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## “Red Reading” Atwood’s *MaddAddam* Trilogy

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(Friday, 10:00-11:30, Camellia 4)

Like our presence here – on land which is simultaneously claimed by Piscataway *as well as* the United States – I want to engage in a border blurring, by using Indigenous theories to analyze the binaries in Atwood’s *MaddAddam* trilogy.

For decades, Atwood’s fiction has been based on binaries and their blurring and convergence. This is the structure of *Oryx and Crake*, *The Year of the Flood*, and partially, *MaddAddam*. In the first two novels, the separated protagonists narrate their past- and present-lives before and after a global pandemic. By the novels’ end, this temporal and spatial binary structure has collapsed as the characters are reunited at the same time and place. Similarly, Atwood’s characters emphasize the destructive nature of dichotomies. The protagonists of the trilogy dramatize the violence – to themselves, others, and the world around them – as a result of polarized binaries like human or animal, self or other, life or death, activity or passivity. Narrative tension and resolution often stems from characters realizing the danger of polarization, before returning to a more unified form of duality. This is representative of Atwood’s interest in a non-binary alternative – or a “third thing” – which escapes the destructiveness of polarization. In a 1973 interview with Graeme Gibson, Atwood defined her theory of the “third thing” by saying it’s “some kind of harmony with the world, which is a productive or creative harmony, rather than a destructive relationship towards the world” (Gibson 26). Though vague, few other descriptions appear in her work, despite its importance to her style.

Insight may be found, though, in Atwood’s references over the years to Indigenous philosophies. Atwood hints at this connection, saying that *Oryx and Crake* came to her after visiting the caves where “Aboriginal people had lived continuously, in harmony with their environment, for tens of thousands of years” (Atwood, qtd. in Mendelsohn, n.pag.). In *Violent Duality: A Study of Margaret Atwood*, Sherrill Grace makes one, uncited reference to Ojibwe philosophies. When I asked her about it, Grace told me “...I remain convinced that Atwood reaches for a path that surpasses the rigid binaries of most western philosophy and ontology” (Grace 2019, n.pag.)

My paper proposes to explore this path further, suggesting that the way *MaddAddam* “surpasses the[se] rigid binaries” is illuminated by the philosophies of the Ojibwe, a transnational

Indigenous tribe whose territory encompasses Atwood's home of Toronto. Drawing Atwood's "third thing" together with Ojibwe worldviews, I conduct what Scott Andrews calls a "red reading" of *MaddAddam*, or "an interpretation of a non-native text from a native perspective" (Andrews, *i*). *Crake* and *Flood* end on an unresolved binary situation of kill or be killed. As the continuation of the story, *MaddAddam* clearly functions as the border-blurring alternative to these earlier binaries. However, when the protagonists of *MaddAddam* face the same crisis, a new, third narrator is introduced. When this narration is read through Ojibwe worldviews, the structuring binaries are systemically undermined. Unlike the earlier novels, *MaddAddam* does not end with unitary convergence but with a multiplicitous and interconnected perspective, one that gives insight into the nature of Atwood's "third thing."

Atwood's description of the "third thing," as "a productive harmony with the world," is oddly similar to how Ojibwe to define *Mino-Bimaadiziwin*, or "the way of the good life" (Rheault 104). The Ojibwe believe that Creation is "the unity, balance, and harmony of *all the parts*," set to the rhythm of generation, growth, death, and regeneration (Rheault 144). In this cycle, death is a necessary part of life. Also, the generating spirit of Creation, called *manidoo*, is shared between human, nonhuman, and other-than-human beings. This means everything – humans, deer, trees, lakes – has a role to play in maintaining the balance of the world. Your actions should always seek to continue this productive balance, and not, as Atwood would say, to enter into a "destructive relationship towards the world."

One way of understanding a worldview better is by looking at the language. Ojibwemowin, the language of the Ojibwe, illuminates three relevant aspects of Ojibwe epistemologies.

1) First, verbs vastly outnumber nouns. The Ojibwe view the world more in terms of dynamic processes than linear cause-and-effect between static subjects and objects (Gross 100). When this is applied to storytelling – a central form of teaching and strengthening Ojibwe communities – it means that a storyteller is constantly shifting between telling and hearing the story (Gross 162). Lawrence Gross writes that there is no difference between an Ojibwe storyteller and the audience.

2) Second, Ojibwemowin separates words into animate and inanimate categories. These categories aren't permanent, and animacy extends to what would typically be understood by Westerners as abstract "things" or inert "objects." Stories, drums, and animals are all imbued with *manidoo*; therefore, they are known to have agency and influence over the world (Vizenor 40).

Anthropologist Irving Hallowell explains that the Ojibwe sacred stories, the *aadizookanag*, are “thought of as conscious beings, with power of thought and action” (27). Hallowell calls these metaphysical beings “other-than-human persons,” since the category of “person” is “by no means limited to human beings” (20). As other-than-human persons, the sacred stories are not abstract narratives to be passively *told*, but act as participants in their own storying process. The story or song must be invoked for it to fulfill its teaching or healing role. To summarize, the storiier, the audience, and the story together are all participants in the process of storying and its the process, not single participants, which can heal or teach.

3) Finally, Ojibwemowin also features a fourth-person tense – called the obviate – which refers to a distant third person. Ojibwe theorist Gerald Vizenor explains that the voice of the physically absent fourth person is heard *through* the speaker, who speaks this “absent” person into virtual presence. To borrow from Mikhail Bakhtin, the speaker is double-voiced: he does not speak with a single, essential voice; instead, multiple voices are heard simultaneously (Bakhtin 75, 218). Animate nonhuman and other-than-human persons are also known to have voices; thus, they too may appear as a fourth-person presences in oral or written stories.

These details make clear how the Ojibwe emphasize the balanced tension within duality: that is, the simultaneity and interconnectivity of humans *and* animals, the self *and* the other, life *and* death, past *and* present. For these reasons, Ojibwe *Mino-Bimaadiziwin* offers a unique advantage over the rigid, bordered binaries of Western worldviews when analyzing *MaddAddam*.

As mentioned above, *MaddAddam* repeats the binary thematics and temporal and spatial separation of its predecessors. Until, that is, the novel’s crisis, when the third narrator, Blackbeard, is introduced. Blackbeard is the result of genetic experimentation to create a humanoid hybrid who embodies genetic components of humans, nonhumans, and plants. In *MaddAddam*’s final two chapters, Blackbeard’s unique narration suggests that his blurring of the human/animal binary is merely a visual aspect of his blurring of other, bordered, binary categories.

Blackbeard begins his penultimate story by introducing a text written by Toby, an earlier protagonist, saying :

Now this is the Book that Toby made when she lived among us. See I am showing you. She made these words on a *page*, and a page is made of *paper*. She made the words with *writing*, [...] and she made the *pages* join together at one side, and that is called a *book*. See, I am showing you. This is the Book, these are the Pages, here is the Writing. [...]

And she showed me how to turn the marks back into a voice, so that when I look at the page and read the words, it is Toby's voice that I hear. And when I speak these words out loud, you too are hearing Toby's voice.

Please don't sing.

And in the Book too are the Words of Zeb, [...] and how he became our Defender against the bad men who did cruel and hurtful things; [...].

In the first paragraph, Blackbeard begins a litany of familiar objects and actions, such as “a *page*” and “*writing*.” But by the end of this paragraph, these items change from lower-case italics and indefinite articles to title-cased plain font with definite articles: “the Pages [...] the Writing.” With this switch comes a change in the “object's” agency: “A *book*” is *something* Blackbeard can “show you,” but “the Writing” can influence the audience, as it makes them start to sing. The change in textual representation depicts the moment when physical objects and abstract actions are seen as other-than-human persons imbued with agency. By identifying the animate presence of the Story itself, Blackbeard's narration makes clear that his worldview is not constructed upon bordered categories of present/absent, subject/object, object/action, but on Ojibwe-esque worldviews of interconnectivity. An abstract action like “Writing” can be an influential presence. Likewise, Blackbeard demonstrates a belief in dynamic processes over inherent qualities: what a thing does defines what it is. “A *book*” participates in the storying and so becomes “The Book,” an animate other-than-human person.

The borders of binary categories like self/other, absent/present, and even life/death are similarly blurred through a “red reading” of the storying process. In the second paragraph, Blackbeard offers a seemingly simple explanation of learning to read and narrate stories, saying

“...she showed me how to turn the marks back into a voice, so that when I look at the page and read the words, it is Toby's voice that I hear. And when I speak these words out loud, you too are hearing Toby's voice.”

To break this down, there are two related processes of storying, each with three participants. First, when Blackbeard engages with the Story, “the marks [turn] back into a voice.” That voice is Toby's; her fourth-person presence is evidenced by her “voice,” which is produced between Blackbeard and the animate Story. Second, by sharing the Story with the implied audience, Toby's voice sounds simultaneously alongside Blackbeard's. He recalls her presence through her phrases like “cruel and hurtful things,” her idea of calling “Fuck” for help (146-47), and by the narrative style itself, since Toby's stories in *MaddAddam* are always in first-person indirect discourse to an implied audience,

just like Blackbeard's. To be clear, this isn't reproducing a representation of Toby's narratives. Representations are part of the metaphysics of presence and absence. Instead, Gerald Vizenor explains that when an Ojibwe man, Charles Aubid told a story in Ojibwemowin involving the verbal participation of his long-deceased friend, Aubid's "stories intimated a third person other than the apparent reference, ... the figurative presence of the fourth person..." (86). Deborah Madsen expands this, saying "Behind the third-person pronoun *he*, Aubid's words 'intimated' and thus evoked another reference – not an indirect third person but a direct address to or invocation of 'a fourth person'" (133).

In the dynamic process of storying, through reading and telling the Story, Blackbeard "intimates" Toby's fourth-person presence. Like he says, "it is Toby's voice that I hear" and "you too are hearing Toby's voice." Through a "red reading," the storying processes make a mess of singular possession: Toby's voice is irreducibly part of the Story and a part of Blackbeard. Though Toby has died, she is, as Vizenor writes, the obviate, "a distinct narrative entity" (36). Death, for the Crakers, is an aspect of life: not its binary opposite and not permanent absence. The past is very much present.

*Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* conclude on the unresolved question of to kill or be killed. *MaddAddam*, and this paper, conclude on Blackbeard's story involving the possible answers to "where did Toby go?". That is, Blackbeard doesn't address the binary question, "How did Toby die"; because, as we've seen, death doesn't necessitate one's absence. What's more, Blackbeard also doesn't answer with one essential truth. Instead, the point of his story is to give storying space and legitimacy to multiple possibilities from multiple human and nonhuman sources. Despite their differences, all of them emphasize Toby's continued connection to her human, nonhuman, and other-than-human community after death. Atwood gives perhaps her clearest depiction of what she intends with her "third thing" by this polyphonic, multi-specied non-conclusion.

For the novel, "red reading" makes clear how, on many narrative levels, Atwood depicts a productive and creative harmony with the world. At every opportunity, she replaces bordered binaries with interconnectivity.

For us as scholars, "red reading" provides a valuable theoretical framework through which to analyze Atwood's theories and fiction. More important, though, by "red reading," we participate in decolonizing academia; we recenter perspectives and voices that have been systematically marginalized and silenced. When Scott Andrews theorized "red reading," he wrote that the act can

“destabilize...the dominant culture’s confidence in representations of itself” (iii). Red reading *MaddAddam* destabilizes rigid Western binaries while also showing the critical value of doing so.

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