

LANGUAGE, TRANSLATION, AND THE INSCRIPTION OF THE FEMALE BODY
IN THE WORKS OF MARGARET ATWOOD

by

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This thesis is dedicated to all those who continue to keep me sane.

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ABSTRACT

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Bodily Harm*, and *Alias Grace*, Atwood demonstrates that the connection between language, translation, and the female body is evident in the ways in which language is used to control the female body. Atwood posits that language systems assume the female body is fixed; however, language is inherently unstable. Consequently, if the female body is inscribed by language, the female body is not fixed just as a text is not fixed. Atwood writes the female body as a *translation* of masculinist text in order to resist the tradition of constructing the female body reductively through masculinist language. Through the attempts of her female characters to represent *themselves* (rather than being represented) in her work, Atwood illustrates that “authentic” linguistic representation of the female body is impossible because language is a patriarchal construction which defines limitations on female voice and articulates the female body in masculinist terms.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“Out of the body, onto the page”

Margaret Atwood,
“The Line: Five Variations”¹

Judith Butler argues that “the body is figured as a surface and the scene of a cultural inscription” because “cultural values emerge as the result of an inscription on the body, understood as a medium, indeed, a blank page” (*Gender Trouble* 176, 177). I propose to expand the notion of the body as a blank page by arguing that language does not only translate other language, but that it also translates and inscribes meaning onto the female body. This is especially evident in the works of Margaret Atwood.

Postmodern novels draw attention to the fact “that all our systems of understanding are deliberate and historically specific human constructs (not natural and eternal givens). . . . These are novels that admit openly they are fiction, but suggest that fiction is just another means by which we make sense of our world (past and present)” (Hutcheon x-xi). As Barbara Blakely further explains,

There is no definition of existence, no human identity, apart from the world that is constructed through human consciousness, given shape and meaning through language, perception, and action. . . . Language ultimately creates significance in a world which exists before and around us, yet is not ours until it is articulated. Through these operations of the body (touch, gesture, posture), of the eye

¹ Line 36.

(image and reflections), and speech, human existence is constituted
and given meaning. (34)

Since language is how we understand and define the world around us, Atwood novels demonstrate that the connection between language, translation, and the female body is evident in the ways in which language is used to control the female body. She explores how language systems assume the female body is fixed; however, as poststructural theory tells us, language is inherently unstable. Consequently, if the female body is inscribed by language, the female body is not fixed just as a text is not fixed. Luce Irigaray also notes that “[f]emale sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters” (248). Atwood illustrates this by writing the female body as a *translation* of masculinist text in order to resist the tradition of constructing the female body reductively through masculinist language. Through the attempts of her female characters to represent *themselves* (rather than being represented) in her work, Atwood illustrates that “authentic” linguistic representation of the female body is impossible because language is a patriarchal construction which defines limitations on female voice and articulates the female body in masculinist terms. Although many contemporary critics have briefly touched on the body as text in some of Atwood’s work—especially in *The Handmaid’s Tale*—I will take my argument further by hypothesizing the body as a translation of text rather than simply a text itself (though the body remains trapped in the text of Atwood’s work), which is not only limited to one or two of Atwood’s works, but is also a pattern in much of her writing, most notably in *Bodily Harm* (1981), *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), and *Alias Grace* (1996).

Susan Bassnett describes translation “as a fundamental act of human exchange” (1). Translation is not only the method one uses to make sense of the same concept in two different languages, but it is also the transfer of meaning between two people, between two texts, between

signifier and signified. Consequently, the study of language has shown us that “every text is in a sense a translation” because “[e]very text is a set of determinate transformations of other, preceding and surrounding texts of which it may not even be consciously aware” (105). Translation is also a study of semiotics, which Bassnett defines as “the science that studies sign systems or structures, sign processes and sign functions” (21), so that every word and every syllable is a symbol that translates rather than transmits meaning.

Eugene Nida argues that there are two types of equivalence in translation theory: formal and dynamic (Bassnett 33). Formal equivalence focuses on the structural message with the purpose of having the reader understand as much of the structure and meaning of the source language as possible; the translation corresponds in “word, phrase, clause, and sentence” (Stanton 44), as well as in concepts with the source language text. The purpose of dynamic equivalence, however, is to attempt to produce the same emotional effect in the target language reader as the source language text would have had for the source language reader; it is “not ‘what’ language communicates, but ‘how’ it communicates” (Gentzler 54). Translation is thus a process of re-creating a text because neither formal nor dynamic equivalence can attempt to create a structurally or emotionally identical text since, as Bassnett explains, “sameness cannot even exist between two TL [target language] versions of the same text, let alone between the SL [source language] and the TL version” (36). At one end of the spectrum a translation can be a reproduction of the source language text, while at the other end of the spectrum a translation can be creatively altered so that it displaces the original and becomes a different text altogether (Stanton 39). Given that something new is created through translation, questions can be posed about the originality of the source that is being translated and the authorship of the translation (Venuti, “Introduction” 7). As Octavio Paz states,

[e]very text is unique and, at the same time, it is the translation of another text. No text is entirely original because language itself, in its essence, is already a translation: firstly, of the non-verbal world and secondly, since every sign and every phrase is the translation of another sign and another phrase. However, this argument can be turned around without losing any of its validity: all texts are original because every translation is distinctive. Every translation, up to a certain point, is an invention and as such it constitutes a unique text. (qtd. in Bassnett 44)

Not only is each linguistic translation unique in word and/or grammatical structures, but also each translation is a result of a different interpretation of the source language text. Therefore, Bassnett explains that “all translations reflect the individual translators’ readings, interpretations and selection of criteria determined by the concept of the *function* both of the translation and of the original text” (102). Many translation theorists and writers, such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, have argued that it is not the job of the translator to interpret the work s/he is translating (Bassnett 101). Instead, the translator must translate what is there rather than manipulate the translation to favour a particular interpretation. However, Bassnett maintains that it is “quite foolish to argue that the task of the translator is to translate but not to interpret, as if the two were separate exercises. The interlingual translation is bound to reflect the translator's own creative interpretation of the SL text” (83). Moreover, she states that “every reading is an interpretation” (101). Since reading is subjective, masculinist language does not only inscribe the female body, but it also interprets the female body in accordance with patriarchal construct.

Translation from a source language to a target language is presently touted as a method of making texts accessible to common people across cultures; however, translation has historically been a means of gaining and maintaining power relations. For example, translation has been used “as an instrument of colonial domination, a means of depriving. . . colonized peoples of a voice” (Bassnett 4). The colonial perception of language superiority has only resulted in a very negative post-colonial view of translation whereby the situation has reversed itself and the colonized have reclaimed their language, deeming it superior to the language of the colonizers: “just as the model of colonialism was based on the notion of a superior culture taking possession of an inferior one, so an original was always seen as superior to its ‘copy’. Hence the translation was doomed to exist in a position of inferiority with regard to the source text from which it was seen to derive” (5). The problematic perception of superior versus inferior languages has therefore led some post-colonial theorists to label many forms of translation as a betrayal of the integrity of the colonized language. Butler explains that “[l]anguage has a dual possibility: It can be used to assert a true and inclusive universality of persons, or it can institute a hierarchy in which only some persons are eligible to speak and others, by virtue of their exclusion from the universal point of view, cannot ‘speak’ without simultaneously deauthorizing that speech” (*Gender Trouble* 164), which is why Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak asks, “[c]an the [s]ubaltern [s]peak?” (271). The subjection of others is accomplished primarily through removing another’s speech. Additionally, Spivak coined the phrase “translation-as-violation” because, as she notes, “translation assumes that the language one translates from is structurally the language of authority rather than subordination” (“Imperialism” 344), so that translating any language automatically marks it as superior to the target language. Spivak’s use of the word *violation* suggests a relationship between translation and the female body because the word *violation*

connotes unwanted or violent penetration, either sexual or psychological. Translation as a means of domination between two systems of language as a method of control reflects that translation as a representative inscription onto the female body is a means of patriarchal control. For instance, Butler states that

the body is always under siege, suffering destruction by the very terms of history. And history is the creation of values and meanings by a signifying practice that requires the subjections of the body. This corporeal destruction is necessary to produce the speaking subject and its significations. This is a body, described through the language of surface and force, weakened through a ‘single drama’ of domination, inscription, and creation. (*Gender Trouble* 177)

In this sense, the female body is always under siege because women have historically been subjected by the patriarchal practices of “domination, inscription, and creation,” and are therefore inscribed by masculinist language. The destruction of this masculinist, signifying practice is necessary for the emergence of female subjectivity and the release of the female voice that holds the power of women’s representation. Atwood is interested in the concept of translation as violation of the female body through colonialism in *Bodily Harm* and throughout history in *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Alias Grace*. In each of these works, “representation is the normative function of a language which is said either to reveal or to distort what is assumed to be true about the category of women” (*Gender Trouble* 2). Atwood writes the female body as the colonized nation attempting to reclaim its language and therefore the representation of its body.

Masculinist language is an example of translation-as-violation. It is a “[s]ymbolic discourse (language, in various contexts) [and] is another means through which man objectifies

the world, reduces it to his terms, speaks in place of everything and everyone else—including women” (Jones 362). The power over the representation of (an)other, for Hélène Cixous, reflects “the power relation between a fantasized obligatory virility meant to invade, to colonize, and the consequential phantasm of woman as a ‘dark continent’ to penetrate and to ‘pacify’” (393, n.3). Woman is a territory, an object, to be possessed and dominated.

Translation as a method of domination begins with assuming the power of representation over an(other); masculinist language, therefore, violates the female body through its representation. Toril Moi, for example, argues that “[p]atriarchy. . . wants us to believe that there is such a thing as an essence of femaleness, called femininity. . . . Patriarchy has developed a whole series of ‘feminine’ characteristics (sweetness, modesty, subservience, humility, etc.)” (123). Masculinist language as a representative inscription onto the female body consequently espouses essentialism. Moi explains how “[e]ssentialism (the belief in a given female nature) in the end always plays into the hands of those who want women to conform to predefined patterns of femininity” (123). The concept of femininity as a “natural” womanly trait inherently labels it as something “biologically given” (123); consequently, if a woman displays elements that challenge this notion she is labelled an “unnatural” woman. Julia Kristeva notes that “[s]exual difference—which is at once biological, physiological, and relative to reproduction—is translated by and translates a difference in the relationship of subjects to the symbolic contract which *is* the social contract: a difference, then, in the relationship to power, language, and meaning” (“Women’s Time” 200). Atwood focuses on the translation of sexual difference in her writing and how both the body and the mind are forced to conform to the symbolic and social contract. She thus brings the connection between women’s representation as a social and psychological construction to the forefront. As Nancy Chodorow explains,

[i]t is crucial for us . . . to recognize that the ideologies of difference, which define us as women and as men, as well as inequality itself, are produced, socially, psychologically, and culturally, by people living in and creating their social, psychological, and cultural worlds. Women participate in the creation of these worlds and ideologies. . . . To speak of difference as a final, irreducible concept and to focus on gender differences as central is to reify them and to deny the reality of those *processes* which create the meaning and significance of gender. (qtd. in Nischik 33-4)

What Chodorow is hinting towards and what Atwood illustrates in her writing is that our social, psychological, and cultural worlds are ultimately constructed through the language we use. The processes of masculinist language as a signifying system are what create notions of essentialism. Moi explains that “[t]o posit all women as necessarily feminine and all men as necessarily masculine, is precisely the move which enables the patriarchal powers to define, not femininity, but all *women* as marginal to the symbolic order and to society” (127). However, Butler explains that gender is a “performance that produces the illusion of an inner sex or essence or psychic gender core; it produces on the skin, through the gesture, the move, the gait. . . the illusion of an inner depth. In effect, one way that genders get naturalized is through being constructed as an inner psychic or physical necessity” (“Imitation” 317). Gender is thus, as Butler says, a “fabrication” (318): a performance required by the patriarchal social construct. This is why Monique Wittig suggests that “[o]ne must understand that men are not born with a faculty for the universal and that women are not reduced at birth to the particular. The universal has been, and is

continually, at every moment, appropriated by men. . . . It is an act carried out at the level of concepts, philosophy, politics” (64). The concept of the essential or symbolic woman inspires Irigaray to argue that women must level the playing field by recovering and/or creating their own language apart from masculinist language: *écriture féminine*.

Since women are defined by masculinist language and their relation to men, Butler explains that “the political challenge is to seize *language* as the means of representation *and* production, to treat it as an instrument that invariably constructs the field of bodies and that ought to be used to deconstruct and reconstruct bodies outside the oppressive categories of sex” (*Gender Trouble* 171). Irigaray argues that “women, because they have been caught in a world structured by man-centered concepts, have had no way of knowing or representing themselves” (Jones 364). She further states that “[t]he rejection, the exclusion of a female imaginary certainly put woman in the position of experiencing herself only fragmentarily, in the little-structured margins of a dominant ideology, as waste, or excess, what is left of a mirror invested by the (masculine) ‘subject’ to reflect himself, to copy himself (Irigaray 254). As a mere copy or reflection of man, woman has no individual identity or representation outside of man’s wants and desires. Since men attempt to control women’s bodies beyond and within inscription, for women “to write from the body is to re-create the world” (Jones 366). Accordingly, Irigaray’s and Cixous’ “*écriture féminine*” as an “expression of a female language predicated upon her physical body,” which “serves to subvert or overturn ‘traditional’ patriarchal discourse” (Greene 2). As I will demonstrate throughout the remainder of this thesis, Atwood’s female narrators metaphorically and/or physically write—tell their stories—through their bodies as a an attempt to overcome patriarchal discourse and the translation of their bodies through masculinist inscription.

Not only is femininity a social, masculinist construct, but Irigaray also states that a woman's desire speaks a different language than a man's desire: "the role of 'femininity' is prescribed by [a] masculine specula(riza)tion and corresponds scarcely at all to woman's desire, which may be recovered only in secret, in hiding, with anxiety and guilt" (254). Taking her cue from Sigmund Freud, she also explains how

the beginnings of the sexual life of a girl child are so 'obscure,' so 'faded with time,' that one would have to dig down very deep indeed to discover beneath the traces of this civilization, of this history, the vestiges of a more archaic civilization that might give some clue to woman's sexuality. That extremely ancient civilization would undoubtedly have a different alphabet, a different language . . . Woman's desire would not be expected to speak the same language as man's; woman's desire has doubtless been submerged by the logic that has dominated the West since the time of the Greeks. (250)

Irigaray is not the only feminist theorist who advocates the existence of a woman's language separate from that of men; Kristeva also argues that there is difference between male and female language. She argues that male language deals with the symbolic while female language deals with the semiotic (Belanoff 194). Patricia A. Belanoff simplifies Kristeva's theory by explaining that symbolic language is a "one-to-one correspondence between signifier and signified. . . which make[s] meaning-in-language possible" (194), whereas "[t]he semiotic—unfixed in reference, nonlinear, fluid, and related to prelinguistic meaning-making—disrupts and infuses the symbolic with meaning not entirely containable in the symbolic" (195). The semiotic lives repressed

beneath the symbolic; however, it is not completely repressible because it is revealed through such nuances as rhythm, stress, intonation and repetition.

Although Irigaray's and Kristeva's concept that women have a separate and distinct language from men is intriguing, it poses a few problems. For example, the argument can be made that women's language only reinforces and espouses essentialism. Irigaray explains that to hear an ancient woman's language "[o]ne would have to listen with another ear, as if hearing *an 'other meaning' always in the process of weaving itself, of embracing itself with words, but also of getting rid of words in order not to become fixed, congealed in them*" (253, author's emphasis). This poses a problem for women's language because (once more) women will not be heard by men as "the deaf male ear. . . hears in language only that which speaks in the masculine" (Cixous 395). Cixous, on the other hand, does not argue that there is a "natural" existence of a female language; rather, she advocates for the creation of a woman's language that involves writing the desires of the female body because, without a female language, woman cannot own her body. She argues that

[a] woman without a body, dumb, blind, can't possibly be a good fighter. She is reduced to being the servant of the militant male, his shadow. . . . By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display. . . . Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time... [h]er flesh speaks true. . . . she signifies it with her body. (395, 396)

By writing the body, women will create their own language with which they can resume control over their bodies through their own representations rather than have their representations

constructed for them through masculinist language. Although it could be argued that a different language for men and women promotes the concept of essentialism, Atwood's female characters do not create their own language separate from men; rather, Atwood's women play with and manipulate masculinist language in relation to their bodies as a method of regaining their voices and deconstructing their representations.

Atwood, a proliferate writer of fiction, poetry, non-fiction, and children's literature, has also experimented with writing comic strips. The comic strip, titled *Kanadian Kultchur Komix*,² describes a superwoman, named Survivalwoman, who does not actually possess superpowers. She attempts to survive in, not only a male-dominated literary genre, but also a male-dominated culture. The following comic strip illustrates the significance of language as a means of controlling the female body.

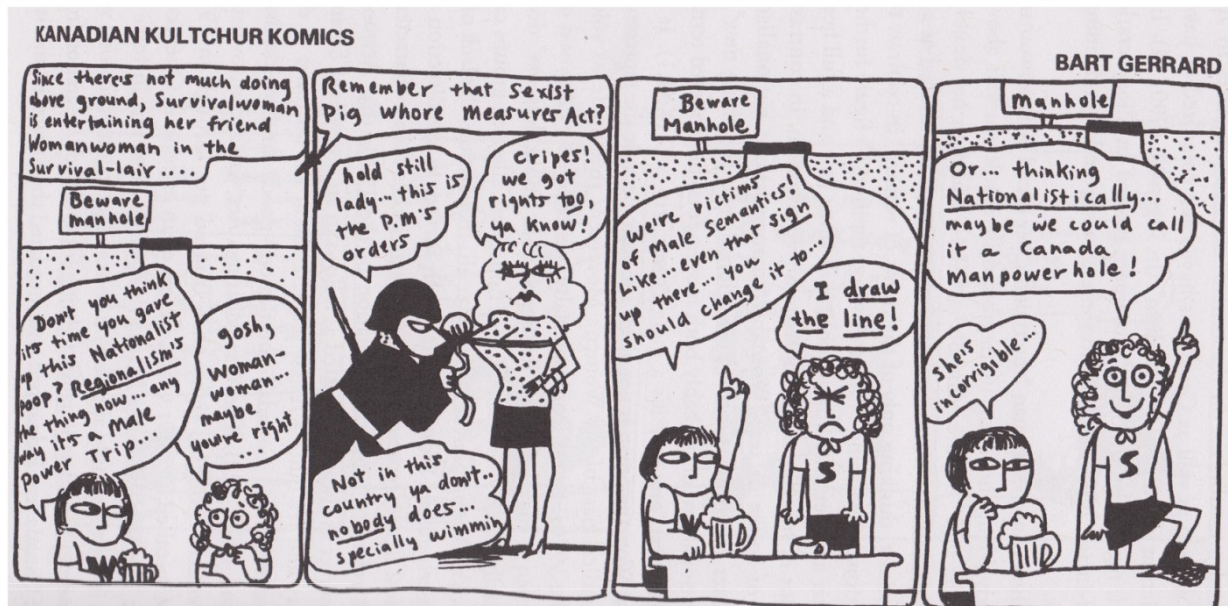


Figure 1.1 – *Kanadian Culture Komix* by Bart Gerrard

² Rather than use her own name for *Kanadian Kultchur Komix*, which was originally published in *This Magazine* in the mid-1970s, Atwood chose a male nom du plume, Bart Gerrard, as a tribute “to the first cartoonist in Canada” (Atwood qtd. in Nischik 258).

Not only does Atwood play on words by calling the measuring of the woman's breasts a "Measures Act," but also by [c]hanging the word *Manhole* to *Womanhole* (as is implicitly suggested by *Womanwoman*)—a word that immediately raises offensive sexual connotations regarding women—Atwood shows that gendered language is connected to the female body because of woman's inscription through "Male semantics" (Nischik 211). Atwood plays with masculinist language to illustrate and ridicule the patriarchal representation of women by punning the concept of the War Measures Act with Whore Measures Act. Atwood's punning of *war* and *whore* also demonstrates that signification is an act of translation. Moreover, the translation from War Measures Act to Whore Measures Act focuses on the sexualization and commodification of the female body. As George Steiner is said to note, "[t]ranslation, as an act of interpretation, is a special case of communication, and communication is a sexual act" (Chamberlain 64). Steiner clarifies by stating that "Eros and language mesh at every point. Intercourse and discourse, copula and copulation, are sub-classes of the dominant fact of communication. . . . Sex is a profoundly semantic act" (Steiner 39-40). Irigaray also notes that the connection between language and the female body is "eroticized, and called to a double movement of exhibition and of chaste retreat in order to stimulate the drives of the 'subject'" because a woman's "sexual organ represents *the horror of having nothing to see*. A defect in this systematics of representation and desire. A 'hole' in its scopophilic lens. . . . this nothing-to-see has to be excluded, rejected, from such a scene of representation. Women's genitals are simply absent, masked, sewn back up inside their 'crack'" (250-1). As women's sexual organs do not resemble a man's, women are thus seen to lack sex organs altogether, which stimulates male anxiety (Greene 65). The *Womanhole*, therefore, cannot be represented within masculinist language without being sexualized because it suggests castration. This fear-inducing absence

results in the projection of masculinist inscription onto the female body; her “absence” is replaced with his “presence” through the inscription of his representation on her. Consequently, if woman’s language can only exist in correspondence with a sexualized male discourse, then the controversy over superior versus inferior languages and translation-as-violation emerges once more.

The degree of untranslatability between a source and target language determines that there will be an element of loss and gain in every translation. The idea of translation-as-violation focuses solely on the loss in translation; however, although many concepts and emotions can be lost in translation, in translating a text one can also enrich or clarify aspects that were absent in the original (Bassnett 29-30, 36-8). For example, although no translation can be a perfect copy of the original, language theorists like Jacques Derrida have made critics realize that translation “ensures the survival of a text” (Bassnett 9). The survival of the text is not that it lives longer, but that it lives “beyond the means of its author” (“Des Tours” 179). Consequently, Derrida compares translation to a child because, although it is a reproduction or representation of the original, the translation has “the power to speak on its own” (191); therefore, “[t]ranslation is neither an image nor a copy” (180).

Translation as a means of inscribing masculinist language onto the female body ensures the survival of patriarchal control by depicting the female body as an art form: she is the result of a masculinist creation, and she survives on her own apart from the male body. Furthermore, she is represented as lesser than a man or childlike because, like a child, she cannot exist without the male body as creator. However, if women can regain their repressed voices and represent themselves by speaking in a new language, Cixous argues that “they will establish a point of view (a site of *différence*) from which phallogocentric concepts and controls can be seen through

and taken apart, not only in theory but also in practice” (Jones 362). In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Bodily Harm*, and *Alias Grace* Atwood explores and deconstructs the patriarchal social order, and therefore reworks masculinist discourse. By telling their stories, for instance, the female narrators in all three novels—Offred, Rennie, and Grace, respectively—are introducing their point of view as an attempt to control the way in which their situation and representation is perceived by subverting masculinist discourse.

While commenting on his translation of Derrida’s “Des Tours de Babel,” Robert Matthews claims that “[t]ranslation is an art of compromise, if only because the problems of translation have no one solution and none that is fully satisfactory” (qtd. in Derrida, “Des Tours” 205). Regardless of the theory or the method used, regardless of authorship and originality, translation will always be made into something new for contemporary audiences because “translation involves the transfer of ‘meaning’ contained in one set of language signs into another set of language signs” (Bassnet 21). This also holds true for translation as a means of inscribing meaning onto the female body. Throughout the remainder of this thesis I will take translation theory further by arguing that translation is not just transferring meaning from one language system to another, but that translation can be understood to be the transference of meaning from one system of language—one mode of communication—to another, all of which, I argue, are essential in constructing the female body. Language, in this sense, is not limited to words alone. Language as a collection of signs and symbols, the gaze, and memory are all systems of communication in which translation functions. Although translation is a re-creation of art that links the past with present and the present with the future, it is also a re-creation of the female body as a means of patriarchal control because masculinist language represents the female body by writing over it.

CHAPTER 2: THE SYMBOLIC ORDER OF *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

You will not listen
to resistances, you cover me

with flags, a dark red
season, you delete me from
all other colours.

Margaret Atwood,
“Hesitations outside the door”³

In her 1980 lecture titled “An End to Audience,” Margaret Atwood describes how

[i]n any totalitarian take-over, whether from the left or the right,
writers, singers and journalists are the first to be suppressed. . . .

The aim of all such suppression is to silence *the voice*, abolish the
word, so that the only voices and words left are those of the ones in
power. Elsewhere, the word itself is thought to have power: that’s
why so much trouble is taken to silence it. (350, author’s emphasis)

“An End to Audience” was published five years before *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and is a precursor indicative of what Atwood is attempting to accomplish in her novel. Throughout *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the female narrator, Offred, attempts to tell her own story in order to resist the ways in which her identity (and therefore her body) is constructed from the translation of masculinist signs and symbols. Atwood illustrates that “authentic” linguistic representation of the female body is impossible because language is a patriarchal construction which defines limitations on female voice and represents the body in masculinist terms. The instability of the systems of language fails to fix the female body because signs and symbols are fundamentally

³ Lines 38-42.

untranslatable. By pointing out and playing with the instability of language, Atwood illustrates that the female body cannot be defined because a masculinist construction of language inevitably fails to communicate a consistent and stable, or essential meaning.

Roman Jakobson describes three types of translation: intralingual translation, intersemiotic translation, and interlingual translation. Intralingual translation is the “interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs in the same language” (139). An example would be to use a synonym; it is a translation because even a synonym cannot produce the exact meaning as the word it is replacing, or it may have additional meaning attached to it (Bassnett 22). Although synonyms are an example of intralingual translation, they are not perfect translations because each word, despite its similar connotation to another word, is unique in that it holds additional or separate information—it is Jacques Derrida’s concept of the *trace* in which “[t]he presence of an element is always a signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of differences and the movement of a chain” (“Structure” 292). This is true in *The Handmaid’s Tale* when Offred says, “I’ve never held a pen or a pencil, in this room, not even to add up the scores. Women can’t add, [the Commander] once said, jokingly. When I asked him what he meant, he said, For them, one and one and one and one don’t make four” (233). Although the Commander says this as a joke, Offred knows it is true: “One and one and one and one doesn’t equal four. Each one remains unique, there is no way of joining them together. They cannot be exchanged, one for the other. They cannot replace each other” (240). Consequently, naming is pivotal in the intralingual translation of Offred’s body because, as Lévi-Strauss puts it, “one. . . never names: one classes someone else. . . [or] one classes oneself” (qtd. in Derrida, “Violence of the Letter” 109). Also, as noted in Atwood’s *Bodily Harm*, naming is power: “They look at your driver’s licence. Then they use your first name. Not Miss or Mrs. or anything, your first name, and you’ve got no way

of knowing any of their names at all. . . . ‘That’s where it begins,’ says Lora. ‘Where they can use your first name and you can’t use theirs. Then they think they’ve got you, they can look down on you’” (85). Naming is a method of categorization meant to fix something or someone in place; however, names are also subject to Derrida’s *trace* because the named is associated with the one who names, and therefore the named signifies its inferiority to the namer: “Always differing and deferring, the trace is never as it is in the presentation of itself. It erases itself in presenting itself” (Derrida, “Différance” 415). Sheila Conboy notes,

[t]he men in Gilead, not unlike Adam in the Genesis story, have been given the power to name women, and their lack of anxiety about such authorship is indicated by the proprietary names they assign to handmaids: Ofwarren, Ofglen, Offred. But the narrator’s designated name literalizes her sense of entrapment and lack of control: she is both ‘Of Fred’ and “Offered,” a kind of fertility sacrifice in a sterile household. (351)

The narrator’s Gileadean name, Offred, is “patronymic, composed of the possessive preposition and the first name of the gentleman in question” (*THT* 380), and is thus what defines her body as property. Offred only knows other women in relation to the men they belong to: “Her name is Ofglen, and that’s about all I know about her” (24). Ofglen, like Offred, has no distinguishable identity of her own outside of her name within this system. Joseph Andriano asks, “[h]ow much worse is it, after all, to call a woman Offred than it is to call her Mrs. Frederick Waterford? Her first name, her essential identity, is still erased?” (95), or, as Derrida would say, her identity has been deferred.

Edwin Gentzler argues that deconstruction, although not a translation theory in itself, uses translation theory to question the nature of language and originality (145). According to Gentzler, Derrida does not agree that translation should be defined as reproducing a text to convey meaning across languages. Instead, he argues that translation is “the process of modifying the original text, of deferring and displacing for ever any possibility of grasping that which the original text desired to name” (163). Derrida applies deconstruction in developing the term *différance*. *Différance*, he says, “is literally neither a word nor a concept” (“Différance” 396); rather, Derrida explains it as a “system of differences” (“Structure” 280) because “[i]n a language, in the *system* of language, there are only differences” (“Différance” 404). Derrida clarifies by saying, “[w]hether we take the signified or the signifier, language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system” (403). Thus, he states,

[e]ssentially and lawfully, every concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences. Such a play, *différance*, is thus no longer simply a concept, but rather the possibility of conceptuality, of a conceptual process and system in general. For the same reason, *différance*, which is not a concept, is not simply a word, that is, what is generally represented as the calm, present, and self-referential unity of concept and phonic material. (404)

In addition, Gentzler simplifies Derrida’s explanation by explaining that “*différance* is derived from the Latin verb *differre* – meaning both to defer, to delay. . . and to differ” (158). However,

Derrida alters one letter: rather than use the grammatically correct French term *différence*, Derrida changes the second-to-last *e* to an *a*. Although the word sounds the same, Gentzler explains that, through this change, Derrida “forces the reader to think in terms of the unheard” (158). Derrida’s deliberate change in spelling is also reminiscent of the present participle *différant*. Although this term no longer exists in modern-day French, Gentzler explains that Derrida “locates a non-term between a verb and a non-existent noun, suggesting a verb/noun between a subject and object, something that has been lost (or repressed) in the development of language” (158-9). This concept of loss or repression in translation is illustrated each time a translator experiments with word choice (168). As previously mentioned, even synonyms do not convey exact meaning due to the subtle variations in meaning that are attached to each word. This limiting aspect of language allows for various interpretations and possibilities. Gentzler explains that “by choosing one possibility, what occurs is that the silent thought that seemed possible between the languages is deferred, delayed, erased by the delimiting chosen term” (168). Although Gentzler suggests that Eugene Nida argues the message of an original text is determined and unchanging (58), and Bassnett argues that each text has an “invariant core” (Bassnett 33), Gentzler argues that, due to *différance*, an original text is never complete and will always have gaps (58). This incompleteness, which results in untranslatability between different languages, and even within the same language, results in the possibility of many interpretations.

Derrida claims that a “proper name was never possible except through its functioning within a classification and therefore within a system of differences” (Derrida, “Violence of the Letter” 109). For this reason, Jessie Givner argues that “the proper name is like a code whose message is missing; the name has no meaning apart from the unique individual it signifies” (59). Atwood, however, links Offred’s name with a common noun because readers are more likely to

mispronounce the narrator's name by saying "off red" rather than "of Fred" (Andriano 89-90). As Spivak suggests that "[t]here is no more dangerous pastime than transposing proper names into common nouns, translating them" ("Subaltern" 306) because when a proper name is associated with a common noun or adjective, the common noun "give[s] a face to a name,' 'make[s] a description from inscription'" (Cynthia Chase qtd. in Givner 59). But in this case, Offred's identity has been deferred and displaced by the removal of her former name. Consequently, the descriptions that her given name evokes express her function and therefore the identity that has been inscribed onto her body. She says,

[m]y name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter. I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up one day. I think of this name as buried. This name has an aura around it, like an amulet, some charm that's survived from an unimaginably distant past. I lie in my single bed at night, with my eyes closed, and the name floats there behind my eyes, not quite within reach, shining in the dark. (*THT* 104)

Offred's real name is "buried" like a "treasure" or a "charm," illustrating that her name is something powerful that has been taken away from her and is out of reach. Not only does a person's name act as an identifier for others, but it also creates a sense of Self and frames the identity in the person named. This is also evident in *Bodily Harm* when Lora identifies her name (and thus herself) with her family lineage: "My name's Lora," says the woman, 'With an *o*, not

the other way. Lora Lucas. *L's* run in our family, my mother's name was Leona" (78). In addition, Rennie explains that "Jocasta wasn't Jocasta's name: her real name was Joanne. She changed it when she was thirty-eight because, as she said, what can you do with a name like Joanne? Too nice. She didn't dye her hair green or wear a safety pin in her ear but calling herself Jocasta was the equivalent" (17). Yet Atwood illustrates in *The Handmaid's Tale* that names in Gilead become "signifier[s] whose signified continually shifts" (Givner 59), erasing the frame by which people construct their identities. For example, the patronymic names of the handmaids are "taken by these women upon their entry into a connection with the household of a specific Commander, and relinquished by them upon leaving it" (*THT* 24). Consequently, when a new handmaid becomes Offred's walking partner, Offred asks where Ofglen is: "'I am Ofglen,' the woman says. Word perfect. And of course she is, the new one, and Ofglen, wherever she is, is no longer Ofglen. I never did know her real name. That is how you can get lost, in a sea of names" (353). The new Ofglen says her name "[w]ord perfect," as if to suggest that language has a stable meaning. Although the name stays the same, the person behind the name, and therefore the meaning behind the name, is interchangeable. Offred, like Ofglen, is replaceable in Gilead because her identity is displaced by her name. Although the handmaids are replaceable in other ways throughout the novel as well, it is the erasure of their names in which their changeability is signified and solidified.

Although the handmaids' identities are displaced, Givner notes, "Gilead never manages to eliminate names completely and Offred never becomes entirely nameless. Instead, Offred enters into a process of giving and taking away names, of dismembering and remembering names" (58). In the Red Centre the women would lie on their cots, "when the Aunts weren't looking, and touch each other's hands across space. We learned to lipread, our heads flat on the beds, turned

sideways, watching each other's mouths. In this way we exchanged names, from bed to bed: Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June" (*THT* 4). Givner explains that this exchange of names "operates through a reading of the face which substitutes the seen for the heard. By lip-reading, the handmaids replace the silenced voice with the movements of the mouth from which the voice emanates. Thus, the handmaids must read the figure, the face, in order to read the name" (60). Although Offred's name inscribes her body, naming does not make the body. Language may shape and order the world; however, language is also shaped by the world⁴ because people, things, or actions conjure new meanings or add additional signifiers to the symbolic order. For instance, Offred explains how, in the past, women like Lauren Bacall and Katharine Hepburn "wore blouses with buttons down the front that suggested the possibilities of the word *undone*" (*THT* 31), and that Serena Joy's garden is a subversive expression that "[w]hatever is silenced will clamor to be heard, though silently. A Tennyson garden, heavy with scent, languid; the return of the word *swoon*" (190). She also claims that her desire to be with another person makes her "feel like the word *shatter*" (127). Atwood's language here is very physical. For instance, Offred is equating her body with material objects: clothes that can be removed to reveal the body, a garden that swoons, and an item that shatters. This physicality suggests "a materialist conception of language" whereby "language contains bodily experience" (Conboy 355). Conboy argues that for Offred, "a name is a physical presence: she believes that it embodies the material connection between signifier and signified, whereas the patronymic 'Offred' is merely a debased signifier of her current status" (353). It may be illegal for Offred to reveal her pre-Gileadean name; however, she rebels by continuing to identify with it. The abovementioned names of the women in the Red Centre are all accounted for throughout the novel except for June (Andriano 90). Also, when disciplining the women's antics, Aunt Lydia says, "[n]o mooning and *June-ing*

⁴ See also Grace, pages 6-7.

around here, girls. Wagging her finger at us” (*THT* 275, my emphasis). By relating how Aunt Lydia converts a proper noun into an adjective, Offred gives us a subtle clue regarding her true name. Andriano argues that this “is her first Scrabble play against the Gileadites. Names and words are her only weapons against the state” (90).

Atwood uses the game of Scrabble in *The Handmaid’s Tale* as a way to demonstrate the power of words. Andriano states that “[t]o make a play in Scrabble is to attempt to gain an advantage with words, to counteract, to cross. It is a game of text/countertext” (89). In her poem, “Spelling,” Atwood uses Scrabble as a metaphor to illustrate the power of words and naming over the body and the desire to silence, or strangle, women’s language and voice. The poem describes the narrator’s daughter, playing a game of Scrabble,

learning how to spell,

spelling,

how to make spells.

....

Ancestress: the burning witch,

her mouth covered by leather to strangle words.

A word after a word

after a word is power.

At the point where language falls away

from the hot bones, at the point

where the rock breaks open and darkness

flows out of it like blood, at
the melting point of granite
when the bones know
they are hollow & the word
splits & doubles & speaks
the truth & the body
itself becomes a mouth.

This is a metaphor.

How do you learn to spell?

...

your own name first,
your first naming, your first name,
your first word. (3-6, 21-41)

In “Spelling,” which reflects the concepts that Atwood addresses in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood describes how language shapes the female body. First, Atwood plays with the word *spell*: not only is the speaker’s daughter learning to spell words, but she is also learning that the creation of words and the power to manipulate language gives one the ability to have power—to cast a spell—over (an)other. Atwood also resurrects the history of female subjugation by using the image of the burning witch whose mouth—and therefore voice—is strangled, illustrating that those who hold the power of the Word have the power to silence the Word in others. Lastly, Atwood describes how “the body / itself becomes a mouth” (34-5), demonstrating that words

infest the very blood and bones of the female body so that the body is only able to represent its inscription. It is only “[a]t the point where language falls away” that the female body is able to speak and reveal its truths apart from the masculinist language through which the female body is inscribed. Lastly, spelling is attached to the concept of naming. The poem suggests that one’s name is often the first word one learns to spell; therefore, it is essential in the construction of one’s identity and subjectivity. Andriano notes that in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Offred “has not merely had her name misspelled; she’s had it erased by the state” (89). The Commander has reduced Offred to nothing, to zilch (95): “‘Zilch, I spell, a convenient one-vowel word with an expensive Z.’ ‘Is that a word?’ says the Commander. ‘We could look it up,’ I say. ‘It’s archaic.’ ‘I’ll give it to you,’ he says. He smiles” (*THT* 230). He “gives her” the points without employing the dictionary, demonstrating that he still has control over, not only the game, but also the written word in general. Offred says, “[t]he Commander likes it when I distinguish myself, show precocity, like an attentive pet, prick-eared and eager to perform” (230). She is there playing Scrabble with him solely for his own entertainment. Moreover, the Commander is in control because he holds the key to lost, archaic language, and therefore knowledge (Klarer 134): “He has something we [women] don’t have, he has the word” (*THT* 110). In addition, as controller of the word he has the power to anticipate the future of language (Klarer 134-5): Offred explains how the Commander becomes silly when he is drunk and makes up words “that don’t exist, words like *smurt* and *crup*, giggling over them” (*THT* 262). Atwood therefore illustrates that the process of writing has the power to construct reality because language can be manipulated to create new words and meanings (Klarer 135).

Written language no longer belongs to Offred, as is evident when she says, “[m]y tongue felt thick with the effort of spelling. It was like using a language I’d once known but had nearly

forgotten, a language having to do with customs that had long before passed out of the world. . . . my mind lurched and stumbled, among the sharp *R*'s and *T*'s, sliding over the ovoid vowels as if on pebbles" (*THT* 193). Her mind lurches and stumbles like a body, and when she describes "[t]he letter *C*. Crisp, slightly acid on the tongue, delicious" (175), she illustrates the physical attributes of language as she embodies the letters, tastes them on her tongue, and attempts to make them her own. However, despite her attempt to reclaim language, when Offred first begins playing Scrabble with the Commander she focuses on words that represent her lack of language and the sexual purpose of her body: "*Larynx*, I spell. . . . *Zygote*. I hold the glossy counters with their smooth edges, finger the letters. The feeling is voluptuous. This is freedom, an eyeblink of it. *Limp*, I spell. *Gorge*" (174-5). Offred's attempt at resistance shows through the words she plays. Scrabble with the Commander is the only way her *larynx* can be put to use. She also turns the sexual and penetrative nature of language away from her own body and places them on the Commander by focusing on *limp* and *gorge*, two words that situate the male penis as a purely material object. In addition to spelling *zygote*, she describes the vowels as, egg-shaped, "ovoid" (193), reflecting her knowledge that her "role in society is dictated by her eggs" (Andriano 94). Offred's role in Gileadean society is strictly procreational. Although the Commander allows her to spell words during Scrabble, to put letter tiles into the appropriate places, Offred knows that "[w]aiting is also a place: it is wherever you wait. For me it's this room. I am a blank, here, between parentheses. Between other people" (*THT* 285). She is inscribed by language, but is at the same time erased, like a blank letter tile ready to be placed on the board. Moreover, she is between other people like the gap between language and meaning. When the Gileadean regime begins to take over and Offred loses her job and access to her bank account, she tells her husband Luke, "[y]ou don't know what it's like. . . I feel as if somebody cut off my feet" (225). For

Offred, losing access to language is tantamount to losing a piece of her body. Although Luke loves her, he is male and thus not subject to the same form of Gileadean inscription. As a male, he has the power to inscribe her; therefore, for Offred, his word resembles the “Gospel according to Luke” (Klarer 139), yet another biblical decree that shapes her body, and thus her experience, as does the biblical Rachel and Leah story.

When Offred loses her access to language, and therefore her perceived control over her body, she realizes that language is what has always defined her: “Any account with an F on it instead of an M” (*THT* 224). A person’s sense of identity—the notion of “I am”—situates “all language in the coexistence of being and action” (Esterhammer xiii). It is this concept of being and action in language—“to be”—that defines one by (an)other (162). Although words indicate that being and action and are what we use to define ourselves, for Derrida writing is a “delusion or lure” (139). Similar to a hunting or fishing lure that pretends to be something it is not, words are symbols that indicate presence or representation, but the presence or representation they denote is ultimately false. In “Différance,” Derrida explains that this presence or representation lacks authority because it can only be defined by its absence. He says this “constrains us—as inhabitants of a language and a system of thought—to formulate the meaning of Being in general as presence or absence” (402). Since language consists of signs, the (sign)al representative of being, or “to be,” is not actually Being. Although language cannot represent Being, we define ourselves through the binary of presence and absence, one or the other: we “are” what something else “is not.” Jean-Jacques Rousseau once wrote, “[w]hen one wants to study men, one must consider those around one. But to study man, one must extend the range of one’s vision. One must first observe the differences in order to discover the properties” (qtd. in Derrida, “Violence of the Letter” 106). In other words, we define our “self” by what is “other.” Additionally, Derek

Attridge explains that defining the other “is premised on a relation. To be ‘other’ is necessarily to be ‘other than’ or ‘other to’” (29). However, if meaning is completely dependent on its relation to (an)other, then the meaning of words can be easily altered. For instance, Offred states, “[d]ate rape. . . . It sounds like some kind of dessert. *Date rapé*” (THT 48). In *Bodily Harm*, Rennie also comments on the fluidity of the meaning of words:

Dead but not molested. The first time she’d seen that word, in a Toronto newspaper when she was eight, she’d thought a molester was someone who caught moles. A molester is someone who is indecent, said her grandmother. But since that was what her grandmother said about almost everyone, it wasn’t much help. Rennie still used that word sometimes, for fun, where other people would use *gross*. (15)

Like the Commander in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Rennie attempts to possess language in such a way that she can alter the meaning of words or create new ones by substituting one word or meaning for another. Not only do these examples show the instability of language, but they also show the patriarchal nature of our language system because Rennie fails where the Commander does not. Rennie does it for fun and therefore her version of the word *molester* is untranslatable to others, like her grandmother and those who use the word *gross*, while the Commander’s manipulation of words and meanings translates his power and control over language.

Not only are words unstable because their meaning can be altered or removed altogether with their relation to (an)other, but words are also unstable because they cannot accurately represent true meaning. When reflecting on her relationship with the Commander, Offred says, “I ought to feel hatred for this man. I know I ought to feel it, but it isn’t what I do feel. What I feel

is more complicated than that. I don't know what to call it. It isn't love" (*THT* 72). Later, when she is describing the Ceremony, she says,

[m]y red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he's doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for. There wasn't a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose. (116)

Offred's inability to define her sexual relationship with the Commander demonstrates that accurate definition is impossible because such words as *fucking*, *love*, *copulating*, and *rape*, carry with them additional meanings that do not fit in with her situation. Similarly, when discussing Rennie's relationship with David in *Bodily Harm*, the narrator says, "Rennie liked to know the names for things and there was no name for this" (*BH* 193). The only way for Offred and Rennie to define their emotions toward the Commander and David, respectively, is by describing what they are not because no words exists to describe what they mean. Similarly, in *Bodily Harm*, David tells Rennie, "[n]obody's forcing you, it's your own decision. He paused here, letting her remember that the alternative he offered her was death. *Either/or*: Multiple choice: which was not what it said" (15-6, author's emphasis). Meaning in these passages comes from what is not said rather than what is said: "There's something to be said for nothing" (*BH* 151). Accordingly, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred refers to the cushion in her room and says, "[f]aith is only a word, embroidered" (365). Atwood's use of the word *embroidered* demonstrates that she is playing with the instability of language because words are stitched together to create various

meanings, yet at the same time they can be unstitched to remove meaning altogether. Words are therefore only visual (written) and aural (spoken) signs that suggest meaning, yet words cannot fully communicate meaning because they are not meaning itself. Atwood also posits an interesting metaphor regarding words and meaning in *Alias Grace* when Dupont (a.k.a. Jeremiah) tells Dr. Jordan, “[i]t is not the tune played by the musical box, but the little cogs and wheels within it, that concern you. . . . For me it is not even the box, with its pretty pictures on the outside. For me, it is only the music. The music is played by a physical object; and yet the music is not that object” (103). In other words, to paraphrase Derrida above, words are only representative and not Being. Consequently, Offred is able to deconstruct language: “Household: that is what we are. The Commander is the head of the household. The house is what he holds. To have and to hold, till death do us part. The hold of a ship. Hollow” (*THT* 99). Offred breaks down the concept of the “household” so that there is nothing left but the hollowness of the building in which they live; like her body, the Commander’s house is a container, a hostile environment. The marriage vows that must have taken place between the Commander and Serena Joy are also hollow in that their union is now one solely through the Commander’s possession.

Offred is inscribed as a symbol for the Commander’s household, but her Self as a symbol deconstructs itself with every subversive thought or action that she takes. Although the Commander still controls the Scrabble game, the dictionary, and therefore the Word, Offred subtly attempts to control language by playing with the various meanings of words as a means of subversion. Not only is Offred attempting to articulate her Self in a masculinist linguistic structure by playing Scrabble, but she also apologizes that the story she is telling—the language that she is using—is “in fragments, like a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force” (*THT* 333), illustrating that when language is translated from one system to another it creates at the

same time that it destroys. Language constructs the female body while at the same time deconstructing it. Offred frequently uses puns to demonstrate the multiple meanings of words.⁵ For example, Offred says, “[t]here is a Balm in Gilead.’ ‘There is a Bomb in Gilead,’ was what Moira used to call it” (*THT* 273). *Balm* and *bomb* sound the same aurally so if one cannot write (and thereby fix into place) the difference—*la différence*—then how can one know the difference? Karen Stein explains that

punning is a way of insinuating connections between apparently different words. The origin of the word ‘pun’ in the Latin root ‘pug,’ meaning ‘to strike with the fist’ (as in pugilist), supports the idea of contestation, struggle, inherent in the term. Puns are distorting mirrors of language, used here to suggest the slipperiness of meaning, the endless possibilities of language. (277)

Offred also plays with the slipperiness language by playing with the various meanings of the word *job*: “It’s strange now to think about having a job. *Job*. It’s a funny word. It’s a job for a man. Do a jobbie, they’d say to children when they were being toilet trained. Or of dogs: he did a job on the carpet. . . . The Book of Job” (*THT* 216-7). By comparing feces with a section of the Bible, Offred is refusing to accept the theocratic regime and her place within it. Moreover, by playing with language, Offred is illustrating that there is more to her than the language by which she is defined. Therefore, Atwood’s focus on puns in the novel functions as a means of resistance against masculinist language. The multiple meanings of words show that language cannot be fixed; therefore, because language is unstable, and is yet what defines the female body, the female body cannot be fixed. The (sign)al representation of a thing does not make that thing.

⁵ See also Andriano, pages 91-2.

When Offred plays with the word chair, she says, “I sit in the chair and think about the word chair. It can also mean the leader of a meeting. It can also mean a mode of execution. It is the first syllable in charity. It is the French word for flesh. None of these facts has any connection with the others” (*THT* 136). Once more, Atwood is connecting flesh to language through puns and homonyms. Offred also says, “[t]he difference between *lie* and *lay*. *Lay* is always passive. Even men used to say, I’d like to get laid. Though sometimes they said, I’d like to lay her. All this is pure speculation. I don’t really know what men used to say. I had only their words for it” (47). Although Offred knows what words men used to say, she does not know their meaning because meaning is unstable; therefore, words cannot effectively communicate meaning. As Offred states, “[c]ontext is all” (180). Thus, Pre-Gilead language holds a different meaning than Gileadean language. Pearls are nothing but “congealed oyster spit” (142), “[n]o romance. . . . would have meant something else, once. Once it would have meant: *no strings*. Now it means: *no heroics*. It means: don’t risk yourself for me, if it should come to that” (329, author’s emphasis), and “September first will be Labor Day, they still have that. Though it didn’t used to have anything to do with mothers” (249). Even the grammatical function of language has changed meaning. When Offred sees oranges at the market she says, “[i]t will be something, a small achievement, to have made oranges happen” (*THT* 32). Oranges are no longer a fruit, but have now become a symbol of an event, a creation. Although the meanings of these words have no connection to each other, they illustrate Derrida’s *trace* in language; each word is unstable because it holds no single or definitive meaning, and each word carries with it multiple associations. Atwood’s play on words and with the meanings of words illustrate that the representation of the female body through the translation of meaning cannot be fixed because the masculinist language used to represent is not fixed.

The second type of translation that Jakobson describes, intersemiotic translation, is “an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of non-verbal sign systems” (139). An example of this would be the red octagon that symbolizes a stop sign. Although the word “STOP” generally appears on the sign in North America and parts of Europe, people do not need to see the word in order to understand the sign’s meaning. Atwood uses similar strategies of intersemiotic translation in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Although Gilead bans women from reading and writing, the regime still requires visual signs to communicate and transfer meaning to and among women (Klarer 136). Rather than head to the market with a grocery list of items to buy, Offred takes “tokens from Rita’s outstretched hand. They have pictures on them, of the things they can be exchanged for: twelve eggs, a piece of cheese, a brown thing that’s supposed to be a steak” (*THT* 13); “they put the picture in the window when they have something, take it away when they don’t. Sign language” (205). Visual signals have thus replaced words as a means of communication in Gilead: “The store has a huge wooden sign outside it, in the shape of a golden lily; Lilies of the Field, it’s called. You can see the place, under the lily, where the lettering was painted out, when they decided that even the names of shops were too much temptation for us. Now places are known by their signs alone” (31). This signals that, although written language has been removed, it is still there beneath the surface. Just as women’s names become a (sign)al description of their place in society, written language has become *sign* language throughout Gilead. Nevertheless, Offred demonstrates the instability of (sign)al language when she describes “a red hexagon which means Stop” (*THT* 24). That Offred describes a stop sign as a six-sided hexagon rather than the recognizable eight-sided octagon illustrates the untranslatability of intersemiotic translation because, although the old adage claims that a picture can say one

thousand words, a picture or a sign cannot effectively communicate the specific meaning of those words due to the *trace*: each picture or sign brings with it multiple interpretations or meanings. Consequently, when language is translated into (sign)al form, it either loses, fragments, or inflates the complexity and/or depth of the original meaning.

Offred's body is also translated into a sign. As she walks past the Guardians, she reflects that "[t]hey have no outlets now except themselves, and that's a sacrilege. There are no more magazines, no more films, no more substitutes; only me and my shadow, walking away from the two men, who stand at attention, stiffly, by a road-block, watching our retreating shapes" (*THT* 28). Offred is a shape that conveys meaning. Not only does she communicate sex and fertility by her dress, "[e]verything except the wings around my face is red: the color of blood, which defines us" (9), but her body is also branded as property: "I cannot avoid seeing, now, the small tattoo on my ankle. Four digits and an eye, a passport in reverse. It's supposed to guarantee that I will never be able to fade, finally, into another landscape. I am too important, too scarce, for that. I am a national resource" (80). Offred's body as property is also apparent when the Commander takes Offred to Jezebel's: "He slips around my wrist a tag, purple, on an elastic band, like the tags for airport luggage. 'If anyone asks you, say you're an evening rental,' he says" (293). When he takes her upstairs to a bedroom, Offred says, "[h]e's stroking my body now, from stem as they say to stern, cat stroke along the left flank, down the left leg. He stops at the foot, his fingers encircling the ankle, briefly, like a bracelet, where the tattoo is, a Braille he can read, a cattle brand. It means ownership" (320). The imagery of the reference from stem to stern places Offred as a material thing. In the same way the Commander's household is hollow, her body is also hollow like a ship, or a container. The Commander also places a luggage tag on her as a reminder that she is his property, ready to be bought, sold, or rented. Offred is consequently inscribed as

“[a]n invalid, one who has been invalidated. No valid passport. No exit” (280). Atwood’s puns illustrate that Offred’s identity, Self, and purpose is a thing that is shifted and moulded by others. In addition, Offred’s dress, and therefore her body, is a symbol of her reproductive role in society. When Rita looks at Offred and frowns, Offred reflects that “the frown isn’t personal: it’s the red dress she disapproves of, and what it stands for. She thinks I may be catching, like a disease or any form of bad luck” (11). Offred’s body—her name, her clothes, her sex—simultaneously symbolize a whore, a possession, a container, a way to renew a dying population: she says, “[w]e are two-legged wombs, that’s all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices” (170-1). Yet, her body is not fully translatable into a (sign)al language. She is forced to wear red, but in the text she is also “off red” and therefore “resistant to complete absorption in the wavelength of the Gileadites” (Andriano 90). Moreover, her body is also “off-read” or misread by her Commander and by the future academics who reconstruct her story (Lacombe 7-8).

Given that Offred is “off-read” and reconstructed by others through masculinist language, her body is no longer constructed by her own subjectivity. If “the basis of subjectivity is the exercise of language” (Emile Benveniste qtd. in Stein 270), then “to lose language is to lose subjectivity” (Stein 270); thus, “[t]o speak, to write, is to assert one’s personhood, inscribe one’s subjectivity” (270). Since subjectivity is dependent on language and language is what represents the body, then the loss of language means one not only loses subjectivity but also loses the ability to govern the body as one’s own. As a result, Offred’s body feels alien to her. She says,

I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will. I could use it to run, push buttons of one sort or another, make

things happen. There were limits, but my body was nevertheless lithe, single, solid, one with me.

Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping. Inside it is a space, huge as the sky at night and dark and curved like that, though black-red rather than black. (*THT* 91)

Offred's "flesh arranges itself differently" because she has lost her sense of subjectivity and is therefore arranged and moulded by others. The loss of her subjectivity once more leaves her feeling hollow; she is an empty space like the night sky. Offred's body is also no longer a part of her that she can control because it is inscribed and represented by others; she is only a vessel, a container for the purpose of procreation: "I have viable ovaries" (180). Offred also says that she "ha[s] trouble remembering what [she] used to look like" (179-80). This is partially due to the lack of mirrors in Gilead, but also because she no longer has access to representative language. She says, "I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it's shameful or immodest but because I don't want to see it. I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely" (78). As the site of representation, Offred's body has betrayed her because it has internalized the hopes of the regime:

Treacherous ground, my own territory. I become the earth I set my ear against, for rumors of the future. Each twinge, each murmur of slight pain, ripples of sloughed-off matter, swellings and diminishings of tissue, the droolings of the flesh, these are signs, these are the things I need to know about. Each month I watch for

blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure. I have failed once again to fulfill the expectations of others, which have become my own. (91)

Her body betrays her every month that she menstruates because it means she has failed to fulfill her ascribed purpose within the regime. Moreover, her body betrays her because, not only has masculinist language been inscribed onto her body, but she has also been forced to internalize Gilead's inscribed expectations of her.⁶ She therefore focuses on the *signs* of her body because, as a sign herself, it is the only language she can access. Additionally, her body is a traitor to herself and to the regime because her body is dangerous: "I can't think of myself, my body, sometimes, without seeing the skeleton: how I must appear to an electron. A cradle of life, made of bones; and within, hazards, warped proteins, bad crystals jagged as glass" (139-40). Her body—potentially full of chemical toxins because "[t]he air got too full, once, of chemicals, rays, radiation, the water swarmed with toxic molecules, all of that takes years to clean up, and meanwhile they creep into your body, camp out in your fatty cells. Who knows, your very flesh may be polluted, dirty as an oily beach, sure death to shore birds and unborn babies" (139)—may be incapable of producing a child; therefore, her body is traitor to Gilead and must therefore be a traitor to herself. Offred knows she only "ha[s] one more chance" (*THT* 180); if her body does not cooperate she will be declared an *Unwoman* and will be sent to the colonies to die: she quotes the biblical story of Rachel and Leah, "[g]ive me children, or else I die" (75). Due to the instability of words, Offred says "[t]here's more than one meaning to it" (75). Offred's body is a symbol of fertility, and as such, if she cannot communicate meaning (read: if she cannot produce a child) her status shifts meaning. Similar to the words *zilch* and *free* (*THT* 230, 67), Offred's

⁶ See also Conboy, page 352.

body will become an archaic form of language because her status as a reproductive symbol shifts to that of an *Unwoman*: she is useless to the regime and thus discarded.

The Salvagings in *The Handmaid's Tale* are also used as a form of sign language in Gilead. Offred describes how the bodies hang for days so that they are sure to be seen and understood:

The three bodies hang there, even with the white sacks over their heads looking curiously stretched, like chickens strung up by the necks in a meatshop window; like birds with their wings clipped, like flightless birds, wrecked angels. It's hard to take your eyes off them. Beneath the hems of the dresses the feet dangle, two pairs of red shoes, one pair of blue. If it weren't for the ropes and the sacks it could be a kind of dance, a ballet, caught by flash-camera: midair.

They look arranged. They look like show biz. (346)

Like the signs that hang in the store windows to communicate the available meat or produce for the day, these hanging bodies with placards around their necks—pictorial representations of their crimes, like a “human fetus” for an abortionist, for example (41)—warn the handmaids and wives against committing crimes against Gilead. The hanging bodies are a performative utterance, a symbol, a signifier, arranged to convey meaning: “It's the bags over the heads that are the worst, worse than the faces themselves would be. It makes the men like dolls on which the faces have not yet been painted; like scarecrows, which in a way is what they are, since they are meant to scare” (41). The masking of the faces is meant to scare because it communicates that no one is safe, including those one loves. In addition, after spotting a body on the wall with

the letter *J* on the placard around his neck, she says, “the J isn’t for Jew. What could it be? Jehovah’s Witness? Jesuit? Whatever it meant, he’s just as dead” (252). Although the letter *J* is one of the few alphabetical signs still on display, the letter *J* as a sign is untranslatable to Offred; however, the invariant core—the dead body hanging on the Wall—is what is meant to be understood. As Michele Lacombe explains, “[i]n the absence of writing, the environment presents itself as a new language to be decoded” (9). For instance, Offred describes how

you can see the outlines of the features under the white cloth, like gray shadows. The heads are the heads of snowmen, with the coal eyes and the carrot noses fallen out. The heads are melting. But on one bag there’s blood, which has seeped through the white cloth, where the mouth must have been. It makes another mouth, a small red one, like the mouths painted with thick brushes by kindergarten children. A child’s idea of a smile. The smile of blood is what fixes the attention, finally. These are not snowmen after all. (*THT* 41)

Offred’s description of these men led Lacombe to state that “[t]he organ of speech, denied existence as well as expression, remains both signifier and signified. And the sign continues to mislead: neither lipstick nor crayon, the mouth of the hanged man is framed by yet another script identifying him as an abortionist when he may simply have been a nonconformist. He is as innocent as a snowman—now ‘no man’” (10). The “smile of blood” furthermore communicates the consequences of what will happen if one attempts to reclaim speech. It is a child’s smile in that it symbolizes lack of knowledge for the consequences that come with disobeying the regime. Offred must adjust her way of thinking to accommodate and translate her new Gileadean *sign*

language. For example, she compares the flowers of Serena Joy's garden to the hanging "snowmen," saying,

[t]he red is the same but there is no connection. The tulips are not tulips of blood, the red smiles are not flowers, neither thing makes a comment on the other. . . . Each thing is valid and really there. It is through a field of such valid objects that I must pick my way, every day and in every way. I put a lot of effort into making such distinctions. I need to make them. I need to be very clear in my own mind. (*THT* 42-3)

Gilead's *sign* language is thus an attempt to use both formal and dynamic translation.⁷ The wooden signs in the store windows, of "three eggs, a bee, a cow" translate word for word: "Milk and Honey" (32), whereas the hanging bodies are meant to translate an emotional effect: "What are we supposed to feel towards these bodies is hatred and scorn" (42). However, Offred says, "[t]his isn't what I feel. These bodies hanging on the Wall are time travelers, anachronisms. They've come here from the past. What I feel towards them is blankness. What I feel is that I must not feel" (42). Not only is language unstable, but Atwood also shows us that the instability of words lead to unstable meaning that even the regime cannot control; therefore, Gilead's use of both formal and dynamic equivalence is ultimately untranslatable. The sign for "Milk and Honey" also shows eggs, suggesting that an additional signifier has been lost in the translation from visual image to words. Gilead also wishes to convey an emotional response with the hanging bodies that it cannot completely control; although they control women's bodies through inscription and attempt to control women's thoughts through indoctrination, Gilead cannot fully

⁷ See Chapter 1: Introduction, page 2.

have power over thoughts and, therefore, Atwood argues that something is always lost in translation because language and meaning do not always correspond.

The third type of translation that Jakobson posits, interlingual translation, is also called translation proper and is defined “as an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language” (139). Translation proper is what translators do when they take a source language text and word for word, meaning for meaning, transform it into the target language text. Translation proper is also the method of moving meaning from the source language to the target language; nevertheless, there can never be complete equivalence in moving meaning from one sign system to another because each sign “contains within itself a set of non-transferable associations and connotations” (Bassnett 22). For example, the code word for the regime’s resistance in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is “[m]ayday” (*THT* 253). Brian Johnson argues that “[b]y speaking the password, a member creates with language an entire community of support” (44); however, Offred explains that “[m]ayday used to be a distress signal, a long time ago, in one of those wars we studied in high school. . . . It’s French. . . . From *m’aidez*. Help me” (*THT* 54). The word can also refer to a day in the month of May, specifically May 1st.⁸ Although mayday, May Day, and *m’aidez* sound similar aurally, the different spelling and meanings of the word illustrate how language and meaning are created through layers. Although some of the meaning will be lost in translation—for instance, once translated into English the word loses meaning from its original French—the trace ensures that additional and/or different meanings will be carried over.

⁸ May 1st, or May Day, has also been known as Labour Day in many countries, especially in those with Communist and/or oligarchical regimes (Wright). The multiple meanings of May Day therefore resonate with the refiguring of Labour Day in *The Handmaid’s Tale*: “September first will be Labor Day, they still have that. Though it didn’t used to have anything to do with mothers” (249).

Atwood further demonstrates interlingual translation in *The Handmaid's Tale* when Offred finds a message left by her predecessor on the floor of her the closet:

there it was, in tiny writing, quite fresh it seemed, scratched with a pin or maybe just a fingernail, in the corner where the darkest shadow fell: *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*.

I didn't know what it meant, or even what language it was in. . . . Still, it was a message, and it was in writing, forbidden by that very fact, and it hadn't yet been discovered. Except by me, for whom it was intended. It was intended for whoever came next. . . . It pleases me to think I'm communing with her, this unknown woman. (*THT* 65)

Despite the fact that she cannot understand what the phrase means, Offred views the code as a form of resistance against the Gileadean regime: "I can't see it in the dark but I trace the tiny scratched writing with the ends of my fingers, as if it's a code in Braille. It sounds in my head now less like a prayer, more like a command; but to do what? Useless to me in any case, an ancient hieroglyph to which the key's been lost" (184). Later, the Commander translates this phrase for Offred as "[d]on't let the bastards grind you down" (235). For Offred, the phrase initially "[f]unction[s] alternately as prayer, command, riddle and curse" (Lacombe 12), and is a subversive form of communication; it gives her hope. However, Lacombe explains that "the graffiti is revealed to be a schoolboy's tag in the Commander's eyes, not true Latin but merely a verbal pun associated with the Venus de Milo as seen by the prepubescent male" (12-3). The Commander says,

‘[i]t’s sort of hard to explain why it’s funny unless you know Latin We used to write all kinds of things like that. I don’t know where we got them, from older boys perhaps.’ Forgetful of me and of himself, he’s turning the pages. ‘Look at this,’ he says. The picture is called *The Sabine Women*, and in the margin is scrawled: *pim pis pit, pimus pistis pants*. ‘There was another one,’ he says. ‘*Cim, cis, cit . . .*’ He stops, returning to the present, embarrassed. (235)

Offred does not truly understand the Commander’s boyhood joke, thereby illustrating that Latin is yet another language of exclusion for women. When the Commander shows Offred the jokes made from (improperly translated) Latin grammatical paradigms, he trails off and looks embarrassed because the final three verbs in the *Cim, cis, cit* paradigm are *cimus, citis, cunt* (Furrow). He tells her these jokes were passed down by older boys, showing that the inscription of women through language—by associating the word *cunt* with the abduction and rape of the Sabine women—is a joke only men are privy to. Here, Atwood is demonstrating women’s speechlessness because only men have access to the meaning of language inside the patriarchal construct. Offred’s translation of the Commander’s boyhood joke means something altogether different for her than it does for the Commander. For Offred, the phrase scratched into her closet floor is initially a message of resistance which illustrates that she still has some form of control over her thoughts, which demonstrates both untranslatability and the instability of language.

In addition to the Commander’s Latin jokes, as a schoolboy he draws “a mustache and a black brassiere and armpit hair” (*THT* 234) on the picture of Venus de Milo. For the Commander, the Venus de Milo, with breasts and buttocks exposed, is a figure of sexual desire.

With her arms cut off at the shoulder and bicep she is powerless to fight back against what the male “pen” projects onto her body. As a boy the Commander inscribed the naked female body by writing over it; as an adult he does the same because he is “responsible for the design of the female costumes and for the suggestion that the Handmaids wear red” (382). After Offred learns that *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum* is meaningless, a grammatically incorrect pun, the made-up masculinist language of a boy, it loses its meaning for her; it is untranslatable: “Don’t let the bastards grind you down. I repeat this to myself but it conveys nothing. You might as well say, Don’t let there be air; or, Don’t be. I suppose you could say that” (363). Although Offred understands that her predecessor wrote *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum* as a form of resistance to the male “pen” that inscribes her, the Offred before her commits suicide. Similar to Spivak’s discussion about how a woman who is sexually compromised may commit suicide “to displace (not merely deny), in the physiological inscription of her body, its imprisonment within the legitimate passion by a single male” (“Subaltern” 308), the first Offred knows that death is the only form of escaping definitive inscription.

The inscription of Offred’s body as being written over by the male “pen” demonstrates that Offred’s body is a site of colonial translation-as-violation.⁹ She compares herself to the portrayal of women in harems in nineteenth century paintings:

Dozens of paintings of harems, fat women lolling on divans, turbans on their heads or velvet caps, being fanned with peacock tails. . . . Studies of sedentary flesh, painted by men who’d never been there. These pictures were supposed to be erotic, and I thought they were, at the time; but I see now what they were really about.

⁹ See Chapter 1: Introduction, page 5.

They were paintings about suspended animation; about waiting, about objects not in use. They were paintings about boredom. But maybe boredom is erotic, when women do it, for men. (*THT* 85)

Offred has figuratively become a harem woman or a work of art like the Venus de Milo: her body is a figure constructed and inscribed by the male gaze. She is an object whose sole purpose in the Commander's family is to procreate, and therefore like the women in harem paintings her body is colonized by men, and thus translated and violated. Offred is consequently a palimpsest, "a manuscript or piece of writing material on which later writing has been superimposed on effaced earlier writing" (*Oxford Dictionaries Online*). Karen Macfarlane explains that harems are "imaginary places in masculinist and orientalist discourses"; therefore, she states that Offred's comparison to a harem woman evokes "this myth of masculinist, imperialist appropriation of women's bodies as coded sites of cultural/racial control in which the women are fictionalized" (9). Offred's identity has been erased and re-written because she no longer owns or controls her body; consequently, her body is a blank page on which her colonizers write: "You're white as a sheet, [Luke] says. That is how I feel: white, flat, thin. I feel transparent. . . . how will I be able to hold on to Luke, to [my daughter], when I'm so flat, so white? I feel as if there's not much left of me; they will slip through my arms, as if I'm made of smoke, as if I'm a mirage, fading before their eyes" (*THT* 106). She is paper, erased, and rewritten by her captors. Nevertheless, Offred is like a medieval palimpsest that scribes scraped clean in order to write something new in that Gilead is "unable to obliterate all traces of the original" (Atwood, "Suggested Topics" 399). As with the aforementioned "Lilies of the Field" sign, her bodily inscriptions cannot be fully erased.

Throughout *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred tells her own story to resist the ways in which her identity (and therefore her body) is constructed through the translation of masculinist signs

and symbols. Although Offred attempts to write her Self by telling her story, and therefore translating “herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement” (Cixous 391), she cannot escape the power of masculinist language. The “Historical Notes” at the end of her story demonstrate that her body is still subject to masculinist definition and inscription. They describe the research into Offred’s manuscript, which was transcribed from a series of approximately thirty tapes. Although these tapes tell Offred’s story, Professor Pieixoto of the “Gileadean Research Association” (*THT* 371) categorizes her representation as property by referring to Offred with the possessive pronoun as “our author” (380, 385, 386), and “our narrator” (387, 388), and to her memoir as “[o]ur document” (388).¹⁰ Pieixoto explains that the narrator did not name her story:

The superscription ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ was appended to it by Professor Wade, partly in homage to the great Geoffrey Chaucer. . . all puns were intentional, particularly that having to do with the archaic vulgar signification of the word *tail*; that being, to some extent, the bone, as it were, of contention, in that phase of Gileadean society of which our saga treats. (*THT* 373)

Pieixoto and Wade persist “on reading only the ‘tail’ of her body” (Conboy 351), rather than her tale as story. Furthermore, Klarer suggests that “[t]his ‘masculinization’ of the ‘feminine’—whereby ‘Tale’ becomes ‘*Tail*’—seems to be a form of the ‘pen/penis’ pun” (140). Susan Gubar’s analysis of Isak Dinesen’s short story, “The Blank Page,” illustrates the connection between the pen and the penis: “Gubar draws a connection between writing and the sexual act. Dinesen’s story describes the custom of presenting the blood-stained linen of the wedding nights

¹⁰ See also Lacombe, page 19.

of princesses in a gallery-like exhibition, thereby illustrating the power of the male ‘pen’ that writes on the linen with blood” (Klarer 140). It is patriarchy that controls the pen and therefore language. Atwood re-imagines the pen/penis pun in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, illustrating “how much a patriarchal society understand[s] literary production as a male activity—as stylized procreation—and how attempts at literary expression by women are interpreted as envy and intrusion into a male domain” (Klarer 140-1). Men write; women procreate. It is for this reason that, when the Commander allows Offred to write, she says, “[t]he pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost, I can feel its power, the power of the words it contains. Pen is Envy, Aunt Lydia would say. . . . And they were right, it is envy. Just holding it is envy. I envy the Commander his pen. It’s one more thing I would like to steal” (*THT* 234). Offred wants to reclaim her body and her Self by figuratively castrating man and stealing patriarchal language (Stein 269). Only by the appropriation of the male pen can Offred signify herself as a subject (272), and follow Hélène Cixous’ assertion that “[w]oman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies. . . . Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement” (224). Offred mirrors Simone de Beauvoir’s reflection that “[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (267), by saying: “I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born” (*THT* 82). Yet, not only does Offred want to steal language to create her Self, but she also wants to inscribe herself with a stable language, a steel language, so that her language and voice can no longer be appropriated from her: “Steel yourself, my mother used to say. . . . I never thought much at the time about what the phrase meant, but it had something to do with metal, with armor, and that’s what I would do, I would steel myself I would pretend not to

be present, not in the flesh” (200). Although Offred’s body is inscribed by masculinist language, part of her resistance to the Gileadean regime is to attempt to write her own body; to transcend her masculinist inscription she must write her body like steel. By telling her story and manipulating it, like she does when she describes her nights with Nick, “[i]t didn’t happen that way either. I’m not sure how it happened; not exactly. All I can hope for is a reconstruction” (330), Offred is stealing/steeling the male pen. She therefore challenges the masculinist inscription of her body by making “the body her book” (Conboy 355). By translating her body into her story, she attempts to reclaim her body and her representation as her own.

Unfortunately, Offred’s body as book is only an attempt to reclaim her body as representation because, just as her body is subject to masculinist interpretation, so too are her words: “All I can hope for is a reconstruction” (330). In “The Death of the Author,” Roland Barthes argues that

writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing. . . . As soon as a fact is narrated no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into this own death, writing begins. (221)

Therefore, Offred's story, once told, is no longer Offred's story as it is subject to the cultural and societal beliefs of the listener/reader. After Pieixoto is introduced to his audience, for instance, he opens by saying, "I am sure we all enjoyed our charming Arctic Char last night at dinner, and now we are enjoying an equally charming Arctic Chair. I use the word 'enjoy' in two distinct senses, precluding, of course, the obsolete third.' (Laughter)" (*THT* 373). This recalls Offred's exploration of the word chair and Atwood's use of punning and homonyms to demonstrate the instability of language.¹¹ Conboy notes how

[t]he third sense of the word is clearly not obsolete, as it amuses the crowd; and only the reader is left with the irony that in spite of the narrator's plea for identification—in spite of the body-focused language which worked to create a reader who might read the place of a woman's body—the future holds still more readers who will read for their pleasure in and exploitation of the female body. (358)

Although Offred attempts to escape the external definition of her body, she cannot because her body will continue to be interpreted by masculinist language. When Pieixoto explains to his audience that "many gaps remain. Some of them could have been filled by our anonymous author, had she had a different turn of mind. She could have told us much about the working of the Gileadean empire, had she had the instincts of a reporter or a spy" (*THT* 386), he is suggesting that her story would be more valuable to them if she gave more insight to the workings of men in Gileadean society. Therefore, Conboy explains, "[j]ust as Offred's literal body is appropriated by her culture for compulsory service, so too is her text—represented as scripted body and directed toward her ideal reader—is finally conscripted by the patriarchal

¹¹ See page 34.

academic institution to serve its own needs” (351). The final pages of *The Handmaid’s Tale* are therefore bleak: Offred may have escaped the regime, but she cannot escape her bodily inscription through masculinist language.

By framing Offred’s tale in a patriarchal context, Pieixoto reinterprets it (Stein 273). Offred as narrator is disempowered because the “representative of the future academy insists on reading only the ‘tail’ of her body” (Conboy 351), which reinforces the masculinist language construct and mistranslation of the female body. Although Offred’s resistance demonstrates her “refus[al] to be silenced by the ‘space between’” language and meaning (Grace 3), she is trapped within the masculinist narrative of Gilead, her Commander, and Pieixoto’s interpretation of her story while at the same time that she is trapped within Atwood’s text because with each reading comes a new interpretation or story. However, Offred needs more than a reader: she says,

[w]hat I need is perspective. The illusion of depth, created by a frame, the arrangement of shapes on the flat surface. Perspective is necessary. Otherwise there are only two dimensions. Otherwise you live with your face squashed against a wall, everything a huge foreground, of details, close-ups, hairs, the weave of the bedsheet, the molecules of the face. Your own skin like a map, a diagram of futility, crisscrossed with tiny roads that lead nowhere. (*THT* 179)

Without perspective, Offred is nothing but flat paper¹² on which (an)other can write their own interpretations of her body. Her skin is a map with roads that crisscross and lead to nowhere because each interpretation of that map leads to new or altered routes of meaning, illustrating that

¹² See page 47.

the inscription of masculinist language onto the female body will always be an exercise in mistranslation.

Carol Singley asks, “[i]f the pen is a metaphorical penis. . . then what is the site of female expression? Lacking the phallus, can woman write except through impersonation? Can she read except through an alienating mimicry of the male voice?” (Singley 3). Atwood sets up Offred’s tale as a bleak one because, despite her attempts to write her self and reclaim her representation, Offred’s body continues to be inscribed and therefore misinterpreted and mistranslated by masculinist language long after her death since signs and symbols cannot communicate a stable, essential truth, or Being. Consequently, although perpetually inscribed by masculinist language, the female body cannot be defined as something fixed because language is fundamentally unstable. Atwood brings the constructions that create identity and meaning in the world to the forefront of her writing in *The Handmaid’s Tale* because it is only through knowledge that we can begin to transcend masculinist language and deconstruct the constructions of our Selves.

CHAPTER 3: THE GAZE AS *BODILY HARM*

Then it comes to him: he's lost the Female Body! . . .
Catch it. Put it in a pumpkin, in a high tower, in a
compound, in a chamber, in a house, in a room.
Quick, stick a leash on it, a lock, a chain, some pain,
settle it down, so it can never get away from you
again.

Margaret Atwood,
"The Female Body"¹³

Margaret Atwood opens *Bodily Harm* with an epigraph from John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*: "A man's presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you or for you. By contrast, a woman's presence. . . defines what can and cannot be done to her" (46), suggesting that the presence, and thus the sight, of the female body is the site of active definition and inscription. In addition to signs and symbols, the gaze is also a communicative means of translation that inscribes meaning onto the female body. There is an emphasis on men's gazes on Rennie's body throughout *Bodily Harm* which, as the title suggests, is translated as a physical threat to her body and identity. However, Rennie is not only seen by the men around her, but she also participates in the gaze and is thus complicit in her own representation and in the representation of others. Nevertheless, Rennie's gaze cannot translate social customs or masculinist language. While Cixous argues that a woman who does not write her Self does not control her body but only exists as shadow of the male,¹⁴ Atwood proposes to enlighten the reader in *Bodily Harm* to the construction of the female body and female identity because Rennie's inability to translate the

¹³ Page 37.

¹⁴ See Chapter 1: Introduction, page 11 for Cixous quotation.

masculinist gaze or to assume a level of power through her own gaze demonstrates that she does not have control over her body, but is a servant to masculinist construction.

As I established in Chapter 2 on *The Handmaid's Tale*, regardless of how faithful a translation is to the source, no translation can ever be an exact copy because there will always be an element of untranslatability between the two systems. John C. Catford argues that there are two types of untranslatability: linguistic and cultural. Linguistic untranslatability obviously results from a lexical structure in a source language that is absent from a target language (99-101). Cultural untranslatability, on the other hand, results from a cultural concept in a source language that is absent or unfamiliar to a target language because, as Judith Butler explains, “[l]anguage assumes and alters its power to act upon the real through locutionary acts, which, repeated, become entrenched practices and, ultimately, institutions” (*Gender Trouble* 158). Since, as Michel Foucault notes, “[t]he body is the inscribed surface of events” (148), it stands to reason that the body is thus “figured as a surface and the scene of a cultural inscription” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 176). As the accepted cultural belief of an ideal and essential “feminine” is inevitably inscribed onto the female body by masculinist language (Hutcheon ix), Butler argues, “the body appears as a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed or as the instrument through which an appropriative and interpretive will determines a cultural meaning for itself. In either case, the body is figured as a mere instrument or medium for which a set of cultural meanings are only externally related. But ‘the body’ is itself a construction” (12).

In addition, André Lefevere argues that texts “have to be seen as complex signifying systems and the task of the translator is to decode and re-encode whichever of those systems is accessible” (Bassnett 8); therefore, a mirror translation is impossible in conveying appropriate meaning. Consequently, as Jakobson argues, all language signs and systems are untranslatable

and “[o]nly creative transposition is possible” (142). The various choices a translator must make in transforming the source language to the target language therefore result in a different translation every time; nevertheless, there is still what some theorists would call the “invariant core” of the source language text, which is “represented by stable, basic and constant semantic elements in the text” (Bassnett 33). The “invariant core” of the inscription of masculinist language onto the female body is the body itself. The female body is the stable element, yet the female body is interpreted differently through the inscription and imposition of masculinist language, which is why, in *Alias Grace*, Grace says, “[y]ou should never let your picture be in a magazine or newspaper if you can help it, as you never know what ends your face may be made to serve, by others, once it has got out of your control” (260). It is by looking at the body—the invariant core—that various translations occur, allowing it to become the site of multiple inscriptions.

The concept of the gaze, as “the register of sight” (Jay Martin qtd. in Drichel 27), is ultimately defined by conflict: “It is a question of whether I will hold the Other in my gaze or whether I will be held in the Other's gaze” (Robert Bernasconi qtd. in Drichel 28). At the beginning of *Bodily Harm*, Rennie is held in the Other's gaze. The novel opens with a scene of potential sexual violence: Rennie comes home to find a “length of rope coiled neatly on the quilt. It wasn't any special kind of rope, there was nothing lurid about it. It was off-white and medium thick. It could have been a clothesline” (6). Although the comparison of the rope to a clothesline associates Rennie with female domesticity, the location of the rope on the bed sexually inscribes Rennie's body because it connotes both physical and sexual restraint. The police, already there, interrogate her:

He must've been watching you for a while. . . He must've known when you'd get home. . . . You close the curtains in the bathroom when you take a shower?

There aren't any curtains in the bathroom, I said. There aren't any windows.

You close the curtains when you get dressed at night? . . . You have men over here a lot? Different men?

He wanted it to be my fault, just a little, some indiscretion, some provocation. Next he would start lecturing me about locks, about living alone, about safety.

I close the curtains, I said. I don't have men over. I turn out the lights. I get undressed by myself, in the dark.

The big [police officer] smirked at me, he knew about single women, and suddenly I was angry. I unbuttoned my blouse and pulled my left arm out of the sleeve and dropped the slip strap over my shoulder. (6-7)

The policemen "knew about single women," immediately inscribing Rennie's body as sexual territory. They suggest that single women are inherently promiscuous and therefore indirectly *ask* for sexual violence. *Bodily Harm* thus works on the same premise as a Dell Mystery novel. For example, when Rennie recalls reading Dell Mysteries, she remembers that each dead female body was

carefully arranged on floor or bed like a still life, not quite naked, clothing dishevelled to suggest rape, though there was no rape in

the forties, finger-marks livid around the throat—they loved livid—
or a wound still oozing, preferably in the left breast. Dead but not
molested. The private eyes find them. . . describe each detail of the
body fully, lushly, as if running their tongues over it; all that flesh,
totally helpless because totally dead. Each of them expresses
outrage at the crime, *even though the victim provoked it*. Rennie
finds it curiously innocent, this hypocritical outrage. It's sweetly
outmoded, like hand-kissing. (246, my emphasis)

The highly sexualized, “lush” description of the male tongue that runs over the helpless murdered female body with her “livid” and “oozing” nakedness automatically reinforces that the victim provoked the attack with the temptations of her body and therefore deserves her end. Similarly, the policemen attempt to distort the situation by presenting Rennie as the guilty party rather than the stalker, inscribing her body as sexually promiscuous in the same way as the Dell Mystery novels. Not only do these passages illustrate that the concept of the gaze is a fundamental structure in the novel, but they also demonstrate that Atwood is focusing on the male gaze (at least initially), “for it is ultimately the Peeping Tom that—through the help of the police men—succeeds in objectifying the female subject he observes, as opposed to him becoming the object of the third party's censoring gaze” (Drichel 26). Consequently, Rennie is forced to show the police her amputated breast so that they will believe her. As a fragmented body, her inscription as sexual is thus erased as desirable in masculinist discourse.

In psychoanalytic theory, the female body suggests that “her lack of penis, impl[ies] a threat of castrations” (Mulvey 444); therefore, “women in representation can signify castration, and activate voyeuristic or fetishistic mechanisms to circumvent this threat” (447). Laura Mulvey

explains that “[u]ltimately, the meaning of woman is sexual difference, the visually ascertainable absence of the penis, the material on which is based the castration complex essential for the organisation of entrance to the symbolic order and the law of the father” (444). Consequently, the pleasure of the gaze “has been split between active/male and passive/female” (442). When Rennie is asked to write a piece about some controversial pornographic artworks, her editor, Keith, tells her “[h]e wanted a woman to write it because he thought they’d crack the nuts of any guy who tried to do it. . . . Tie it in with women’s fantasy lives, if you can, he said. Keep it light. Rennie said she thought the subject might have more to do with men’s fantasy lives, but Keith said he wanted the woman’s angle” (BH 205-6). Like the police officers, Keith is twisting the narrative of the male gaze and projecting fantasy onto the female figure. Mulvey states that “women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*” (442). This is also evident in *Alias Grace* when Dr. Jordan looks at a pamphlet with the abridged version of the murder trial. He notes, “[a]t the front is an engraved portrait of Grace, which could easily pass for the heroine of a sentimental novel. . . . Her shoulders are swathed in a tippet; the brim of a bonnet encircles her head like a dark aureole. The nose is straight, the mouth dainty, the expression conventionally soulful—the vapid pensiveness of a Magdalene, with the large eyes gazing at nothing” (70). Not only does Dr. Jordan describe Grace in the terms of a female breast, but he also describes her as a “vapid” Magdalene—or an unthinking prostitute figure. This is something he does frequently: “He has tried imagining her [Dora] as a prostitute—he often plays this private mental game with various women he encounters” (69). Dr. Jordan is not gazing at Dora, but at what he wishes her to be. By focusing on the female body and sexualizing it, he is projecting his own fantasies onto it. The accusation is thus of the women who wish to be looked

at and not the men who look. The representations of the women in the pornographic photographs in *Bodily Harm* are “sex-and-death pieces, women being strangled or bludgeoned or having their nipples cut off by men dressed up as Nazis” (208). The women—not the men—are the ones whose mangled bodies are being looked at; they represent a literal inscription onto the female body, reflecting the desires of the men who inscribe. Rennie then notices in one of the photographs that “something small and grey and wet appeared, poking out from between the legs. It was the head of a rat. Rennie felt that a large gap had appeared in what she’d been used to think of as reality. What if this is normal, she thought, and we just haven’t been told yet?” (208-9). The men are the active participants who strangle, bludgeon, or cut while the women remain passive. Moreover, the rat replaces the absent penis between the legs of the woman, inscribing onto her body her threat and role as a passive object through the male gaze. It is not that Rennie has not been told yet, but that she has failed to notice it. This moment is a turning point for Rennie when she realizes that there is a gap between the signifier and the signified in what she views as reality. She notes that in one of the photographs, the artist “had one woman harnessed to a dogsled, with a muzzle on. It was called *Nationalism is Dangerous*” (206). The artist of *Nationalism is Dangerous*, Frank, tells her that his work is “not supposed to turn you on. . . . Art is for contemplation. What art does is, it takes what society deals out and makes it visible, right? So you can see it” (206). Not only does the title of Frank’s photograph suggest that women’s bodies are sites of colonial and sexual domination, but also the photographs in general are thus metaphors for the language of the male gaze and the inscription of masculinist language onto the female body. They represent women as art—a material thing that is created, not born. As Frank suggests, Atwood’s novel as art makes the construction of the female body through masculinist language visible.

The visual representation of women's bodies is translated through masculinist language, demonstrating the power of the male gaze. For instance, Jake asks, "[w]hat is a woman. . . . A head with a cunt attached or a cunt with a head attached? Depends which end you start at" (235). Not only does Jake focus on the bodily representation of woman, but also by using the word *cunt* he is showing his mastery of language (and thus power over the female body) by degrading the female sexual organs. Rennie explains, "[i]t was understood between them that this was a joke" (235). However, after viewing the pornographic art, the joke takes on a whole new meaning for Rennie. She begins to understand Jocasta's theory of sex:

My theory is that when sex was such a big deal, above the waist, below the waist, with stages of achievement. . . they wanted it that way because you could measure it, you could win, scoring, you know? Our team against their team. . . . The new scoring is *not* scoring. Just so long as you keep control. They don't want love and understanding and meaningful relationships, they still want sex, but only if they can *take* it. Only if you've got something to lose, only if you struggle a little. (163)

Like Jocasta, Rennie begins to realize that her sexual relations with Jake are the result of a power struggle: "Jake liked to pin her down, he like to hold her so she couldn't move. He liked that, he liked thinking of sex as something he could win at. Sometimes he really hurt her, once he put his arm across her throat and she really did stop breathing. Danger turns you on, he said. Admit it. It was a game, they both knew that. . . . So she didn't have to be afraid of him" (205). However, the narrator tells us that Rennie could not make love with Jake for a couple of weeks after the art show because "[s]he didn't want him grabbing her from behind when she wasn't expecting it, she

didn't like being thrown onto the bed or held so she couldn't move. She had trouble dismissing it as a game. She now felt that in some way that had never been spelled out between them he thought of her as the enemy" (209). Although Rennie once viewed this power struggle as a game, she begins to realize it is a game where she does not have equal footing because it is always Jake who "wins" and Rennie who is powerless to stop him. Rennie is the enemy because as a woman she is the "unknown" to Jake and a source of sexual fear that he must dominate. The violent sexual games that Jake plays with Rennie as well as the violence pornographic art demonstrates that Atwood is playing with the idea that sexual violence is a continuum in the novel.

Similarly, in *Alias Grace*, when Grace meets McDermot for the first time, she notes that "[h]e said nothing, but stared at me, suspicious and frowning a little, almost as if I was an enemy of his; yet he did not seem to be looking at me at all, but at someone else right behind me" (250). Grace is the enemy because her body is the site of the unknown. McDermot is not looking at her; rather, he is looking at what he assumes her to be, what she symbolizes in the patriarchal construct and how she reflects his own desires, prejudices, and fears. Atwood often uses mirrors as representative of the gaze because they represent one's reflection and symbolize notions of subjectivity.¹⁵ During a child's development, Jacques Lacan explains "the mirror stage *as an identification*. . . namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image" (2). He describes how the mirror stage is essential for the development of the ego and one's subjectivity:

The mirror phase occurs at a time when children's physical
ambitions outstrip their motor capacity, with the result that . . . they

¹⁵ Macfarlane explains that the hallway mirror in the Commander's house is "[p]ositioned physically in a decidedly in-between space, this mirror reflects more than is contained in the frame of the text that we are reading. It is associated both with the handmaid's interspaical positioning and with the strategic distortions in her self-narrative. An ironic play on the blind 'eyes' that are Gilead's symbol, this reflecting 'eye' reveals the 'I' that has been rendered invisible through/to the dominant 'eye'" (2).

imagine their mirror image to be more complete, more perfect than they experience in their own body. Recognition is thus overlaid with misrecognition: the image recognised is conceived as the reflected body of the self, but its misrecognition as superior projects this body outside itself as an ideal ego. . . . This mirror moment predates language for the child. . . . an image that constitutes the matrix of the imaginary, of recognition/misrecognition and identification, and hence of the first articulation of the I, of subjectivity. (Mulvey 441)

Therefore, subjectivity is “a process of identity, ego, or self formation. . . . It is a symbolic position through which the subject participates in social and circulatory networks of exchange” (Mycak 24). Yet, for Lacan, “entry into language constitutes a split within the self, between the I that perceives and the I that is perceived” (Singley 4). In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Offred describes the mirror as “round, convex, a pier glass, like the eye of a fish, and myself in it like a distorted shadow, a parody of something, some fairy-tale figure in a red cloak” (9). The mirror, here, is representative of the male gaze. The eye of the fish-like mirror reflects the “I” of the woman, but it is not her. Rather, the woman reflected in the mirror—and thus reflected in the eyes of men—is nothing but a distortion and parody of her Self, a shadow of the male (as aforementioned by Cixous),¹⁶ a make-believe tale that projects masculine fear and desire. Thus, the misrecognition of one’s reflection becomes mistranslation. Atwood also addresses this concept in her poetry, especially in “The Circle Game”:

You look past me. . .
watching

¹⁶ See Chapter 1: Introduction, page 11, and Chapter 2: The Symbolic Order of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, page 54.

your own reflection somewhere
behind my head,
over my shoulder. (59-64)

The male subject in the poem refuses to look at the female, but instead looks past her to his own reflection, suggesting his own reflection is what he wants her to be.

In addition, when Grace meets Dr. Jordan for the first time in *Alias Grace*, she will not eat the apple he has given her until after he leaves: “I don’t want him watching me while I eat. I don’t want him to see my hunger. If you have a need and they find it out, they will use it against you. The best way is to stop from wanting anything” (47). Unlike Rennie, Grace knows that the one who gazes holds the power of inscription; however, after Rennie views the pornographic photographs she begins to realize they are the backdrops of her identity. The women in the pictures—or in the male gaze in general—exist “as *construction*—not as reflection—of woman as subject and also as object” (Hutcheon 8, author’s emphasis), which “question[s] whether there can ever be such a thing as a final, definitive ‘inscription’ of selfhood or subjectivity” (8). Consequently, Rennie tells Jake, “[l]ately I feel I’m being used. . . . Used for what? said Jake. Rennie thought about it. Raw material, she said” (*BH* 210). Rennie realizes that the female body is inscribed by masculinist language as a form of art. Yet not only does the male gaze work to literally represent the female body in pictures, but the male gaze also figuratively represents the female body by creating it as a construction of his own desires, and by doing so inscribes it with definition. For instance, Jake likes to pose Rennie as if she were in a Cartier-Bresson photograph: “Put your arms over your head, Jake said, it lifts *the* breasts. Move your legs apart, just a little. Raise your left knee. You look fantastic” (99, my emphasis). By stating he wants Rennie to move *the* breasts rather than *her* breasts, Jake is establishing Rennie as an object rather than as a

subject. He also tells her she has “great cheekbones. . . .You should exploit them. Oppressed cheekbones? said Rennie. . . . Sometimes I feel like a blank sheet of paper, she said. For you to doodle on” (97). Jake fragments her body and dismembers it in his description by focusing on specific parts of it, thereby reducing Rennie to the materiality of her body. She eventually realizes that Jake is defining her through inscription; she says, “[i]t took her more time than it should have to realize that she was one of the things Jake was packaging” (97) because she is “‘designed’ by him in much the same way as he designs rooms or magazines” (Mycak, “Decentred Subject” 475). Jake views Rennie’s body as a work of art that he constructs as he looks upon it. Woman as a material object to be viewed is also evident in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. When Offred is at Jezebel’s with the Commander, she knows she is on display; she says, “[i]t occurs to me he is showing off. He is showing me off, to them, and they understand that, they are decorous enough, they keep their hands to themselves, but they review my breasts, my legs, as if there’s no reason why they shouldn’t. But also he is showing off to me. He is demonstrating, to me, his mastery of the world” (296). Offred is an object that the Commander has power over, both literally and figuratively. Like the Commander, Jake has power over Rennie because he sees her body as nothing more than a material object. For instance, when Rennie tells Jake that she is a Christian, he says, “[n]o, you’re not. . . . Christians don’t have cunts. You’re only a *shiksa*. That’s different” (BH 63). Jake erases the Christian identity that Rennie affirms by labelling her as a *shiksa*, a non-Jewish woman. He furthermore sexualizes and debases her identity by telling her she has a cunt. Rennie is well aware of her anatomy, but it is Jake’s choice of word, *cunt*, that suggests Rennie is sexually open and promiscuous, or displays base sexual traits that Christians are supposed to repress. Later in the novel Jake also tells her, “[y]ou’re my golden *shiksa*. We all have to have at least one, it’s obligatory. So that’s what I am, said Rennie. I guess that’s it for my

identity crisis. It's nice to know who you are" (197). Jake once again labels her definitively by using possessive language: "my. . . shiksa." Although Rennie adds a codicil that she is "hardly golden" (197), Jake's definition of Rennie as an object he has the power to "package" disallows her own definition of herself because he refuses to see her subjectivity or as anything apart from her connection to him.

Jake enacts his voyeuristic and fetishistic desire for Rennie by projecting his desire onto her and using her body as a site of violent inscription. Jake tells Rennie, "[s]crew your mind. . . . No, he said, I couldn't screw your mind even if I wanted to. You're a tough lady, you've got your legs crossed pretty tight. You can't rape a woman's mind without her consent" (97). The wording that Atwood uses here is unusual because is it rape if a woman consents? This suggests that for Jake the definitions of rape and consent are variable. In addition, Jake knows that a woman's mind cannot be raped without her consent because she is capable of thinking for herself; however, Atwood uses this point to illustrate that women are complicit in their construction because, like Rennie, they internalize it. Jake ignores the value of Rennie's mind and focuses solely on her body: "I'm not a mind man. I'm more interested in your body" (97). Although at one point Jake tells her to "[s]kip the semantics. . . . Tell the truth. Tell me how you want to be treated. In twenty-five words or less. You say it, I'll do it" (153), he is also restricting her word count and thus controlling her speech. Jake "liked it when she swore; he said she was the only woman he knew who still pronounced the g in 'fucking'. . . . You have a dirty mouth, Jake said. It needs to be washed out with a tongue" (111). Not only is Jake once more sexually inscribing Rennie's body, but he also suggests that the male (tongue, and therefore masculinist language) needs to wash out, and thus erase, her language. Jake also tells her,

I dream about your bum, a hundred times life-size, floating in the sky, covered with neon lights and flashing on and off. . . . Don't put me down, said Rennie.

I like you down, said Jake. Flat on your back. . . . Watch it, pussycat. . . . Remember your place. He got hold of her two hands, held her wrists together, shoved himself in between her thighs, squeezing her breast harder than he needed to. Feel that, he said. That's what you do to me, the fastest erection in the West. Pretend I just came through the window. Pretend you're being raped.

What's pretend about it? said Rennie. Stop pinching.

Admit it turns you on, said Jake. Admit you love it. Ask for it. Say please. (111)

Not only does Jake take away Rennie's language and ability to speak for herself, but he also replaces it with his own. By using the imperative, "Admit. . . Admit. . . Ask for. . . Say," he is scripting her. Jake assumes that rape is something that turns Rennie on, that she loves, that she has asked for. He is projecting his power fantasies of bondage and forced sex onto her, removing her own interpretation of the situation. Rennie also describes how Jake would sometimes "climb up the fire escape and in through the window instead of coming through the door, he'd send her ungrammatical and obscene letters composed of words snipped from newspapers. . . he'd hide in closets and spring out at her, pretending to be a lurker" (19). Rennie says, "[a]part from the first shock, none of these things had ever alarmed her" (19). She is not alarmed because she is initially blind to the threat of the faceless man that symbolizes masculinist language and inscribes meaning onto her body through violence. Moreover, she is complicit because she has internalized

Jake's fantasies as her own. Rennie tells herself that "[a] secure woman is not threatened by her partner's fantasies. . . . As long as there is trust. She'd even written that, or something like it, in a piece on the comeback of satin lingerie and fancy garter belts. And she was not threatened, not for some time" (99). Just as Rennie starts new fashion trends by writing them, she convinces herself that Jake's fantasies are not threatening through *her* written word. Yet, Rennie is not secure because deep down she knows that Jake's "fantasies" are actual realities—not just for Jake, but as part of the overall patriarchal construct. After Jake moves out and the man with the rope metaphorically moves in, she says, "[t]he face keeps changing, eluding her, he might as well be invisible, she can't see him, this is what is so terrifying, he isn't really there, he's only a shadow, anonymous, familiar, with silver eyes that twin and reflect her own" (288). Although Rennie is referring to the man who left the rope on her bed, Atwood is suggesting that it is the overarching masculinist language of patriarchy that "twin[s] and reflect[s]" Rennie. The face of the man keeps changing because it is not only one man who inscribes meaning onto Rennie's body. For instance, Rennie says, "[w]hen Jake moved out, naturally there was a vacuum. Something had to come in to fill it. Maybe the man with the rope hadn't so much broken into her apartment as been sucked in, by the force of gravity" (32). Although Jake is no longer a presence inscribing her body with his gaze, the social construct of the male gaze, and thus masculinist language, demands that someone take Jake's place with regards to both the bedroom and to inscribing her body: "A faceless stranger. Mr. X, in the bedroom, with a knife" (155). The vacuum left by Jake that must be filled by another man shows that Rennie cannot escape bodily inscription through masculinist language. Although Jake figuratively inscribes her body, and Daniel physically cuts into her body, the notion of a stranger with the knife suggests a literal bodily inscription with permanent etching, demonstrating that Rennie—and therefore all

women—are “not exempt” (303) because the inscription of the female body through masculinist language is a social construct.

Once Rennie has had a mastectomy she no longer identifies with Jake’s construction/inscription of her: “She didn’t want to be seen, the way she was, damaged, amputated” (195). She says, “[s]he felt that Jake’s eyes kept slipping away from her face, down to the top button of her blouse; then, as if he’d reached a line, a taboo, back up to her face again. He’s fascinated, she thought” (12). Jake’s fascination reflects his fear of castration—not only is Rennie without male genitalia, but she is also without one of the key sexual and reproductive organs that define her as female and a sexual object; therefore, Jake’s bodily inscription of her no longer fits. Rennie knows that Jake “was afraid of her, she had the kiss of death on her, you could see the marks. Mortality infested her, she was a carrier, it was catching. . . . *Life is just another sexually transmitted social disease*” (198, author’s emphasis). Rennie’s body thus becomes abject. Julia Kristeva explains that “[t]he abject is not an ob-ject facing me, which I name or imagine. . . . The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to *I*” (“Approaching Abjection” 1); therefore, to purify from the abject the “*I*” must “expel it. . . . I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which ‘*I*’ claim to establish *myself*” (3). The abject thus presents a threat of disintegration to one’s subjectivity (Mycak, “Decentred Subject” 475). However, Kristeva notes that it is “not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order” (“Approaching Abjection” 4). Rather, Rennie’s mastectomy disrupts everything she thinks she knows about herself, her sexuality, and her body: her “identity is dislocated, alienated, splintered, and split” (Mycak, *Split Subject* 9). Rennie’s amputated breast has become separate from her Self. Mycak therefore argues that Rennie’s cancer is functional in the novel for two things: “First, on an intrasubjective

level, it marks both the constitution of Rennie's subjective identity and its potential dissolution. . . . Second, on a communal level, abjection. . . bespeaks the broader, intersubjective connotations of the corporeal nature of identity" (*Split Subject* 150). Rennie's cancer consequently threatens her identity by illustrating that her subjectivity "is conditional upon her exercising her position within the symbolic discourse" (158). The removal of one of her sexual and maternal organs places Rennie outside the masculinist construct of her Self. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred also views her body as abject. When looking at the hanging bodies on the Wall she says, "I don't want pain. I don't want to be a dancer, my feet in the air, my head a faceless oblong of white cloth. I don't want to be a doll hung up on the Wall, I don't want to be a wingless angel. I want to keep on living, in any form. I resign my body freely, to the uses of others. They can do what they like with me. I am abject. I feel, for the first time, their true power" (357). Offred understands that the rejection of her body is the ultimate form of submission and acceptance to the translation of her body through masculinist language. Her subjectivity has been removed and replaced by patriarchal bodily inscription. Since the abject is present and communicated through language (Kristeva, "Approaching Abjection" 23), both Rennie and Offred are renouncing their own claim to language and allowing the inscription of masculinist language onto them.

After Rennie's surgery, her doctor, Daniel, tells her that "[a] remission can last for years, for a normal lifespan even. He leaned forward slightly. Think of your life as a clean page. You can write whatever you like on it" (*BH* 76). Rennie also describes her life "like a book Jocasta once lent her. . . . The main character fell off a cliff on page sixty-three and the rest of the pages were blank" (270). Since Rennie can no longer reconcile her Self with Jake's inscription of her, Rennie looks elsewhere for identification; however, because Rennie is entrenched in the patriarchal construct, she does not look to herself for identification. Daniel is the first man to take

Jake's place as he re-inscribes her body. Rennie has a fear that her scar will come undone, "split open like a faulty zipper, and she will turn inside out. Then she would see what Daniel saw when he looked into her, while she herself lay on the table unconscious as a slit fish. This is partly why she fell in love with him: he knows something about her she doesn't know, he knows what she's like on the inside" (73). Daniel not only gazes at Rennie's outside form, but he also has looked at the inside of her body. Since Daniel knows what she looks like on the inside—something that Jake could never see—Rennie says, "I imprinted on him. . . like a duckling, like a baby chick" (25). Rennie is looking for a bodily inscription that focuses on more than just what she looks like on the outside. Although Rennie thinks she loves Daniel, she tells us that

[s]he wasn't jealous of his wife, though. Only of his other patients. Maybe I'm not the only one, thought Rennie. Maybe there's a whole lineup of them, dozens and dozens of women, each with a bite taken out of them, one breast or the other. He's saved all our lives, he has lunch with us all in turn, he tells us all he loves us. He thinks it's his duty, it gives us something to hold onto. Anyway he gets off on it, it's like a harem. As for us, we can't help it, he's the only man in the world who knows the truth, he's looked into each one of us and seen death. He knows we've been resurrected, he knows we're not all that well glued together, any minute we'll vaporize. These bodies are only provisional. (138)

There is a double meaning to Rennie's notion that these women's bodies are only provisional. At first glance it would seem as if she is talking about their impending death; however, the resurrected, yet vaporized and provisional bodies also suggest the need for bodily re-inscription.

Rennie's body has become alien to her because the removal of her breast automatically fragments Jake's inscription of her as a sexual object: "He raised her arms, holding her wrists above her head. Fight me for it, he said. Tell me you want it. This was his ritual, one of them, it had once been hers too and now she could no longer perform it. She didn't move and he let go of her. . . . He needed to believe. . . she could still fight, play, stand up to him, he could not bear to see her vulnerable like this" (198). Unlike Jake who only knows what Rennie looks like on the outside, Daniel has seen the inside of her body; nevertheless, this does not translate to understanding who Rennie is. Daniel still constructs Rennie as a reflection of who he wants her to be, and not as she actually is. Rennie is only one in his harem of fragmented women looking for a new identity; therefore, as with Jake, Daniel places himself in the position of power and puts Rennie in the place of object.

When Rennie leaves Canada to write a travel article on the Carribean islands of St. Antoine and Ste. Agathe, and therefore leaves Daniel, Paul becomes the next man who fills the vacuum left by the masculinist need for female bodily inscription. With Paul, Rennie is able to once more see herself as a sexual being. Rennie therefore thinks that "[s]he owes [Paul] something: he was the one who gave her back her body; wasn't he?" (248). However, Paul did not *give* Rennie back her body, rather he has re-inscribed it. When Paul kisses her mouth, it is with "more exploration than passion" (92), yet when he kisses her on the forehead he does so "as if she were a child, as if he were kissing her goodnight" (225), illustrating that Rennie's body is a territory he must assume control over. This reflects Spivak's concept of translation-as-violation¹⁷ because Rennie reflects a colonial body that he must explore and dominate through his American masculine superiority. Moreover, when Paul tells her, "[i]t's not that I've got anything against women" (*BH* 239), Rennie hears Paul's subtext and supplies "[i]n their place" (239, author's

¹⁷ See Chapter 1: Introduction, page 5.

emphasis), and when she tries to talk to Paul she “[f]eel[s] like a wife. Incapable” (245). Also, when Paul tells Rennie to go into the bedroom, Rennie notes that the bedroom is “where Paul wants her to be” (245). Yet, Rennie admits that the bedroom is also “where she wants to be” (245). Rennie believes she has escaped Jake’s bodily inscriptions of her; however, she fails to realize that she is now defined, inscribed, and represented by Paul. It is only during the political coup that “Rennie can see what she is now: she’s an object of negotiations. The truth about knights comes suddenly clear: the maidens were only an excuse. The dragon was the real business. . . . She feels like a hostage, and, like a hostage, strangely uninvolved in her own fate. Other people are deciding that for her” (258). Paul—and men in general—are thus “the connection” (246) between language and meaning.

Rennie’s realization that her body is a territory—a site of inscription—opens her eyes to power relations between men and women. She “wondered what it was like to be able to throw yourself into another person, another body, a darkness like that. Women could not do it. Instead they had darkness thrown into them” (235). This is a subject that is found in much of Atwood’s work. For example, Atwood opens her poetry collection, *Power Politics*, with the following four lines:

you fit into me
like a hook into an eye
a fish hook
an open eye (1-4, author’s emphasis)

The poem begins with the concept of romantic love (“You fit into me”) and an image of knitting and/or sewing—and thus domesticity—(“a hook into an eye”), yet quickly transforms into an image of physical violence by suggesting an image of a fish hook piercing a human eye.

Reingard Nischik notes how this “forc[es] the reader to question the value and justification of conventional categories of perception” (25). Atwood thus explores how perception is a social construct. The “I” of the poem is female and the “you” is male. That the male “you” fits perfectly into the female “I” “not only conveys the harmony of a perfect match but also suggests a scenario of possessive penetration” (25). Atwood therefore suggests that love is a power struggle between men and women whereby masculinist language violently penetrates female subjectivity. For instance, Rennie’s and Jake’s relationship began with “no mess, no *in love*. By the time she met Jake she’d decided she didn’t much like being in love. Being in love was like. . . taking off your clothes at lunchtime in a bank. It let people think they knew something about you that you didn’t know about them, it gave them power over you. It made you visible, soft, penetrable” (*BH* 95). This once more reflects the concept of translation-as-violation because masculine language violates a female’s sense of “I”. Similarly, in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Aunt Lydia tells the women in the Red Centre that “[m]odesty is invisibility. . . . Never forget it. To be seen—to be seen—is to be—her voice trembled—penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable” (36). The male gaze is penetration, violation in this discourse; thus, the male gaze is violent. Nischik also observes that the image of a fish hook in an open eye “painfully evokes wounding and destruction. The hook seems to have hunted down and captured its object of desire, thereby destroying the fragile, unprotected eye/I, that is, the woman herself” (25-6). This is reminiscent of Offred’s face as reflected in the hall mirror in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Her face is “distant and white and distorted, framed in the hall mirror, which bulges outward like an eye under pressure” (61). Offred’s “I”, which is reflected in the eye of the patriarchal regime, is distorted because it is only a construction of the regime’s desire of what it wants her to be.

Derrida explains that “the subject becomes a speaking subject only in its commerce with the system of linguistic differences; or yet, the subject becomes a signifying (signifying in general, by means of speech or any other sign) subject only by inscribing itself in the system of differences” (“Différance” 408). Language is therefore what creates subjectivity. Rennie moves into the realm of the speaking subject as a way to claim subjectivity. Rennie says that “[s]he would much rather be the one who wrote things about people. . . than be the one they got written about” (*BH* 19), which is why she chose journalism as her career. Not only does this allow her to step into the world of writing—a male-dominated profession—but it also allows her (or so she thinks) to influence how she is defined and inscribed by those around her: “Rennie introduces herself and mentions that she’s a journalist. She always likes to get that in first, before people mistake her for a secretary” (37). By being a signifying subject who inscribes herself within the system of differences, Rennie seems to have control over her subjectivity. It also allows her to influence, and therefore define and inscribe, others because, as Carol Singley argues, “[w]riting . . . [is] linked to the notion of self. The ‘I’ is implicitly present in every act of writing and reading. . . . writing is the act of saying *I*, of imposing yourself on other people” (3). Atwood therefore calls writers “eye-witnesses, I-witnesses” (qtd. in Hutcheon 11): writers use their gaze—their *eye*—to project their own selves—their *I*—onto others. In addition, Rennie knows that in journalism, “[i]f you do both the pictures and the text you can go almost anywhere, or so they say” (*BH* 60). Rennie is therefore imposing herself on others through her use of the gaze and her attempt at inscribing meaning onto others through text. For instance, “sometimes Rennie liked to write pieces about trends that didn’t really exist, to see if she could make them exist by writing about them. Six to one she’d see at least ten women with bathplug chains looped around their necks two weeks after the piece came out” (17-8). Through Rennie, Atwood demonstrates that

one can use language to create (an)other's identity or subjectivity from one's own reflections or desires.

Rennie is using the power of the gaze in her lifestyle writing as a method of inscribing meaning onto the female body. Rennie thus attempts to step into the masculine gaze and the inscription of the body; however, her attempts to gaze at the Other and project bodily inscription ultimately fail. The narrator explains, “[a]t first she’d looked in order to copy; later on she’d looked in order not to copy. After that she just looked” (18). Rennie also says, “[i]f I could see into the future. . . do you think I’d waste my time on The colour of women’s lipstick, the length of their skirts, the height of their heels, what bits of plastic or gilt junk they choose to stick on themselves? I see into the present, that’s all. Surfaces. There’s not a whole lot to it” (18). Rennie focuses solely on surfaces because “[s]urfaces determined whether or not people took you seriously” (18). Rennie’s attempt to step into the male role of the gaze and bodily inscription fail because her inscription only touches the surface of those she attempts to inscribe whereas the male gaze inscribes masculinist language not only onto her body, but also onto her sense of subjectivity. For instance, Rennie explains that she “dislikes having. . . assumptions made about her, she dislikes being lumped in with a fictitious group labelled *people like you*. She can’t stand the self-righteousness of *people like Lora*, who think that because they’ve had deprived childhoods or not as much money as everybody else they are in some way superior” (83, my emphasis). Rennie, in assuming the role of the gazer, inscribes Lora the way that other people have inscribed Rennie. Notably, Rennie is inscribing another female body, and not the male body. Although some might argue that this is a feminist alternative to masculine inscription, it is still the inscription of an(other), and therefore a power construct between the one who gazes and the one that is gazed on. Rennie is participating in the masculine inscription of the female body,

and thereby showing her complicity in accepting the masculinist construction of her Self and women in general. However, when she tells Lora, “[y]ou’re worth more than a package of gum,” Lora responds with, “[w]omen like you make me sick. . . . Tightass. You wouldn’t put out to save your granny, would you?” Rennie notes Lora’s use of “[w]omen like you. She deserves it. It’s a pigeonhole, she’s in it, it fits” (286-7). It is here that Rennie’s perception of Lora changes as she realizes her complicity in the masculinist construction of women because she is fictionalizing and defining what cannot be defined by an(other). Rennie’s attempt to take on the power of the gaze therefore fails to fully inscribe because she only focuses on the surfaces; her inscription of others therefore does not become internalized by them.

Rennie also fails to inscribe through masculinist language when a homeless man touches her shoulder and

 makes his right hand into a fist, then points to her, still smiling.

 Rennie smiles back at him. She doesn’t understand what he wants.

 He repeats the gesture, he’s deaf and dumb or perhaps drunk.

 Rennie feels very suddenly as if she’s stepped across a line and

 found herself on Mars. . . . Rennie feels bewildered and threatened.

 . . . She can feel him behind her, following her. . . . nobody does

 anything to help her. . . . But he’s right behind her, he’s not as

 decrepit as he looks, and that’s his hand on her arm. . . .

 ‘It’s okay,’ says Paul. . . . ‘He chases women a lot. . . .

 Especially the white ones. He’s deaf and dumb, he’s harmless. He

 only wants to shake your hand, he thinks it’s good luck. . . . Not for

 him,’ says Paul. ‘For you.’

Now Rennie feels both rude and uncharitable: he's only been trying to give her something. Reluctantly she puts her hand into the outstretched hand of the old man. (66-68)

Rennie only sees the surface of the man and defines him as someone dangerous. It is Paul who must translate the deeper meaning for Rennie. Although Rennie pretends that she can move back and forth between gender roles of gaze and inscription, she cannot overcome the fundamental untranslatability of cultural construction and masculinist language. The inscription of Rennie's body goes deeper than her surface, as is suggested when Rennie assumes the ascribed feminine role of victim and runs away from the old and helpless man. Yet the man is not completely helpless. He is deaf and dumb, but he can still see and inscribe Rennie, therefore believing it is his duty to give her luck.

Edwin Gentzler asks: Does an original piece of literature have a fixed identity or does it change with each translation?: “[w]hat exists *before* the original? An idea? A form? A thing? Nothing?” (145). In discussing translation, Maurice Blanchot describes the translator as “a writer whose singular originality lies in the fact that he seems to make no claim to any” (qtd. in Venuti, “Introduction” 1). This is because the original text is traditionally viewed as “a form of self-expression appropriate to the author, a copy true to his personality or intention, an image endowed with resemblance, whereas the translation can be no more than a copy of a copy, derivative, simulacral, false, an image without resemblance” (Venuti, “Introduction” 3). As the inscription of the female body is only a translation, a reflection, and a copy of masculinist ideals, it assumes that a woman's representation of her Self is or can be original and accurate. However, recent critics like Lawrence Venuti have argued that since the original text is a copy of cultural or societal norms, it follows that original texts are also simulacra. Consequently, if the “original

language is always already displaced language,” then no original text can exist (Gentzler 179). John Johnston argues that “the simulacrum can no longer be regarded as a ‘bad’ or degraded image, since the model or ‘original’ that founds this distinction is no longer distinct from the copy or imitation; instead, within the simulacrum, at least two divergent series are interiorised, with neither being assignable as the original or the copy” (49). Therefore, the original is a fluid form that only exists through translation of other languages, texts, and historical and cultural aspects. Although Rennie tries to reclaim and own her subjectivity, her body continues to be inscribed by masculinist language within the patriarchal construct; therefore, it is impossible for Rennie to translate masculinist language into a form that allows her to speak outside of masculinist language and define her Self apart from the patriarchal construction of her.

The male gaze not only inscribes the surface of the female body, but also the overarching patriarchal construct ensures that the inscription of the female body is internalized. For instance, Atwood writes in “The Circle Game,”

(your observations change me
to a spineless woman in
a cage of bones, obsolete fort
pulled inside out). (263-6)

Rennie’s fear of having her scar open and her insides come out is a metaphorical reality. Therefore, Rennie states,

nothing is inconceivable here, no rats in the vagina but only
because they haven’t thought of it yet, they’re still amateurs. She
afraid of men and it’s simple, it’s rational, she’s afraid of men
because men are frightening. She’s seen the man with the rope, now

she knows what he looks like. She has been turned inside out, there's no longer a here and a there. Rennie understands for the first time that this is not necessarily a place she will get out of, ever. She is not exempt. Nobody is exempt from anything. (*BH* 291)

Rennie finally understands that the man with the rope symbolizes the construct of masculinist language that defines her and all women. Moreover, Rennie realizes that she cannot escape. Although she attempts to reverse the structure of the male gaze by being the one who gazes and thus inscribes, by the end of the novel she knows she has failed because “[s]he is asked to sign a release from saying that while in custody she has not been harmed in any way and has not witnessed any other detainee being so harmed. She thinks of Lora, her pulped face. She understands that unless she makes a mark on this paper they may not let her out. She feels that she has forgotten how to write. She signs her name” (294). Men are controlling her utterance by taking away her ability write. Moreover, by signing her name to their texts, she is signing her name to their voice. Although, for the purposes of this thesis, I focus mostly on the character of Rennie, the pattern of representation and bodily inscription of all of the female characters in the novel from Rennie’s faceless stranger with the rope, to the pornographic photos of women being brutalized and murdered, to the stories of Lora’s violent childhood upbringing with her step-dad and her severe beating in prison, to the story of Marsdon’s girlfriend being covered in nettle, tied naked to a tree near a stinging-ant hill, and left for five hours, are described as victims of sexual violence resulting from the construct of masculinist language. The “bodily harm” towards Rennie and the other female characters in this novel illustrate that the female body as text cannot sustain the illusions of the male gaze as prescribed by masculinist language (Tuttle Hansen 20).

As Rennie flies home the man in the seat next to her reinforces the novel's emphasis on the power of the male gaze and masculinist assumptions. Projecting his definition onto her, "[h]e asks her if she's a secretary" (*BH* 302), a usual question.¹⁸ "'I'm doing a travel piece,' she says, and gets the usual reaction, a little surprise, a little respect, she's not what she looks like" (302). In spite of Rennie's assertions about her Self, she cannot escape the definition of others. Rennie "has no intention of telling the truth, she knows when she will not be believed. In any case she is a subversive. She was not one once but now she is. A reporter. She will pick her time; then she will report" (302). Rennie is a subversive because after her experiences on the islands of St. Antoine and Ste. Agathe she is no longer complicit in the masculinist inscription of her Self. Although Rennie's gaze fails to assume the power of the masculine gazer and she continues to be controlled by the inscription of masculinist language, she will continue to write; only this time, Rennie is finally aware: "She's paying attention, that's all" (303). As a subversive who is "paying attention," Rennie is placed into the role of a reporter, demonstrating that social change can only occur through awareness. Atwood uses *Bodily Harm* to not only show her own awareness that the female body is a construction of masculinist language, but to also illustrate that with this awareness comes the power to make others aware through reporting the gaze and refusing to be complicit in it.

¹⁸ See page 75: "Rennie introduces herself and mentions that she's a journalist. She always likes to get that in first, before people mistake her for a secretary" (37).

CHAPTER 4: NARRATIVE AS MEMORY IN *ALIAS GRACE*

A language is not words only,
it is the stories
that are told in it,
the stories that are never told.

Margaret Atwood,
“Four Small Elegies”¹⁹

Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* is a fictional narrative based on what is known regarding the true events of the murders of Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery, which took place on July 23, 1843 in Richmond Hill, Ontario. The novel focuses on Grace Marks, the accused accomplice of murderer James McDermott, and is told through a compilation of newspaper snippets from the trial and the fictional narrative segments of Grace relating the events through memory. In *Alias Grace*, memory as a translation that inscribes meaning onto the female body—Grace’s body, to be exact—illustrates instability and ambiguity because memory is translated through language, making memory ultimately incomplete and unstable. Atwood uses the instability of memory and language in *Alias Grace* to explore the ways in which the female body is constructed through masculinist language. Like Offred in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Grace is the narrator of her own story, and as such, she is able to construct her own identity: “This is what I told Dr. Jordan, when we came to that part of the story” (*AG* 7). However, as with Offred and with Rennie in *Bodily Harm*, Grace cannot fully escape the power that inscribes on her by masculinist constructions of language because there is no other language Grace can use define her own experiences, her body, and her Self.

¹⁹ Lines 49-52.

Karl Marx once said, women “cannot represent themselves; they must be represented” (qtd. in Spivak, “Subaltern” 276-7). As with those of Offred and Rennie, Grace’s representation in *Alias Grace*—her identity, and therefore her body—is based on the inscription that other characters have placed on her. Grace’s body determines her identity in the novel. For instance, a doctor comes to the penitentiary to measure the heads of the criminals “to see if he can tell from the bumps on their skulls what sort of criminals they are, whether they are pickpockets or swindlers or embezzlers or criminal lunatics or murderers. . . . And then they could lock those people up before they had a chance to commit any crimes, and think how that would improve the world” (*AG* 33). The contours of Grace’s head are believed to define her identity, demonstrating that her body is translated into meaning, and thus inscribed by masculinist language and beliefs. Yet, Grace is not only inscribed with masculinist language through her physical body, but also through the memory of her body. For example, Dr. Jordan not only relies on Grace’s memory when she relates her story, but he must also rely on his own memory to transcribe her words and piece them together:

The trouble is that the more she remembers, the more she relates, the more difficulty he himself is having. He can’t seem to keep track of the pieces. . . . there was something about a man, in the night: has he missed it? Once of those men: McDermott, Kinnear. In his notebook he has pencilled the word *whisper*, and underlined it three times. Of what had he wished to remind himself? (*AG* 351)

Dr. Jordan has trouble remembering significant parts of Grace’s narrative, yet he knows there is something he is forgetting that is hidden in his memory. What Dr. Jordan does remember are the sexual aspects of her story. He remembers a man in the night, whispering, all of which suggest

that Grace had a sexual rendezvous. Grace's representation as a construction of Dr. Jordan's memory is also evident when Dr. Jordan dreams. In one of his dreams, he is attempting to dissect a woman's body, but is unsuccessful because "under the sheet there's another sheet, and under that another one. It looks like a white muslin curtain. Then there's a black veil, and then—can it be?—a petticoat. The woman must be down there somewhere; frantically he rummages. But no; the last sheet is a bedsheet, and there's nothing under it" (425). The woman hidden by layer upon layer of sheets represents Grace and the many constructions of her Self—those she creates and those that are created for her—demonstrating that an authentic Grace cannot be found. In another dream, Dr. Jordan wants to peel the inscriptions of others off of Grace so that he can inscribe his own: "[h]e must lift off the sheet, then lift off her skin, whoever she is, or was, layer by layer. Strip back her rubbery flesh, peel her open, gut her like a haddock" (425). Like an onion (Tolan 245), Grace consists of layers—all of which hold a different inscription of her. Dr. Jordan constructs his representation of Grace from the memory of his unconscious dreams, which suggests instability three times removed: not only is language unstable, but also the nature of both memory and the unconscious cannot be fixed because they are the products of language and how we define the world and those around us.

Since much of *Alias Grace* is narrated by Simon, we see his construction of Grace through his eyes. Amelia Defalco argues that, "[f]or Simon, the body figures as an epistemological tool, assisting in the construction of meaning" (778). Thus, Dr. Jordan knows that "[b]efore the murders Grace would have been entirely different from the woman he now knows. A young girl, scarcely formed; tepid; bland, and tasteless. A flat landscape" (*AG* 471). Grace as a "scarcely formed" and "flat landscape" is a figure ready to be moulded and drawn over, ready to be constructed by others. Yet Grace is not only represented by the memories of Dr.

Jordan in the text, but she is also represented by the memories of newspaper reporters and Susanna Moodie. Grace thus reflects on the identity other people have constructed for her:

I think of all the things that have been written about me—that I am an inhuman female demon, that I am an innocent victim of a blackguard forced against my will and in danger of my own life, that I was too ignorant to know how to act and that to hang me would be judicial murder, that I am fond of animals, that I am very handsome with a brilliant complexion, that I have blue eyes, that I have green eyes, that I have auburn and also brown hair, that I am tall and also not above the average height, that I am well and decently dressed, that I robbed a dead woman to appear so, that I am brisk and smart about my work, that I am of a sullen disposition with a quarrelsome temper, that I have the appearance of a person rather above my humble station, that I am a good girl with a pliable nature and no harm is told of me, that I am cunning and devious, that I am soft in the head and little better than an idiot. And I wonder, how can I be all of these different things at once? (27-8)

That no one can agree as to what eye colour, hair colour, height, and disposition Grace has illustrates that she is represented solely through the unreliable memory of others. She is represented through the descriptions of her body and outward demeanour—all of which contradict each other, showing once more the various unstable layers of interpretation inscribed onto her body. Grace's body is inscribed by the masculinist construct that others use to define her identity. For example, Grace's sentence of life imprisonment was used as an example for other

would-be murderesses, but Simon wonders, once pardoned, “what does an example do, afterwards? Her story is over. The main story, that is; the thing that has defined her” (110). Grace’s story defines her experience, but it is not her story that is the example for “other would-be murderesses”—Grace, herself, is the example because it is her body that defines her for others, not her story. Her body is thus translated into a language that others will read.

Grace tells us, “[w]hile [Dr. Jordan] writes, I feel as if he is drawing me; or not drawing me, drawing on me—drawing on my skin—not with the pencil he is using, but with an old-fashioned goose pen, and not with the quill end but with the feather end” (82). That Grace views Dr. Jordan as drawing *on* her (and therefore inscribing her with masculinist language) with the feather end rather than the ink insinuates that Grace’s body is sexualized. Grace thus reflects on the word with the most impact that has been inscribed onto her body:

I am a celebrated murderess. Or that is what has been written down.

When I first saw it I was surprised, because they say Celebrated Singer and Celebrated Poetess and Celebrated Spiritualist and Celebrated Actress, but what is there to celebrate about murder?

All the same, *Murderess* is a strong word to have attached to you. It has a smell to it, that word—musky and oppressive, like dead flowers in a vase. Sometimes at night I whisper it over to myself:

Murderess, Murderess. It rustles, like a taffeta skirt across the floor. (27)

Atwood’s language in this passage is very physical and cannot help but be associated with the body because *murderess* has a “smell,” which is “musky,” bringing with it associations of body odour. *Murderess* also has a “sound” that “rustles,” like clothes moving against the body or

undressing. *Murderess* is also something one “whisper[s]”, as though in the dark. Both the smell and sound of the word *murderess* are thus sexualized. In addition, the word *murderess* is “written down,” which reflects its inscription onto Grace’s body, thereby becoming the symbol of her representation. Dr. Jordan also sexually inscribes the label of *murderess* to Grace: “[m]urderess, murderess, he whispers to himself. It has an allure, a scent almost. Hothouse gardenias. Lurid, but also furtive. He imagines himself breathing it as he draws Grace towards him, pressing his mouth against her. *Murderess*. He applies it to her throat like a brand” (471). Dr. Jordan inscribes Grace as his property by figuratively writing (branding) her body: “Grace is his territory; he must repel poachers” (363). As a territory he must protect from others, Grace represents a colonial body that Dr. Jordan must dominate, must violate: the translation of her body by masculinist language is a violation to her Self.

Although Grace’s body is inscribed by masculinist language, she refutes the external definition of her body by attempting to manipulate masculinist language and construct her Self. Jacques Derrida describes translation as a “contract: hymen or marriage contract with the promise to produce a child whose seed will give rise to history and growth. . . to speak on its own which makes of a child something other than a product subjected to the law of reproduction” (“Des Tours” 191). He argues that the translation speaks for itself, creating a third self apart from the marriage of two languages. Similarly, Atwood constructs the narrative of *Alias Grace* from a mixture of fiction and historical documentation, demonstrating that the representation of Grace’s body is the product of the translation of various texts that are dependent on memory. Although Grace is the product of the construction of others, as a translation she is able to speak for herself. Fiona Tolan notes that

[e]ven the apparently friendly attempts of Reverend Verringer's committee to discover her true nature is recognised as an alternative version of the same impulse to limit and define, to take over her story, and Grace continues to defend herself from them. Like the subaltern woman, Grace is trapped between silence and representation, and must work to discover an alternative. (234)

As a subaltern woman, Grace's alternative between silence and representation is the way in which she manipulates her narrative. For instance, the manipulation of Grace's narrative works as a survival mechanism. In *Survival*, Atwood develops a four-point theory of victimization in literature:

Position One: To deny the fact that you are a victim. . . . Position Two: To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim, but to explain this as an act of Fate. . . or any other large general powerful idea. . . . Position Three: To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim but to refuse to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable. . . . Position Four: To be a creative non-victim. (36-8, author's emphasis)

Atwood chooses position number four for Grace. The way in which Grace manipulates language reveals that she refuses to accept her role as a victim of circumstance. For instance, she is a creative non-victim because she takes advantage of her role with Dr. Jordan to become a storyteller, an acceptable role for a woman of her time (Straus 337)—and yet one in which she finds she has full control. Grace has full control over her stories because she can rework the language she is using to manipulate those around her. For instance, Dr. Jordan tells MacKenzie,

‘I must admit I’ve been baffled. What she says has the ring of truth; her manner is candid and sincere; and yet I can’t shake the suspicion that, in some way I cannot put my finger on, she is lying to me.’

‘Lying,’ says MacKenzie. ‘A severe term, surely. . . . Let me put it this way—did Scheherazade lie? Not in her own eyes; indeed, the stories she told ought never to be subjected to the harsh categories of Truth and Falsehood. They belong in another realm altogether. Perhaps Grace Marks has merely been telling you what she needs to tell, in order to accomplish the desired end.’

‘Which is?’ asks Simon.

‘To keep the Sultan amused,’ says MacKenzie. (*AG* 456-7)

Mackenzie understands what Dr. Jordan does not: Grace’s story is a construction out of her own mind and, like Scheherazade,²⁰ Grace must manipulate her stories to please her listener and save her life. Grace’s life is in danger in more ways than one. First, if she says the wrong thing she could be hanged for murder. Second, if she surrenders to the masculinist inscription of her body, she will lose her Self, or subjectivity. Yet, like Offred in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Grace knows “[i]f it’s a story I’m telling, then I have control over the ending” (*THT* 50). Grace can only keep her own representation of her Self alive by destabilizing the masculinist inscription of her body.

Atwood writes Grace with agency because she is the primary narrator of her own story as she tells it to Dr. Jordan. As the primary narrator, she is able to destabilize the masculinist

²⁰ Karen Stein compares Offred in *The Handmaid’s Tale* to Scheherazade as well. Both Grace and Offred need to tell stories to stave off death. Not only is this death literal because Grace could be hanged for murder and Offred could be sent to the Colonies, but both women need to stave off metaphorical death because their bodily inscription through masculinist language subverts their identities and erases their subjectivity.

inscription of her body by manipulating her relationship to her audience. We are privy to Grace's conversations with Dr. Jordan as readers; however, significantly, "Grace is aware of an audience beyond Simon Jordan" (Blanc 121) because she addresses the reader,²¹ making us aware of aspects of her story she keeps hidden from Dr. Jordan. Walter Ong argues that "[t]he writer's audience is a fiction . . . the writer must construct in his imagination, clearly or vaguely, an audience cast in some sort of role" such as "reflective sharers of experience" (4). When Grace says, "[t]his is what I told Dr. Jordan, when we came to that part of the story" (*AG* 7), she is letting us in on a secret. Gillian Siddall explains how

it is shocking to discover that we have been seduced by a narrative that Grace has fabricated for her own purposes. Yet, paradoxically, while this revelation at the end of the passage evokes in us a sense of betrayal. . . it also invites us to be her confidant/e; we now know something that Simon does not know—that Grace, in telling him her story, is consciously constructing it. (92-3)

As readers, we see Grace's conscious construction of her story, and how she manipulates Dr. Jordan, but as readers we are also manipulated into building an intimate relationship with Grace. Grace, in telling her story through a first-person narrative, is attempting to elicit a particular effect and control the way in which her reader will view her experiences and therefore her body (Straus 337), which weakens her inscribed definition. By addressing her reader, Grace is engaging in an intimate speech genre which, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, is "based on a maximum internal proximity of the speaker and addressee. . . . Intimate speech is imbued with a deep confidence in the addressee, in his sympathy, in the sensitivity and goodwill of his responsive understanding. In this atmosphere of profound trust, the speaker reveals his internal

²¹ See also Siddall, pages 91-2.

depths” (93). Consequently, he explains, intimate speech genres require “the addressee’s actively responsive understanding that is anticipated by the speaker” (93). When Dr. Jordan asks Grace to tell him her dreams she addresses the reader: “I say, I can’t remember, Sir. . . . I have little enough of my own, no belongings, no possessions, no privacy to speak of, and I need to keep something for myself” (*AG* 120). This passage works to evoke sympathy by bringing the reader into Grace’s confidence. Atwood therefore uses Grace as a fictional device whose construction is not only dependent on the interpretation and analysis of the newspaper clippings and of the other characters in the novel, but is also dependent on the reader’s interpretation and analysis. This alliance with her reader is important for Grace’s character because it is only through the power of her storytelling that she is able to deconstruct the masculinist inscription on her body through her own manipulation of language and attempt to create her own representation of her Self. Therefore, by engaging with the reader, Grace is able to translate masculinist language to her own advantage.

Siddall explains how “women writing autobiography [in the nineteenth century] were seen to be transgressing gender boundaries, since autobiography recounts public life, and women were restricted to the private sphere” (85); therefore, she argues that a woman writer/storyteller “had to maintain a fine balance between characterizing herself as ‘male,’ a public persona, and ‘female,’ a private one” (85). As Ong states, “telling a story, even a true story, means making selections for a special purpose” (13). Grace must therefore adjust her story by omitting aspects, embellishing, or lying because “the extent to which one is empowered by language depends on one’s relative position of power in society. . . . Every time [Grace] speaks, she takes a risk—that she will incriminate herself, that she will be returned to the asylum, that she will alienate Simon” (Siddall 99). As a result, although Grace has let the reader into her intimate confidence, she is a

narrator who cannot be trusted. Grace tells Dr. Jordan, “[p]erhaps I will tell you lies. . . . He says, Perhaps you will. Perhaps you will tell lies without meaning to, and perhaps you will also tell them deliberately. Perhaps you are a liar. I look at him. There are those who have said I am one, I say” (AG 50). By telling Dr. Jordan that others have said she is a liar, Grace is showing her awareness of her external definition. Grace reassures Dr. Jordan that she will speak truthfully: “‘I have no reason not to be frank with you, Sir,’ she said. ‘A lady might conceal things, as she has her reputation to lose; but I am beyond that. . . . I was never a lady, Sir, and I’ve already lost whatever reputation I ever had. I can say anything I like; or if I don’t wish to, I needn’t say anything at all” (109). With this passage, Grace is demonstrating that the kind of language one uses in a story is dependent on external factors. A “lady” knows that she must manipulate by concealing aspects of a story because otherwise she could lose her reputation. Grace, both as a poor Irishwoman and as an accused *murderess*, does not fit into the nineteenth-century definition of a proper woman; consequently, her reputation as a “lady” is already lost. As a woman whose good reputation is either gone or was never there to begin with, Grace is afforded a certain amount of freedom in her storytelling: she “needn’t say anything at all”; however, Grace also tells Dr. Jordan, “I know these are odd thoughts to confess to, Sir, but I will not lie and conceal them, as I could easily do, having never told this to anyone before. I wish to relate everything just as it happened to me, and those were the thoughts I had” (380). Despite Grace’s claim to truth, she chooses to keep Dr. Jordan in the dark regarding some of the pivotal points of her story: “But I do not say any of this to Dr. Jordan. And so forth, I say firmly, because And so forth is all he is entitled to. Just because he pesters me to know everything is no reason for me to tell him” (260). It is also likely that Grace is doing more than omitting parts of her story; she is also lying. Grace tells her reader, “[b]ecause he was so thoughtful as to bring me this radish, I set to work willingly

to tell my story, and to make it as interesting as I can, and rich in incident, as a sort of return gift to him” (295-6). She is hinting (to us) that she is elaborating on or lying about parts of her story to make it “interesting” and “rich in incident.” Grace also admits to us, “I did not say that I could not remember. Instead I said that I had indeed had a dream. . . . I told him I’d dreamt about flowers. . . . But I did not say that they were made of cloth, nor did I say when I had seen them last; nor did I say that they were not a dream” (290). Grace lets the reader know that she does not remember her dream from the night before, yet she lies to Dr. Jordan that she dreamt about flowers. Moreover, the imaginary flowers that she is describing for him are not imaginary in her mind at all, “they were made of cloth,” and “were not a dream.” Grace is relating a real memory to Dr. Jordan, yet manipulating her language so that her story is fictionalized.

Even after Grace is pardoned she must construct another fictional version of her Self (Tolan 229). She says, “I felt as if my face was dissolving and turning into someone else’s face, and I recalled my poor mother in her shroud. . . and how I thought that she had already changed inside the sheet, and was a different woman, and now the same thing was happening to me. Of course I wasn’t dying, but it was in a way similar” (*AG* 535). After Grace’s release, her past identity/ies are no longer valid; thus, she must work to construct a new identity. She says, “[i]t was very strange to realize that I would not be a celebrated murderess any more, but seen perhaps as an innocent woman wrongly accused and imprisoned unjustly. . . . It calls for a different arrangement of the face” (536). Grace is aware that her identity is constructed by the memory of others, and as the public memory of Grace’s position in society changes she knows she must adapt her body and adhere to this new construction (Siddall 86-7); Grace must construct her body as a translation of her external definition. Therefore, Grace’s identity, as Tolan states, is “tinged with artificiality” (229). Tolan argues that “[e]ach person responds to Grace according to one or

more of these definitions, and she in turn presents them with various manifestations of her artificially constructed character” (229). For example, when Dr. Jordan quotes a passage from the Book of Job, Grace says, “I look at him stupidly. I have a good stupid look which I have practised” (*AG* 46). Dr. Jordan is testing Grace’s “intelligence and literacy” (Tolan 229), but she will not oblige to his inscription of her, only to the one she manipulates for herself. Grace’s “stupid look” not only demonstrates that Grace is aware “of the politics of her identity” (Siddall 93), but also that her identity is “practised,” and is thus artificial. Once Grace is pardoned it could be assumed that, for the first time, Grace can attempt to inscribe herself. Yet, Sidonie Smith argues that “[t]o write an autobiography from that speaking posture does not become tantamount to liberating woman from the fictions that bind her; indeed, it may embed her even more deeply in them since it promotes identification with the very essentialist ideology that renders woman’s story a story of silence, powerlessness, self-effacement” (qtd. in Siddall 85). Not only must Grace still construct an artificial identity, “we have thought it best not to reveal too much of the past. . . . We’ve given out that Mr. Walsh was my childhood sweetheart, and that I married another, but was lately widowed; and that since Mr. Walsh’s wife died, we arranged to meet again, and to marry. That is a story easily accepted” (*AG* 552), but also her body is now inscribed by her husband:

He likes to picture the sufferings. . . . The more watery I make the soup and the more rancid the cheese, and the worse I make the coarse talk and proddings of the keepers, the better he likes it. . . . If I put in the chilblains and the shivering at night under the thin blanket, and the whipping if you complained, he is in raptures; and if I add the improper behaviour of Dr. Bannerling towards me, and

the cold baths naked and wrapped in a sheet, and the strait-waistcoat in the darkened room, he is almost in ecstasies; but his favourite part of the story is when poor James McDermott was hauling me all around the house at Mr. Kinnear's, looking for a bed fit for his wicked purposes. . . . after I have told him a few stories of torment and misery he clasps me in his arms and strokes my hair, and begins to unbutton my nightgown. (553-4)

Although Grace is the one “mak[ing]” her story “rancid” for her new husband, she is only perpetuating the earlier inscriptions and constructions of her Self by others. Grace may be telling the story from memory, but her body is still sexually inscribed by the masculinist language of her husband as he incorporates her story into his own fantasies. Grace's representation as a construction fabricated by the unstable memories of others as well as the fabrication of her own unstable and/or fictional memories “highlights the impossibility of locating Grace outside of constructions of her” (Michael 437). Just as Rennie in *Bodily Harm* tells herself after her surgery that she will “get back to normal. . . though she could not remember any longer what *normal* had been like” (28), Grace does not have an authentic self that she can go back to. There is no sense of an authentic Grace in the novel—only of “Alias Grace”—because Grace's body and language do not belong to her, but are a social masculinist construction.

Grace is either being dishonest or is simply “eager to please” (Tolan 230) because she is adjusting her story to what Dr. Jordan and Mr. Walsh seem to enjoy, which are often stories that reflect the role of her body: “I will tell Dr. Jordan about this, as he likes to hear about such things [sexual advances/indecencies], and always writes them down” (*AG* 430). Dr. Jordan never fails to write down Grace's stories that involve sexual advances or indecencies because they reflect

and confirm her external definition as a *murderess*. Moreover, she is choosing what stories to tell Dr. Jordan, and how much detail to divulge:

What should I tell Dr. Jordan about this day? Because now we are almost there. I can remember what I said when arrested, and what Mr. MacKenzie the lawyer said I should say, *and what I did not say even to him*; and *what I said at the trial, and what I said afterwards, which was different as well*. And what McDermott said I said, and what the others said I must have said, for there are always those that will supply you with speeches of their own, and put them right into your mouth for you too. . . . I said that I remembered some of the things I did. But there are other things they said I did, *which I said I could not remember at all*. (356, my emphasis)

Not only does Grace hint at her guilt by suggesting that she omitted aspects of the murders to her lawyer, and that she remembers telling different stories before, during, and after her trial, but she also suggests that she remembers more than she will tell: she *said* she could not remember versus she *could not* remember. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred also constructs multiple versions of the same event yet, unlike Grace, she is not trying to convince her audience of anything.²² For instance, Offred believes that

²² Although Offred never claims to have an audience, she is clearly talking to someone by addressing “you”: “You can see from the way I was speaking to him that we were already on different terms” (203); “But I keep on going with this sad and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story, because after all I want you to hear it, as I will hear yours too if I ever get the chance, if I meet you or if you escape, in the future or in heaven or in prison or underground, some other place. What they have in common is that they’re not here. By telling you anything at all I’m at least believing in you, I believe you’re there, I believe you into being. Because I’m telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are” (334); “I am coming to a part you will not like at all, because in it I did not behave well, but I will try nonetheless to leave nothing out. After all you’ve been through, you deserve whatever I have left, which is not much but includes the truth” (334). Furthermore, the “Historical Notes” at the end of the

Luke is lying face down in a thicket. . . . I also believe that Luke is sitting up, in a rectangle somewhere, gray cement, on a ledge or the edge of something, a bed or chair. . . . I also believe that they didn't catch him or catch up with him after all, that he made it, reached the bank, swam the river, crossed the border. . . . I believe in all of them, all three versions of Luke, at one and the same time. (128-31)

Offred's three versions of Luke, although contradictory, "open rather than close textual possibility for the reader" (Conboy 357). Therefore, Tolan argues, in *Alias Grace* "if there is no single factual account of the murders, only interpretations and version of truth," then the reader "must accept that Grace, as a re-inscribed text, is equally open to interpretation" (228). Grace's multiple narratives are therefore not necessarily meant to convince, confuse, or gain sympathy from the reader; rather, they are meant to demonstrate the impossibility of a fundamental truth; all narratives, including Grace's bodily inscription, are unstable and subject to an infinite amount of interpretation.

Although Grace appears to conform to the inscriptions placed upon her by adjusting her "arrangement of the face" (*AG* 536), she uses multiple narratives as a way to destabilize the representations placed upon her. For example, when discussing the mystery of Grace's many narratives with Reverend Verringer, Dr. Jordan says,

Grace appears to have told one story at the inquest, another one at the trial, and, after her death sentence had been commuted, yet a third. In all three, however, she denied ever having laid a finger on Nancy Montgomery. But then, some years later, we have Mrs.

novel explain that her narrative is composed through the arrangement of various tapes. Although she would not have been talking to someone directly while composing her tapes, she composed the tapes with an audience in mind.

Moodie's account, which amounts to a confession by Grace. . . in accordance with James McDermott's dying words. . . . Since her return from the Asylum, however, you say she denies it.'

Reverend Verringer sips at his coffee. 'She denies the *memory* of it,' he says.

'Ah yes. The *memory* of it,' says Simon. 'A proper distinction.'

'She could well have been convinced by others that she had done something of which she is innocent,' says Reverend Verringer. 'It has happened before.' (94-5)

By relating multiple narratives of the same event, Grace brings her representation as only a construction fabricated by others into question, which destabilizes her inscription and—to her advantage—places her guilt in doubt. Grace therefore uses the concept of the unstable memory to become a master storyteller. She tells us that her lawyer, Mackenzie,

wanted me to tell my story in what he called a coherent way, but would often accuse me of wandering, and become annoyed with me; and at last he said that the right thing was, not to tell the story as I truly remembered it, which nobody could be expected to make any sense of; but to tell a story that would hang together, and that had some chance of being believed. I was to leave out the parts I could not remember, and especially to leave out the fact that I could not remember them. And I should say what must have happened,

according to plausibility, rather than what I myself could actually recall. So that is what I attempted to do. (432-3)

Mackenzie knows that Grace's memory is unstable and therefore useless as evidence during the trial because "nobody could be expected to make any sense of [it]." He is not necessarily suggesting that Grace lie on the stand, but is asking her to manipulate the pieces of her memory—and therefore her language—to create a plausible story. It is from Mackenzie that Grace learns she has the power to manipulate language by telling *a* story versus *the* story:

When you are in the middle of a story it isn't a story at all, but only a confusion; a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood; like a house in a whirlwind, or else a boat crushed by the icebergs or swept over the rapids, and all aboard powerless to stop it. It's only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all. When you are telling it, to yourself or to someone else. (359)

Grace is aware of the difference between an event that happens in the present and the story of said event after it has already happened. For Grace, the event out of which a story comes is violent and fragmented, like the many inscriptions of her. It is a time of powerlessness that cannot be controlled. It is only afterwards, when the event becomes a story, that one begins to have control over it, and can manipulate the details through language.

This is also evident in *The Handmaid's Tale* when the Commander brings Offred to Jezebels; he says, "[i]t's like walking into the past" (295). Offred "tr[ies] to remember if the past was exactly like this. I'm not sure, now. I know it contained these things, but somehow the mix is different. A movie about the past is not the same as the past" (295-6). Like Grace, Offred knows

that a representation is not the same as the thing itself; a story is nothing but a reconstruction. Therefore, Offred says,

[w]hen I get out of here, if I'm ever able to set this down, in any form, even in the form of one voice to another, it will be a reconstruction then too. . . . It's impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out, there are too many parts, side, crosscurrents, nuances; too many gestures, which could mean this or that, too many shapes which can never be fully described, too many flavors, in the air or on the tongue, half-colors, too many.
(168)

Atwood's language in this passage is once more very physical and rooted to the body. She discusses "parts," "nuances," "gestures," and "shapes," which all reflect the figure and motion of the body. Furthermore, stories have "flavors. . . on the tongue," suggesting that stories, and therefore language, are connected to the physical body. Offred also describes her meeting with Nick as, "[h]is mouth is on me, his hands, I can't wait and he's moving, already, love, it's been so long, I'm alive in my skin, again, arms around him, falling and water softly everywhere, never-ending. I knew it might only be once. . . . I made that up. It didn't happen that way" (327). Atwood explores the notion that any reconstruction of the past or of a person must necessarily be fictional²³ because the instability of memory and language makes it impossible to create an authentic story or identity.

The instability and malleability of memory is also evident in *Bodily Harm*. Rennie "wants to remember someone she's loved, she want [sic] to remember loving someone. It's hard to do.

²³ See also Lacombe, page 8.

She tries to conjure up a body, Jake's body. . . but she can hardly remember what he looks like. How does she know he ever existed? There's no proof. Acts of the body, of love, what's left? A change, a result, a trace, hand through the sea at night, phosphorescence" (283). Like Derrida's *trace*,²⁴ memory holds numerous connections and is a gap between signifier and signified. Just as *Memory*, the name of the ferry Rennie watches depart, "fad[es] on the bow" (172) and "threads through them, trailing grey smoke" (178), Atwood uses images of ephemerality to describe the instability of memory because they show that memory as language is untranslatable. For Atwood, then, the gaps in memory must therefore be filled in with narrative fabrications:

Did he say, I pay good wages but I want good service in return?

Did he say, Do not worry, I will not tell your mistress, it will be our secret? . . . He might have said that. Or I might have been asleep.

Did she say, Don't think I don't know what you've been up to? Did she say, I will pay you your wages on Saturday and then you can be gone out of here. . . . Yes. She did say that.

Was I crouching behind the kitchen door after that, crying?
Did he take me in his arms? Did I let him do it? . . . Did I say I wished she was dead?

Oh no. Surely I did not say that. Or not out loud. . . . Did he say I will tell you a secret if you promise to keep it? And if you do not, your life will not be worth a straw.

It might have happened. (*AG* 356)

In this passage Atwood connects memory to the sexual body: Kinnear *might* have told her that he expects sexual service, and she *may* have let McDermot take her into his arms. As Grace moves

²⁴ See Chapter 2: The Symbolic Order of *The Handmaid's Tale*, page 18.

from, “He might have said that. Or I might have been asleep” to “Yes. She did say that” to “Oh no. Surely I did not say that. Or not out loud” to “It might have happened,” she demonstrates how fragile memory and reconstruction is. In addition, when Grace comes to the story of her arrival in Richmond, she says that Kinnear asked, “[w]ould your name be Grace Marks? he said, or something of the sort; I cannot remember his exact words” (248). This statement once again brings Grace’s reliability as a narrator into question. She cannot remember the exact words of Kinnear when he came to get her, yet she can seem to remember every other minute detail of her story: “every button and candle-end seems accounted for” (222). Through Grace’s omissions and elaborations of her story, as well as her faulty and yet detailed memory, Atwood demonstrates that the narrative of memory is always—at least in part—a construction. Although Magali Cornier Michael argues that this does not “invalidate her story” (436), it explains that all texts, and therefore language, are questionable (436). Grace furthermore tells Dr. Jordan that her confessions are fabrications: “That is not really my Confessions. . . it was only what the lawyer told me to say, and things made up by the men from the newspapers” (120). Not only is Grace’s confession suspect, but she also indicates that all other narratives are as well (Michael 437), hinting to the impossibility of language to accurately define and inscribe the female body with meaning. By drawing attention to the constructed interpretations of Grace’s body, Atwood draws parallels between the systems through which identity and the female body are constructed

The combination of Grace’s fragmented narratives and Atwood’s epigraphs allow *Alias Grace* to be described as a postmodern, metafictional text. A metafictional text “brings itself inescapably to the reader’s attention so that the text foregrounds itself as though it were a Tiffany windowpane: a world may exist on the other side of the windowpane, but it is the text or representation that seems to have become more important (Ingersoll 385-6). Michael argues that

the metafictionality of *Alias Grace*, “[b]y juxtaposing multiple contrasting narratives. . . demonstrates how singling out any one strand of narrative and allowing it to dominate one’s reading or view results in a particular but always partial overall pattern or version of events. Indeed, *Alias Grace* enacts the impossibility of locating one overall or definitive pattern or version of events” (429). Consequently, any confidence that there is a definitive identity for Grace or that there is an essential “truth” of the events regarding the murders of Kinnear and Montgomery is undermined (Ingersoll 392). Michael suggests that,

[t]hrough its spatial presentation of this variety of texts, Atwood’s novel asks for a different kind of reading that disrupts the teleological bases of most realist and historical narratives since the nineteenth century and, instead, constructs an other kind of narrative that remains dynamic, always in process. The patchwork framework results in the presentation of multiple possible connections, including but surpassing those of cause and effect. (430)

Grace notices the possibility of multiple connections and meanings, and causes and effects when she reflects on the quilt pattern called Lady of the Lake. She says,

I thought [it] was named for the poem; but I could never find any lady in the pattern, nor any lake. But now I saw that the boat was named for the poem, and the quilt was named for the boat; because it was a pinwheel design, which must have stood for the paddle going around. And I thought that things did make sense, and have a design to them, if you only pondered them long enough. (*AG* 411)

For Grace, the quilt becomes a metaphor because, like Derrida's *trace*, it demonstrates the connection between various meanings that can lead to further meanings and additional connections (Siddall 98). Consequently, Michael states that the novel's "deliberate juxtaposition of so many pieces within a recognizable but not easily decipherable pattern leads to a certain overdetermination of meaning that signals the impossibility of locating a single privileged meaning; instead, the novel allows meanings—in the plural—to proliferate" (431). The multiplicity of meaning brought forth by the contradicting epigraphs and fragmented narrative question the validity of the documented "official" sources as well as author(ity) (432). Moreover, the epigraphs and the narrative question the stability of language as a whole. When Kinneer tells Grace about "the Apocrypha. . . a book where they'd put all the stories from Biblical times that they'd decided should not go into the Bible" (*AG* 267), Grace asks, "[w]ho decided? Because I'd always thought that the Bible was written by God" (267). Kinneer replies by saying, "perhaps God wrote it, [but] it was men who wrote it down; which was a little different" (267). Revealing that the Bible is constructed by men questions the stability of the text because the Bible is thus a "constructed patchwork, of multiplicity rather than static, singular authority" (Michael 439). Like a quilt or the Bible, *Alias Grace* is "a patchwork of multiple genres" that works to destabilize the standard, linear narrative (434). By destabilizing the linear narrative and not privileging one narrative over another, Atwood demonstrates that the instability of text—and therefore of masculinist language—deconstructs female bodily inscription because authentic definition is impossible.

Quilts in *Alias Grace* thus work as a metaphor, not only of Grace's metanarrative, but also of the metanarrative inscribed onto her body by others. Grace tells Dr. Jordan that she sees quilts as flags:

why is it that women have chosen to sew such flags, and then to lay them on the tops of beds? . . . I have thought, it's for a warning. . . . there are many dangerous things that may take place in a bed. It is where we are born, and that is our first peril in life; and it is where the women give birth, which is often their last. And it is where the act takes place between men and women that I will not mention to you, Sir, but I suppose you know what it is; and some call it love, and others despair, or else merely an indignity which they must suffer through. And finally beds are what we sleep in, and where we dream, and often where we die. (192)

Grace focuses, not on the physicality of quilts, but on the physicality of the bodies quilts are made to cover. Quilts are witness to acts that are physically dangerous, as well as wanted and unwanted sexual acts. Quilts are also privy to dreams and therefore the unconscious memory. Atwood uses quilting in *Alias Grace* as a metaphor for language because, as Margaret Rogerson notes, quilting is “[a]most exclusively a female activity. . . a form of female discourse [that] empowers Grace to speak in a language that is not universally accessible” (qtd. in Siddall 95).²⁵ Quilts therefore operate as texts. When Grace sews the Tree of Paradise, the first quilt she “ha[s] ever done for [her]self” (*AG* 556), she tells us,

I am changing the pattern a little to suit my own ideas. . . . three of the triangles in my Tree will be different. One will be white, from the petticoat I still have that was Mary Whitney's; one will be faded

²⁵ Siddall argues that “[t]he narrative possibilities of quilting are suggested by Atwood's decision to use the title and graphic of a quilting pattern to begin each section of the novel” (95). Regarding the female culture of quilting, Elaine Hedges and Pat Ferrero argue that “women's stitched fabrics were often the most eloquent records of their lives” (Hedges and Ferrero qtd. in Michael 427).

yellowish, from the prison nightdress I begged as a keepsake when I left there. And the third will be a pale cotton, a pink and white floral, cut from the dress of Nancy's that she had on the first day I was at Mr. Kinnear's, and that I wore on the ferry to Lewiston. . . . I will embroider around each one of them with red feather-stitching, to blend them in as a part of the pattern. (556, 557-8)

Grace takes these scraps of women's clothing, and of memory, and places them in her pattern "so we will all be together" (558). For Grace, the quilt—and the clothing from which it is made—signifies moments in Grace's life and in the novel, as well as signifying the women in the narrative the same way that non-verbal signs signify meaning in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Siddall argues that Grace's "quilt, then, pays tribute to the women whom Grace sees as victims of a society that cannot reconcile notions of sexuality with categories of gender and class, and, while it is too private a communication to make social change in her lifetime" (99), Grace is putting these women's bodies into writing. As Cixous demands, Grace is writing the body.²⁶

Women's art as a translation of text is also seen in *The Handmaid's Tale* when Serena Joy uses knitting as a form of subversive communication; she creates symbolic language through art. Like quilting, knitting is yet another form of communicative discourse available to women. Serena Joy spends much of her free time knitting: "Fir trees march across the ends of her scarves, or eagles, or stiff humanoid figures, boy and girl, boy and girl" (*THT* 15). Mario Klarer states, "[e]ven the wives of the Commanders, who are also forbidden to use writing, try to express themselves through a primitive mode of 'writing'. . . . These tapestries are on the same level as magic pre-historic cave paintings; here, however, they are not used to conjure up a good hunt but as a plea for numerous offspring" (136). Offred notes how Serena Joy is always "knitting away at

²⁶ See Chapter 1: Introduction, page 11.

her endless. . . scarves, turning out. . . useless wool people; her form of procreation, it must be” (*THT* 191). Just as Offred’s body communicates her reproductive role in society, Serena Joy’s bodily action communicates her desire to be a mother through the creation of an archaic form of art. Yet, Serena Joy’s art tells multiple stories; her scarves not only relate her inability to procreate, but they also demonstrate her lack of a voice, her place in society, and her conformance to the regime. In *Alias Grace*, Grace explains that the quilt called “Attic Windows,” like Serena Joy’s scarves, can shift its focus depending on how one looks at it. She says, “that is the same with all quilts, you can see them two different ways, by looking at the dark pieces, or else the light” (194). Both the quilts and the scarves therefore illustrate that there is no such thing as an essential narrative because each narrative is continually re-interpreted and re-inscribed. Although Grace and Serena Joy are attempting to write the female body through art, they are doing so both through a form of text that can only be interpreted through masculinist language because it is the only language that the patriarchal social construct understands.

Grace describes her memories—a metanarrative system that is translated into language—as “scraps, like a plate that’s been broken. There are always some pieces that would seem to belong to another plate altogether; and then there are the empty spaces, where you cannot fit anything in” (*AG* 123). Her narrative is based on memory, which is, according to Sharon Wilson, “yet another story—she gradually constructs and unravels. Thus, Grace, a superior seamstress, presents the reader with blocks for a many-layered story quilt complete with border design and padding. As readers ‘progress’ through the book, they must quilt the pieces, creating their own patterns and watching them deconstruct as they are constructed” (126). The deconstruction of Grace’s construction suggests that her stories, like the piecing together of a quilt, and like the inscription of masculinist language onto the female body, creates a fragmented narrative or

pattern that questions the concept of master narratives, and thus all narrative patterns (123). For example, Grace explains,

[t]oday when I woke up there was a beautiful pink sunrise, with the mist lying over the fields like a white soft cloud of muslin, and the sun shining through the layers of it all blurred and rosy like a peach gently on fire.

In fact I have no idea what kind of a sunrise there was. In prison they make the windows high up, so you cannot climb out of them I suppose, but also so you cannot see out of them either, or at least no onto the outside world. . . . And so this morning I saw only the usual form of light, a light without shape, coming in through the high-up and dirty grey windows, as if cast by no sun and no moon and no lamp or candle. (*AG* 283)

Here Grace demonstrates that storytelling is an exercise in piecing together fragments. From the “usual form of light, a light without shape,” Grace amalgamates what she sees with what she remembers of a sunrise. As Atwood constructs a fictional character out of an actual woman’s history, Grace fictionalizes her Self the same way that masculinist language fictionalizes her body. After changing the words to a song she recalls, Grace says, “I knew I’d remembered it wrong. . . but I didn’t see why I shouldn’t make it come out in a better way; and as long as I told no one of what was in my mind, there was no one to hold me to account, or correct me. Just as there was no one to say that the real sunrise was nothing like the one I’d invented for myself” (284). Grace sees no harm in fabricating pieces of her story in the same way she would piece together a quilt: “What should I tell [Dr. Jordan]. . . . He will want to know about the arrest, and

the trial, and what was said. Some of it is all jumbled in my mind, but I could pick out this or that for him, some bits of whole cloth you might say, as when you go through the rag bag looking for something that will do, to supply a touch of colour. I could say this. . . .” (427). Atwood constructs the story of Grace’s body and Self the way Grace constructs a quilt: she pieces together the main structure and pattern, and then fills in the empty spaces with whatever she can find that will accent her pattern. Although Atwood shows that Grace attempts to create her own story by manipulating masculinist language, Grace’s propensity to fabrication rather than constructing an authentic Self shows that she is complicit in the patriarchal construct because her fabrications reflect those that are continually placed on her by masculinist language.

At first glance, Atwood’s *Alias Grace* seems to be about the desire to recover lost and silent female voices from a history that is and has always been *his* story. However, as with Grace’s metanarrative, there is an underlying narrative in Atwood’s project. She moves beyond the notion of reconstructing the female body and female experience in history by challenging “the assumption that there is a stable subject to be recovered from the historical record, but also the systems of power and desire that can be unwittingly exposed in the attempted construction of another person’s identity” (Tolan 223-3). Grace never tells Dr. Jordan or her reader whether or not she was a willing participant in the murders of Kinnear and Montgomery because her story is not meant to establish an authentic identity or reveal a fundamental truth (Siddall 85). Rather, through her creative narrative form, Grace is challenging her inscription within patriarchal discourse (Singley 9). Although Grace uses her agency by manipulating her narrative through the unstable language of memory, she fails to escape from masculinist inscription because the multi-layered construction she creates for herself traps her. She says, “I must go on with the story. Or the story must go on with me, carrying me inside it, along the track it must travel, straight to the

end, weeping like a train and deaf and single-eyed and locked tight shut; although I hurl myself against the walls of it and scream and cry, and beg God himself to let me out” (*AG* 358-9). Grace’s attempt to break free of masculinist inscription is thus a failure because she can only attempt to define her Self through the patriarchal language that binds her body.

Grace tells us that Kinnear “was always kind to me, or so I will say. But I can’t rightly remember. . . . he has faded; he’s been fading year by year, like a dress washed over and over, and now what is left of him? A faint pattern. A button or two. Sometimes a voice; but not eyes, no mouth. What did he really look like, when he was in the flesh? Nobody wrote it down, not even in the newspapers” (356-7). Atwood’s focus here is that a person’s identity resembles a quilt that is pieced together; however, it is significant that no one constructed Kinnear by inscribing his body with language. Grace’s body, however, was memorized, written about, sexualized, and therefore inscribed: “they told all. . . about me. . . looks and appearance, but not about Mr. Kinnear, because it is more important to be a murderess than the one murdered, you are more stared at then” (357). Unlike Kinnear, Grace will always be remembered because of the varied and layered representations of her. Although she is “like a dress washed over and over” because her representations are continuously re-interpreted, and re-inscribed by those in the novel, she will never fade and will therefore continue to be re-interpreted and represented by others. Moreover, each reader of *Alias Grace* will re-interpret and re-inscribe Grace’s body and identity as I am doing now. Atwood writes Grace as “Alias Grace” because her many-layered bodily inscription is fictional.²⁷ In doing so, Atwood questions the power of Grace’s multiple inscriptions by creating a narrator who is capable of rewriting them. Nevertheless, through Grace’s failure to construct her Self apart from the masculinist language that defines her, Atwood

²⁷ See also Wilson, page 134.

demonstrates that as long as we rely on masculinist language, it is impossible define an authentic Self because all definition must occur within the patriarchal construct.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Translation was never possible.
Instead there was always only
conquest, the influx
of the language of hard nouns,
the language of metal,
the language of either / or,
the one language that has eaten all the others.

Margaret Atwood
“Marsh Languages”²⁸

Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Bodily Harm*, and *Alias Grace* explore the postmodern notion that language is a construction that conveys meaning and therefore constructs subjectivity through the translation of language onto (an)Other. The female body does not have an essential construction, but is only the result of the masculinist language used to define it within the patriarchal social construct. The translation of language through various mediums of communication, such as signs and symbols, the gaze, and narrative memory is how Atwood’s male and female characters represent and understand the world. Yet, these methods of language are fundamentally unstable because the meaning of language is constantly evolving with each translation and interpretation, revealing that all representations are unstable.

In his discussion of translation, Walter Benjamin states, “[i]n the original [text], content and language constitute a certain unity, like that between a fruit and its skin, whereas a translation surrounds its content as if with the broad folds of a royal mantle. . . . For every translation of a work at a specific point in the history of language represents, with respect to a specific aspect of its content, translation into all other languages” (158). Likewise, Derrida

²⁸ Lines 25-31.

argues, “just as the debris become recognizable as fragments of the same amphora, original and translations become recognizable as fragments of a larger language” (“Des Tours” 190). Thus, according to Derrida, “one never writes in just one language, but is always already writing in multiple languages, composing new meanings while eradicating others” (Gentzler 166). The meaning of the female body as translated through masculinist language is therefore layered with previous interpretations so that the construction of the female body is constantly changing. Despite Derrida’s statement that a translation is a child who is neither a copy nor an image,²⁹ Lawrence Venuti sees translation as *différance*: “the signifying movement in language whereby the signified is an effect of relations and differences along a potentially endless chain of signifiers and therefore is always differential and deferred, never present as a unity. This means that the original is itself a translation” (7). A translation is therefore a synecdoche of the mutability and incapability of all forms of language. Consequently, the deconstruction of language breaks down all aspects of fidelity, originality, and authorship while working to make the translator more visible in the creation of a translation. In other words, the instability of the language by which we know the world, which allows for multiple representation and inscription, does not allow for authenticity. Therefore, I would like to end by asking, can the women in Atwood’s novels ever have subjectivity?

Linda Hutcheon states that “[s]ubjectivity in the Western liberal humanist tradition is defined. . . in terms of rationality, individuality, and power; in other words, it is defined in terms of those domains traditionally denied women, who are relegated instead to the realms of intuition, familiar collectivity, and submission” (5). Offred, Rennie, and Grace cannot escape their inscription through masculinist language because masculinist language is the only means of communication available to them, and there is nothing outside of it by which they can identify;

²⁹ See Chapter 1: Introduction, page 14, and Chapter 3: Narrative as Memory in *Alias Grace*, page 87

their identities are thus forever delayed, deferred, and are always simulacral. Offred, Rennie, and Grace cannot return to an authentic subjectivity because it never existed. Although Offred, Rennie, and Grace try to define and possess their subjectivity by attempting to translate masculinist language, all three ultimately fail because they cannot escape bodily inscription through masculinist language since the representation of an(other) automatically subverts the subjectivity of the subaltern (Maggio 422). Just Spivak attempts to speak for the subaltern (Maggio 429), so is Atwood, and so am I because the subaltern woman cannot be spoken for by the masculinist language structure that subjects them. Women cannot be spoken for by a masculinist language without translating its values, customs, and beliefs onto the female body, and thus onto her subjectivity. Therefore, because the subaltern woman can only speak through the dominant masculinist language, Atwood's novels illustrate that, although the subaltern woman speaks, she cannot truly be heard.³⁰ Since Atwood states that "[a]uthors are. . . transmitters of their culture" (*Survival* 12), *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Bodily Harm*, and *Alias Grace* essentially tell both women and men to be aware of power structures and how they work within the patriarchal construct: "You refuse to own / yourself, you permit / others to do it for you" ("You refuse to own" 1-3). By bringing the patriarchal construct and the power of masculinist language to the forefront of her writing, Atwood's novels ask women to recognize and acknowledge their own complicity within the masculinist power structure that subjects them (Hutcheon 1). Atwood's novels work to resist the masculinist construction of the female body by demonstrating that to hear the subaltern woman one must move beyond masculinist language to recognize the female body for what it is and not for what others have constructed it to be. Although this thesis only examines three of Atwood's novels, the inclusion of extracts from her

³⁰ See also Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" page 308, and Maggio, pages 429-437 for their discussion of the subaltern.

poetry indicate that this translation of the female body as evidence of a male/female power construct though the inscription of masculinist language is a pattern that is found throughout Atwood's oeuvre.

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