigree, he would think, picturing her bones inside her small body. She had a triangular face—big eyes, a small jaw—a Hymenoptera face, a mantid face, the face of a Siamese cat. Skin of the palest yellow, smooth and translucent, like old, expensive porcelain” (115)—such portrayal is not only fervent with lust, allusive to male penetration, but also saturated with the love-fear ambivalence in male-female relationships.