Title
Fantastic Interventions: Feminism and Environmentalism in Atwood’s Speculative Fiction

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/56f2x874

Author
Bedford, Anna

Publication Date
2009-02-01
Ecofeminism is an emerging field. For me ecofeminism is a political and philosophical stance that recognizes the connections between women’s rights and environmental ones and, conversely, finds in the subjugation of women and the denigration of the environment a similar patriarchal and hierarchical paradigm. Given the history of gendered images of nature and “natural” conceptions of women it is understandable that some critics fear an essentialism in ecofeminism. However, ecofeminist work, as I understand it, challenges the conflation of women and nature whilst simultaneously asserting the connections, the continuums.

My scholarship builds upon and is indebted to this emerging field of ecofeminist work and also, in particular, to Donna Haraway, who challenges us to think beyond essentialism and beyond the “natural” to conceptualize the “cyborg”. I look at Speculative Fiction, which, as a genre of alternative imaginings, frequently offers renegotiations in the relationship between nature and society, men and women, human and non-human. In Atwood’s works I investigate the questions of survival, the constructions and disciplining of women and nature and also continuums, through boundary species and even through a broader conception of spirituality.
In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood’s earlier of two dystopian novels, we see “nature” - or more particularly women’s nature - constructed in the society of Gilead in the service of human and domestic reproduction and production (the Handmaids and the Marthas, respectively), and ultimately in the service of a militant patriarchy. The “natural” is “summoned to discipline feminist subjects and deny women reproductive control”, as Stacy Alaimo has noted in a different context (108-9). Indeed we see in *The Handmaid’s Tale* an explicit and intentional response to feminism and birth control, to women’s lib and abortion, to lesbianism and lack of domestication - the new order is in reaction to women like Offred’s mother - feminist, women’s libber, burner of porn.

Yet, to suggest that nature is summoned - as if pre-existing and external - is also naïve. Nature is constructed, and in particular its meanings are constructed, to serve the will of the summoner. The conflation of woman (gendered) with female (biological) might almost seem complete in Gilead, might almost seem natural? Like a stripping away of the layers of culture to get to the essence, the essentialism. However, the conflation’s not complete and the very effort of its “unnatural” maintenance is betrayed by the elaborate employment of religion and the Old Testament. Here “nature” is decidedly “created” by religious arguments and language and policed by a surveillance state. Nature is unnaturally constructed by religious ideology and sexism, that is to say it is cultural.

Offred, the narrator of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, is reduced to her biological sex and comes even to envision herself as a “melon on legs”. She’s depicted as a woman dehumanized, however, and ironically, she has also been described as a “symbol of common humanity brutalized by instrumental language and rationalist phallic technology” (Frank Davey,
emphasis mine). It is indeed a fragile line between human and not in Gilead - between woman and Unwoman, child and Unchild.

The subjugation of handmaids as breeders is “justified” as biological imperative amidst rampant infertility caused by environmental pollution and - it is suggested - “unnatural” practices of birth control and abortion in the previous society. Indeed, survival is a common trope between Atwood’s two dystopias, as well as a motif of Canadian Literature. The environment has always been part of the Canadian story – from literature of settlement in an inhospitable northern climate to the narratives of small-town life in distinctly regional and rural Canada. Speculative Fiction, with its roots in imaginings of new lands and new peoples, has historically been allied to the colonial literature of Great Britain and the US cultural and literary imagination of the frontier; however in Canada it finds a more problematized relationship – one that involves survival rather than colonization, refugees rather than explorers.

In Oryx and Crake survival of the “human animal” as a species is at stake, after bioterrorism has seemingly wiped out the human population. For Snowman and the Crakers, survival is something to be struggled for amidst aggressive transgenic monsters, food shortages and a changing climate. Before the pandemic, Oryx and Crake depicts a futuristic society with such technologies that we must reconsider what is human and what is not, where we draw these distinctions, how we draw them, and how we can envisage our relationships to what Haraway calls “companion species”. Indeed, unlike The Handmaid’s Tale, where distinctions are make between Woman and UnWoman, for
example, in *Oryx and Crake* we find instead a continuum, the hybridity imagined in Haraway’s cyborg. The facile distinctions are transgressed by human organ bearing pigs, whose DNA has been spliced with human, by other transgenic creatures, and the hybridity ultimately embodied in the genetically engineered “humans” that are Crakers.

In *Oryx and Crake, life* has become a corporate commodity. Animals are created as organ farms for human transplants - as in the case of the Pigoons. The rich and corporately sponsored live in compounds, while the poor occupy the polluted and peripheral areas of “pleeblands”. And sexuality, too, is a commodity to be bought and sold - prostitution and pornography are as integral as “nudie news”. The love story of the novel comes in the form of Oryx - the Asian child prostitute, glimpsed on an internet site, who mesmerized Crake and Snowman with her sad eyes, and is later found and hired by Crake, and loved by Snowman. Through a similar patriarchal and hierarchical paradigm we see at the start of the novel the concurrent exploitation of women and children and the poor, as well as the environment and other “companion species”.

Perhaps we should not be surprised that the near extinction of humans is facilitated through drugs and sex, and spread globally - and unwittingly - by Oryx. The Eastern, foreign, and exotic female is the one who precipitates - though not masterminds - the fall from Paradice (Paradice with a “c” being the corporate enclave run by Crake, set up against the pollution and dangers of the toxic environment and the poverty and disease of the Pleeblands). In *Oryx and Crake* we don’t see, however, the historic “woman as monster/monster as woman” (Adrienne Rich) but rather the monstrous and abominable
survivor is male, Snowman. He is the one to endure in order to lead the Crakers out of Paradice and into the wilderness to find a new home - or more likely nothing so domestic as “home”.

The Pigoons of *Oryx and Crake* are not only pigs, but also part human - transgenic - and capable of growing harvests of organs for human use, or more properly, corporate profit. They call to mind the very real Oncomouse, with its cancer gene, who is trade marked and sacrificed to the advancement of scientific knowledge. Haraway explains of the Oncomouse, even without splicing of human DNA that Pigoons have, she is still a relative, family, sister. In Haraway’s depiction the suffering is sacrificial, and survival akin to salvation. Haraway writes:

> Oncomouse™ is my sibling, and more properly, male or female, s/he is my sister. […] Although her promise is decidedly secular, s/he is a figure in the sense developed within Christian realism: S/he is our scapegoat; s/he bears our suffering; s/he signifies and enacts our mortality in a powerful, historically specific way that promises a culturally privileged kind of salvation - a “cure for cancer”. Whether I agree to her existence and use or not, s/he suffers physically, repeatedly, and profoundly, that I and my sisters may live. In the experimental way of life, she is the experiment. S/he also suffers that we, that is, those interpellated into this ubiquitous story, might inhabit the multi-billion dollar quest narrative of the search for the “cure for cancer”. (79)

Remarkably similar suggestions of sacrifice and Biblical depictions can be found in
Atwood’s novel *Surfacing*. In this novel a nameless narrator comes to terms with her own past and complicity in destruction and pain that she initially associates with Americans. She returns to her parents’ cabin beside a “fished out” lake, and is stricken by a slain heron, found hanging from a tree.

Whether it died willingly, consented, whether Christ died willingly, anything that suffers and dies instead of us is Christ; if they didn’t kill birds and fish they would have killed us. The animals die that we may live, they are substitute people, hunters in the fall killing the deer. That is Christ also. And we eat them, out of cans or otherwise; we are eaters of death, dead Christ-flesh resurrecting inside us, granting us life. Canned Spam, canned Jesus, even the plants must be Christ. But we refuse to worship; the body worships with blood and muscle but the thing in the knob head will not, wills not to, the head is greedy, it consumes but does not give thanks.” (141)

To find in nature spirituality or even Christ is nothing new. Religions encourage us to view natural events as God’s will, ourselves and companion species as his creations, and in nature itself Romantics found the sublime. However, these texts are no pastorals. The difference in this unusual pantheist identification of Christ in plants, deer… spam… is the granting of agency and suffering.

I hope I have suggested in my analysis of Atwood’s cautionary tales that humans, too, are animals and the treatment of one is connected to the other - part of the same conceptual
paradigm. As the unnamed narrator of *Surfacing* puts it, “Find the brain of the worm, donate your body to science. Anything we could do to the animals we could do to each other: we practiced on them first.” (122) Indeed, while Pigoons are offered up in Oryx and Crake, in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, it is women who are sacrificed not as organs but as wombs to continue the species, with all the accompanying Old Testament justifications and rhetoric. Survival is a complex trope for a national literature. The Canadian compulsion for survival is cultural as well as biological - although we have learned that the two are not distinct. In both *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* the dystopia is not another world but an all-too-familiar future, one where conservative and religious neoliberalism or scientific biotechnologies and environmental destruction are taken to their logical and frightening extremes.
Bibliography


