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IMAGINING BOUNDARIES: (POST) HUMANIST UNDERSTANDINGS AND
ECOLOGICAL ETHICS IN THE FICTION OF MARGARET ATWOOD

By

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ECOLOGICAL ETHICS IN THE FICTION OF MARGARET ATWOOD

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Atwood's concern for the environment has spanned nearly the entirety of her career, informing her fears about the future and providing the grounding for her speculative fiction. In Atwood's understanding, ecological ruin stems from human estrangement from the natural environment, an estrangement fortified by capitalism and consumerism in contemporary societies. Instead, she strives to situate the creative, imaginative human species within a larger natural order that inspires ethical treatment of the more-than-human world. Atwood attempts to provide us with a model of interconnection and respect for nature that we must imagine if we desire to avoid the apocalyptic future she describes in her novels. This paper will investigate three of Atwood's novels that address issues concerning our interactions with nature and the effects of technology.

In *Oryx and Crake*, humanist and posthumanist understandings of the world cannot provide individuals with meaning in their radically altered environment. In *The Year of the Flood*, the second of Atwood's trilogy, we are introduced to the God's Gardeners, who demonstrate how new ethical systems can be enacted within specific subcultural spaces. From their space on the Edencliff Rooftop Garden, the Gardeners have a critical vantage point by which to view society and resist the controlling aspects of corporation run state. Atwood gives us a model by which to imagine enacting change in our own society, and the ethical system that must be implemented if we wish to avoid ecological ruin.

Finally, I turn to Atwood's second novel, *Surfacing*, to end my discussion. *Surfacing* demonstrates that Atwood does not believe that returning to nature is the answer to ecological problems and the ills of society. The dissatisfaction at the end of the novel hints at the necessity of humans to exist within communities, as well as the affirmation of traits specific to the human – creativity and the imagination. The image of personal survival depicted by *Surfacing* does not allow for large-scale political or social change. The answer to our dissatisfaction is not to return to nature, but to, like the God's Gardeners, find a way to be both social and natural – the human animal.

IMAGINING BOUNDARIES: (POST) HUMANIST UNDERSTANDINGS AND ECOLOGICAL ETHICS IN THE
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“How did I myself come to create my own ustopias – these not-exactly places, which are anywhere but nowhere, and which are both mappable locations and states of mind?”

Margaret Atwood

INTRODUCTION: EXPLORING USTOPIA IN MARGARET ATWOOD’S FICTION

It goes without saying that our contemporary existence is one of great ambiguity, confusion, innovation, and hope. With the technological innovations we experience daily, our future becomes increasingly difficult to imagine. As we move forward into an obscure future, we continue our attempt to impose systems of meaning and categorization to aid our understanding, ethically, materially, and ideologically. However, in a rapidly changing world, former means of understanding cannot hold. As we look toward our future, many of the stories we tell ourselves seem to be characterized by great hope or devastating ruin. Our future could be utopic, as some scientists and innovators would have us believe. Technological innovations will outpace ecological ruin; we will be able to transcend our frail bodies; immortality can be achieved; we can live forever. Or our future could be apocalyptic. Our technological innovations cannot save us; scarcity is unavoidable; plagues, famines, and wars are all increasingly likely.

It is from this ambiguity in the stories we tell ourselves about the future that Margaret Atwood’s fiction takes place. In her treatise on speculative fiction, *SF and Other Worlds*, Atwood claims, “*Ustopia* is a word I made up by combining utopia and dystopia – the imagined perfect society and its opposite – because, in my view, each contains a latent version of the other” (66). For Atwood, our possible futures of absolute ruin and ultimate hope are twinned. It

seems ever more likely that one cannot exist without the other. Utopia cannot be achieved without someone or something paying a price, while dystopic futures provide some chance of wiping the slate clean and beginning a different, more hopeful existence. It is within this ambiguity that Atwood has placed her most recent two novels, *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, with a third, *Maddaddam*, soon to be published. We do not yet have the final view of the new, fictional world she has created, however it is likely to be a world full of ambivalence about the future, mirroring closely our contemporary existence with all its possibility and fear.

Atwood's concern for the environment has spanned the nearly the entirety of her career, informing her fears about the future and providing the grounding for her speculative fiction. When Atwood began her most recent trilogy, she had not planned to start another novel right away. However, *Oryx and Crake* began when she saw the melting of the glaciers ("Writing *Oryx and Crake*" 285). In Atwood's understanding, ecological ruin stems from human estrangement from the natural environment, an estrangement fortified by capitalism and consumerism in contemporary societies. Her novels focus on imagining ways to recuperate a means by which to understand the human as animal and cultural, without denying the special qualities of the human. Instead, she strives to situate the creative, imaginative human species within a larger natural order that inspires ethical treatment of the more-than-human world. Atwood's novels speculate on the future in store for humankind if we continue on the path we are on now. At the same time, Atwood attempts to provide us with a model of interconnection and respect for nature that we must imagine if we desire to avoid the apocalyptic future she describes in her novels.

This paper will investigate three of Atwood's novels that address issues concerning our interactions with nature and the effects of technology. My first chapter focuses on *Oryx and Crake*, describing the society invented by Atwood and the humanist and posthumanist

alternatives that exist in this possible future. In this fictional future, the human race has been killed by a commercially developed virus, making room for a group of genetically modified posthumans, called the Crakers, to begin living in the newly depopulated America. Jimmy, ostensibly the last human, leads the Crakers out of the lab where they were created, and they take up residence near the ocean. My first chapter focuses on the character of Jimmy as he attempts to cling to a humanist framework for meaning – a project that is doomed to fail now that the human-less world is radically altered. In this way, Atwood depicts a failure of humanism that cannot help to find a meaningful life in a posthuman environment.

In addition to this failing humanism, posthumanist alternatives cannot help characters find a meaningful existence either. The posthumans Atwood describes are genetically modified by Jimmy's childhood friend, Crake, and are a blend of animal and human adaptations. As such, Crake has attempted to remove all biological aspects of the human he believes are responsible for violence, inequality, greed, and lust. In creating these beings, however, Crake has written a particular ethic into the Crakers' DNA and vitiated individual or communal choice as a result. This posthumanist framework is not a viable alternative to our current situation because it, on one hand, requires the annihilation of the human species, and, on the other hand, destroys the possibility of choice that defines ethical considerations.

In *The Year of the Flood*, the second of Atwood's trilogy, we are introduced to the God's Gardeners, the most uplifting model depicted by Atwood in this future world. *The Year of the Flood*, a parallel narrative to *Oryx and Crake*, follows a different group of individuals through the same genetically-engineered apocalypse. The God's Gardeners follow a self-consciously created religious system – an imaginative structure that demands respect for all creatures, an understanding of the human as fallible, and a refusal of corporately produced commodities. The

Gardeners react to a society that has erased ethical constraints toward the treatment of human and animal bodies. As a result, all individual bodies are treated as raw material for the production of more goods in order to sustain a controlling capitalist system. As a result of their beliefs, many of the Gardeners survive the Waterless Flood and emerge, beginning to create a new community in depopulated America.

The God's Gardeners demonstrate how non-normative ethical systems can be enacted within specific subcultural spaces. From their space on the Edencliff Rooftop Garden, the Gardeners have a critical vantage point by which to view society and resist the controlling aspects of their Corpocracy – their corporation run state. Their garden space, where they grow their own food and teach their followers their doctrine, proves to be sustainable as a place of both political empowerment and personal survival. In this way, Atwood gives us a model by which to imagine enacting change in our own society, and the ethical system that must be implemented if we wish to avoid ecological ruin.

Finally, I turn to Atwood's second novel, *Surfacing*, to end my discussion. *Surfacing*, written in 1972, is an interesting text in understanding Atwood's oeuvre as well as contextualizing her thought on ecological matters. *Surfacing* depicts a narrator who is disgusted with the state of Western society, and ends up leaving cultural systems behind to become animal. In this text, Atwood demonstrates both the constructed conceptual base of terms such as "human" and "natural," as well as depicting dissatisfaction when the narrator does give up culture, attempting to become wholly natural. *Surfacing* demonstrates that Atwood does not believe that returning to nature is the answer to ecological problems and the ills of society. The dissatisfaction at the end of the novel hints at the necessity of humans to exist within communities, as well as the affirmation of traits specific to the human – creativity and the

imagination. The image of personal survival depicted by *Surfacing* does not allow for large-scale political or social change. The answer to our dissatisfaction is not to return to nature, but to, like the God's Gardeners, find a way to be both social and natural – the human animal.

I conclude my discussion of Atwood's work by contextualizing the characters and ideologies depicted within Donna Haraway's cyborg framework. Haraway describes an ambivalence similar to Atwood's utopia; technology presents great hope and great power. The cyborg position, which lauds hybridity and a "pleasure in the confusion of boundaries" (Haraway 8), holds great promise for sociopolitical change. However, as technology continually breaks down material to be manipulated, the possibilities for control and domination also proliferate. What is necessary is the responsible construction of boundaries, similar to the work done by the God's Gardeners.

Atwood's fiction demonstrates the power and importance of the imagination in constructing these boundaries, boundaries we are in dire need of before we disappear down the rabbit-hole of technology. While technology presents great promise for the future, we must understand these innovations in a different way if we are to avoid the future depicted in *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*. The God's Gardeners provide us with a model by which to construct imaginative systems and subcultural spaces that may help us to survive. Like Atwood's utopia, we must find boundaries but understand their necessary confusion if we are to imagine a new future for ourselves.

CHAPTER 1: HUMANIST & POSTHUMANIST ALTERNATIVES IN ATWOOD'S *ORYX AND CRAKE*

In *Oryx and Crake*, Margaret Atwood describes a society, not very far from our own, where resource shortages and ecological destruction have begun to threaten the sustainability of the human race. In addition to this ecologically dire situation, capitalism and corporation-controlled governments have replaced traditional ethical considerations with values based almost entirely on profit and commodification. In *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood investigates two possible alternatives for sustaining the human through the impending apocalypse. The first, a radical posthumanism, attempts to breed the detrimental human qualities out of the human, creating a species of posthuman Crakers. The second, traditional humanism, provides the protagonist, Jimmy, with potential empathy and ethical understandings of others. However, after the genocidal destruction of the human race, both humanist and posthumanist alternatives fail to create a meaningful world for the characters. Instead, a new imaginative structure is needed in order for humanity to survive, one that does not deny our biological heritage, but that also takes into account the human-as-animal, existing within larger ecological systems.

Margaret Atwood's 2003 work of speculative fiction, *Oryx and Crake*, tells the story of a near-future world through the eyes of Jimmy, renamed Snowman, in the post-apocalyptic landscape. Through flashbacks, Snowman tells the story of a future, centered in America, where the human race has died out due to the JUVE virus, engineered in a lab and incorporated into the recently marketed BlyssPluss pill. The engineer of the virus is Jimmy's childhood friend, Crake, who, in addition to developing the virus, developed a new race of posthumans, termed the Crakers, by Jimmy. Jimmy, who believes he is the last man existing in this post-apocalyptic world, watches over the Crakers while trying to survive and reflects on how the world came to be this way. Through these reflections, Jimmy describes a world separated into sterile, corporation-

controlled Compounds and slum-like Pleebands. Within the Compounds, radical experiments in genetic engineering and gene splicing take place, the results of which create everything from pets to artificial/real chicken to deadly viruses.

As the novel continues, Jimmy narrates his time at Martha Graham, an academy for the arts, as well as Crake's time at the Watson-Crick Institute, where Crake begins his experiments that would lead to the creation of the Crakers. After going to work for Crake, Jimmy meets Oryx, a woman Jimmy and Crake believe to have first encountered watching child pornography and who now serves as a teacher to the Crakers. Jimmy/Snowman reflects on his relationship with her, indicating the intense meaning given to his life by her presence. Sometime after the final creation of the Crakers, Crake sends virus in the BlyssPlus pill into effect, killing off the majority of the human race. Crake confronts Jimmy and slits Oryx's throat, causing Jimmy to shoot Crake.

My discussion of *Oryx and Crake* will begin by characterizing the state of the environment in Atwood's fictional world, as well as the new technological innovations that drastically change the conception of the human body. These new circumstances fundamentally revise both nature and culture, though these distinctions may not hold, even within our own time. However, these new understandings become the speculative basis for much of Atwood's investigation. I will then examine Crake's understanding of the relation between representation and reality, a distinction that allows for his ultimate plan, the destruction of the human race and the creation of the Crakers. I will proceed to discuss the failure of Crake's posthumanist project by investigating the lives of the Crakers. Finally, I will consider Jimmy's humanist sensibilities and the possibilities of these understandings as he enters the post-apocalyptic world as shepherd of the Crakers.

REVISING NATURE AND CULTURE

To begin, *Oryx and Crake* depicts a world where the consequences of global warming and habitat destruction have come to threaten human sustainability. According to critic Jayne Glover,

It is becoming ever more obvious that many human practices are not sustainable: ultimately human beings need more food and space, viable soils, clean air and potable water than the earth can provide... *Oryx and Crake* imagines a time which is clearly suffering from these effects. Atwood has pointed out that part of the novel was written on a ship in the Arctic where she saw first-hand the melting of the glaciers. (Glover 52)

In *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood extrapolates from our contemporary society and creates a world that suffers from all of our current ecological fears. Atwood has long been concerned with ecological issues, and claims, "I'd been clipping small items from the back pages of newspapers for years, and noting with alarm that trends derided ten years ago as paranoid had become possibilities" ("Writing *Oryx and Crake*" 285). Atwood is adamant in her definition of speculative fiction; she includes "nothing we haven't already invented or started to invent" ("Writing *Oryx and Crake*" 285). Atwood's depictions of the environment and the ecological situation in *Oryx and Crake* have much basis in our contemporary reality.

As such, Atwood's depictions of the environment radically revise how we understand "nature" currently. The novel opens with Snowman hearing the sound of birds: "The shrieks of the birds that nest out there and the distant ocean grinding against the ersatz reefs of rusted car parts and jumbled bricks and assorted rubble sound almost like holiday music" (3). The sound of the ocean is mechanized as "grinding" and car parts, bricks, and rubble replace coral reefs in this new environmental situation. The ocean, once natural, is described as more like a machine than a

body of water. Additionally, Snowman reflects on various environments that have been altered by the new weather patterns resulting from global warming: “the coastal aquifers turned salty and the northern permafrost melted and the vast tundra bubbled with methane, and the drought in the midcontinental plains regions went on and on, and the Asian steppes turned to sand dunes” (25). Even before Crake’s engineered genocide, the likelihood of human sustainability was low. Technological advances had drastically transformed the environment. In “Writing *Oryx and Crake*” Atwood claims, “The rules of biology are as inexorable as those of physics: run out of food and water and you die. No animal can exhaust its resource base and hope to survive. Human civilizations are subject to the same law” (285). This fundamental transformation of the environment as a result of humanity draining the earth of its resources forms the foundation of Atwood’s thought experiment in both *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*.

In addition to these new material circumstances depicted by technology altering what were once understood as natural systems of the earth, Atwood describes the way in which technological innovation has changed characters’ understandings of the human body. Formerly, technology was understood as created by, sustaining, and marking culture. However, as in the case of the environment, technology is no longer simply a cultural innovation, since it has entered the body, a “natural” being. Early in Atwood’s narrative, Jimmy witnesses conflicts between his mother and father about the nature of the technologies created by the corporations. During one of these numerous fights, Jimmy’s mother says, ““What you’re doing – this pig brain thing. You’re interfering with the building blocks of life. It’s immoral. It’s... sacrilegious”” (57). In this moment, Jimmy’s mother appeals to an original nature, a state that should not be tampered with. These “building blocks of life” constitute the human, and as such, imply an ethic in their treatment. However, Jimmy’s father responds, ““It’s just proteins, you know that!

There's nothing sacred about cells and tissue it's just..." (57). Jimmy's father, in his inability to name what it "just" is frames a central question to Atwood's query, and my own. How are we to define aspects of the body that are increasingly easy to discern and manipulate? How are we to treat the body ethically from this instrumentalist view? This argument, first described between Jimmy's parents, forms a premise for ethics within the book, and within a society where bioengineering and gene splicing have become realities. Jimmy will continue to appeal to an origin – a real, authentic nature that should not be tampered with - in his conversations with Crake about the biotechnologies encountered in the book. Similarly, Atwood uses the character of Jimmy to frame those traditional understandings of nature that have been eroded and altered in her speculative world.

In the ethical debates depicted by the novel, Atwood draws heavily from current bioethical concerns preoccupying our contemporary society. Ways of ascribing an essential dignity to the human body are becoming increasingly difficult as radical manipulation of the genome has become possible. In *French DNA*, Paul Rabinow highlights the bioethical issues emerging in the 1980's, "Representationally, the body was becoming simplified, treated as sheer raw material" where formerly, the "body was taken to be sacred, holistic, the container of the past and the vehicle of the future... Body parts were entering into a machinery that produced spiritual entities" (101). In the novel, Jimmy's father expresses this latter view. There is nothing sacred about the body; it is raw material to be used for the creation of new and different species, treatments, and products.

In the novel, new technologies, yet another important premise of Atwood's speculation, allow both humanist and posthumanist ideologies to be called into question. These new technologies, represented largely by genetic engineering, pose a challenge to traditional

humanism, as Cartesian assumptions are called into question. Is the body the dignified site of rationality, or something else entirely? Forces of science, technology, and capital simultaneously threaten to reduce the human body to “raw material” while producing once sacred “spiritual entities.” Controlling these technologies and their ethical implications thus becomes imperative in contemporary society if we wish to maintain the ideas of dignity that formerly ruled the treatment of the body. Rabinow continues: “Whether this particular humanist dogma, and the institutions that espouse it, will be able to socialize these forces afterward remains unclear” (110). This is one of the questions Atwood poses in *Oryx and Crake*. Can humanist dogma impose ethical conditions for the treatment of human bodies? Further, can humanist ideologies hold in a world of ecological peril, where humans are increasingly concerned with their own survival? On the other hand, what possibilities do posthuman futures hold, given our technological innovations? Critic Shari Evans characterizes this questioning in the following way:

Like much speculative fiction, Atwood’s novel suggests a moment of decision, the moment we occupy now, from which we can see one possibly, problematic path: our lack of ethical engagement, which ultimately leads to our demise. *Oryx and Crake* leaves us with the question of what ethics we can practice to prevent this catastrophe, and ties the possibility of ethical thought and action to the built environment and ideologies. (37)

Humanist and posthumanist practices seem to be the actions Evans refers to, and the question of *Oryx and Crake* becomes whether or not ethics are sustainable within these two positions.

Furthermore, lack of interaction with nature, and continual engagement with “built” environments seems to, in Evans view, preclude ethical considerations within the world of *Oryx*

and Crake. It is this issue that Atwood will take up in the second installment of the trilogy, *The Year of the Flood*.

In this chapter, I argue, along with Hannes Bergthaller, that humanism, as well as Crake's posthuman alternative, seem doomed to fail in Atwood's fictional account. If humanism and posthumanist are the two alternatives were are given to deal with humanity's failures and the subsequent ecological ruin, there seems to be little hope for imagining a new future within *Oryx and Crake*. As Bergthaller says,

Jimmy and Crake (and the academic institutions they attend) stand for two different ways of tackling these flaws: traditional humanism, which in *Oryx and Crake* appears to have pathetically failed, and an aggressive posthumanism that ruthlessly remodels human nature according to "ecological" criteria – an approach whose triumph the novel depicts as indistinguishable from catastrophe. (729)

While Jimmy's humanism fails him in his attempt to deal with the apocalypse he has been forced to endure, Crake's avid posthumanism fails in Atwood's figuration; the Crakers do not represent a cleansing, but a catastrophe. As these two alternatives fail to rectify humanity's failed ecological existence, Atwood will eventually pose a third alternative in *The Year of the Flood*.

CRAKE'S POSTHUMANISM

An investigation of Crake's posthuman project in developing the Crakers benefits from characterizing the society in which Jimmy and Crake grew up. In terms of the ideologies governing this society, Atwood effectively demonstrates the many ways in which society has become unmoored from reality and the resulting ethics derived from such a position. As Snowman reflects on his childhood and experiences with Crake, it becomes apparent that Crake and Jimmy grew up in a world where representations did not reflect reality, where, in fact, the

distinction did not often matter. In these childhood interactions, the fine line between reality and artifice is eroded quickly. In one of the first interactions we see between Jimmy and Crake, they play chess. Jimmy wants to play with a “real” set as opposed to a virtual set, and Crake asserts that a “real” set is not even real, because the plastic chessmen are, obviously, not real men. Crake goes on to claim, “The real set is in your head” (77). This interaction encompasses the tenor of many of Jimmy and Crake’s conversations. Jimmy appeals to an authentic “real” and Crake exposes the real as artifice. These interactions describe Jean Baudrillard’s notion of a copy¹ without an original; there was never an “original” chessboard. The virtual form of chess Jimmy and Crake play is a copy of a material chessboard, the “reality” of which never existed, except in the imagination.

As Jimmy and Crake get older, Crake continues to question reality while Jimmy attempts to find the distinctions between simulations and reality. On “shortcircuit.com, brainfrizz.com, and deathrowlive.com” Jimmy and Crake watch executions (83). Jimmy asks,

“Do you think they’re being executed?” he said. “A lot of them look like simulations.”

¹ Baudrillard’s formulation in “Simulacra and Simulations” is an apt description of Crake’s worldview that persists throughout the first two novel of Atwood’s trilogy. As reality is erased and the hyperreal takes its place, there is no reality, no origin: “In this passage of space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor of truth, the age of simulation thus begins with the liquidation of all referentials – worse: by their artificial resurrection in systems of signs, which are a more ductile material than meaning...” (Baudrillard 366). He continues, “Then the whole system becomes weightless; it is no longer anything but a gigantic simulacrum: not unreal, but a simulacrum, never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference” (368). In Crake’s interrogation of the real, he buys Baudrillard’s formulation wholesale; if everything is simulation, there is little ethical consideration given to those material bodies that may still be considered “real.” Furthermore, in his creation of the Crakers, Crake takes a simulation, the pure image of a ecological posthuman, and embodies this image in the material “real.” As Snowman provides the Crakers with their fictional origin story, he is aware of their status as “copies without originals” as he demonstrates, “a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second hand truth, objectivity and authenticity” (Baudrillard 369).

“You never know,” said Crake.

“You never know what?”

“What is *reality*?” (83)

Crake’s lack of faith in knowable “reality” is a frequent characteristic of their internet wanderings. In their highly mediated, sexually deprived, and often violent world, the distinction makes little sense. The atrocities Jimmy and Crake witness on television are reduced to pure entertainment, but Jimmy doubts the reality of such acts. While Jimmy’s father is creating pigs with human organs and rakunks to play as pets, the reality of the online executions and pornography seems possible, if not actual. Jimmy maintains the distinction, however, often seeming to replicate his own mother’s cry of sacrilege with his own cry of “Bogus!” (83). For Crake, the distinction is lost. Everything may be real; everything may be fake. Both terms have been emptied of meaning, and this lack of distinction allows for Crake’s ultimate plan.

Crake’s interrogation of the real is not limited to their various forms of entertainment, but instead becomes increasingly problematic as Crake enters a career in the sciences. As Jimmy and Crake continue their friendship through various stages of their lives, Jimmy becomes invested in the humanities at Martha Graham, while Crake continues his studies at Watson-Crick. When Jimmy visits Crake at Watson-Crick, Crake demonstrates the developments of the students at the institute:

“So the butterflies – are they recent?” Jimmy asked after a while. The ones he was looking at had wings the size of pancakes and were shocking pink, and were clustering all over one of the purple shrubs.

“You mean did they occur in nature or were they created by the hand of man? In other words, are they real or fake?”

“Mm,” said Jimmy. He didn’t want to get into the *what is real* thing with Crake.

(200)

In this interaction, Jimmy, in true humanist fashion, attempts to equate reality with nature and artifice with culture, as culture is defined by technologies. Throughout the novel, Jimmy continually pushes to discover the boundary between what can be understood as “real,” or nature, and the “fake,” or that which is, as Crake claims, “created by the hand of man.” This boundary becomes murky as Crake emphasizes the lack of distinction between the two terms. According to critic Jayne Glover, Crake “has worked so long with an instrumentalist approach towards nature that he is able to convince himself that animals and insects created in a laboratory are the same as those naturally occurring in nature and that there are no ethical questions surrounding the creation of new species” (53). Those organisms created by nature are, for Crake, the same as those created in a laboratory. Importantly, his view of reality, which I will expand upon in the coming paragraphs, does not imply any moral guidance in his continuing scientific experiments.

Crake’s refusal to acknowledge the real in relation to the artificial develops his ethic, or lack of ethics, and utilitarian view of the human race. In one exchange, Jimmy and Crake reflect on an experiment they preformed in High School. After Crake denies that he dreams, Jimmy claims, “Everyone dreams,” Jimmy said. “Remember the REM-sleep study at HelthWyzer High?” (218). To which Crake replies, “The one where we tortured cats?” (218). Jimmy responds, correcting Crake: “Virtual cats, yeah. And the cats that couldn’t dream went crazy.” (218). In this particularly telling passage, Crake demonstrates his understanding of the virtual as real. There is no distinction between the virtual cats and the real cats in Crake’s mind, though Jimmy does take the moment to correct him. Thus, real torture and virtual torture are indistinguishable to Crake. While the “torture” of cats was a simulation, Crake does not see it as

such, and the distinction between representation and reality is collapsed. Without the meaning taken from material reality, where we will see Jimmy forming relationships and deriving pleasure, Crake has no empathetic framework from which to create ethical relationships. This lack of ethic is ultimately what allows for Crake's final plan – the destruction of the human race at the hands of the BlyssPluss pill, clearing the way for the posthuman Crakers to move in.

Crake's lack of distinction between reality and artifice erases any ethical obligation toward his fellow human beings. While Jimmy is wondering, "Why is it he feels some line has been crossed, some boundary transgressed? How much is too much, how far is too far?" (206), Crake actively acknowledges the erasure of any such boundary: "'I don't believe in Nature either,' said Crake. 'Or not with a capital N'" (206). In Crake's mind, there is no boundary between real/artificial, or human/posthuman to transgress. According to Glover, "It is this confusion of boundaries which is partly what allows Crake to assume that the natural world – including its human inhabitants – is part of an enormous laboratory which he has the right to control" (53). This view of the human is what Martin Heidegger warned of in his concept of standing reserve and echoed by Rabinow in his discussion of current bioethical concerns. In Heidegger's understanding, technology has altered nature and created a view of nature as material to be used, constantly converting this "nature" into material technologies to be held for potential use. In the case of machines like airplanes, Heidegger claims, "Everywhere everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately on hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for a further ordering... Yet an airliner that stands on the runway is surely an object... Revealed, it stands on the taxi strip only as standing reserve, inasmuch as it is ordered to insure the possibility of transportation" (322). Nature is converted into technologies that are not valued as ends in themselves, but are only useful in that they hold the potential for further use. However,

Heidegger's true warning comes when he discusses the human. Holding the natural world in this way is one thing, but Heidegger warns that this idea can be transferred onto the human body as well:

The current talk about human resources, about the supply of patients for a clinic gives evidence of this. The forester who measures the felled timber in the woods and who to all appearances walks the forest path in the same way his grandfather did is today ordered by the industry that produces commercial woods whether he knows it or not. He is made subordinate to the orderability of cellulose, which for its part is challenged forth by the need for paper, which is then delivered to newspapers and illustrated magazines. (323)

Human bodies are not intrinsically valued, as in a humanist sensibility, as sites of meaning, emotion, individual identity, or communal identification. Bodies become technologies to be held in reserve for the end of making paper. In this case, human bodies understood as "standing reserve" in a technological society are "subordinate" to the cultural forces such as capitalism, or corporate rule, as in *Oryx and Crake*. Crake's view of humans as machine could not be more apparent than when he calls humans "hormone robots anyway, only we're faulty ones" (166). In realizing Heidegger's worst fear, humans and the environment have become nothing but material.

Crake's lack of empathy, derived from his inability to distinguish and experience the real, causes him to view the body as mere material for manipulation and play. Criticism surrounding the character of Crake largely agrees with this view. Jayne Glover, for instance, highlights the ecocritical framework in which Crake operates, describing his instrumentalism, or understanding of the human as apart from nature. According to Glover, this view "has been blamed for the objectification of nature – thus leading to the use of nature as instrument or object. In terms of

Atwood's fictions, Glover suggests, "It is this instrumentalism that underpins the science so often practised in *Oryx and Crake* as the scientists' belief in their own power leads them to abuse their responsibility by treating the natural world as a mere plaything" (52). Humans become nothing more than resource, and the destruction of the human race becomes no more than the clearing of a forest. When torturing a real cat is indistinguishable from torturing a virtual cat, acting upon the real, be it a human body or other element of nature, can occur without an ethical framework. In Crake's understanding, the collapse between real and representation does not make everything *either* real *or* artificial, but instead erases any such understanding of these two terms. Everything is emptied of meaning, and the world simply becomes material for Crake to play with. It is in this way that Crake forces his representation of the ideal "human" into the realm of the real.

On face value, Crake's desire to engineer the "detrimental" qualities out of humans seems rational. His new creatures have modifications that remove the destructive tendencies of humankind, such as racism, hierarchy, and sexual competition. According to Glover, "Crake's logic here seems valid: if humans are responsible for destroying the world, then it makes sense to alter humans radically in order to ensure this destruction can no longer continue" (54). If part of the problem is resource shortages as a result of human overpopulation, it makes sense to create a new species that is ecologically sustainable in an environment that is no longer hospitable toward humans. Glover continues, "Taken from a certain perspective, the Crakers therefore form an ideal community: they are peace-loving vegetarians, designed to live in harmony with both each other and their environment. There is no rape or sexual abuse, no racial disharmony or

dominance/submission culture” (55). While Crake², in his disgust with the culture in which he was raised, does in fact create an admirable, ecologically minded species, Atwood questions the cost of creating such a being.

Despite the ecologically evolved status of the Crakers, Crake’s posthumanist³ project fails for two reasons. First of all, in creating the posthumans, Crake has destroyed all aspects of humanity, good and bad. Second, Crake’s new posthuman world, is indistinguishable from an apocalypse. The Crakers may be an excellent experiment in ecological being, but they come at the cost of almost all human life. In the first case, according to Bergthaller:

Crake fully understands the destructive potential of mankind’s evolutionary inheritance, but he does not appreciate what his revulsion against the latter indicates: that human beings are not fully determined by that inheritance, and that this lack of determination allows for the forms of self-domestication that constitute cultural history. His attempt to

² I am careful to note that not all of Crake alterations in the Crakers are derived from a desire to create a more ecological or sustainable species. Instead, Crake’s development of the Crakers hints at other more aesthetic or ideological alterations that demonstrate Crake’s hubris as an archetypical “mad scientist” character. The simple fact that Crake believes he has the capability to diagnose the human race, alter those “detrimental” attributes, and exterminate the remaining humans displays Crake’s great hubris. Furthermore, aesthetically, Crake has given the Crakers his own green eyes. These literally parentless creatures have a metaphorical father in Crake as their eyes are identical to his own. Despite the fact that Crake claims “But human beings hope they can stick their souls into someone else, some new version of themselves, and live on forever” (120), he demonstrates a surprisingly humanist inclination in “fathering” the Crakers.

³ It should be noted that the definitions of “posthumanism” are widely disputed as technological modifications continually change our perception of the traditional definitions of the human. In this paper, I align most closely with Cary Wolfe’s definitions from *What is Posthumanism?* Wolfe outlines posthumanism as the questioning that comes after humanism, not just the intensification of humanist values such as, “escaping or repressing not just its animal origins in nature, the biological, and the evolutionary, but more generally by transcending the bonds of materiality and embodiment altogether” (xv). As such, the Crakers present a true posthumanist alternative, as Crake does not wish to intensify humanism, as transhumanism does, but instead dissolve those aspects of the human responsible for the violence, death, and inequality he sees in society.

do humanism one better in effect cancels out the conditions of its own possibility, foreclosing the very space of biological indeterminacy within which alone the imperative from the Rilke fridge magnet – “you must change your life” – can make sense.

(Bergthaller 737)

Due to his revulsion against human culture, Crake rewrote the Crakers’ biology; the Crakers are, quite literally, word made flesh. The representation of an ideal creature that Crake held in his mind has, through technology, been made into a “real” body. However, in the process of this revision Crake has foreclosed upon the possibility of choice and the ability to change, as the dictum on his fridge magnet suggests. Shari Evans claims, “In some ways, the Crakers are the end result of the Enlightenment project – a scientific experiment that attempts to erase all imagination, passion, and desire from the human condition” (48). Instead of understanding the special qualities of *Homo sapiens*, rationality and creativity, that create death and destruction as well as life and art, Crake erases all of these qualities in the Crakers. Glover, evoking ecocritic Kate Soper, suggests that a special quality of the human is the “ability to reflect upon the characteristics of nature and humanity which separates us from non-human nature: at the crux of much ecological thinking is the problem that humans are both a part of nature and apart from nature. Crake’s rejection of ‘culture’ therefore is a rejection of part of what makes us human” (57). Crake is unable to imagine the human as both natural and apart from nature. Instead Crake, in the second failing of his avid posthumanism, attempts to erase all aspects of the human from the earth, making the JUVE virus active and killing off the human race.

JIMMY/SNOWMAN’S HUMANISM

Jimmy, though not the most admirable of characters, still displays a superior appreciation for human qualities and an enhanced ability to relate to others when compared to Crake. Before

Crake sends the JUVE virus into effect, Jimmy sees the body not as material to be manipulated, but as a site of pleasure and emotion. Previous to the “zero hour” (3) Jimmy had found pleasure in the body. He frequently questions food, not only in interest of where it came from (real versus artificial) but also in terms of its quality. To this questioning, Crake responds “indifferently” by saying “It’s food” (201). Crake, always utilitarian, doesn’t take pleasure in food, as Jimmy does. Jimmy frequently reflects on and describes its presence in various interactions, as in the pizza that is always present during his nights with Oryx (122). These sexual encounters with Oryx are often paired with food, as he reflects on “pizza, then Oryx’s fingers in his mouth” (122). In Snowman’s reflections on his relationship with Oryx, he thinks, “Then joy, crushing his whole body in its boa-constrictor grip. Oh stolen sweet picnics. Oh sweet delight. Oh clear memory, oh pure pain. Oh endless night” (122). Sex, joy, and pain are all experienced through the body, feelings that Crake seems incapable or indifferent towards experiencing.

Additionally, Atwood seems to describe the body, particularly the face, as a site where empathy and interconnectedness can be understood between human subjects. Jimmy and Crake, in their internet wanderings, believe that their first encounter with Oryx was on a website, HottTotts, featuring child pornography. Critic Stephen Dunning has described Oryx as “the exploited third-world ‘Other,’ victim of an imperialistic, commercialized ‘phallic’ gaze” (96). Jimmy describes Oryx, at age eight, as she turned to look at the camera: “Then she looked over her shoulder and right into the eyes of the viewer – right into Jimmy’s eyes, into the secret person inside him. *I see you*, that look said. *I see you watching. I know you. I know what you want*” (91). Jimmy and Crake’s experiences on the internet call into question the differences between simulations and reality, as Crake continually asserts; however, the look Oryx gives Jimmy at this time mutually individuates Oryx and Jimmy. Oryx denies her status as an object

and reasserts herself as a subject, a speaking “I,” while Jimmy transforms from a “viewer” consuming a product into Jimmy, a individuated human with ethical obligations to another human. “Jimmy felt burned by this look – eaten into, as if by acid. She’d been so contemptuous of him... But for the first time he’d felt what they’d been doing was wrong. Before, it had always been entertainment, or else far beyond his control, but now he felt culpable” (91). This look is a moment of recognition, in which Oryx recognizes something about her audience and their desires and Jimmy recognizes the common humanity in Oryx. Most importantly, however, this act of looking demands an ethic from Jimmy. Jimmy’s recognition of Oryx’s subjectivity leads him to the conclusion that they are doing something wrong in watching the depraved objectification of children on HottTotts. Something in the look alerts Jimmy to the vulnerability of Oryx as well as her demand to be treated as human.

In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Judith Butler calls for a recognition of the other in terms of an acknowledgement of the vulnerability in the other. One way in which this recognition is achieved is through the face in the mutual act of looking. Butler conceives of this recognition as the desire for both subjects to be recognized as desiring to be recognized:

Consider that the struggle for recognition in the Hegelian sense requires that each partner in the exchange recognize not only that the other needs and deserves recognition, but also the each, in a different way, is compelled by the same need, the same requirement. This means that we are not separate identities in the struggle for recognition but are already involved in a reciprocal exchange, an exchange that dislocates us from our positions, our subject-positions, and allows us to see that community itself requires the recognition that we are all, in different ways, striving for recognition. (43-44)

Jimmy may not fully recognize his desire for recognition yet; it is not until after the human pandemic that he realizes his desire for community with other humans. However, the look that he exchanges with Oryx does work to redefine her as a subject *in relation* to Jimmy, who now feels personal, ethical obligation to Oryx due to this look. Butler also emphasizes that, “To ask for recognition, or to offer it, is precisely not to ask for recognition of what one already is. It is to solicit a becoming, to instigate a transformation, to petition the future always in relation to the Other” (44). This mutual becoming, as opposed to recognition⁴ of “what one already is,” is certainly depicted in Oryx and Jimmy’s interaction. In looking for recognition, Oryx demands personhood and a new future for herself, while Jimmy realizes the ethics of his behavior, recognizing his culpability and desire to change. The future is transformed for both these characters by this look, as they meet in life and imagination throughout the remainder of the novel.

While I have stressed the importance of the material body and its relation to meaning, it should be noted, however, that both Butler and Atwood’s depiction of this act of recognition is heavily mediated. Butler admits that many of our interactions with the Other come through media representations. Oryx and Jimmy’s interaction is confined to the internet, where Jimmy can see her face, but Oryx cannot see his. In the proliferation of technology, we are hard pressed to find interactions with others that are not subject to this type of mediation. Despite this estrangement from material bodies, Jimmy and Oryx’s look demonstrates that we are still able to find mediated representations that result in empathy with the other. Butler suggests, “The reality is not conveyed by what is represented within the image, but through the challenge to representation that reality delivers” (146). It is not, as in Crake’s case, the disparity between

⁴ Butler stresses the importance of the face in this act of recognition. Evoking Emmanuel Levinas, Butler emphasizes that the face is the site that demands the ethic “Thou shalt not kill.”

representation and reality that troubles Jimmy, but instead his experience of reality that challenges the representation. He recognizes, in Oryx's look, that he is not an anonymous viewer consuming a product; his former reality as a disconnected consumer absorbing entertainment is challenged by the representation/reality of Oryx looking at him and saying, simply, "I see you." His previous reality is challenged by the mediated representation he is faced with, and he is faced with a new reality, reinvesting Oryx with personhood and himself with culpability.

However, Jimmy's empathy and understanding of the human other, demonstrated in these encounters with Oryx, is dependent upon there being other humans to relate to.

Jimmy/Snowman, as his name change indicates, presents a liminal position between a humanist past and a posthuman future. After the "zero hour," Jimmy cannot relate to the Crakers as he did with humans. Humans, in their imperfection, were something that "used to move him, the flaws in the design: the lopsided smile, the wart next to the navel, the mole, the bruise" ... "But these new women are neither lopsided nor sad: they're placid, like animated statues. They leave him chilled" (100). Jimmy's humanist ideals do not hold in his posthuman existence as he takes up the role of shepherd to the Crakers. Obviously, Jimmy's humanist ideals cannot hold in a world without humans.

Additionally, after Snowman leads the Crakers out of the Paradise compound and into the "real" world, his understanding of his body, mediated or otherwise, is drastically altered. The body is no longer a site of pleasure, but it is instead maladapted, imperfect, and ugly in relationship to both the Crakers and the harsh environment. Crake's writing of the body of the Crakers drastically alters their interaction with their environment, which Atwood effectively characterizes by showing them in relation to Jimmy. If we construct our individual identities from our relation to the other, be it other humans, posthumans, or the environment, Crake has

effectively reconstituted the meaning of the Craker's lives through writing their bodies. They interact peacefully with their environment in a sustainable and ecological manner. Not only are the Crakers inhumanly beautiful, Crake has built in several features. The Crakers heal by purring, and Jimmy claims Crake "turned himself inside out in the attempt to install the feature" (156). Crakers have a special chemical in their urine, allowing them to mark territory, smell citrusy to repel insects, and produce caecotrophs to get all the nutrients out of their food (156). The Crakers are perfectly adapted to their environment, as they are written for the degraded environment they inhabit. Jimmy's rhetoric of "installing features" further likens Crake's work to the building of a machine. Heidegger's transformation of the human (or posthuman) into material resources is actualized to an extreme in Crake's creation of these posthumans.

In contrast to the Crakers, Snowman sees the environment as his antagonist, a constant force to be battled at all hours. This battle is described from the outset of the novel: "The ants have got in, even though he tied the bag as tightly as he could. Already they're running up his arms, the black kind and the vicious little yellow kind" (4). Snowman is unable to take pleasure in his environment, describing the birds and claiming that, "In a former life he might have snuck up on them, studied them through binoculars, wondering at their grace. No, he never would have done that, it hadn't been his style" (148). Registered in this moment is Snowman's recognition of how nature used to be viewed before zero-hour - something to wonder at as pastoral or sublime - as well as some regret for not having done so. As the environment has been othered as an antagonist, his ability to take pleasure from nature has been reduced. The ants are out to bite him, and the pigeons plot against him. Furthermore, Snowman's reduction to a form of primitivism is made evident by his appearance - his caveman-esque wrapping made of a sheet from one of his "hunting" expeditions. Jimmy, in his new habitat, is forced to encounter his maladapted body as

disgusting, frail, and painful. In this lack of identification with his own body, Jimmy experiences the abject. Jimmy encounters the limits of the material when removed from the culture in which his body was formed.

Furthermore, human systems of language are not maintained in Jimmy's relations with the Crakers. Bergthaller claims:

Both *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* are principally concerned with the question of what role language, literature and, more generally, the human propensity for symbol-making can play in our attempts to deal with the ecological crisis – a crisis that Atwood describes as arising from flaws in humanity's biological make-up. (Bergthaller 729)

Language, literature, and symbol-making, traditionally taken as markers of humanity, seem to lose any definition when they are robbed of their communicative function. Whereas Jimmy was once a word man, taking great delight in old self-help manuals and collections of dated words from his days at Martha Graham, Snowman cannot maintain these linguistic systems of meaning in his new environment. Snowman attempts to maintain these humanist sensibilities in his unfamiliar environment despite the lack of cultural systems to give his attempts meaning. Jimmy's collections of words have lost all function without other humans to communicate with. As Alan Sinfield claims, "Meaning, communication, language work only because they are shared" (Sinfield 742). Ways of making meaning in the world are dependent upon others with which to share these systems. In speaking of ideology, Sinfield continues, "Ideology makes sense for us – of us – because it is already proceeding when we arrive in the world, and we come into consciousness in its terms" (745). This observation marks the difference between Jimmy/Snowman and the Crakers. Jimmy was born into what we could consider "our" ideology -

the world Atwood and her readers exist within. However, due to Crake's careful material and ideological construction of the Crakers, they are born into a different ideology, preventing Jimmy from interacting meaningfully with them. The failure of humanism, in Jimmy/Snowman's existence, stems from this difference; humanist sensibilities cannot be maintained when removed from their cultural context. By exploring the last man scenario, Atwood questions another tenet of humanism – the autonomy of the individual. Jimmy's position is a final test of humanism, as he exists alone, in nature. Atwood demonstrates that the individual cannot be the source of truth and meaning, as humanism would have us believe. Jimmy's failure to find a meaningful existence demonstrates that ways of understanding and being in the world are formed elsewhere, in social, communicative systems.

Additionally, Snowman continually speaks old words and adages in his new environment despite the lack of relation between his representations and his reality. However, "Language itself had lost its solidity; it had become thin, contingent, slippery, a viscid film on which he was sliding around like an eyeball on a plate. An eyeball that could still see, however. That was the trouble" (260). While he still takes in his environment, experiencing and processing it, there is no meaning in language without its communicative properties. Snowman attempts to maintain language, his last recourse for meaning, in a world that has turned his body against him. Words, even at the beginning of *Oryx and Crake*, provided Snowman some respite from his situation. However, these words have been transformed and "there was no longer any comfort in the words. There was nothing in them. It no longer delighted Jimmy to possess these small collections of letters that other people had forgotten about. It was like having his own baby teeth in a box" (261). Language is past use, a relic that is as useful as a tooth in a box. Language can only be kept for sentimental reasons, with no utility left. Jimmy can no longer experience the

material world as it was, so he attempts to find the meaning and pleasure in life from his collections of words. However, without an external, material referent to provide these words with meaning, the power of Jimmy's language is lost.

The breakdown of systems of understanding between Snowman and the Crakers is another way in which the loss of language registers in the novel. At one point, Snowman slips up and says, ““And he's telling me that if you don't stop doing that you'll all be toast.”” To which the Crakers respond, ““Please, oh Snowman, what is toast?”” (97). Snowman then imagines the conversation that would ensue if he tried to explain toast to the Crakers:

Toast is when you take a piece of bread – What is bread? Bread is when you take some flour – What is flour? We'll skip that part, it's too complicated... Toast was a pointless invention from the Dark Ages. Toast was an implement of torture that caused all those subjected to it to regurgitate in verbal form the sins and crimes of past lives. Toast was a ritual item devoured by fetishists in the belief that it would enhance their kinetic and sexual powers. Toast cannot be explained by any rational means. Toast is me. I am toast.

(98)

Snowman demonstrates the way in which a simple phrase has lost all communicative power in his interactions with the posthuman Crakers. Although the Crakers have been given some language and understanding, Jimmy is never satisfied by his interactions with them.

Furthermore, Jimmy's active myth-making with the Crakers is one way in which Atwood warns against institutionalized forms of meaning being necessarily constructed and thus fraught and inaccurate. Jimmy has created a theology for the Crakers that is self-consciously contrived. In this imaginary conversation about the meaning of toast, Snowman demonstrates the ease with which systems of meaning can be created if language remains unmoored from reality. The

Crakers literally would have believed anything about toast if Jimmy had told them, exposing the arbitrary nature of language at its worst representational moments. In this passage, toast takes on the power of a sacrament, imbued with all the mysticism of religious dogma and all made up on the spot by Snowman. Jimmy/Snowman, the word man, exposes to himself that the words he has relied on to make sense of his world are now and were always arbitrary constructions. In his inability to take pleasure from his body, and the failure of language to create meaning in his new environment, Jimmy/Snowman demonstrates the failure of humanism to overcome the challenges of ecological peril and make meaning of these posthuman realities.

In *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood's description of Crake provides us with an example of a view of the human as mere material to be used for the creation of a new human race. As such, this material can be discarded without ethical implications. In Crake's Paradise compound where he creates the Crakers, representations have entered the body of the real as bodies become texts to be revised and rewritten. Crake's experiments demonstrate representation made real, and this demonstrates a loss of any originary nature, no matter how tenuously conceived. His inability to discern artifice from reality and the essential collapse of the two terms, does not allow him to encounter unmediated reality or empathy through the body, as a site of pleasure or meaning. The creation of the Crakers demonstrates the failure of posthumanism, as their creation erases any conception of the human and vitiates any possibilities for free will or choice. This new posthuman world is indistinguishable from an apocalypse as the rampant virus kills off the human race.

Jimmy, by contrast, maintains a humanist position that claims, "When any civilization is dust and ashes... art is all that's left over. Images, words, music. Imaginative structure. Meaning – human meaning, that is – is defined by them. You have to admit that'" (167). In this view,

material civilization may be altered, but representational systems persist in the form of art. It is this distinction that creates a space for meaning and a standard by which to judge human nature over time. Representational structures unite humans over millennia and create heritage, tradition, and a conception of a common humanity - in short, meaning. Snowman gets the chance to experience and test this hypothesis firsthand. Civilization is indeed dust and ashes, and images, words, and music are losing their ability to create meaning. Snowman occupies this liminal space between the human and posthuman, and it may be, with a lack of humans, that these representational forms can no longer hold. Meaning is constituted through these imaginative structures under the assumption that there are other humans to relate to – those that have come before and those that will come after. As McKibben claims, bioengineering creates the possibility that the new human will “glance back over his shoulder and see a gap between himself and human history... he won’t be able to look forward either. He won’t be able to imagine himself connected with those who will come after him” (64-65). Snowman is poised at the point between the end of the human and the beginning of a new future as he encounters other surviving humans at the end of the novel (374). However, he is unable to relate to either group. The lack of correlation between his imaginative systems and his material reality leaves him in a life devoid of meaning.

Jimmy, with his humanist sensibilities and reliance on words embodies the double bind of representationalism that Atwood continues to investigate in *The Year of the Flood*. According to Bergthaller:

Jimmy and Crake thus have two different but equally flawed answers to the problem of taming the human animal... Jimmy... represents a humanism that fails to understand itself as a bio-political project. He is fully alive to the thrill of artistic beauty, yet does not

understand that it is meaningful not in itself, but because it provides a way of coping with the conflicting tendencies rooted in our biological being. What is absent from *Oryx and Crake* is a perspective that would, as it were, put these two half-understandings together. (Bergthaller 737)

Jimmy is incapable of relating his mind to his body in his experiences after the zero hour. He is aware and appreciative of the possibilities of humanism in his ability to relate to other humans; however, he is unable to maintain these systems when faced with the reality of his body and existence in nature. In a sense, humanist structures only make sense within culture. When Jimmy attempts to carry these structures into nature, he fails miserably. Glover further emphasizes this point, saying, “For after all, what Atwood appear to be saying in *Oryx and Crake* is that being human means being an ethical, cultural and creative, as well as the animal that is *homo sapiens*” (60). What *Oryx and Crake* lacks is this both/and, or an understanding of the human as both biological and cultural. *Oryx and Crake* does not provide us with a way of resolving humanism and posthumanism, or nature and culture; however, Atwood introduces one way of understanding these problematic dualisms in *The Year of the Flood*. Through representations provided by technology and capital, human bodies are reduced to material, a transformation that is further depicted in the treatment of female bodies in *The Year of the Flood*. While, at the end of *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood presents a bleak view of the humanist project in response to extreme posthumanist alternatives and ecological peril, she will attempt to recuperate representationalism with the introduction of the God’s Gardeners in *The Year of the Flood*. Bergthaller claims, “*Oryx and Crake* thus ends with a conceptual impasse that Atwood attempts to resolve in *The Year of the Flood* by retrenching to a qualified humanism informed by evolutionary biology and disenchanting with human nature” (729). Grounding these representations in self-conscious

religious systems that stress ecological interconnectedness and the dignity of matter, Atwood depicts a group of humans that make it out of the apocalypse engineered by Crake to carry on and repopulate the earth.

CHAPTER 2: CULTIVATING THE GARDEN: SUBCULTURAL SPACE FOR IMAGINATION & ETHICS IN
MARGARET ATWOODS'S *THE YEAR OF THE FLOOD*

In our contemporary world, we have become increasingly aware of the manner in which our cultural productions have come to affect the natural environment. As demonstrated by *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood's recent fiction has become ever more concerned with environmental collapse and resource shortages. Disasters, such as Hurricane Sandy in 2012 or the Fukushima nuclear meltdown of 2011, provide us with examples of the ways in which the technologies created by modernity have penetrated the natural. As radioactive material travels on currents across the Pacific Ocean and Hurricane Sandy brings the realities of global warming to America's front door, we can no longer ignore the ways in which our cultural productions have infiltrated what were formerly understood as the natural systems of the earth. Both in our representations of "nature" and our material experience of this realm, cultural systems threaten to overwhelm nature, and, perhaps, already have. It has become increasingly difficult to determine what constitutes the "natural" and the "cultural," the detrimental effects of which are demonstrated in Crake's instrumentalist view of nature. Given these circumstances, in *The Year of the Flood* Atwood asks us to consider if imaginative structures can work to reinstate ethics in our interactions with others, and what political possibilities there might be for restoring these ethics within cultural ideologies.

In our postmodern existence, we are living with what Fredric Jameson termed "the radical eclipse of nature" (34). Jameson frames the problem of this postmodern existence as "the prodigious new expansion of multinational capital... penetrating and colonizing those very precapitalist enclaves (Nature and the Unconscious) which offered extraterritorial and Archimedean footholds for critical effectivity" (49). Without access to nature, an originary space

outside culture, we are unable, in Jameson's understandings, to gain the critical distance necessary to effect political change. We need, as Atwood demonstrates in her most recent trilogy, new ways of thinking, new ways of imagining, a new "cognitive map" (Jameson 54) in order to understand the present and the self in relation to the Other, be it human or non human. In a society that threatens to collapse human and natural identities into materials to be used by the systems of capital, we need to impose a new system of understanding upon our relations with the world in order to inspire a new ethic.

Atwood's fiction provides us with one possibility for a new system of understanding. More than just dystopic story telling, Atwood both imparts a warning and proposes a new ethic of relationality between the self and other. In many of her fictions, Atwood has demonstrated her prescience in diagnosing contemporary society. In *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, Atwood again takes our current society to task as she charts a trajectory from our contemporary society into a post-apocalyptic, posthuman, dystopian future. In *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood describes a divided America ruled by corporations that sell genetic modifications as the newest commodity fetish. As the novel progresses, these commodities, engineered to contain a virus, lead to the downfall of the human race, making room for the posthuman Crakers to take up residence in the now depopulated America. As Atwood continues this story in *The Year of the Flood*, the parallel narrative follows a group called the God's Gardeners through the same apocalypse.

The Year of the Flood, I would argue, has much to say about resistance to the controlling methods of capital as well as the state of the human in relation to the other, outside the realm of capitalist concerns. With her depiction of the God's Gardeners, Atwood describes the formation of a subculture as it reacts against the ideals of the dominant culture. I would argue that the

God's Gardeners react to an objectification of both the human body and land that collapses the distinction between representation and reality, thus offering all matter up to the productive systems of capital. The new imaginative system Atwood provides us with is a recursively constructed cosmology, in which the God's Gardeners apply themselves to a religious system that takes into account the fallibility of man, the ecological connectedness of all things, and the ethics that are derived from such understandings. This new ideology attempts to rectify the failures of Jimmy's humanism and Crake's posthumanism depicted in *Oryx and Crake*. As such, the Gardeners recognize their inclusive position, human and animal, cultural and natural. Ultimately, Atwood demonstrates a subculture that survives when the dominant culture falls upon its own sword, and reimagines a new, ethical relation to the world as the God's Gardeners emerge from the disaster they have termed the Waterless Flood.

This chapter will begin by characterizing the culture in which the God's Gardeners reside, a culture that has given both nature and human bodies up to the capitalist system as raw material, in a continuation of the discussion in *Oryx and Crake*. I will then investigate the God's Gardeners as a subculture, standing against the dominant cultural and political ideologies, as a means of effecting political change as well as individual survival. Finally, I will investigate the religious ideology constructed by the God's Gardeners as an imaginative structure that provides these individuals with an ethic and, ultimately, a means of survival.

BODIES AS RAW MATERIAL: REPRESENTATION & COMMODIFICATION

Atwood's second installment of the trilogy follows two female characters, Ren and Toby, through their lives before joining the God's Gardeners, their time with the God's Gardeners, and their time after the "Waterless Flood," characterized by the mass extinction of the human race engineered by the corporations. The Waterless Flood "was not an ordinary pandemic: it wouldn't

be contained after a few hundred deaths, then obliterated with biotools and bleach” (20). The Waterless Flood could not be prevented or cured by further technological innovations. Instead the outbreak “had all the signs: it travelled through the air as if on wings, it burned through cities like fire, spreading germ-ridden mobs, terror, and butchery” (20). Ren and Toby’s experience of their society as women before the flood occurs constitutes an important ecofeminist critique of biocapitalism that cannot be ignored. Their experience of society is similar to that of the characters in *Oryx and Crake*, but Atwood’s use of the female perspective adds important extensions and qualifications to the society she describes. Their reflections on society before the flood provide a means by which to understand the ruin of society enacted in the Waterless Flood.

Ecofeminism describes a relation between nature and the feminine suggesting that a society that subjugates women is a society that also typically subjugates nature. Ecofeminists have made the argument against an ethic that situates the self against the other in a way that indicates a hierarchy, and thus a logic of domination. Val Plumwood describes this hierarchy as the constructed ground of rationality: “Reason in the western tradition has been constructed as the privileged domain of the master, who has conceived nature as a wife or subordinate other encompassing and representing the sphere of materiality, subsistence and the feminine which the master has split off and constructed as beneath him” (3). Reason’s equating of the female and the natural cannot be overstated. This formulation is largely achieved through a discourse which both naturalizes women and feminizes nature, allowing masculine domination to occur (Soper 139). In one historic example of this formulation, Carolyn Merchant points out that during the 15th century nature and women were equated through discourse, providing the framework for their domination: “Sensitive to the same social transformations that had already begun to reduce women to psychic and reproductive resources, Bacon developed the power of language as a

political instrument in reducing female nature to a resources for economic production” (Merchant 165). In this particular understanding, women occupy a more material existence than men due to their “role[s] in reproduction” making the female “a more corporeal being than the male” (Soper 139). This corporeal existence of women is not empowering but is instead a ground for domination. Women, described through this discourse, do not have access to the cultural markers that indicate rationality, civilization, and humanity that characterize a Western, male existence. They are reduced to representations of reproductive function, occupying the realm of emotion, animality, and nature.

In this way, ecofeminism offers an important understanding of the human body, especially the human female body, as equitable to nature within a patriarchal ethos. However, while reproductive value is one why of understanding the commodification of bodies (as Atwood has investigated in *A Handmaid’s Tale*), *The Year of the Flood* depicts a society that has totalized the commodification of all parts of all bodies. When nature, understood as resource to be used for the creation of new goods, is extended to the human body, this relation takes on an ethical component in the use of human bodies as commodity. Our contemporary society maintains laws against prostitution for precisely this reason. Once bodies become commodified, the intrinsic worth typically maintained as a “self-evident” right goes the way of any other material object. Atwood warns against this view quite clearly in *The Year of the Flood*. Prostitution has become legal “when they outlawed the pimps and the street trade – for public health and the safety of women, they said – and rolled everything into SeksMart under CorpSeCorp control” (7). The sex trade proliferates and the exploitation of female bodies is detailed in Ren’s accounts after she leaves the God’s Gardeners. Prostitution is sanctioned and supported by corporations, predicated through a discourse, not of profit, but of “health and

safety.” The girls who work at Scales and Tails, the club that Ren works in, are seen as “valuable assets,” “the cream of the crop” (7). Prostitutes outside the club are viewed as “hazardous waste” (7). The line between the female body and a material commodity, be it property or waste, has been erased, allowing for the understanding of human bodies as material to be used within systems of capital.

This view of the body as commodity becomes even more problematic in Atwood’s description of Toby’s experience. Toby works at SecretBurgers, a fast food chain that sells hamburgers made of whatever meat can be found. Toby comments, “The meat grinders weren’t 100 per cent efficient; you might find a swatch of cat fur in your burger or a fragment of mouse tail. Was there a human fingernail, once?” (Atwood 33). In this truly disturbing moment, offered in a off-handed manner by Toby, the line between human bodies and meat for the production of hamburgers is dissolved. As a result of this Soylent-Green-like realization, the human is understood in the same way animals have been understood previously. It is not only the female reproductive function that has been commodified in Toby’s society. Every part of the human body is commodified: Toby’s hair fetches a decent sum of money, and she sells all of her eggs on the black market until “there were complications, so she could never donate any more eggs, or – incidentally – have any children herself” (32). Just as ecofemism posits, the fragmented body of woman is divided up and sold across the market. Only valued for its productions, be it parts or labor, Toby’s body is truly understood as a resource for extraction, as nature has been understood through the lens of modernity. The body is only valuable in what it can produce, like eggs and hair, without the previously ethical understanding of the human predicated on autonomy and self-determination. Of her previous life, Toby says, “at least she had something of marketable value, namely her young ass, and therefore she wouldn’t starve to death, and nobody had to feel

guilty” (28). Humanist values have been reduced to market values, and there is no space for understanding the human outside the constraints of capitalism.

The totalized commodification of nature is also clear in descriptions of food as well. Endangered species become a commodity to be sold and eaten, the worth and pleasure of consumption derived from their illegality and status as rare. At one of Toby’s first jobs, she works at a business that skins rare animals and sells the skins as costumes. The meat of the animals is then sold to a restaurant called Rarity. “The public dining room served steak and lamb and venison and buffalo, certified disease-free so it could be cooked rare – that was what “Rarity” pretended to mean. But in the private banquet rooms... you could eat endangered species. The profits were immense; one bottle of tiger-bone wine alone was worth a neckful of diamonds” (31). The endangered animal trade is strictly illegal, but the corruption in the corporations is rampant: “There were pockets within pockets, with a CorpSeCorps hand in each one of them” (31). In this society, nature is valued because it is rare. However, it is not rare due to a desire to experience nature as a space or uncommodifiable other outside of modernity’s expansion of culture, but is instead rare and desirable as a commodity. Nature’s commodification is complete. In the society Toby experiences outside the God’s Gardeners, there is no access to nature as a space for experiencing alternatives to culture, instead everything, from human bodies to nature, is given up to systems of capital that demand commodity.

Capitalist representational structures, compounded by the material realities of severe overpopulation and resource shortages, have allowed human bodies to be seen in the same way nature has been viewed through the lens of modernity. Atwood’s depiction of this society is truly chilling – when “nature” runs out, and “rare” is a commodity, society tries to maintain its previous cultural practices by feeding human bodies into the system. In all of the cases, humans

have just become grist to run through the mill of capitalist, corporation-run system. Again echoing Heidegger's warning in "The Question Concerning Technology," bodies are not valued with an intrinsic dignity that promotes their ethical treatment. Instead, understood as "standing-reserve" human bodies are either commodities themselves or raw material to be used, as labor or material, for the production of more commodities. Heidegger's description of standing reserve serves as the end of representation. Carried to its conclusion, the representations of bodies in terms of marketable value erase the ethical constraints that would have prevented bodies from being understood as material resources for commodification. It is this dominant culture that the God's Gardeners react against in *The Year of the Flood*, creating their own dissident subculture that tries to reinvest the human body with meaning.

THE PRODUCTION OF SUBCULTURE

THE GOD'S GARDENERS AND THE PERSISTENCE OF STYLE

The God's Gardeners that Atwood describes represent a subculture existing both within, and against the dominant, capitalist, corporation-run society. Primarily, the God's Gardeners react against the police state represented by the CorpSeCorp Men and the commodity fetishism of genetic engineering that attempts to preserve an illusion of youth and longevity. Their distrust of the controlling features of these cultural productions causes them to leave society and live apart on a rooftop garden, growing their own food, rejecting the products of corporations, and living sustainably. According to Adam One, the leader of the God's Gardeners, the dominant cultures "view us as twisted fanatics who combine food extremism with bad fashion sense and a puritanical attitude toward shopping. But we own nothing they want, so we don't qualify as terrorists" (48). Due to the totalizing effects of the dominant culture and the understanding of bodies as human resources, it has become imperative that the Gardeners find an existence outside

of culture if they are to maintain their understanding of the body as something pre-capitalist, with an integrity all its own.

If, as Jameson insists, we must find a space outside culture from which to effectively comment upon the dominant culture, subcultures are a good place to look. However, insofar as subcultures extend from and are defined by a parent culture, such investigations may prove limiting. Alan Sinfield frames this question as, “This is a key question: if we come to consciousness within a language that is continuous with the power structures that sustain the social order, how can we conceive, let alone organize, resistance?” (Sinfield 748). As we understand ourselves and our relations with others within languages produced by dominant systems of power, what chance do we have of altering our social and political realities while we continue to operate within their terms? Atwood provides one possibility through her depiction of the God’s Gardeners.

Atwood’s God’s Gardeners, while still marginally subject to the capitalist system – they sell “all natural” products at the local market – provide a qualified space “outside” dominant culture by which to achieve critical discourse. In his review of *The Year of the Flood*, Jameson claims:

Oryx gave us the view of this system from the inside and as it were from above, even though there really does seem to be no oligarchic ruling elite nor any totalitarian party or dictatorship on the old-fashioned modernist dystopian model; *The Year of the Flood* gives us the view from below – always, as we well know, the most reliable vantage point from which to gauge and map a society. (Jameson 1)

Jameson affirms the position of subculture as the best position from which to examine the parent culture. Within the space of Atwood’s narrative, perspectives within the God’s Gardeners

provides a place to look in at culture from the perspective of a disempowered and subordinate class, making an effective critique of her fictional world. Furthermore, part of the power of God's Gardeners comes from their existence both in culture and outside culture. This both/and position makes them both politically and socially active within society while ideologically outside of society, and thus able to effectively comment upon the dominant culture.

The God's Gardeners' existence as a subculture can be formulated in numerous ways. Dick Hebdige's model from *Subculture and the Meaning of Style* provides a useful framework for understanding the Gardeners' reappropriation of objects from the dominant culture, while Jean Baudrillard's formulation is intriguing in demonstrating the Gardeners as a political and social virulence developing out of the dominant culture's controlling practices. In either case, what stands is the God's Gardeners' growth out of the dominant culture that allows them, in their maturity, to exist in radical opposition to culture. This maturity, I believe, demonstrates their political efficacy and personal survival, resisting "incorporation" (Hebdige 92) into the parent culture, and, ultimately, allowing them to carry on to repopulate the earth.

In one of his sermons, Adam One claims, "I have enjoyed viewing the excellent Tree of Creatures created by our Children from the plastic objects they've gleaned – such a fine illustration of evil materials being put to good uses!" (51). Hebdige, in "Subculture and Style" argues that "tensions between dominant and subordinate groups can be found reflected in the surfaces of subculture – in the styles made up of mundane objects which have a double meaning" (431). The God's Gardeners' use of plastic to create the Tree of Creatures demonstrates both the "evil" of the plastic, a symbol of the dominant culture and ecological peril, as well as the Tree of Creatures, ostensibly a reminder of the connectedness of all things. Further, these "objects become signs of forbidden identity, sources of value" (Hebdige 431). The forbidden identity

represented by the Tree of Creatures is one in which the self is instantiated in nature, as opposed to the alienating practices of the dominant culture. The forbidden identity uncovered by this subcultural object is truly a “source of value,” as the object takes from the parent culture and reforms into a symbol of the cosmology of the God’s Gardeners. Through this borrowing from the parent culture, the God’s Gardeners are able to imagine an ethical place for themselves outside consumer culture, in the Tree of Creatures.

The Gardeners’ reuse of objects in a desire to live sustainably serves their material aims as well. The Gardeners attempt to use as few resources as possible, gleaning what they need from waste containers behind stores and restaurants. Ren claims, “There was no such thing as garbage, trash, or dirt, only matter that hadn’t been put to a proper use” (69). As opposed to human bodies, which consumer culture may label as raw material or waste, the Gardeners recuperate the value of matter in all cases. While these understandings of matter are still teleological, often determined by use, they still recuperate the meaning of matter in a way that resists the norms of consumer culture’s designations of waste.

In support of this view, critic Raymond Malewitz claims, the God’s Gardeners “reject the specific premise held by the pleebanders that each object has a singular use value and that once that use has been fulfilled, it is perfectly acceptable to discard the commodity’s husk” (535). Instead, the Gardeners use the practice of recycling to confirm their ideology so that through “God-given powers of creativity... even the useless and discarded may be redeemed from meaninglessness” (160). This act “reobjectifies the world,” according to Malewitz (535). As such, the creation of the Tree of Creatures and other acts of recycling may be seen as a kind of analog for the Gardeners’ desire to reinvest human bodies with meaning. Bodies, termed

meaningless and disposable by contemporary culture, are recuperated from their status as commodity.

CULTURAL CONTROL & POLITICAL VIRULENCE

In addition to Hebdige's formulation of subculture through the development of style, the creation of the kind of subversive, reactionary subculture is described by Jean Baudrillard in his essay "Prophylaxis and Virulence." Baudrillard claims that when a system desires to exert ultimate control over all aspects itself, it will attempt to purge all difference. As a result of this removal, new, harmful elements arise within the system that will eventually lead to its destruction. Baudrillard claims that the growing technological enhancements will "occasion a technological purification of bodies" (34). Technology offers us the opportunity to control all aspects of our bodies, purging disease and weakness. However, bodies then become less effective in dealing with threats as such developments tend to "strip the human body and mind of their systems of initiative and defence" through which the bodies "become eminently vulnerable to science and technology" (34). Our attempts at control will inevitably fail as we cannot know all weaknesses, or as our attempts create new, virulent responses. Of the resulting condition, Baudrillard claims, "we are all potentially immunodeficient," but in more than the literal understanding (35).

As the police force in *The Year of the Flood* is privatized, it seems as though this is exactly the trajectory Atwood's society has taken. "CorpSeCorps started as a private security firm for the Corporations, but then they'd taken over when the local police force collapsed for lack of funding, and people liked that at first because the Corporations paid, but now CorpSeCorps were sending their tentacles everywhere" (25). The CorpSeCorps began consolidating power across the world in an effort for total control. While this control was

welcome at first, the protection it offered was limited. The safety such police forces were intended to maintain prevented citizens from being able to distinguish between safety and control, and when CorpSeCorps became a totalizing power, citizens were unable to fight back; they were immunodeficient.

Through this desire for purification, systems, writ large, end up engineering their own downfall. It has long been said that dictatorships make enemies of their subjects, but this desire for purification in our contemporary landscape threatens all political systems and all individual lives. Baudrillard claims, “Seeming to eliminate all external aggression, they secrete their own internal virulence, their own malignant reversibility” (35). Baudrillard continues to give examples of such virulence, including electronic viruses, terrorism, and cancers, indicating that the “absence of otherness secretes another, intangible otherness: the absolute other of the virus” (37). Otherness cannot be purged, and attempts to do so will only create more virulent, threatening strains of otherness. Chaos, in systems, is necessary because it “imposes a limit upon what would otherwise hurtle into an absolute void” (39). Systems recognize limits of what can and cannot be controlled through the understanding of chaos. The threat of chaos imposes an order on the system, allowing the system to self regulate. If we attempt to purge the chaos from the system, the limits cannot be set, and virulence abounds.

Control characterizes the dystopian society seen in Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*. As the government has privatized its military force, the CorpSeCorps, fear proliferates. Society is broken into a bourgeoisie society in the sterilized Compounds and the sick, impoverished, depraved existence in the Pleeblands. As the Compounds attempt to prevent virulence from entering their sterilized bubble, viruses engineered in the Compound laboratories proliferate, unchecked. In one example from *Oryx and Crake*, Crake’s own mother dies of such a

virus, despite her Compound job, and Crake watches her literally dissolve before his eyes. In the ultimate example of such a virulence, the virus engineered and incorporated into the BlyssPlus pill (a pill intended as a prophylactic that increased sexual pleasure with the side effect of sterilization) kills off the majority of the human race, Compound and Pleeblands alike. Though it was intended as species genocide to purge the earth of the human race, very few human bodies have the capability to ward off such a virus, as we see in *The Year of the Flood*. At the end of the novel, there are perhaps twenty individuals left in what was the United States after the virus runs its course. Such is the Waterless Flood.

Aside from this literal virulence plaguing society, a political virulence is exemplified by the God's Gardeners. The controlling police state witnessed in their society has created significant distrust of corporations, and as a result subcultures, like the Gardeners, have broken off from society, forming their own community in a rooftop garden. Governmental attempts to control the population have resulted in the creation of such a group that does not consume Compound-produced food or drugs, opting instead to grow their own food and herbs for medicinal use. This ideology eventually saves them, but their existence represents the way in which the controlling state secreted dissent. The domestic terrorists represented by the Maddaddam group, possibly the focus of Atwood's third installment, express the extreme of this dissension as they attempt to destroy the parent culture by reappropriating its own technological products to destroy American infrastructure.

The God's Gardeners are born of the totalizing control of the dominant culture and their representative CorpSeCorps men. However, the ideology of the God's Gardeners makes room for the otherness that Baudrillard discusses in "Prophylaxis and Virulence." In one sermon given by Adam One, he says, "True, we are sometimes infested with nanobioforms we would prefer to

be without, such as the Eyebrow Mite, the Hookworm... not to mention the hostile bacteria and viruses. But think of them as God's tiniest Angels, doing His unfathomable work in their own way..." (160). The God's Gardeners have written otherness into their own cosmology. Instead of trying to purify their bodies and landscape, they accept the viruses as part of the "polyphonic symphony of Creation" (160). In making room for this existence, they accept chaos as a limit, and, ultimately, it helps them survive.

Baudrillard's formulation of subculture seems to resonate with Alan Sinfield's perception of the political efficacy of subcultures. Sinfield evokes the metaphor of faultlines to imagine the relation between subcultures and dominant cultures. Instead of framing a space outside of culture by which to comment on dominant practices, Sinfield argues that "...the social order *cannot but produce* faultlines through which its own criteria of plausibility fall into contest and disarray" (Sinfield 755). Like Baudrillard's depiction, Sinfield suggests that the creation of dissent, or virulence, as a condition of apparatuses of power or dominance. Furthermore, Sinfield claims "My argument is that dissident potential derives ultimately not from essential qualities in individuals (though they have qualities) but from conflict and contradiction that the social order inevitably produces within itself, even as it attempts to sustain itself" (Sinfield 752). Dissident power does not emerge from individuals, but from groups, existing within the faultlines of dominant cultural practices. The God's Gardeners represent a model of this dissent as, in their community, they reveal the cracks in ideology and devise an alternate ideology that promote new ethical understandings.

In these formulations of subculture, we see the Gardeners taking up objects from a parent culture and reappropriating these objects for material and ideological ends, as in the Tree of Creatures. Additionally, we see the Gardeners as a "secreted" virulence in Baudrillard's

formulations, as they are born of the controlling aspects of their dominant, corporate-controlled culture. Their interactions with the dominant culture, either in virulent response or the reinterpretation of material objects, asserts their status as both a part of, but separate from their contemporary, commodity-defined culture. It is this both/and space that ultimately empowers the God's Gardeners and allows them to survive the Waterless Flood.

CULTIVATING THE GARDEN

In looking at both Hebdige's and Baudrillard's descriptions of the creation of a subculture, we can find the space that Jameson talks about as necessary for political effectivity. Fredric Jameson claims that

distance in general (including "critical distance" in particular) has very precisely been abolished in the new space of postmodernism. We are submerged in its henceforth filled and suffused volumes to the point where our now postmodern bodies are bereft of spacial coordinates and practically (let alone theoretically) incapable of distanciation...

(Postmodernism 48-9).

I have argued, and will argue, that the model provided by Atwood demonstrates space within the context of the novel – the God's Gardeners – to maintain this type of distance. The subcultural space the characters occupy, avoiding contact with the destructive representations of society, maintains a critical distance by which discourse and practice are able to proliferate in opposition to a dominant culture. The "radical eclipse of nature" (Jameson 49) lifts, and the category of nature is reaffirmed as a space from which to critique culture. As such, the God's Gardeners exist as both a part of culture, as they use the discarded objects of culture to make meaning for themselves, and apart from culture, as they shun the contemporary norms and critique capitalist practices. Their Rooftop Garden thus stands as a material space and metaphor for the Gardeners'

position. Their rooftop is situated within a city, on top of an abandoned building, a space in which they grow their food and look down at the rest of culture. This literal distance becomes metaphorical as the Gardeners' ideology matches their physical position. They are both a part of culture, and distant from culture, and thus able to critique culture without being subsumed by the contemporary ideologies responsible for ecological ruin.

However, insofar as the garden represents a new investment in nature, the material conditions of "nature" may need to be redefined to maintain nature's existence as a theoretical category. This is largely the issue Dana Philips argues in "Is Nature Necessary?" Philips argues that modernists understood nature as "the affirmation of the self in a transcendent moment of realization in which the dross of culture (language, sexuality, history) is clarified, melting away to reveal the roots of culture in nature, and human nature" (205). In a postmodern world, however, "representation has supplanted presence" (206) and "Such encounters with artifice, where one expects to find only the real thing, suggest that we have found a substitute for 'the natural world': in the postmodern world, nature no longer seems to be necessary" (215). As seen in both *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, "nature" has been significantly redefined as "culture." This end of representation, described best by Heideggerian standing reserve, subsumes all underneath the heading of culture. On a material level, this may very well be true. The conflation of nature and culture is quite complete in our own world. In one example, William Cronon claims that our contemporary constructions hold the wilderness up as "an island in the polluted sea of urban-industrial modernity, the one place we can turn for escape from our own too-muchness" (69). However, he argues that wilderness "is quite profoundly a human creation – indeed the creation of very particular human cultures at very particular moments in human history" (69). This structuration of wilderness, often thought of as "nature" par excellence,

threatens to erase all previous understandings of what nature may be. Certainly, within Atwood's world, the boundary is erased. Pigoons, hybrids of pigs and humans, bred for human transplant organs and a bit too rational as a result, represent one instance of this blurred boundary (18). Recalling *Oryx and Crake*, Jimmy and Crake continually get in arguments about whether the newly engineered organisms are "real." Jimmy continually struggles with these categories, attempting, in his postmodern/posthuman world to equate "real" with "nature" and "artificial" with "man-made." In Atwood's world, these categories cannot hold. Culture is absorbing everything around it, including the realm formerly known as nature. In the face of this conflation, however, we *must*, as Philips and Jameson argue maintain an *imaginative* boundary between nature and culture, even if that boundary may not *materially* hold in our postmodern world. As Philips argues:

Meanwhile, we ought to begin what Jameson has called "the practical reconquest of a sense of place," a practice he terms "cognitive mapping." Cognitive mapping entails the establishment of "an *imaginary* relation to the *real*": which I understand to mean the imagination of the real as *real*, as something that *matters*, to use a verb with possibly Heideggerian resonances. (219)

What Philips argues for is an imaginative structure revealing an ethical framework that, despite the materially confusing appearance of things, maintains nature as nature. In this way, reality is not given up to proliferating representations, but is instead grounded again a "reconquest" of a space apart from culture. The God's Gardeners, and the imaginative structure that they base their epistemological and ontological understandings upon, is most definitely a reconquest – they imagine themselves *in relation* to a originary nature that resists the controlling aspects of culture and reinterprets otherness, not as something to be eliminated but embraced. While their position

could be understood as yet another ideology, their imaginative structure affirms them as both in nature and apart from nature, both animal and cultural. The remainder of this chapter will focus on the important implications of this position as an ethic emerges out of this ideology that bridges the gap between Crake's posthumanism and Jimmy's humanism.

IMAGINATIVE STRUCTURES AND ETHICAL UNDERSTANDING

This discussion of subculture yields a model in which the imaginative structures of subculture are remain available while the material practices may be prevented by the dominant culture. Sinfield describes the movement from dissent to practice as follows, "It is through such sharing that one may learn to inhabit plausible oppositional preoccupations and forms – ways of relating to others – and hence develop a plausible oppositional selfhood. That is how successful movements have worked" (Sinfield 749). As the God's Gardeners work together to practice their resistance, they are able to construct an alternate selfhood, based in an alternate understanding of the relation between self and other. Additionally, Baudrillard's discussion of the necessity of such otherness allows us to enter an investigation of the cosmology of the subculture of the God's Gardeners. Created as a reaction to the totalizing representations of the dominant culture that demands human bodies on the order of resource and resistance to the control of culture by its occupation of a subcultural space, the cosmology of the Gardeners provides a means by which to use imaginative structures toward the creation of an ethic. "You create your own reality, the horoscopes always said, and the Gardeners said that too" (284). The construction of their way of life chooses to reaffirm the natural, creating a new "cognitive map" and an imaginary space outside culture for nature. The Gardeners believe in a one-ness of all things, so that they see the destruction of an other being a destruction of the self: "Do not eat anything with a face! Do not kill your own Soul!" (40)... "For when a species dies from Earth, We die a little too" (314). A

crime against the other is a crime against the self within the Gardeners' cosmology, making a space for otherness and chaos that Baudrillard suggests.

Ren and Toby's entrance into the God's Gardeners introduces readers to a cosmology that, though based in Christianity, has taken several liberties with the original particulars of the religion. The ethic proposed by the God's Gardeners writes in a sustainable relationship with the land, a strong distrust of corporations, a faith in the evolutionary process, and an understanding of human fallibility and the failings of language. They, as a subculture, have reappropriated the Christian mythos and carefully constructed a cosmology that stands in direct opposition to the mainstream commodity culture. Largely, the Gardeners believe in the coming Waterless Flood:

A massive die-off of the human race was impending, due to overpopulation and wickedness, but the Gardeners exempted themselves: they intended to float above the Waterless Flood, with the aid of the food they were stashing away in the hidden storeplaces they called Ararats. As for flotation devices in which they would ride out this flood, they themselves would be their own Arks, stored with their own collections of inner animals, or at least the names of those animals. Thus they would survive to replenish the Earth. Or something like that. (47)

Toby, though a member of the God's Gardeners, finds that "the prayers were tedious, the theology scrambled – why be so picky about lifestyle details if you believed everyone would soon be wiped off the face of the planet?" (47). However problematic, these "fugitives from reality" present a useful cosmology constructed against dominant, Western societal norms.

The basis for much of the Gardener's cosmology relies on their belief in the ecological connectedness of all things. Many of Adam One's sermons stress these connections: "We thank Thee, oh God, for having made us in such a way as to remind us, not only of our less than

Angelic being, but also of the knots of DNA and RNA that ties us to our many fellow creatures” (53). Adam’s sentiments in these prayers and sermons often waver between scientific materiality and spiritual mysticism in describing the connections between beings. Scientific understandings are used to strengthen, rather than undermine, the belief in a god or spirit that unites all beings. Adam’s sermons demonstrate a valiant attempt to recuperate scientific knowledge in a way that does not reduce bodies to material, but instead enforce an understanding of the matter as inextricably tied to the spirit or soul.

In addition to the Gardeners’ attempts to create a more ecological ethic, they reject much of the ideology of Western civilization and modernity, which they believe is responsible for the failings of culture in their world. In Toby’s first interaction with the God’s Gardeners, they save her from her work at SecretBurgers and her violent boss, Blanco. As Adam One preaches to the crowd, he says, “I studied epidemics, I counted diseases and dying animals, and people too, as if they were so many pebbles. I thought only numbers could give a true description of Reality” (40). In this moment, Adam One registers his past beliefs as wrong, in that he viewed human bodies as numbers, recalling Heidegger’s warning of the creation of a “standing reserve” of “human resources.” He rejects traditional models of empiricism – the notion that “numbers could give a true description of Reality” – for a new model of thinking, elucidated in his sermons, as an ecological ethic vested in reality that has the ability to see the human as a subject, not a number.

The development of civilization, typically lauded as Hegelian progress, instead signals a continually Fall to the God’s Gardeners:

According to Adam One, the Fall of Man was multidimensional. The ancestral primates fell out of the trees; then fell from vegetarianism into meat-eating. Then they fell from instinct into reason, and thus into technology; from simple signals into complex grammar,

and thus into humanity; from firelessness into fire, and thence into weaponry; and from seasonal mating into an incessant sexual twitching. Then they fell from a joyous life in the moment to the anxious contemplation of the vanished past and distant future. (188)

Instead of viewing these aspects of culture, technology, humanity, rationality, language, self-consciousness, and pleasure, as indicators of progress, the Gardeners reverse the narrative of civilization radically. Instead they are “bent towards an Earth restored to balance” (276). Finally, when the Waterless Flood comes, “all the works of Man will be as words written on water” (312). The Gardeners see the coming destruction as wrought by God for the chance to repopulate the Earth and instill a more ecological ethic.

When Toby questions the cosmology given by the God’s Gardeners, Adam One, the leader, claims, “That being the case, we need to push popular sentiment in a biosphere-friendly direction by pointing out the hazards of annoying God by a violation of His trust in our stewardship” (241). Toby replies, “What you mean is, with God in the story there’s a penalty” (241). The cosmology of the God’s Gardener’s may be consciously constructed, but they accept it as such because it inspires an ethic at odds with a parent culture that threatens to destroy humanity. According to Hannes Berthaller, “It is not enough to simply survive – what is needed is a symbolic order within which the fact of survival can appear as meaningful and good” (Berthaller 738). The Gardeners have created a belief system where there are ethical categories that serve to govern actions. Sustainability, and the resulting survival, is “meaningful and good” while consumerism and subsequent death are evil.

However, the God depicted by the Gardeners is quite qualified as opposed to the typical understanding of the Christian God. When speaking of God, the Gardeners continually refer to His words as the “human words of God” in recognition of human fallibility and the failings of

language (11). Instead, “God cannot be held to the literal and materialistic interpretations, not measured through Human measurements, for His days are eons and thousand ages of our time are like an evening to Him” (11). Shown in relief to the assumptions of Western empiricism, the Gardeners affirm the limitations of the human and of knowledge, avoiding the anthropocentric assumptions that allowed for the ecological destruction of the earth.

Extending out of this belief in the fallibility of human understanding is a distrust of representational structures, such as language. The Gardeners are urged to avoid writing things down. “*Beware of words. Be careful what you write. Leave no trails,*” Ren reflects. “They told us to depend on memory, because nothing written down could be relied on. The Spirit travels mouth to mouth, not from thing to thing: books could be burnt, paper crumble away, computers could be destroyed” (6). Representations, which have allowed for the human body to be seen a resource, as well as language, which is imperfect, from a poststructuralist view, prevents the Gardeners from relying on language in any form.

Most importantly, in contrast to the alienating aspects of the dominant culture that understand human bodies as resources, Toby’s work with the God’s Gardeners instead, quite literally, allows the body to be understood as part of nature. Toby reflects, “Her own hands are getting thicker – stiff and brown, like roots. She’s been digging in the earth too much” (16). The body is seen as a natural being and “a gift from God and you must honour that gift” (378). The cosmology offered by the Gardeners reinvests the body with intrinsic worth, not materialist, commodifiable value. In contrast, when Toby must leave the Gardeners to escape from her former boss, Blanco, she is stuffed into a duck suit to hide her identity. “Oh great, thought Toby. You quack with your foot, you talk through your earhole. I won’t ask how to do any other bodily

functions” (258). Her body, once meaningfully grounded in nature, is symbolically disoriented as she is forced to leave the Gardeners.

In this discourse surrounding the body, Atwood indicates the dual nature of representationalism. Representation, preformed by capitalism, allows for human bodies to be seen as resources for the production of more commodities. However, the life-affirming representation, grounded in an ethic that describes how the self should relate to the other, prevents the objectification of human bodies and allows for continued human existence. Many of the God’s Gardeners do, in fact, survive the Waterless Flood. As the virus ravages the human population, the Gardeners were not infected since they scorned corporation-produced supplements. They lock themselves in the arks of their bodies and wait for the virus to run its course. They live off their stored food, and emerge later, whole.

What Atwood ultimately argues for is the necessity of imaginative structures. She highlights the slippery slope of representationalism, but ultimately affirms the ethic taken from the imaginative structure of the God’s Gardeners by demonstrating their survival. Imaginative structures allow for material objects to be held within categories for ethical consideration, combating the ephemeral, changing nature of material in a technological society. Structures such as these provide epistemological ground for the understanding of matter. The God’s Gardeners maintain the imaginative category of nature, though they are continually faced with examples of its illusory presence. However, maintaining the distinction allows for the ethical framework to which they subscribe and carry through to the new world they will inhabit after the Waterless Flood. The cosmology of the individuals in *The Year of the Flood* is obviously constructed, but constructed in a dialogical ethic that situates the individual body in a more responsible relationship with the land. In doing so, the God’s Gardeners are able, albeit through

representation, to maintain a conception of the material, “natural” self to combat the ubiquity of representations offered up by commodity culture. In this way they are able to prevent the dialectic of man versus wild that Annette Kolodny characterizes in *The Lay of the Land*:

But such speculations are only the beginning: the more we understand how we use language and, conversely, how (in some sense) language uses us, the stronger the possibility becomes that we may actually begin to choose more beneficial patterns for labeling and experiencing that mysterious realm of phenomena outside ourselves and, hopefully, with that, better our chances for survival amid phenomena that, after all, we know only through the intercession of our brain’s encoding. (Kolodny 147)

Instead, the God’s Gardeners, recognizing the representation of the human body offered up by the parent culture and the fallibility of such language and representations, *choose* to understand their bodies differently, and are ultimately saved as a result. In the novel, Toby represents the epitome of this position, as she continually struggles with true belief or faith in the convoluted theology of the God’s Gardeners. When she expresses these doubts to Adam One, he says, “ ‘In some religions, faith precedes action... In ours, action precedes faith. You’ve been acting as if you believe, dear Toby. *As if* – those two words are very important to us. Continue to live according to them, and belief will follow in time’ ” (168). The Gardeners may recognize their theology as constructed, but it does not necessarily matter. Instead, the action preceding belief, the conscious action of follow a certain set of representations, helps the Gardeners emerge from the Waterless Flood.

In Atwood’s *The Year of the Flood*, we experience a world in which we can no longer distinguish between nature and culture. Human bodies are no more than resources for the production of commodities, and the totalizing effects of capitalism are carried through to their

disturbing ends. In order to combat the realities of this world, the God's Gardeners imagine an ethic that resituates the human within the natural, creating a subcultural space for practice and critical discourse that is imperative within this society. More importantly, Atwood provides us with a model for ethics that demonstrates a more ecological understanding of our world as well as a prescient critique of our own commodity-driven culture that is only a few removes from her fictional future. In "Margaret Atwood, the Land, and Ecology," Ronald B. Hatch, claims, "Atwood has something in common with recent ecocentrist writers in her rejection of the anthropomorphic viewpoint and their struggles to re-position humanity as one species among many in a web of natural connections" (181). The imaginative structure of the God's Gardeners certainly demonstrates Atwood's tendency, as it develops an ethic that sees the human as both a part of nature and a part of culture, and this inclusive position demands an acknowledgment of other subjectivities, human and non-human, that leads to the ethical treatment of all.

CHAPTER 3: IMAGINING BOUNDARIES IN ATWOOD'S FICTION

In *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, Atwood demonstrates the harmful consequences of understanding and representing the human body and nature as resource to be used for the production of more goods in a capitalist system. While *Oryx and Crake* demonstrates humanist and posthumanist alternatives entering the post-apocalyptic world, *The Year of the Flood* continues Atwood's diagnosis of the divide between nature and contemporary culture. More importantly, *The Year of the Flood* provides us with both a new imaginative structure that resists the destructive tendencies of science, technology, and capital, and a model by which to begin to establish this system in our understanding and interactions with others. In the subcultural space of the God's Gardeners, we begin to see a space emerge that could continue to promote ecological understanding and cultural criticism in a politically effective manner.

The imaginative structure depicted by the God's Gardeners stresses both the ecological and spiritual connectedness of all things. While the concept of a God is used to enforce these beliefs, the cosmology of the Gardeners largely works to negate the empiricism, commodification, and utilitarianism rendered by a contemporary culture that demands that everything be understood as material for the production of more goods. In Atwood's second novel, *Surfacing*, she investigates what a true ecological existence might look like. *Surfacing*, written in 1972, stands as an important example of Atwood's continued preoccupation with issues concerning the human's relationship with the environment. In the novel, the human narrator living as animal ultimately proves dissatisfying since the narrator denies her markers of humanity – rationality and creativity – that allow for connections amongst others of her species. It is important to return to this novel, not just to understand the scope of Atwood's thinking on the subject of nature and culture, but also because it provides a necessary qualification to

Atwood's later work. In our contemporary world, a natural existence may be desirable, but it is not the answer to the questions Atwood poses in *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*. Atwood does not promote the human returning to a natural state, because this existence lacks meaning without communities formed through interactions with other, and through language. Furthermore, this lack of community between humans prevents large scale change on the social or political level that would help to save not only individuals, but all of society. After this discussion of *Surfacing*, I will then investigate the conversation Atwood creates in these three novels, and the possibilities for ethical involvement with others that resist our contemporary understandings. This chapter will continue to investigate these new understandings of the relation between self and other, turning to Donna Haraway's work. Finally, I will look at the political possibilities of these new understandings as a way of avoiding the ecological ruin Atwood depicts in her novels.

SURFACING, OR IMAGINING A NATURAL EXISTENCE

It should be noted that investigating new ecological ways of being in the world has long been a concern of Atwood's. *Surfacing*, Atwood's second novel, describes an unnamed narrator rejecting culture and living on her own in nature. The narrator, searching for her father around his cabin in the Canadian wilderness, resolves her painful past through her interactions with nature and the spiritual presences she feels there. She sheds her friends, her clothes, her language, and her food, wrapping herself in a sheet and living in a makeshift home in the woodpile. Throughout the course of the novel, the narrator becomes more and more disgusted with Cartesian dualities that demand a split between the mind and the body as well as Western, male-dominated, empiricist culture, simply described by the narrator as the "Americans."

The narrator's frustration with culture is largely tied to the destruction of others, human and non-human, that cultural systems both condone and perform. The narrator is troubled throughout the narrative by a dead heron⁵ that has been hung from a tree by other campers in the area:

Why had they strung it up like a lynch victim, why didn't they just throw it away like the trash? To prove they could do it, they had the power to kill. Otherwise it was valueless; beautiful from a distance but it couldn't be tamed or cooked or trained to talk, the only relation they could have to a thing like that was to destroy it. (118)

In her mind there seems to be no reason for such a death, and the image of the heron begins to haunt the narrator. The narrator claims that the only way in which the "Americans" could interact with the heron was to destroy it. It could not be tamed, resisting the cultural aims of civilization in controlling nature. It could not be cooked, satisfying utilitarian aims that see nature as resources to be used by humans to sustain the self or further cultural progress. It could not, in another method of civilization, be given language by being trained to talk. The heron, resisting all of the means of being understood within cultural systems, could only be killed as a means of demonstrating civilization's power over nature. The dead heron, hanging lynched from a tree, becomes a symbol for all the ways in which civilization is able, or unable, to relate to nature. It is this relation that the narrator continues to interrogate, eventually describing a new relation through her interactions with the land.

⁵ Atwood could be evoking Sarah Orne Jewett's (date) "A White Heron" in which a young girl, Sylvie, encounters a young hunter that wishes to know the locations of a white heron. Sylvie, though knowing the location of the heron, refuses the inquiries of the hunter, and keeps the knowledge of the heron to herself. Atwood's evocation works, possibly, to carry the image of the heron toward our postmodern society. Jewett's text is often read as a Romantic, feminist text. The dead heron in *Surfacing* seems to read as both an evocation and a representative death of Romantic sensibilities about nature.

As she and her companions fish, she becomes increasingly troubled by human interactions with nature, not only in the senseless killing of the heron. “Thud of metal on fishbone, skull, neckless headbody, the fish is whole. I couldn’t anymore, I had no right to. We didn’t need it, our proper food was in tin cans. We were committing this act, violation, for sport or amusement or pleasure, recreation they called it, these were no longer the right reasons” (121). Even though the narrator and her companions eat what they kill, the narrator can no longer find justification for such violence. All the food that they needed existed in tin cans in the cabin and thus there was no reason to kill the fish. This death, while not as senseless as the heron hanging in the tree, is still a death that cannot be justified in the narrator’s mind. However, in this moment, the narrator demonstrates her limited capability to understand what exactly would be a natural death. They may not need to kill the fish; however, the reliance on tin cans for food only serves to dislocate the violence the narrator finds so distasteful. The tin cans do not represent a better alternative to the fishing she and her companions do, but instead demonstrate the narrator’s confusion about ethical choices in the murky space between nature and culture. In the narrator’s logic, the introduction of technology, equated with culture, into the killing of creatures seems to be a source of her dissatisfaction. “If we dived for them and used our teeth to catch them, fighting on their own grounds, that would be fair, but hooks were substitutes and air wasn’t their place” (127). By using hooks and not allowing the fish to fight in its own environment, the humans are, in a sense, not fighting fair. Again, the narrator’s confusion about the natural world is demonstrated. As she romanticizes a more natural human existence, she ignores or is ignorant of the fact that humans can be considered apex predators, and are unlikely to “fight fair” in any case. In this way, the narrator equates ethical and natural, whereas, in nature, ethical considerations do not exist as such. Natural systems are governed by rules outside

the realm of cultural constructed ethics. In any case, the narrator believes that if the human was once again animal, there would be some fairness to the battle for food. Atwood does not seem to promote vegetarianism, but instead argues for a fair fight. Later in the novel, after the narrator's transformation, she claims, "I can catch a bird or a fish, with my hands, that will be fair" (187). For the narrator, there is a sense of ethical fairness in beings fighting, one-on-one, using only their bodies. Technology has alienated humans from their formerly animalistic, pre-cultural forms, and the "surfacing" the narrator undergoes involves a recuperation of this former state.

The narrator's claims about animals and their ethical treatment are quickly expanded to include humans as well. The narrator claims, "Anything we could do to the animals we could do to each other: we practiced on them first" (122). This warning extends her preoccupation with the treatment of animals to the treatment of humans as well. If the senseless killing of animals does not evoke the ethical distinctions the narrator wishes, she sees little hope for the ethical treatment of humans as a result. The narrator continues,

The innocents get slaughtered because they exist, I thought, there is nothing inside the happy killers to restrain them, no conscience or piety; for them, the only things worthy of life were human, their own kind of human, framed in the proper clothes and gimmicks, laminated. It would have been different in those countries where an animal is the soul of an ancestor or the child of a god, at least they would have felt guilt. (129)

The only humans that are worth treating ethically are those that conform to cultural standards, "framed in the proper clothes and gimmicks" (129). Further, the killers and oppressors contain nothing that would allow for ethical treatment, and the narrator becomes nostalgic for a more animistic culture, in which the existence of the spirit of the animal was understood. If animals were understood within familial or spiritual traditions, ethics would follow this ontology. The

narrator's sentiments in this passage echo David Abram's discussion of oral traditions in *The Spell of the Sensuous*: "The 'body' – whether human or otherwise – is not yet a mechanical object in such cultures, but is a magical entity, the mind's own sensuous aspect, and at death the body's decomposition into soil, worms, and dust can only signify the gradual reintegration of one's ancestors and elders into the living landscape, from which all, too, are born" (15). The narrator is nostalgic for this animistic tradition; however, there is little hope of finding these connections that the narrator hopes to recuperate within current cultural understandings.

Finally, the narrator places much of the blame for the lack of ethical treatment of others on the Cartesian separation between mind and body: *Cogito ergo sum*. Abram, like many others, credits Descartes with being one of the first to formulate this distinction. As a result, "material reality came to be commonly spoken of as a strictly mechanical realm, as a determinate structure whose laws of operation could be discerned only via mathematical analysis" (Abram 32). This divorce between the thinking mind and the acting body is defined, by the narrator, as the problem of language. Part of the new imagination the narrator calls for involves the rejection of language, which continually hinders and angers the narrator. She feels as though language is responsible for the fragmentation she feels as she is unable to express the pure emotions she feels and her mind is continually split from her body. She claims, "Language divides us into fragments, I wanted to be whole" (147). Due to this frustration, she will continually reject language, opting for a pure experience of nature. Similar to her discussion on fishing, where technology creates an unfair advantage for humankind, language and other cultural systems make the human into machine. In discussing her boyfriend, Joe, the narrator claims, "For him truth might still be possible, what will preserve him is the absence of words; but the others are already turning to metal, skins galvanizing heads congealing to brass knobs, components and intricate wires ripening inside"

(160). Only the absence of language, the essential technology that has often served to define the human, can prevent culture turning human bodies away from nature and into machines. The narrator's position recalls another of Abram's assertions in *The Spell of the Sensuous*. Like Atwood, Abram claims that without nature, "we have no distance from our technologies, no way of assessing their limitations, no way to keep ourselves from turning into them" (x). Echoing the frustrations of the God's Gardeners, Abram suggests, without access to nature, our bodies become increasingly mechanized. Atwood's depiction of the mind, or rationality, as a mechanical knob at the top of the head, becomes a metaphor for the cultural transformation of the understanding of bodies.

In addition to language, the narrator of *Surfacing* finds fault with the spatial orientation of the human body in maintaining the split between body and mind. As in her discussion of Joe, she frequently characterizes the head as a knob separated from the body - a situation that forecloses upon any possibility of understanding the mind and body as part of a singular organism:

The trouble is all in the knob at the top of our bodies. I'm not against the body or the head either: only the neck, which creates the illusion that they are separate. The language is wrong, it shouldn't have different words for them. If the head extended directly into the shoulders like a worm's or a frog's without that constriction, that lie, they wouldn't be able to look down at their bodies and move them around as if they were robots or puppets; they would have to realize that if the head is detached from the body both of them will die. (75)

This detachment between mind and body, depicted by the narrator as problem of the neck, prevents humans from seeing the mind and the body as one. Furthermore, language, in giving different words for *head* and *body* enforces this division. As a result, the body is alienated, seen

as a robot or puppet, and controlled by the mind. The split between the mind and body is a lie, in the narrator's understanding, and she continually looks for ways to transcend this split.

Much of the narrator's frustration with the Cartesian split seems to agree with Abram's discussion of the body as it relates to our experience of the world. Abram, employing phenomenology, argues that that body is key in our understanding of the world. The thinking mind would have nothing to think about, were it not for the sensory information provided by the body. The body, then, "is that mysterious and multifaceted phenomenon that seems always to accompany one's awareness, and indeed to be the very location of one's awareness within the field of appearances" (Abram 37). In discussion Merleau-Ponty, Abram argues, "Most of us are accustomed to consider the self, our innermost essence, as something incorporeal" (45). However, "the living body is thus the very possibility of contact, not just with others, but with oneself – the very possibility of reflection, or thought, of knowledge" (45). All thought, indeed, the entire sense of self that has constituted the Cartesian mind, cannot exist without the body. Through the body, we are placed within a world that is in constant reciprocity with the self. "Far from restricting my access to things and to the world, the body is my very means of entering into relation with all things" (Abram 47). Abram suggests that it is the perceptive capability of the body that will allow us to see the world, not as inert matter, but as a constant vibrant force in interaction with us.

The narrator's revelation in *Surfacing* seems to mirror Abram's call for a more animistic understanding of the world. The narrator's preoccupation with the consumption of animals and her disgust with the divorce between mind and body come together as the narrator begins to imagine a religiously oriented ethic that will allow for her transformation toward a more animalistic way of being:

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

In this important passage, the narrator imagines the animals and plants humans consumed as Christ, a being that dies so that humans may live. Animals die so that humans may continue to live, and live without killing each other. She sees this death as a resurrection within the consuming body that worships that which it has consumed. However, the head, that knob, refuses to grant Christ-like status to that which is consumed, but the body, she claims, worships that which is consumed in a proper way. This revelation, redefining the problems of Cartesian duality as well as the death of animals, will guide the narrator through her transformation.

As a result of her transformation, the narrator's perception, understanding of the world, and material existence are all changed. She burns all images of her past, and "When nothing is left intact and the fire is only smoldering I leave, carrying one of the wounded blankets with me, I will need it until the fur grows" (182). She takes one blanket, imagining a transformation of her body in the near future. She first eats from her father's garden, but soon rejects this food, as it is cultivated. She moves into the woods, eating only those plants she finds there. In addition to shedding cultural forms of sustenance, she sheds her language as well: "Sight flowing ahead of me over the ground, eyes filtering the shapes, the names of things fading but their forms and uses

remaining, the animals learned what to eat without nouns” (151). Instead of relying on language to make sense of things in the world, she relies on pure perception based in images. As the narrator rejects language, she is able to identify closely with elements of language and, in a sense, become these things. “The animals have no need for speech, why talk when you are a word. I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning... I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place” (187). The action of her body, leaning against a tree, becomes transformed into the thing itself as she becomes a tree leaning. As language falls away, so too does the separation of her body and the natural world she inhabits. She becomes the place itself. Citing Merleau-Ponty from *Phenomenology of Perception*, Abram describes this new ontology one in which “we may ultimately describe perception as a mutual interaction, an intercourse, ‘a coition, so to speak, of my body with things’” (Abram 55). The narrator blends with the landscape, becoming the tree and becoming the place. “So the recuperation of the incarnate, sensorial dimension of experience brings with it the recuperation of the living landscape in which we are corporeally embedded” (Abram 65). This new, animistic sentiment, provides the narrator with a way of understanding herself as both a part of the world, while still maintaining her human self within the world.

These realizations give way to a larger understanding of the world. Shortly before her boyfriend, Joe, left for the mainland, she believes she has become pregnant. As a result of her newfound awareness of her body, she feels the procreative nature of the earth. She reimagines the heron, no longer seeing it as an image of destruction wrought by culture, but instead as a image of connection between all elements of the earth. “I remember the heron; by now it will be insects, frogs, fish, other herons. My body changes, the creature in me, plant-animal, sends out filaments in me; I ferry it secure between death and life, I multiply” (172). The narrator’s

transformation allows her to recognize cycles of life and death, and her body can now be understood within the context of the systems of the earth: “If our bodies lived in the earth with only the hair sprouting up through the leaf mold it would seem as if that was all we were, filament plants” (151). This image connects all beings, human or otherwise, rooting them in the earth.

Like *Oryx and Crake*, *Surfacing* ends with the narrator musing on whether or not to move toward connection with another human or to stay, alone, in nature. The end of the novel is not a utopic vision of a peaceful existence in nature; instead the narrator considers the option of returning to culture. The narrator acknowledges that culture will not accept her. Looking in the mirror, she says, “This was the stereotype, straws in the hair, talking nonsense or not talking at all. To have someone to speak to and words that can be understood: their definition of sanity... They would never believe it’s only a natural woman, state of nature...” (196). As she mutters to herself in the mirror, she views herself not through the lens of nature but through the lens of culture. She has become a stereotype, a concept that can only have meaning within culture. She recognizes that she will be considered insane since she does not conform to cultural norms. Those in culture will “never believe” or will refuse to believe that she is simply a natural woman. As Abram says, within cultural assumptions there is “a real inability to clearly see, or focus upon, anything outside the realm of human technology, or to hear as meaningful anything other than human speech” (27). Culture and cultural systems seem to preclude all else; there is a sense that nature cannot be seen within culture. At the end of the novel, there is no way for the narrator to resolve the gap between nature and culture as she stands in the woods looking out at the shore. She says, “To trust is to let go. I tense forward, towards the demands and questions, though my feet do not yet move” (198). Despite the narrator’s transformation, she is still caught between the

demands and questions of the mind, and the movement of the body. The final pages of the book do not indicate which the narrator chooses, but her inability to decide at the end of the novel suggests that the body/mind and nature/culture cannot be resolved.

This resolution is largely what Atwood has investigated in much of her fiction. While *Surfacing* provides us with an idealistic vision of what might be gained, the ending calls into question the feasibility of such an existence in today's world. Additionally, *Surfacing*, though dealing with many of the themes present in *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, shows us a personal vision of existence within nature. On one hand, Atwood, like her narrator in *Surfacing*, is hesitant in giving up the ties to other human beings that culture provides. Becoming wholly animal means giving up rationality, creativity, and imagination, leading to a deeply dissatisfying existence in the world. On the other hand, however, something must change in our current understanding in the world if we are to envision a different future than that described by *Oryx and Crake*. This way of being in the world cannot be maintained in the social or cultural sphere. Instead, *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* provide us with cultural commentary and political models where the ethics described by *Surfacing* may be imagined in larger, social or political contexts.

In this way, Atwood critiques yet another humanist position: the primacy of the individual. Instead, focusing on the individual as a source of truth or meaning denies the way in which cultural systems, or ideologies, are formed. According to Alan Sinfield,

The essentialist-humanist approach to literature and sexual politics depends upon the belief that the individual is the probable, indeed necessary, source of truth and meaning... But thinking of ourselves as essentially individual tends to efface processes of cultural production and, in the same movement, leads us to imagine ourselves to be autonomous,

self-determining. It is not individuals but power structures that produce the system within which we live and think, and focusing upon the individual makes it hard to discern those structures; and if we discern them, hard to do much about them, since that would require collective action. (Sinfield 749)

Sinfield's observations are reflected in the dissatisfying ending of *Surfacing*, and in Atwood's discussion of the possibilities for social or political change in *The Year of the Flood*. Personal visions of a new life cannot expose culturally produced ideologies in a manner that can call for change. Systems of meaning are produced collectively, and must be changed collectively. Individuals, like Jimmy or the narrator of *Surfacing*, cannot alter ideological structures personally, though humanism may suggest this power. Instead, it is the collective that must work to change these ideologies if we are to imagine a more positive future. The remainder of this paper will focus on possibilities for altering dominant ideologies toward the development of more ethical alternatives.

"PLEASURE IN THE CONFUSION OF BOUNDARIES"

The unresolved ending of *Surfacing* hints at a deep-seated dissatisfaction with the nature/culture divide. The narrator desires to live a "natural" existence away from a culture that has fractured her identity and her body. At the same time, she desires the connection with other humans that is provided by communal culture. There is no way of existing in both of these spaces in the narrator's contemporary world. Similarly, *Oryx and Crake* sets up dualist divisions such as nature/culture and real/artificial. Jimmy, in his liminal position as last man, finds it increasingly difficult to maintain these categories and the meaning associated with them due to increasing technological innovations. Additionally, his humanist perspective fails him in his posthuman world as he is unable to relate words to his surroundings or feel empathy with the

Crakers. Finally, the cosmology of the God's Gardeners depicted in *The Year of the Flood*, while not perfect, takes steps towards resolving the disparity between nature and culture while promoting an ecological understanding that stresses the connectedness of all things, human and nonhuman, self and other, nature and culture.

This connectedness, within our contemporary world, has been practically and theoretically imagined in contemporary conversations about nature and technology. In Donna Haraway's seminal *A Manifesto for Cyborgs*, she theorizes the concept of the cyborg as a means by which to combat problematic conceptions of nature and culture. Like Atwood, Haraway identifies great importance in the imagination as a means by which to achieve a more sustainable understanding of the human. As Haraway states, "I am making an argument for the cyborg as a fiction mapping our social and bodily reality and as an imaginative resource suggesting some very fruitful couplings" (8). Like the God's Gardeners, who provide the most hopeful model for this new understanding, this new cosmology, that of the cyborg, is based in the imagination and is understood as a fiction, a necessary construction. Expanding on this point, Haraway claims:

In the traditions of 'Western' science and politics – the tradition of racist, male-dominated capitalism; the tradition of progress; the tradition of the appropriation of nature as resource for the productions of culture; the tradition of reproduction of the self from the reflections of the other – the relation between organism and machine has been a border war. The stakes in the border war have been the territories of production, reproduction, and imagination. This essay is an argument for *pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and for the *responsibility* in their construction. (8)

While Haraway echos the concerns of many of Atwood's characters – *Surfacing's* narrator's disgust with Western empiricism and Cartesian thought, Jimmy's frustration with artificiality,

and the God's Gardener's ecofeminist concerns – she finds the source of these dissatisfactions. In looking at the works discussed in this study, these dissatisfactions stem from a desire to confine objects within ideological boundaries that can no longer hold. The answer is not to reverse the dualism, privileging, say, nature over culture, but to instead find pleasure in the confusion of these boundaries. Like the God's Gardeners, Haraway argues for boundaries (as boundaries must exist for such pleasurable confusion to occur), but these boundaries must be responsibly constructed. While we may need a new cognitive map, or a new “imaginary relation to the real,” to again invoke Dana Philips, there is something to be gained in the confusion of the boundaries we have constructed (Philips 219). In Haraway's cyborg, “Nature and culture are reworked; the one can no longer be the resource for appropriation of incorporation by the other. The relationships forming wholes from parts, including those of polarity and hierarchical domination, are at issue in the cyborg world” (Haraway 9). Those structures that have demanded domination of others, or others understood as Heideggerian standing reserve, are erased in this reworking, providing an ethic very similar to that desired by the God's Gardeners.

Haraway's work stresses not only the pleasure in the blurring of boundaries but the powerful political resonances a position such as the cyborg may hold. Haraway states, “The cyborg is the ontology; it give us our politics. The cyborg is the condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centers structuring any possibility of historical transformation” (8). In this passage, Haraway suggests that her definition of political change depends on the imagination's ability to create and implement a change in material reality, allowing for “historical transformation.” Haraway continues, “So my cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work... a slightly perverse shift of perspective

might better enable us to contest for meanings, as well as for other forms of power and pleasure in technologically mediated societies” (12-13). The cyborg, in particular, representing the blurred boundary of nature and culture, is a “perverse” position that is better able to contest the meanings and power structures normalized by contemporary culture.

The characters of Atwood’s I have discussed in this study all struggle with moving forward in “technologically mediated societies” (Haraway 13). All are disgusted with some aspect of their society, and attempt to encourage a new, sometimes misguided, ethic within it. To begin, the narrator of *Surfacing* attempts to reverse the dualist boundary between nature and culture, and become wholly natural. This position ultimately fails because the answer to a better imaginative relationship with the more than human world does not exist in rejecting culture and the human entirely, but instead in finding power and pleasure in the blurred boundary, without obscuring the boundary altogether. In her transformation, she gives the self up to her hungers and instincts, a position that is empowering at first, but ultimately dissatisfying. The narrator desires connection between herself and other humans. While she is more aware of nature, she has lost an integral part of herself that does not allow for meaningful existence. Furthermore, to create political change in the world, community and other social structure must exist. The answer to political crises, for Atwood, is not to run away from culture and live in the woods. This conclusion forecloses upon any possibility of widespread political and social change. Our ecological situation was not created by single individuals, but the whole of civilization, and must be solved by the whole of civilization. Denying culture and returning to nature will not help create the large-scale change necessary for our global society to remain sustainable. In her two latest novels, Atwood attempts to find a way to resolve these important aspects of nature and culture without denying space to either.

Like *Surfacing*'s protagonist, Crake ultimately sees society as not worth saving. However, unlike *Surfacing*'s narrator, his disgust with society stems, not from a romanticized understanding of nature, but from his understanding of the society's totalized artifice – there is no difference between representation and reality. His attempt to make a posthuman that denies humanist impulses in favor of more ecologically constructed being is the extreme case of the blurred boundary, and, perhaps, even the cyborg. The creation of the Crakers erases important aspects of the human that allows a boundary between human and animal to exist. As Crake revises his new species's biology, he attempts, though he may not succeed, in erasing imagination and creativity – those aspects of the human that are responsible for both ethical and unethical behavior. His inability to see any good in the world causes him to delete all aspects of the human that are responsible for atrocities, but in doing so he also erases those aspects that define the human itself, such as the imagination required for meaningful political and social change.

Though there is the position of empowerment in Haraway's understanding of the cyborg, she also describes the possibility of an "informatics of domination" as matter becomes increasing manipulated by those skilled with knowledge and power (20). She warns that, "we are living through a movement from an organic, industrial society to a polymorphous, information system – from all work to all play, a deadly game" (20). Crake may stand as an example of the informatics of domination par excellence. His understanding of human bodies their genetic codes as material to be rewritten and rearranged, demonstrates his understanding of the world as all play without ethical constraint in the treatment of these materials. As such, "No objects, spaces, or bodies are sacred in themselves; any component can be interfaced with any other if the proper standard, the proper code, can be constructed for processing signals in a common language" (22).

In Crake's world, genetic code represents just this common language, as he is able to interface between humans and animals, creating new bodies and new species. In this new understanding of the world, Haraway expresses some of the same ambivalence Atwood describes in her coinage of *Utopia* since "potent oppositional international movements [become] difficult to imagine and essential for survival" (23). Movements that call for radical change form with increasing difficulty in a society that threatens to discard the ethical considerations that governed matter in favor of infinite play. However, these movements are necessary for survival if we are to demand ethics from these ever-evolving circumstances. Haraway, like Atwood, does not provide a solution to these problems but sketches out the great promise and great fear that these new understandings give us. In an answer to the informatics of domination, Haraway states, "...the phrase should also indicate that science and technology provide fresh sources of power, that we need fresh sources of analysis and political action" (25). In my understanding, Atwood provides us with the new sources of analysis and action as she investigates old models of understanding and creates a new model for dissidence in *The God's Gardeners*.

In this way, Atwood, through her investigation of Jimmy, discards humanist models for understanding and ethics in her fictional future. Jimmy clings on to humanist values that do not hold as his past is dissolved and his future becomes uncertain. Of these principles, Haraway claims, "It is important to note that effort to construct revolutionary standpoints, epistemologies as achievements of people committed to changing the world, has been part of the process of showing the limits of identification... None of 'us' have any longer the symbolic or material capability of dictating the shape of reality to any of 'them'" (16). Jimmy, though he tries to identify with humans and posthumans, is doomed to fail because identification cannot create meaningful understandings of his self as part of his environment. Identification does not change

the subject's understanding of the self; it only allows the self, for a moment, to imagine being other, a skill both limited and unfeasible in our time. Furthermore, Jimmy's humanism is limiting because it clings too tightly to categories that are no longer accurate in late capitalist technocracy. Instead of understanding the confusion and flow across boundaries, he still attempts to set objects and ideas into strict distinctions between human/animal, natural/artificial, and real/simulacra. However, as his interactions with Crake and his experiences with the Crakers demonstrate, these distinctions cannot adequately order his world any longer. In his reliance on his humanist dogma, he finds that his language fails, and he is left in a world devoid of meaning.

As I have said before, as Atwood's novels stand now, the God's Gardeners of *The Year of the Flood* seem to represent the most empowered, ethical, and sustainable group of people we have met. Most closely following Haraway's theory of the cyborg, they have blurred the boundary between nature and culture in their rooftop garden. The subcultural space is always a blurred area, as it extends out of but contests the dominant culture. The subculture is not cut off from the dominant culture, but interacts with the dominant culture as information and material objects flow between them. However, in this space, the God's Gardeners utilize their imaginations toward the creation of a new cosmology, an example of Haraway's "cyborg writing." Haraway claims, "Cyborg writing must not be about the Fall, the imagination of a once-upon-a-time wholeness before language, before writing, before Man. Cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other" (33). While the Gardeners may be limited by their imagination of an originary wholeness and their concern with the Fall, they are aware that they cannot go back. Nature, as it once existed, is no longer: "We cannot go back ideologically or materially" (Haraway 21). The Gardeners, at their heart, are forward thinking. They envision

the future as an Eden, but a highly qualified and hard fought place, more mythologically than materially Edenic in the traditional sense. Their new writing, conferred orally through their hymns and sermons, is certainly about survival as well as about the appropriation of the contemporary material culture that marked them, and everyone else, as “other,” as material and commodity to be used by systems of capital.

The God’s Gardeners provide an example of Haraway’s cyborg theory not only methodologically, but ideologically as well. In cyborg theory, “The dichotomies between mind and body, animal and human, organism and machine, public and private, nature and culture, men and women, primitive and civilized are all in question ideologically” (22). Additionally, “One should expect control strategies to concentrate on boundary conditions and interfaces, on rates of flow across boundaries – and not on the integrity of natural objects” (22). In defining themselves relationally, both to culture and to nature, the dichotomies between these boundaries become increasingly murky, however, the Gardeners seem to take much solace in this fact. They do not deny their human sensibilities but also wish to be more like the animals they revere. They maintain boundaries, but construct them responsibly, and understand the flow across these boundaries. Atwood, who considered calling *The Year of the Flood* by the alternate title *Serpent Wisdom*, sums up the Gardeners’ sentiment in the following hymn:

God gave unto the Animals
A wisdom past our power to see
Each know innately how to live,
Which we must learn laboriously...

The Serpent is an arrow bright

That feels the Earth's vibrations fine
Run through its armoured shining flesh,
And all along its twining spine.

Oh, would I were, like Serpents⁶, wise –
To sense the wholeness of the Whole,
Not only with a thinking Brain,
But with a swift and ardent Soul. (236)

From Haraway's cyborg theory, we can see, within the study of the God's Gardeners, a way of understanding the world as a relational whole that does not negate the construction of boundaries, but stresses the importance of the transgression and flow across these boundaries. Echoing Jameson, Haraway's theory provides a new map, based in an imaginative construction, that holds important political resonances echoed in the Gardeners' existence as a subculture.

THE POWER AND POSSIBILITY OF THE IMAGINATION

To conclude, I return to Jimmy's assertion from *Oryx and Crake*. "When any civilization is dust and ashes," he said, 'art is all that's left over. Images, words, music. Imaginative structure. Meaning – human meaning, that is – is defined by them. You have to admit that'" (167). What exists in all of Atwood's writing is the primacy of the human imagination, and its ability to persist through hardship as the ultimate form of survival. The answer to issues of ecological peril

⁶ It is interesting to note that the Atwood's and the Gardeners's use of serpent imagery serves as yet another careful appropriation of meta-narrative for the creation of their own ideology. Though the Gardeners use a distinctly Christian setting for their cosmology, they reject the connotation of the serpent as evil, as it represents the promise of forbidden knowledge and the resulting Fall. Instead, in their recuperation of a more pagan understanding of the serpent, they again emphasize the natural, biological qualities of the serpent body as opposed to the cultural meaning given to the serpent through Christian narrative.

is not to deny the human imagination, opting for a more natural existence, as in *Surfacing*. Instead, *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* test Jimmy's hypothesis. The apocalypse occurs, and the remaining individuals are left with nothing but their imaginative structures to guide them in their new world. Atwood's third novel, *Maddaddam*, will likely explore existence in this new world, what imaginative structures persist as the community attempts to survive. The Gardeners, for their part, have given us a view of what political methodology and communal ideology could help remake the world. According to Bergthaller, "This is, one suspects, the reason why Atwood chose a Christian background for the Gardeners... the Christian emphasis on the absolute sovereignty of an extramundane God resonates with Atwood's own views on the equally momentous sovereignty of the human imagination" (741). The human imagination holds much possibility, and is responsible for much evil and much good. However, the responsible construction of boundaries modeled by the Gardeners, provides us with an importance representation of what a more ethical, meaningful, and sustainable world could look like.

Atwood's novels exist as an imaginative exercise in what our world could like – a much needed exercise as we begin to feel, more acutely, our dire ecological situation. Atwood's creation of this world, an ultimate act of human imagination, allows for us, as readers, to imagine outside of our contemporary world to see what is coming and what we can avoid as we enter a heightened technological future. In his study of Atwood, Gerry Canavan claims, "The apocalypse is the only thing in our time that seems to have to the capacity to shake the foundations of the system and 'jumpstart' a history that now seems completely moribund – the only power left that could still create a renewed, free space in which another kind of life might be possible" (139). In imagining the apocalypse, and forcing readers to experience the apocalypse along with her, Atwood provides a "free space" similar to that of the Gardeners. In

the text of the novel, we experience an outside of culture, a space from which to look back from our fictional future and critique our contemporary mode of being. Atwood, in laying bare our possible future, allows us to see what might be possible and what changes we can make if we desire to avoid the impending Waterless Flood. Her fiction alerts us to our own blurred positions, our own politically promising situations. In recognizing our potential futures, we are able to create responsible boundaries, and find pleasure in their confusion instead of attempting to reify or erase these differences. Ultimately, we are able to value our own imaginations and our ability to envision a better existence for ourselves and for our future.

CONCLUSION: IMAGINING FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Margaret Atwood's speculation on the ecological issues, technological innovations, and the political and ethical responses to our rapidly changing society leaves us with much to contemplate as we move into the future. *Oryx and Crake* shows us the future we could inhabit if we refuse to impose ethical boundaries on the technologies we create and utilize. The character of Crake warns us the dangers of science and of what can happen if we lose the differentiation between representation and reality. Posthumanist understandings must evolve differently if we are to maintain ethics in the future. Furthermore, Atwood suggests that humanist ideals have little hope of sustaining us into the future, as our interaction with other becoming increasingly difficult to define. What is needed is a new imaginative structure that can organize our new world and help us to move into a more hopeful future.

The God's Gardeners of *The Year of the Flood* are the most hopeful alternative we have within the context of Atwood's fiction. The answer to our technological circumstance is not to return to nature, as does the protagonist of *Surfacing*, but instead to find a way to understand ourselves as both animal and culture, and take pleasure in the confusion of boundaries. The God's Gardeners raise important questions of political and social change, and how to enact these desired changes within dominant cultures that demand all material, from bodies to nature, be given to systems of capitalist technocracy. The Gardeners reveal a political and material space between nature and culture that allows for critical distance, political empowerment, and personal survival as they develop their ecological ethic that supports the dignity of all things.

In terms of future directions for this investigation of Atwood, I would like to situate Atwood's *ustopia* within the larger genres of utopia and dystopia. In *Archaeologies of the Future*, Frederic Jameson asserts that utopic and dystopic literature emerge out of specific

historical circumstances, and may provide effective political models to encourage social change (xiv). Atwood consciously engages in this form, and situating her within this tradition may lend much to my discussion of the political efficacy of Atwood's project. Additionally, I would like to further theorize the space of the garden as it stands, historically, as a place both cultivated and natural, demonstrating the God's Gardeners' place as a permeable boundary that confuses the categories of cultural and animal. Finally, I am looking forward to investigating Atwood's final installment of the trilogy within the schema developed by this paper. Will better alternatives arise for dealing with the constraints of capitalism and impending ecological ruin?

Outside of the conversation surrounding Atwood's novels, I would like to engage with other speculative genres, particularly those that suggest the utopic possibilities of technology. Science fiction, with its focus on modifying the human towards a posthuman or transhuman being, is a fruitful area of study. I'm interested in investigating issues of nature, technology, and futurism as it relates to this genre. More specifically, I would like to study the ways in which materiality and representation are altered in speculative futures that do not necessarily demand that humankind (if they can still be called human) exist within bodies. The boundary confusion within these speculations proliferates, and I would be interested to see how categories are maintained or erased and how ethics are developed as a result.

Finally, I am always interested in what role literature and art can play in changing our material, socioeconomic, or political circumstances. While Atwood's literature helps us to imagine the danger and hope implicit in our future, can her literature help to change anything in our experience or treatment of the more-than-human world, or others? What are the limits of literature in inspiring ethics, and what are the possibilities? Are the models Atwood provides feasible, or are these models increasingly difficult to move from the imagination into action?

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