



'Belief Rather Than a Memory'—The Relationship Between Gender and Trauma in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*

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Much of the scholarship that surrounds Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) discusses trauma and gender, with an emphasis on ecocritical interpretation. It is rarely discussed as a 9/11 novel, although scholars such as Sharon Sutherland and Sarah Swan assert that it can be read as a 9/11 text that deals with trauma amid an assortment of post-9/11 'worries.' In this article, I contribute to these debates by analysing trauma as a specific constitutive factor in the construction of gender in the post-9/11 period. Atwood's novel, I argue, depicts the gender binary as an empty talisman ('a belief rather than a memory') used by a society in crisis to self-soothe. In this way, *Oryx and Crake* can be situated in relation to Susan Faludi's understanding of the aftermath of 9/11 as part of the backlash to second-wave feminism.

According to this reading, *Oryx and Crake* can be understood as a version of the bleak future Atwood has been imagining since *The Handmaid's Tale*, in which sexism is endemic to capitalist society. Specifically, I explore how the novel presents readers with a dystopian combination of Orwellian political oppression and Huxleyan consumerist 'numbing' (Kroon), concentrating on the way in which gender informs these dynamics. The novel's post-apocalyptic hellscape gives its protagonist-narrator a chance to reevaluate these ideals as relative and ridiculous. In posing the question: 'what would society be like without gatekeepers, where critical thinking was the only way to function and survive?' – the novel provides the jumping-off point for a post-truth literature to emerge.



Introduction

Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) has rarely been discussed as a 9/11 novel, despite undeniably dealing with the issues of trauma and identity that inform post-9/11 literature. A 9/11 novel is usually defined as a work that comments on the western cultural climate during and directly following the terrorist attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001. 9/11 novels are fiction but comment on real-life cultural currents, either directly referencing the attacks (as in Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007)) or indirectly evoking the atmosphere of disillusionment and turmoil (as in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007)). Given its prescient depiction of a late-capitalist dystopia leading up to (and enabling) a sudden, unexpected apocalyptic event driving its tragic plot, *Oryx and Crake* can be considered a 9/11 novel of the latter category, indirectly evoking the turmoil of the terrorist attacks.

Previous scholarship has engaged with *Oryx and Crake* in relation to 9/11 problems and themes only indirectly. For example, Ashley Winstead's (2003) discussion of *Oryx and Crake* as a prediction of outcomes for a petroleum-centric economy which relates to the Iraq War and the financial motives of its proponents in the executive branch,¹ or Michael Spiegel's (2010) analysis of neomedievalism in a post-national world.² Sharon Sutherland and Sarah Swan (2009) explicitly name *Oryx and Crake* as a 9/11 novel, but they focus more on Atwood's exploration of the rights of the individual and pseudo-fascist measures taken by the corporate state – on Atwood's invocation of the Orwellian dystopia – while they suggest that Jimmy's complicity in the sexist, hedonistic campaign of the BlyssPluss pill that would destroy humanity is more in

¹ David E. Rosenbaum notes that: 'Mr. Cheney's financial disclosure statements from 2001, 2002 and 2003 show that since becoming vice president-elect, he has received \$1,997,525 from the company: \$1,451,398 in a bonus deferred from 1999, the rest in deferred salary. He also holds options to buy Halliburton stock. [...] Halliburton's construction and engineering subsidiary, received from the Pentagon what is called a sole-source contract, meaning it was awarded without bidding, to restore and operate Iraqi oil wells. The contract, which was classified when it was awarded just before the invasion of Iraq, could be worth as much as \$7 billion.' (Rosenbaum 2004: n. pag.).

² Michael Spiegel writes that: 'Neomedievalism was first conceived by Hedley Bull, in his seminal 1977 text *The Anarchical Society*, as "a system of overlapping authorities and crisscrossing loyalties that hold all people together in a universal society" (246). Since then, but particularly since 9/11, it has become a prominent metaphor in International Relations (IR) to describe a world of simultaneous globalization and fragmentation where the nation state persists, though weakened. Such a world resembles that of Western Christendom during the Middle Ages, when the universalism of the Catholic Church coexisted with the fragmentation of kingdoms into fiefdoms. [...] Neomedievalism finds in *Oryx and Crake* a unique imagining of a neomedieval world rendered by one of the world's most revered literary figures. Possessing the imagination and insight that IR theorists lack, Atwood's rendition highlights the potential repercussions of a neomedieval world that have been overlooked by theorists. At the same time, *Oryx and Crake* finds in neomedievalism the social structure necessary to understand how Atwood's portrayals of *Oryx and Crake* work to subvert the realist novel and challenge its claim to fully represent an increasingly post-national world' (Spiegel 2010: 121).

keeping with an anaesthetised Huxleyan dystopia. In this sense, Sutherland and Swan concentrate on the totalitarian aspects of terrorism (e.g. Jimmy's role in effectively creating propaganda) rather than the patriarchal aspects of terrorist ideation, which is my entry point into the scholarly conversation.

The universe of Atwood's *MaddAddam* series depicts trauma as a sublimation of a character's personality to ensure personal safety or restore a character's sense of self due to ambient threat. This is in keeping with the prevalent scholarly discourse of 9/11 literature, which identifies the series as a subgenre of the 'trauma narrative' that came to the fore in the 1980s and continued to rise in popularity through the postmodern period. As Roger Luckhurst (2008: 75) writes: 'Trauma, in effect, issues a challenge to the capacities of narrative knowledge. In its shock impact trauma is anti-narrative, but it also generates the manic production of retrospective narratives that seek to explicate the trauma.' This 'anti-narrative' scrambling of chronological order is often considered to be a hallmark of both postmodernism metafiction as well as of trauma narratives, and Jimmy's narratorial perspective in Atwood's series can usefully be situated as part of the 'manic production of retrospective narratives' that Luckhurst identifies.

In *Oryx and Crake*, trauma generally appears as a sudden, horrifying upheaval of familiar circumstances that leads to self-loathing, self-effacement, or self-aggrandizement. In some instances, however, shared cultural traumas can lead groups of people – e.g. some survivors seen in the later novels in the *MaddAddam* series – to engage in self-reflection, and ultimately choose healthier belief systems and behaviours. Abandonment of a belief in the heteronormative gender binary would be an example of such a choice, and the band of survivors in the latter two books (*The Year of the Flood* (2009) and *MaddAddam* (2013)) arrive at this position, but only after the prequel to the apocalypse, *Oryx and Crake*, expounds on the vagaries of toxic masculinity.

Sutherland and Swan make the connection to language as a means of acting out cultural trauma ('a communal need for both control and revenge') in *Oryx and Crake* but stop short of applying that to the relationship between trauma and gender. As they write:

Although language has been a theme of dystopias since the early 20th century, the focus on applied rhetoric as a trade resonates more with the post-9/11 era where spin doctors are employed to fashion language that will engage the public on the side of a "War on Terror." A nationwide fear and sense of vulnerability following September 11 was appeased by a declaration of a War on Terrorism – a name capturing the communal need for both control and revenge. The significant focus on

rhetoric in post-9/11 America is paralleled by a similar focus in *Oryx and Crake*. That focus in the novel is satirically underscored by Jimmy's largely unreflective participation in training to effectively manipulate language [...] (Sutherland and Swan 2009: 229-30).

In this article I connect this post-9/11 focus on applied rhetoric in *Oryx and Crake* with what Susan Faludi (2007: 20-21) terms the incongruous 'desire to rein in a liberated female population' in cultural responses to 9/11. As she suggests, the nation's failure to protect itself becomes associated with a reification of 'traditional' gender roles.³ I argue that Atwood's novel portrays this peculiarly post-9/11 connection between dystopian language and a backlash against feminist politics within the collective society of the Crakers, but also most powerfully through the personal traumas of individual characters. As I conclude, *Oryx and Crake* offers a compelling literary example of the way in which gender roles are used to act out and ward against cultural trauma within Anglophone representations of the post-9/11 period.⁴

Understanding *Oryx and Crake* as a 9/11 Novel

Oryx and Crake is best understood as a novel responding to and commenting on 9/11, specifically the pathological western retreat to narrow gender archetypes after this cultural trauma. Its politics can be seen as a critique of binary gender relations that the novel claims has led, or will lead, humanity towards apocalyptic crisis. The title characters are the love interest and best friend, respectively, of the protagonist Jimmy and these three characters are involved in a love triangle. This doomed dynamic plays out against a larger, more literal doomsday scenario. Crake is a prolific scientist who has deployed a sexual enhancement drug to spread a delayed-symptom-onset pandemic that is designed to wipe out the human race. This is intended to enable his genetically engineered species, the Crakers, to repopulate the Earth in a way that promotes peace and sustainability, without all the fatal flaws of human nature. The framing device of the novel is the narratorial present time in which the lone human survivor Jimmy retraces his

³ Faludi writes that: 'Of all the peculiar responses our culture manifested to 9/11, perhaps none was more incongruous than the desire to rein in a liberated female population. In some murky fashion, women's independence had become implicated in our nation's failure to protect itself. And conversely, the need to remedy that failure somehow required a distaff correction, a discounting of female opinions, a demeaning of the female voice, and a general shrinkage of the female profile. As it turned out, feminists weren't the only women to be "pushed off the map"; their expulsion was just the preview for the larger erasures to follow.' (Faludi 2007: 20-1).

⁴ As previously stated, the 'working through' that revises the gender construct in Atwood's texts occurs almost totally in the latter two books of the series, so this article will concentrate more on the 'acting out,' as that is the centre of *Oryx and Crake*'s contribution to Atwood's gender construct.

steps leading up to this apocalyptic crisis. In an interwoven series of analeptic chapters starting in his childhood, the reader learns about Jimmy's friendship with Crake and their mutual fascination with Oryx, narrated so that the reader already knows where each of Jimmy's decisions will eventually lead. As Sutherland and Swan have suggested in their analysis of the novel, Canada's unique position following 9/11 corresponds to Jimmy's position in the plot: Atwood's lonely protagonist is the 'intimate outsider,' that is, he corresponds to Canada, which 'share[s] American[s]' concerns with national security, cannot truly extricate from their geographical and cultural connections with the US, and yet are in no position to impact American policies' (2009: 226).

Scholars have noted that 9/11 intensified the cultural focus on 'traditional' heteronormative gender roles. Sonia Baelo-Allue describes the 9/11 novel as 'both a psychic/personal trauma and a cultural/collective one since it was a wound not only in the mind of those directly affected by the tragedy but also in the nation's sense of identity' (Baelo-Allue 2013: 63). The American sense of identity included a response to trauma by fierce reidentification as an imperial warrior-centric society, with men as rescuers and protectors and women as nurturers of the home and hearth. Faludi zeroed in on the refortification of the gender binary as an almost instantaneous impulse, having described 9/11 coverage as inundated with 'homemakers in the suburbs held hostage by fear and little children traumatized by television footage' (Faludi 2008: 5-6). The image of the hyperfeminised homemaking of the 1950s is the necessary foil to that of masculine dominance through warfare, with children requiring both maternal nurturing and paternal protection. In Faludi's retelling, the sight of flaming buildings collapsing and the people inside jumping to their deaths was narrated by the American news media via associations with the archetypal nuclear family. In media coverage at the time, the indomitable American male subject was conspicuously absent from this image of trauma and vulnerability, and instead featured as the fearless, virile rescue worker.

In *Oryx and Crake* Margaret Atwood is less concerned with depictions of American or Canadian nationalism; her novel conveys a sense of the decline of western capitalist cohesion and its ties to *masculine* identity as a social force. Specifically, Atwood interprets gender as an empty signifier used by the characters as a coping mechanism despite its origins in outdated cultural mores; 'a belief rather than a memory,' to quote the novel. Interestingly, Atwood depicts this masculinist outlook as operating in tandem with late capitalism (as Fredric Jameson theorises the term, which he borrows from Ernest Mandel (Jameson 1983)), with certain aspects echoing fascism. Previous scholarship has offered feminist interpretations of *Oryx and Crake* as well as readings of Crake himself as a villain/madman (Banerjee (2013) and Kroon (2015)). These articles

build on feminist readings and suggest that Atwood presents the gender binary as foundational to a post-truth (dystopian) society. I will argue that Atwood's depiction of the gender binary reminds readers of the ideological constructedness and historical contingency of gender. In this way, the novel offers a fascinating insight into the ways in which binary gender functions as a coping mechanism and bulwark against cultural trauma, now freshly weaponised to obscure inconvenient or painful actualities.

Jimmy/Snowman as Individuated Cultural Trauma Tour Guide

As scholars have demonstrated, 9/11 fiction depicts the trauma experienced by characters as representations of America's reimagining its own self-concept, with 9/11 as the harbinger of decay for the post-WWII New World Order and the belief in the Allied powers as guardians of a hard-won peace. Previous scholarship understands this reimagining as a fortification of the myth(s) surrounding western colonisation: '[After 9/11] We were also enlisted in a symbolic war at home [...] to repair and restore a national myth [...] It belonged to a long-standing American pattern of response to threat, a response that we've been perfecting since our original wilderness experience' (Faludi 2007: 13). The American concept of 'traditional' gender roles is one of these national myths; the rugged, masculine conquest of a chaotic wilderness. Atwood's depiction of Jimmy/Snowman's fight to survive in a once urban hellscape now repopulated by plants and animals is no accident. Instead of embodying the virile (white) masculine subject of American nationhood, he is shown as vulnerable and despondent: psychologically traumatized and possibly dying. Jimmy's life story and eventual destiny as Snowman, the last surviving human in his immediate vicinity, is comprised of memories and coping mechanisms. His journey through this apocalyptic trauma via acting out (he is prone to outbursts of drunkenness and displays of self-destructive impulses) is both a personalised and metonymised perspective on what is happening in the larger society within this speculative fiction universe. Jimmy/Snowman's trauma is representative of the larger cultural trauma, and his counterproductive attitudes (namely misogyny, chauvinism) mirror society's attitudes. In subverting the myth of rugged American masculinity, in *Oryx and Crake* Jimmy/Snowman becomes symbolic of a dying social construct.

When considered through the lens of American individualism, trauma becomes focused around the individual subject, with collective experience characterised by a sense of absence and isolation. Post-9/11 works have conveyed this individualist focus by portraying characters that must navigate their own consciousness as part of their experience of trauma: sifting through a mix of memories, shattered assumptions, and,

finally, attempts to reconfigure if not fully understand their reality. Introducing her study of 9/11 as a cultural trauma, E. Ann Kaplan writes that:

...the political-ideological context within which traumatic events occur shapes their impact...it is hard to separate individual and collective trauma. The experience of 9/11 also demonstrates the difficulties of generalizing about trauma and its impact for, as Freud pointed out long ago, how one reacts to a traumatic event depends on one's individual psychic history, on memories inevitably mixed with fantasies of prior catastrophes, and on the particular cultural and political context within which a catastrophe takes place, especially how it is "managed" by institutional forces. (Kaplan 2005: i)

This explanation also serves as a near-perfect summary of *Oryx and Crake's* thematic quest, as Atwood depicts collective trauma through the omniscient point of view centred on an individual character, Jimmy/Snowman. Of course, a person (or character's) reaction to trauma depends on their individual psychic history, which is shaped at least partially by their environment, both immediate and socio-political. Jimmy's experience is a totalising vehicle for the reader to understand these larger concepts, a common device which Atwood borrows from science fiction and speculative fiction (I would cite that characters Bob Arctor, the protagonist of Philip K. Dick's *A Scanner Darkly* (1977), and Henry Case, the hacker in William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), as illustrative examples of this type of character).

9/11 as a Real Time Influence on Atwood's Novel-in-Progress

Margaret Atwood started writing *Oryx and Crake* in March 2001, six months before the 9/11 attacks. As Sutherland and Swan note:

Inevitably, perhaps, 9/11 heavily influenced the finished *Oryx and Crake* and infused it with themes like the problematic nature of predicting perceived and real terrorist threats, the difficulties of balancing individual rights and national security...and the troubling nature of the emerging discourse [...] focusing on the "greater good." (Sutherland and Swan 2009: 219).

Sutherland and Swan have perceived the allegorical tones that surrounded the dubious agreement between Compound citizens and the CorpSeCorp (a privatised, corporate government organisation); that constant surveillance would ensure their safety from the ravages of the 'outside' world and, even more saliently, the sudden and terrifying

effects experienced by these citizens when the apocalyptic event hit. As Margaret Atwood has revealed in interview, she had already begun writing *Oryx and Crake* when the attacks against the World Trade Center took place and was sitting, of all places, in an airport waiting to board a flight to New York City when she learned of the hijacked planes crashing into Manhattan's iconic Twin Towers: 'I stopped for about three weeks. Like everyone else, I wanted to see what was going to happen next' (D'Souza 2004: n. pag.). This dividing line between before- and after- 9/11 correlates to a shift in the novel itself in the transition from Chapter 7 to Chapter 8:

I continued to write away at *Oryx and Crake* during the summer of 2001. We had some other travels planned, and I wrote several chapters of this book on a boat in the Arctic, where I could see for myself how quickly the glaciers were receding. I had the whole book mapped out and had reached the end of Part 7 when I was due to go to New York...I was sitting in the Toronto airport, daydreaming about Part 8. In ten minutes my flight would be called. An old friend of mine came over and said, "We're not flying." "What do you mean?" I said. "Come and look at the television," he replied. It was September 11. (Atwood 2004: 2)

Once the manuscript was finished, Chapter 8 would contain the ecocritical angle inspired by the receding glaciers, but Atwood's last written section of *Oryx and Crake* prior to 9/11 was edited into the preceding Chapter 7, which ends with Jimmy's memory of a particular scene between him and Crake in which their arguments are based on their respective fields of study: the humanities, in Jimmy's case, and science in Crake's. Crake denounces art as an evolutionary construct, a courtship behaviour designed to obscure less-desirable genes; ' "A stab at getting laid." "Your analogy falls down when it comes to female artists, they're not in it to get laid..." "Female artists are biologically confused..." ' (Atwood 2004: 168). After this, Jimmy laments that he is alone in a postapocalyptic wasteland, as Crake did not leave him with a suitable female mate: 'Where's my Bride of Frankenstein?' (Atwood 2004: 169).⁵ That her last renderings of these male characters centres on their simplistic, romanticised musings on sexual entitlement is significant. For Crake to reduce art, in a context belittling Jimmy's relegation to the humanities, to a male-oriented sexual ploy and then for Snowman to

⁵ This classical allusion to Frankenstein is part of Atwood's transition from postmodernism to post-truth, as Jimmy/Snowman has thereby characterised himself as also one of Crake's creations, though it is the reality around him that Crake has created. The idea that a character is their reality, is their beliefs, and his passionate grievance at this state of affairs, heavily bespeaks post-truth instead of the ironic indifference of postmodernism – an attitude Atwood ties to youth in this book, or at least Jimmy's youth in particular.

cast himself as a victim of Crake's mad genius, deserving of sex as compensation, sets up the novel's reckoning with the static binary logic of heteronormative gender roles.

In the same stroke, Crake the mastermind casts Jimmy as the complicit enabler. Jimmy accepts his own lesser status as a specialist in the humanities and therefore as a less masculine figure than Crake. He stays in the compound and does not turn against Crake until the mayhem affects him personally through the death of his beloved Oryx. Here Atwood represents, in microcosm, the complacency of educated elites when faced with the breakdown of democracy and onset of climate disaster. Jimmy spends the rest of the novel blaming himself: 'There were signs, Snowman thinks. There were signs and I missed them' (Atwood 2004: 320). Readers who recall their history will find this quotation particularly prescient, since sources reported at the time that Present George W. Bush had been officially warned by US intelligence agencies of an impending planned attack on 11 September 2001 (ABC News 2002: n. pag.). This indictment of the upper classes continues in the transition from Chapter 7 into Chapter 8, which goes not forward but backwards to Jimmy and Crake's high school graduation. In these opening paragraphs, Atwood makes an ironic statement about the nature of perceived power contrasted with actual power and again citing the gender binary as instrumental to civilisation's collapse.

The opening paragraph remarks on the encroaching weather changes, incorporating the global warming anxieties Atwood referenced in interview (cited above), with her allusion to the melting glaciers: 'The ceremony used to take place in June; then the weather was sunny and moderate. But June was now the wet season all the way up the east coast...' (Atwood 2004: 173). This is a depiction not only of a world after global warming but, moreover, of society's willingness to solve only the immediate problems while neglecting the larger, more important one(s). In *Oryx and Crake*, the affluent Compound parents are willing to move the ceremony in hopes of more accommodating weather, but they sidestep the cause of the problem: widespread pollution and waste, much of which they themselves perpetuate. Atwood connects the disintegration of the climate with the performance of American masculinity, providing a telling detail about Crake's matriculation: 'It was like going to Harvard had been, before it got drowned' (Atwood 2004: 173). The part of the book the author had been contemplating when she became aware of 9/11 is set at an American monument, an erection signifying privilege and prestige, falling victim to human mismanagement as the Harvard campus is swallowed by rising sea levels.

The conferring of status upon the graduating students takes on distinctly masculine overtones: ' "When can I stop being a son?" thought Jimmy. Not yet. Oh, not yet. "Attaboy, Jimmy," said his father at the garden party afterwards, giving him the

arm punch' (Atwood 2004: 174–5). Jimmy's inner monologue does not ask when he can stop being a *child*, but specifically when his duties of being a *son* are over, implying that Jimmy's value to his father lies in bolstering his father's sense of masculine prowess, as evidenced by the mimed punching. His father's congratulations are not centred on academic or personal achievement, but on masculine virility; 'Attaboy' [emphasis mine]. Jimmy's performance as a young man, as a son, has ostensibly met his father's expectations.

Broken Masculinity as a Trope in the 9/11 Novel (*Oryx and Crake* is No Exception)

A character coping with a broken masculine ideal is a well-established trope of the 9/11 novel. To view the gender binary as a coping mechanism allows us to understand Atwood's characters in their fundamentally disconnected states: they are emotionally raw but withdrawn from other characters, because their trauma hinders intimacy and personal growth. Atwood adopts a subtly cautionary approach in *Oryx and Crake*, using character dynamics to depict the gender binary as part of an evolutionarily defunct value system. The novel suggests that adherence to this defunct value system could lead to an apocalyptic breakdown of civilised society by denying people personal realisation and individuality through fluid identity expression beyond rigidly defined roles.

In *Oryx and Crake* the male protagonist Jimmy oscillates between his present and immersive retrospection during which he evaluates himself not as a human being but as a man. The narrator includes the female characters' contention with the social expectations (specifically Jimmy's expectations) put upon them, which portray the gender binary as not just symptomatic of trauma but likely causal. This dynamic is typical of the post-9/11 novel, for example Keith's character development in Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* or Henry Perowne in Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005) (for a filmic counterpart see Charlie Fineman in *Reign O'er Me* (2007)).⁶ Sonia Baelo-Allue understands *Falling Man* as a 'psychic trauma novel' but also makes the distinction that 'many people experienced 9/11 as both individual and cultural trauma and, in the aftermath, the difference between these two types of trauma was blurred' (Baelo-Allue 2012: 65). This blurring between the individual and the cultural is also evident in *Oryx and Crake*. Often in 9/11 literature, then, the male protagonist's downfall is synecdochic

⁶ 'By substituting a male protagonist for Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* in a narrative that locates its action explicitly in the domestic realm while simultaneously invalidating any strict separation between the domestic and public spheres, McEwan's novel calls attention to the ways in which, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, upper class privileged men in the West are perhaps more dependent on and more apt to preserve the illusion of the private sphere as a refuge from the chaos and violence of world events precisely because they have lost a sense of control and power in the public sphere, particularly in the face of the amorphous threat of terrorism...' (Michael 2005: 29).

for the mass disaster surrounding him. In the parlance of trauma theory, retreating into gender roles is not representative of *working through* the trauma but is, rather, another form of what Dominick LaCapra terms *acting out* (LaCapra qtd. in Schick 2011: 1842). As Schick writes:

working through takes trauma seriously: it involves a work of mourning for past and present suffering whilst also insisting on a struggle to understand and challenge the social and political arrangements that facilitated that suffering. Working through stands in stark contrast to acting out: it is a politically engaged response that refuses to be seduced by simple stories about trauma, with their easily identifiable villains and victims, but that takes time to understand an inevitably more complex reality. Furthermore, it recognizes the political dangers of unmourned loss (Schick 2010: 1838).

The male characters in post-9/11 texts are often seen acting out their trauma in destructive ways, and *Oryx and Crake* is no exception. According to this interpretive approach, the genocidal pandemic meant to wipe out a species, therefore, can be understood as Crake's ultimate act of 'acting out' in response to his father's murder. It is important to note that while the character of Jimmy/Snowman does fit this post-9/11 archetype of acting out, as evidenced by his alcoholism and sordid relationships with women, for both Jimmy/Snowman and Crake the trauma that informs their character development(s) is less the apocalypse that occurs at the end of the book than their own distressed childhoods under the oppression of toxic masculinity.

Atwood's character development in *Oryx and Crake* hinges largely on scenes exploring the themes of motherhood and parent-child relationships as both a hotbed for trauma (in and of itself and as a metaphor for larger cataclysms, e.g. an apocalyptic event) and formative for the way in which the character behaves as an adult. The reader is introduced to Oryx in the shared space of Crake's laboratory, the Paradise gardens conceived as an incubator for the Craker society. As Aaron DeRosa (2011: 607) notes, '[i]t seems the peculiar nature of trauma demands it [9/11] be addressed in postlapsarian terms,' and this postlapsarian framing is evident in the Biblical undertones of Snowman returning to the parodied Garden of Eden later in the novel.

Jimmy/Snowman's Fraught Relationship with Femininity

The scene in which Jimmy first meets Oryx places her in a maternal role, in which she *explains* the workings of the natural world to the Crakers in the garden: 'The lessons Oryx taught were short...the leaf, insect, mammal or reptile she was about to explain...'

(Atwood 2004: 309). In a fittingly Freudian gesture, this recalls Jimmy's mother Sharon's performative caricature of femininity/maternal sublimation as a cue for young Jimmy to perform the role of happy-son-having-his-needs-met. Here, however, the third person omniscient narrator apprises the reader that what he really enjoyed about these childhood moments were his mother's 'explaining moods' (Atwood 2004: 29), where she tried to teach him about her work in biological engineering:

on some days – days when she seemed brisk and purposeful, aimed and steady – she would want to fool around on the computer herself. He liked it when she did that – when she seemed to be enjoying herself. She was friendly then, too. She was like a real mother and he was like a real child. (Atwood 2004: 30)

Atwood's use of the word 'explain' signifies a link between the tense, temporary happinesses of Jimmy's childhood and the instant thrall he feels watching Oryx teaching the Crakers. Jimmy liked his mother best when she was being herself, as he was not obligated to perform but only to listen/appreciate; true intimacy could then be achieved. Both mother and son were 'real' in these moments, not attempting to fulfil a gendered idea of how they *should* be behaving, of what cartoonish exchanges should result in happiness. A page later, these cartoonish behaviours are on display: the link between explanation and true nurturing freshly forged in the novel's exposition, the narration then features a contrasting scene in which Jimmy's mother makes him a sandwich:

Once in a while there would be a real lunch waiting for him, a lunch so arranged and extravagant it frightened him, for what was the occasion? ... peanut butter and jelly, his preferred combo...His mother would be carefully dressed, her lipstick smile an echo of the jelly smile on the sandwich, and she would be all sparkling attention ... He knew he was expected to appreciate all the effort she was putting into this lunch, and so he too made an effort. "Oh boy, my favourite!" he would say, rolling his eyes, rubbing his stomach in a caricature of hunger, overdoing it. (Atwood 2004: 31-2)

In crying out 'Oh boy!', of all possible exclamations, Jimmy is validating her performance of hyperfeminine motherhood by verbalising his own reassurance as a believable *son*. In this passage, gender roles are characterised as performed mythology.

In this sense, the novel implies that western masculinity contributes to the eventual apocalyptic climax of *Oryx and Crake* (a pandemic that leads to a mass extinction event). The temporality of his gender performance is interesting here. Failing to be 'the man'

his father expects bears no immediate shame in Jimmy's recollections of his childhood; it is later during his analeptic accounts of what he remembers from his past life that Jimmy is distressed by his inability to perform the expected masculinity, as appraised within a world where others still existed to police the gender binary. In an uncivilised, nature-dominated world, these constraints mean nothing. For Jimmy/Snowman the destructive force of these gendered ideals is laid bare in memories of his father:

Oh boohoo! Why can't he control himself? On the other hand, why bother, since nobody's watching? Still, the noise he's making seems to him like the exaggerated howling of a clown – like misery performed for applause. Stop sniveling son, says his father's voice. Pull yourself together. You're the man around here. "Right!" Snowman yells. "What exactly would you suggest? You were such a great example!" But irony is lost on the trees. He wipes his nose with his stick-free hand and keeps walking. (Atwood 2004: 162)

The reader sees Snowman reidentifying as the implied Abominable Snowman instead of Jimmy. The Abominable Snowman is a mythical archetypal creature, here expected to be 'the man' for a group of humanoid creatures who look to him for guidance. As Snyder argues:

Like the abominable legend after which he re-names himself, Snowman is a relic of a lost world, a post-apocalyptic atavism who has lived past his own time and conceivably past the human epoch...a specter of the past who haunts an unimaginable present... Snowman's post-apocalyptic plight literalizes the temporal disruption that has come to be understood as the hallmark of traumatized consciousness. (Snyder 2011: 472)

With the Sasquatch/Yeti allusion implicit in the name 'Abominable Snowman,' Atwood characterizes her narrator as a guilt-ridden loner deformed by his passive role in humanity's near-extinction. She also suggests that 'the man,' that is to say the masculine ideal as the modern western world understands it, is a myth: Snowman falls short of this ingrained masculine ideal by crying. In the final sentence of the chapter, we see him wiping his face with his 'stick-free hand.' His walking stick is a metaphor for toxic masculinity as a crutch. He is eschewing this phallic symbol for the 'freer' hand not constrained by unrealistic expectations, and ultimately that is how he pulls himself together in this scene: by rejecting the conditioning of his childhood and reaffirming his pragmatism. That the 'irony is lost on the trees' indicates that these notions of

gendered identity only have social relevance within a social group; humanity itself is contingent within the novel but the trees (and the Crakers) will endure the extinction event that ultimately removes the gender binary altogether.

In contrast to the stoic male ideal, the male characters in *Oryx and Crake* retain a certain childlike quality. Jimmy's estimation of manhood has to do with duplicating the dynamic he experienced with his mother, as he gravitates towards women who make him feel needed. Ameliorating the sadness of 'delicate and breakable' women allows Jimmy to recast himself as the attentive son and tempers his own sense of inadequacy:

After his indiscriminate adolescence he'd preferred sad women, delicate and breakable, women who'd been messed up and who needed him. He'd liked to comfort them, stroke them gently at first, reassure them. Make them happier, if only for a moment. Himself too, of course; that was the payoff... (Atwood 2004: 100)

Here Jimmy attempts to work through the trauma of his childhood, specifically his feelings of abandonment that shape his memory of his mother, in one of the narrowly defined ways acceptable to the toxic standard of binary masculinity: sexual conquest.

Jimmy and Oryx, a Romance Based on Memories of Trauma

While other previously mentioned 9/11 texts such as *Falling Man*, *Reign O'er Me* and *Saturday* focus more on the alterations to characters' realities following 9/11, Atwood spends much of *Oryx and Crake* examining the characters' realities preceding the apocalyptic event. Jimmy sifts through the illusory details of his own memory trying to understand exactly how much of the BlyssPluss genocide was his fault, either by active participation or passive ignorance. Oryx's reality preceding the apocalyptic event is also conveyed through analeptic recollections. She is a foil to Jimmy, but her reactions to her traumas stand in stark contrast. Luckhurst's breakdown of trauma symptoms helps us understand these characters' disjointed memories:

Trauma disrupts memory, and therefore identity, in peculiar ways [...] recurring dreams, or later situations that repeat or echo the original. Weirdly, the second set of symptoms suggests the complete opposite [...] avoidance of thoughts or feelings related to the event to a general sense of emotional numbing to the total absence of recall of the significant event (Luckhurst 2008: 1).

Some of Oryx's sparse character development deals directly with her memories of a life lived, presumed, from one trauma to another – her way of coping is to not

remember it clearly, or to say she does not to avoid talking about it (the reader is never clued in to which is actually the case). In E. Ann Kaplan's definitional terms, Jimmy's reminiscences and hallucinations are relayed in the text as 'memories' and 'fantasies of prior catastrophes': Jimmy as Snowman has recurring dreams and hallucinatory flashbacks about women in his life.

Part of Jimmy's infatuation with Oryx results from his understanding that she cannot recall her biological mother because she, too, was abandoned as a child: 'She had no images of this love. She could offer no anecdotes. It was a belief rather than a memory' (Atwood 2004: 121). This differentiation not only applies to a lack of maternal love but can be read more widely to include the imposition of the gender binary. The idea of gender as a social construct gained traction in the latter half of the twentieth century (contemporaneous with Atwood's work) as Brickell notes:

Since the 1970s, ethnomethodological approaches have been adopted by those wishing to explore how gender is achieved through action and interaction. A rejection of essentialism lies at the heart of this, as it does in post-structuralist writing: there is no authentic or 'natural' maleness or femaleness. Instead, the subject is gendered through social practices such as naming and talk that construct and relay meaning. Even the attributes of our bodies that we understand as "biological" markers of sex – such as genitalia – hold no significance prior to social interaction. (Brickell 2006: 93)

As previously discussed, Crake's gender essentialism is a rejection of this post-structuralist outlook that basically understands gender roles as what we (society) make of them, through 'practices [...] that relay meaning.' Crake regards gender as something genetically encoded by nature, synonymous with biological sex, and fails to see the bioengineered Crakers' territorial 'special piss' ritual or their highly codified mating behaviour involving flowers and dancing as what Judith Butler would call 'performative acts' (Butler 1988: 1). Jimmy's gender expression is more ambiguous and nuanced, as Banerjee explains:

The cultivation of mental traits attuned to the needs of capitalistic materialism, namely utilitarian rationality and aggression, dovetails into gender-making. [...] Despite such an ambience, however, Jimmy develops an emotional sensitivity that is at odds with the utilitarianism and materialism that define the world around him. Complementing the presentation of Jimmy as a self-absorbed, parochial male are

streaks of tenderness, sensitivity and empathy in him that run counter to his father's attempts to genderize him into a "tough guy" (17). (Banerjee 2013: 242)

The 'ambience' of toxic masculinity that undergirds his childhood and adolescence fails to purge Jimmy's more subtle feminine attributes completely, namely his sensitivity to the feelings of others. However, in situations where he is performing masculinity, like a sexual relationship, the 'self-absorbed, parochial male' side of his personality dominates, and his tenderness is ultimately used to manipulate the women in his life. I will return to this topic momentarily.

What is especially important is where the traumatic response to memory and essentialist beliefs surrounding gender merge. A memory, often distorted by perception, is derived from actual events, but a belief is based on desire and requires only faith. Gender works similarly: gender as a function of biological sex was never demonstrably real, and the stolid rejection of this fact under the auspices of scientific advancement – evidence-based inquiry – is a parallel to the traumatised psyche's inability to integrate painful events from one's past (individual or cultural) into a functional identity. In keeping with this distinction, the separation of Oryx's memory into parts divorced from concrete reality has to do with the atrocities of the rest of her childhood. Atwood characterizes Oryx as stuck in a state of perpetual childish naivete (or a performance thereof), which exemplifies the developmental arrest symptomatic of trauma as dissociation from her sale into sexual slavery, as described by Parler: 'Dissociation is thought to stem primarily from exposure to traumatic events or disruptions in attachment, serving to overmodulate affect and protect the individual' (Parler et al. 2016: 3). Or alternatively, if not dissociating Oryx deftly performs a childlike and stereotypically feminine affectation for Jimmy's benefit, to bolster his ego: ' "It's all right," he told her. "None of it was your fault." "None of what, Jimmy?" ' (Atwood 2004: 114). Either Oryx is genuine about her lack of memory, or it is a contrivance, but as with Laura's Chase within Iris' unreliable narration in *The Blind Assassin* (2000),⁷ Atwood provides no interior monologue or narrative illumination of Oryx's thought process, despite her significant influence on the plot. This lack of access to Oryx's interiority is dissatisfying for the reader

⁷ *The Blind Assassin* employs a vast array of images of gaps, absences, zeros and nothings. But perhaps the most gaping hole of all...is the family home...The place is haunted by maternal memories...As arbitrary...signifiers, these words radiate an effect of meaning, duping the sisters into a sense of understanding...Too many things...are being set up to stand in for "what isn't there"—which, like the phantasy of maternal presence, acts like a vortex into which every substitution rushes.' (Parkin-Gounelas 2004: 690-1, 693-4). Laura is similarly depicted as an unsatisfying emptiness; her point of view is never explored, and Iris' status as an acknowledged unreliable narrator is perhaps most stark when contemplating her own ignorance as to her sister's true thoughts and feelings. Memory and belief are very much conflated.

and leads to a frustration that mirrors Jimmy's, underscoring the ways in which trauma underpins both characters: '*Not knowing* is an inherent element of trauma... Trauma ... defies our witness in that it is never able to be fully known or understood; memory does not and cannot record the event in full' (Schick 2011: 1840). The reader's unanswered questions mirror Jimmy's unanswered questions, and it is entirely possible that Oryx does not know the answers herself. Atwood's portrayal of Oryx as mysterious and unknowable reminds us of the non-narratability of trauma and the inescapably partial and equivocal access memory provides the traumatised consciousness.

There is a temptation to see Atwood as providing Jimmy a female counterpart who is also traumatised in deeply gendered contexts, but it is Jimmy's insistence – his *belief* – that his role is different, and dominant, that keeps him from ever truly empathising with Oryx despite the clear commonalities between them. Atwood's third-person omniscient narration does not give the reader any glimpse into Oryx's true thoughts or feelings, and Jimmy's speculations are clearly biased. He is able to empathise with and understand his *male* foil: ' "They trust her," said Crake. "She has a great manner." Jimmy's heart sank. Crake was in love, for the first time ever. It wasn't just the praise, rare enough. It was the tone of voice ' (Atwood 2004: 309). This draws inferences from Crake's rare display of emotion, but his ruminations on what Oryx's point of view might possibly be (at least while she is still alive) are restricted to his clumsy interrogations and his frustration with her unwillingness to engage in intimacy on his terms, as well as his jealous, possessive contemplations of what transpired between her and Crake (Atwood 2004: 314).

To return to the pivotal moment in the novel when Oryx and Jimmy first meet, Oryx's actual employment under Crake is that of a teacher: it is her job to teach simple survival lessons to the Crakers. In this role, she is naked but literally desexualised by a pheromone-neutralising spray before entering the Crakers' 'homeland' while Crake watches through a one-way mirror (Atwood 2004: 309). He has claimed Oryx's sexuality as his own asset, to be turned on and off when it suits his purposes or needs. Atwood's omniscient narration positions Jimmy as the butt of Crake's sophomoric double-entendre – ' "you were the student, she was the service?" ' – said accompanied by 'a smug little smile, an alpha smile' (Atwood 2004: 310). This exchange encapsulates the egocentric priorities of both men. Crake's triumph in Jimmy's mind is not chiefly being in possession of Oryx but of being a *possessor*, an 'alpha' male, rendering Jimmy a beta. Simultaneously, Atwood is also borrowing (intentionally or not) this language from the internet lexicon of male competition, where the hierarchy of alpha and beta is oriented around sexual conquest.

Even after civilization is obliterated, Jimmy never arrives at a healthier belief concerning gender roles, but merely alternates between fantasies about past lovers and elaborate self-flagellation, specifically blaming himself for the apocalypse and Oryx's death. This, alongside his alcoholism, mirrors other 9/11 novel protagonists' retreat into gender-coded self-destruction, for example Keith's gambling in DeLillo's *Falling Man*. A new approach to gender politics does not occur until the second and third novels in Atwood's dystopian trilogy, aided by the points of view of female characters. In *Year of the Flood*, the overarching metaphor of a young woman trapped in a strip club (Ren) and an older woman trapped in a spa (Toby) when the apocalyptic event occurs depicts the gender binary as both a death trap and a refuge, as both women use those locations – capitalist enterprises whose profits depended on female sexuality and physical beauty as a commodity – to hide and then eventually escape, which symbolises a liberation from these constricting roles. *MaddAddam* then follows the creation of a new society where Toby and Zeb are the matriarch and patriarch, respectively, but their marriage does not occur until the very end of the series, after Jimmy's death. The old heteronormative gender roles are not completely gone, but the survivors confront toxic ideologies and difficult decisions in a more egalitarian way than is present in *Oryx and Crake*.

Conclusion

Oryx and Crake is not Atwood's first trauma narrative by any means, and some critics have cited past works such as *Cat's Eye* (1988) as canonical of the genre (Luckhurst 2008: 87). The novel's mechanism of trauma thus draws on the real-world ecological and socio-political realities unfolding when Atwood began drafting the novel in 2001 at the time of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. As I hope to have demonstrated in this article, reading the novel through the intersection of gender and trauma reveals Atwood's warning to the reader that ecological destruction will continue unchecked if we fail to understand how gender and traumatic violence are interrelated.

At both the beginning and ending of *Oryx and Crake*, Snowman is contemplating time as a social, human construct: his pun of the 'zero hour' provides the temporal equivalent of the spatial ground zero. Jimmy/Snowman's bleak gaze at his watch brings the end of the novel back to where it began; a state of suffering without a point of reference that had previously been comforting, as it indicated a social compact with others:

Out of habit he looks at his watch...it no longer works. He wears it now as his only talisman. A blank face is what it shows him: zero hour. It causes a jolt of terror to run through him, this absence of official time. Nobody nowhere knows what time it is. (Atwood 2004: 3)

From habit he lifts his watch; it shows him its blank face. Zero hour, Snowman thinks. Time to go. (Atwood 2004: 374)

In this instance, the point of reference is time, but the same can be said for the novel's treatment of gender. While a spatial apocalypse has occurred, what has also been obliterated are human ideas meant to punctuate consciousness and provide consistency, such as time and the gender binary. Measuring time would indicate a coordinated community. Humans as superior to animals and men as superior to women would also indicate a coordinated community, a situation under control, mirroring the sexist heteropatriarchal ideas of the 'great chain of being' dating back to the Elizabethan period: 'women were seen as closer than men to animals in the Great Chain of Being' (Roberts 1994: 25), and thus further from God, or more abstractly, from goodness and/or a sense of order, like the connotations surrounding a timepiece; orderliness, predictability.

I have superimposed memory and gender in this discussion, purposefully: they are both prone to distortions and fabrications from internal and external sources. Atwood depicts the gender binary as a defunct talisman like a broken watch, no longer functional but a superstitious holdover (note the repeated use of the word 'habit' throughout *Oryx and Crake*) from a previous era, meant to ward off an existential crisis. The double-negative could also apply to gender: Nobody nowhere knows what makes a man a man or a woman a woman. The gender construct displaces the idea of shared humanity between the genders, but for the man it privileges these ideas eclipse his own humanity. In this schema, to be a man is to be a valid human being, but without a woman or any other person to provide this validation or even a point of comparison, all these tenets become relative. Contemplation of these philosophical gender tensions is indicative of what trauma theory refers to as 'working through,' as Kate Schick reminds us: '... to promote working through ... involves "looking behind the curtain" of daily life and reflecting on the deeper (personal and societal) implications of ... suffering. This may involve rejecting beliefs once held to be true, such as traditional views on sexuality...' (Schick 2011: 1850). The traumatised mind that clings to the gender binary, seeking solace from a world suddenly bare of continuity is, in Atwood's interpretation, partially the cause of preventable collapse.

The other books in the *MaddAddam* trilogy expand on this examination of gender through the narration of female characters, with women Jimmy knew during the events of *Oryx and Crake*, Ren and Amanda, figuring heavily into his last act. *MaddAddam*, the third book in the trilogy (the title track, if you will) is about how these points of view, male then female, antiquated then innovating, converge and, out of necessity, work together: the characters band together to capture the immediate villain (a serial murderer

stalking the outpost), work out a system of justice, and thereby forge a makeshift society. Crucially, Jimmy is no longer the protagonist or even a central character in the subsequent two novels. The women of God's Gardeners, the environmentalist commune, take Jimmy in after the conclusion of *Oryx and Crake* and tie his misguided elegy to the survivalist scramble to seize what was left of civilization. The women end up pitying him, temporarily nursing him partially back to health but ultimately caring for him on his deathbed. These strong female characters, Ren, Amanda, and Toby appear in *Oryx and Crake* only in the final pages, and only as still figures on the beach, ending the novel in a freeze frame. At that point, the future of the world and of this plot is still in flux, but Jimmy/Snowman's past life is gone, and thus the past world, the technocratic capitalist western civilisation, is also gone.

Read as a whole, the *MaddAddam* trilogy moves its characters from a process of 'acting out' towards one of 'working through' their individual and share(d) traumas. Atwood does indeed portray the gender binary as foundational to a post-truth society, but the implication by the end of the series is that it does not have to be – that by acknowledging the dangers of applying postmodern relativity in regressive ways, the post-post-truth world can continue to make strides toward a more equal, equitable stasis between the sexes, among the genders. *Oryx and Crake*'s focus on male characters, with their traumatised childhoods leading to harmful decisions made as young adults, is representative of the starting point of the process of acting out. The cooperative, largely woman-led society formed by the end of *MaddAddam* is thus representative of the working through end of this spectrum. That the narration moves from an omniscient point of view centred on male characters to the first-person point of view of mostly female characters shows a reclaimed sense of self that is consistent with working through, as well as a reintegration of femininity into consciousness beyond sexual objectification.

Further research could extrapolate upon the idea that *Oryx and Crake*, in addition to being Atwood's definitive 9/11 novel, was also her last postmodern novel, with the other two instalments in the series functioning as post-truth works of literature. But that is for another, longer piece of scholarship. It is helpful to think of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* as literal bookends of her contributions to the postmodern literary project, upon which she exerted a formidable influence. Atwood's writing is one of the reasons that postmodernism is seen as inextricably bound with the second wave of feminism: the impact of post-structuralist deconstruction reverberates through her works, demanding that the patriarchy be dismantled. As Luckhurst describes, this connects narrative with politics:

Where narrativization is seen as an act acquiring agency, as in feminist discussions of trauma, a political imperative is foregrounded [...] Formal radicalism is equated with political radicalism, and sets a high standard of expectations about the political utility of fiction. (Luckhurst 2008: 89).

Where *Oryx and Crake* gets murky according to this paradigm is in the nature of the novel's feminism; it conveys trauma but not in the sense of a space of equality for women, as we find under threat of complete extinction in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Rather, Atwood spends most of *Oryx and Crake* exploring the harmful effects of the patriarchy on the novel's central male characters (Jimmy and Crake), detailing the ways in which the deconstruction of the heteronormative male archetype is experienced as a dissolution of their identity, which is to say that two men let sexual jealousy and a need for violent revenge obscure their sense of humanity. To say that *Oryx and Crake* is a post-truth novel would not be correct, for several reasons; it regards femininity through the lens of postmodern indifference and not as a platform for moral reckoning. It also does not extend all the way into third-wave feminism, but merely points out the blind spots of the 20th-century status quo – third-wave feminism and revamped roles for men and women would appear in Atwood's next two *MaddAddam* instalments.

If we read *Oryx and Crake* as a standalone text, we can identify that Atwood is alluding to a better trajectory by showing 'acting out' as the antithesis of 'working through.' This would be represented in the rediscovery of what the novel codes as 'feminine' virtues, like the humanities, art, and emotional intelligence. There is also the suggestion, relating to the ecocritical point of view, that a renaissance of these traits and ideas could temper capitalism's greed and cynicism, currently sapping resources and leading toward the eventual uninhabitability of planet Earth. The alternative, then, is a willingness to question the efficacy of such old traditions in a rapidly changing world and to embrace critical thinking, braving a possible existential crisis in order to keep doomsday averted. Such is Snowman's journey, taken too late.

Competing Interests

NLF was a student of Aaron DeRosa's from 2012–2014. The author declares no other competing interests.

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