MARGARET ATWOOD'S METAFICTIONAL ACTS: COLLABORATIVE STORYTELLING IN *THE BLIND ASSASSIN* AND *ORYX AND CRAKE*

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary Canadian authors appear to find self-reflective fiction a powerful tool to explore a variety of issues. Margaret Atwood's latest novels continue her exploration of the dynamics of story telling. In *Negotiating with the Dead* (2002), Atwood discusses the writing triangle (i.e. the interconnection between the writer, the reader, and the text) as "communion," and she stresses the importance and singularity of the reader in the process. The aim of this paper is to describe the writing triangle in her latest novels and to discuss its implications in the context of Atwood's own production. In them, two lovers live out their passion in closed rooms while they tell each other tales. The storyteller has the ability to keep the listener enthralled, but the audience is far from powerless, since for them listening becomes an act of (psychological versus physical) possession, whereby they appropriate and 'consume' their loved ones.

KEY WORDS: Metafiction, storytelling, Margaret Atwood, *The Blind Assassin, Oryx and Crake.*

RESUMEN

La narrativa contemporánea canadiense continúa haciendo de la metaficción una herramienta para explorar gran variedad de temas. Así puede apreciarse en las novelas más recientes de Margaret Atwood, que enfatizan la dimensión metanarrativa. En su ensayo *Negotiating with the Dead* (2002), Atwood define el triángulo literario, es decir, la interrelación entre quien escribe y lee mediante el texto literario, como una "comunión" en la que el público juega un papel fundamental. El presente artículo procede a describir dicho triángulo en *The Blind Assassin* y *Oryx and Crake*, contextualizándolo en la amplia producción de Atwood. En las dos, unos amantes disfrutan de su pasión a puerta cerrada mientras se cuentan relatos. Si bien narrar constituye un acto de seducción en ambas obras, el público posee la capacidad de apropiarse del texto y su trasmisor, bien psicológica bien físicamente, y por tanto de "consumirlos."

PALABRAS CLAVE: Metaficción, narración, Margaret Atwood, *The Blind Assassin,* O*ryx and Crake.*

Margaret Atwood's latest novels, *The Blind Assassin* (2000) and *Oryx and Crake* (2003), display a striking number of commonalities in subject matter and technique. In both of them, Atwood's sustained interest in the generic forms of dystopia and science fiction has surfaced again after a while. One might argue, for instance, that to a certain extent *Oryx and Crake*'s vision of the future of humanity derives from the embedded story "The Blind Assassin," a fantasy tale of faraway cities, sacrificial victims, child slaves, and everlasting love. Whereas in the former novel the flight of fancy shared narrative space with a framing tale that revisited the past (Ontario in the first half of the twentieth century), in the latter the future holds its own ground.

Furthermore, a closer reading reveals that both works continue Atwood's relentless exploration of the dynamics of storytelling and the literary act. Atwood has engaged with these issues on several occasions, not only in her fiction but also in her critical writing, most recently in *Negotiating with the Dead* (2002). There she has discussed the writing triangle in a chapter that stresses the importance and singularity of the reader in the process. Under the title "Communion: Nobody to Nobody" and with the subtitle "The eternal triangle: the writer, the reader, and the book as go-between" (*Negotiating with the Dead* 123-51), this chapter sets out to answer the following questions:

> First, for whom does the writer write? And, secondly: what is the book's function—or duty, if you like—in its position between writer and reader? What ought it to be doing, in the opinion of its writer? And finally, a third question arising from the other two: where is the writer when the reader is reading? (Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead* 126)

Atwood answers the third question straight away: "when you are reading, the writer is *not in the same room*. If he were, either you'd be talking together, or he'd catch you in the act" (*Negotiating with the Dead* 126). Although Atwood would seem to subscribe to the Barthian notion of "the death of the author," I would contend that the one quoted above is nevertheless the very situation enacted in a number of scenes embedded in the main plot of her latest works of fiction. In them, two lovers live out their passion in closed rooms while they tell each other tales, variously labelled as "real" or "fantastic." Alex and Iris in *The Blind Assassin* and Jimmy and Oryx in *Oryx and Crake* enjoy their clandestine relationships for a limited time, but their frantic lovemaking is only equalled by their need to tell (or to listen to) each other's stories. Writer and reader, or rather, storyteller and audience, share their bodies as well as their tales. Both acts are shown to be equally intimate. Both are part of an act of communion by means of which the lovers try to 'possess' each other. Even though the attempt itself is condemned to fail, because possessing someone is extremely unlikely in Atwood's fictional *ethos*, the trope itself highlights the self-reflective nature of both novels.

The aim of this paper is to describe the writing triangle in these two relationships and novels and to discuss its implications in the context of Atwood's own production. To that purpose, I will be drawing insights from Bakhtin's theories of

dialogism, from narratological taxonomies of narrative levels in fiction, and from postmodernist accounts of the self-reflexivity of the genre.[1] First of all, it seems to me that Atwood's peculiar blending of conversation and storytelling in these scenes endows the text with a multi-voicedness that can be best analysed with some of the tools provided by Bakhtinian thought. In particular, I would like to define the structural manifestation of the writing triangle in both Atwoodian novels as a chronotope in Bakhtinian terms, since it functions as a recurrent device with specific temporal and spatial coordinates.[2] Such a chronotope, which I will call "the lovers' room", establishes a dialogical situation in a completely separate time and place from the rest of the unfolding narrative, and becomes the site of complex ideological negotiations between competing voices and world views, thus constituting both a challenge to and an amplification of those posited by the main work. Very importantly, the analysis of the chronotope of the lovers' room should take into account the different authority of the voices and their struggle for or against a dominating discourse. As Peter Hitchcock has convincingly reminded us in *Dialogics of the Oppressed*, "without struggle dialogic discourse is heteroglossia without limits: one only has to utter to become part of the great democratic dialogue" (7). There is no such thing as equal linguistic exchange.

However, it is important to note too that in these Atwoodian novels two different narrative levels are established. In *The Blind Assassin*, the framing and the embedded story stand at opposite extremes on a scale of reliability and realism. The framing story is told by Iris Chase in her old age, in a last effort to set the record straight. It is meant to disclose the secrets of the past, some of them shameful and shocking, and to challenge the public record, as collected in the newspaper clippings interspersed here and there in the novel. The confessional discourse of a character that is soon to die reinforces for readers —perhaps deceptively— the reliability of this intradiegetic-homodiegetic narrator, as does the historicity of the events she describes.[3] Marta Dvorak has examined the overlapping of geopolitical events with 'domestic' history in a novel that has "a profoundly metatextual Russian doll story-within-a-story structure" (65) and that makes use of "the device of hybridisation that feeds fiction with fact" (60). The familiarity of those historical events, together with interspersed pseudo-factual texts such as extracts from Canadian newspapers, strengthen the trustworthiness of the narrator's story in the framing narrative. In contrast, in the chapters entitled "The Blind Assassin" we find a reversal of the dichotomy truth/lie. In them, a man and a woman construct a tall tale, a wild

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[1] Like other feminists, I believe Bakhtinian theories can be fruitfully deployed for a feminist politics of reading. In Shumway's words, the "celebration of diversity —of heterogeneity (feminist theory) and of heteroglossia (Bakhtinian theory)— allows for a rich dialogue between the two theoretical systems" (153).

[2] Bakhtin defined the chronotope as one in which "spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole" (*The Dialogic Imagination* 84).

[3] In Genette's terminology, this defines a narrator that is a character in the novel and whose story involves herself (*Narrative Discourse* 227-262).

lie that may help them escape from the sordidness of their situation and move away from the real.

I say "a man and a woman" because they are consistently identified in these sections simply by the pronouns "he" and "she." Their names are not used, and in fact we can only infer them by connecting the dots, by collating the information provided in these episodes with the events in Iris's confessional frame, as Staels has done (150-51). In a way, though as characters they are very much represented in their corporeality, in terms of narrative structure and rhetoric they function as disembodied beings. They are truly —to echo Atwood's title above— "nobody" talking to "nobody." Likewise, as lovers secretly meeting in seedy rooms across Toronto, they leave outside the door their family, social respectability, wealth, etc, and they stand truly naked. They are Everyman and Everywoman, Adam and Eve. Or they try to be, for reality creeps in when they least expect it.

The tale is originally meant by the writer, Alex, to capture his audience, Iris, and to draw her into a magic circle:

> What will it be, then? He says. Dinner jackets and romance, or shipwrecks on a barren coast? You can have your pick: jungles, tropical islands, mountains. Or another dimension of space —that's what I'm best at.
> Another dimension of space? Oh really!
> Don't scoff. It's a useful address. Anything you like can happen there. ...
> There are other people around... It's all very proper. Nevertheless she feels that the two of them are alone; as if the apple tree they're sitting under is not a tree but a tent; as if there's a line drawn around them with chalk. Inside this line, they're invisible.
> Space it is, then, he says. ...Agreed? ...Good, he says. Now I have to think. He keeps his voice casual. Too much urgency might put her off. (Atwood, *BA* 9-10)

Once the listener accepts the narrative pact, this becomes their joint way to escape from reality and to hide away in a faraway land of make-believe. This is, according to Hutcheon, one of the four recurrent models internalized in "narcissistic narratives." Fantasy "provides the freedom —or the 'escape'— of an ordered vision, perhaps a kind of 'vital' consolation for living in a world whose order one usually perceives and experiences only as chaos" (*Narcissistic Narrative* 76).

The teller consistently behaves as a magician, an illusionist, or, in Stein's term, "a trickster" (169-70). Alex wields a magic wand that allows him to retain his lover and to keep the real world at bay. For instance, in a later rendezvous, he takes hold of her wrist and covers the face of her watch before offering a new instalment of the tale, thus signalling the shift from fact to fiction, from "real" time to an *Alice*-like Wonderland (Atwood, *BA* 112). But equally consistent is his fear that "he won't be able to hold on to her, not for long. She'll melt, she'll drift away, she'll slide out of his hands" (Atwood, *BA* 120), an attitude that Staels has described as that of "a male Scheherazade" (150). Thus the act of communion, whether it is love or literature, can only happen while the other is willing to partake of the experience.

However, the tensions arising from the situation of the lovers in the real world surface from time to time and make ripples in their story. Narrative control is

then fought over, with the narratee challenging the power of the hypodiegetic narrator, or even temporarily taking over from him.[4] They tend to argue about the politics of some aspects of the tale. For instance, when she complains that the slave children of the story have become assassins, he retaliates with half-disguised accusations.

> They didn't have much choice, did they? They couldn't become the carpet-merchants themselves, or the brothel-owners. They didn't have the capital. So they had to take the dirty work. Tough luck for them.
> Don't, she says. It's not my fault.
> Nor mine either. Let's say we're stuck with the sins of the fathers.
> That's unnecessarily cruel, she says coldly.
> When is cruelty necessary? He says. And how much of it? Read the newspapers, I didn't invent the world. Anyway, I'm on the side of the throat-cutters. If you had to cut throats or starve, which would you do? Or screw for a living, there's always that.
> Now he's gone too far. He's let his anger show. She draws away from him. (Atwood, *BA* 23)

Later on, her challenge will reach the point of attempting to provide an alternative ending for the story he has been telling her. These different endings —the happy ending she would like to believe in and the unhappy one he created— highlight their diverse ideology, expectations, and even reading experiences. Thus, though not unaware of the demands of an audience, it is ultimately the writer's politics that are shown here to shape the story and its impact.

Moreover, this helps us ascertain that the relationship established by both narrative levels is thematic, and not actional or explicative.[5] As told by Alex, the metadiegetic tale of the kingdom of Sakiel-Norn bears a striking resemblance to events described in Iris's intradiegetic story, and therefore the parallelism amplifies the symbolism and the power of the novel as a whole:

> In pointedly connecting the traumatic sexual sacrifice of the two sisters, Iris and Laura Chase, to the sacrifice of the virgin in "The Blind Assassin" science fiction tale, Atwood, through repetitive retellings of the story of women's sexual victimization, probes the cultural—and historical—repetition of sexual violence against women, showing the link between institutionalized misogyny and the sexual traumatization of women. (Bouson 251)

The strong analogical relationship thus established between both narrative levels brings the effect fairly close to a *mise-en-abyme*. In *The Blind Assassin*, Atwood

[4] By "hypodiegetic" I refer to a second-degree narrator, also called a metadiegetic narrator by Genette (Rimmon-Kenan 91), that is, the one in the embedded tale.

[5] Genette ascribes three main functions to a subordinate narrative level: actional, explicative and thematic (227-62). They are very aptly summarised by Rimmon-Kenan, who explains that a thematic function relies on analogy, i.e. similarity and contrast. When analogy becomes identity, we find a *mise-en-abyme* effect (92-93).

lays bare the "bones" of storytelling and extradiegetic readers can watch the very process by which the text emerges from the interaction of writer and audience, storyteller and rapt listener. In Hutcheon's words, this would be the kind of self-reflective novel in which "the act of reading becomes a creative, interpretative one that partakes of the experience of writing itself. These fictions are about their own processes, as experienced and created by the reader's responses" (*Narcissistic Narrative* 144). But that was not Atwood's last word on writing or reading. Her next novel, *Oryx and Crake*, uses once more the chronotope of the lovers' room in order to raise even more paradoxical questions about the writing triangle.

Oryx and Crake reverses the relationship between framing text and embedded tale in *The Blind Assassin*. Here the diegetic level consists of a futuristic tale, and thus is understood as basically untruthful or far-fetched, while in the hypodiegetic sections Oryx tells her life story in ways that resemble Iris's tale in the previous novel. Like Iris, Oryx seems to be a reliable narrator despite some reluctance to disclose certain shameful parts of her past. It is also striking that this kind of story of child slavery that sounded so unlikely in *The Blind Assassin* acquires here credibility simply by virtue of the form. But Atwood's handling of the fictive confession, as Nathalie Cooke has rightly pointed out, is a powerful rhetorical strategy that never fails to lure the reader (224-25).

Jimmy and Oryx resemble Iris and Alex in that as part of the metafictional trope they lose corporeality and reality and become fairly disembodied and seemingly neutral voices while at the same time they are obviously discussing and performing bodily functions. Even though they are enclosed by the walls of a bedroom, they are free-floating characters, signifiers for larger and more abstract processes. In part this results from the fact that the dystopian frame places them at a distance from our empathy. But Oryx's true name, like Offred's in *The Handmaid's Tale*, remains unknown, and her life story is at best extremely vague, whereas Jimmy's double nature as Jimmy and Snowman, before and after the genocide, turns him into a kind of Everyman too, or a twenty-first-century Robinson Crusoe.

While *The Blind Assassin* put the storyteller in the spotlight, and he stood out as a charmer and a magician luring his audience into a magic circle, in *Oryx and Crake* it is the reader's role that becomes more prominent. Jimmy appears to be the one who feels an urgent need to know everything about Oryx. His personal involvement and investment in the tale is proportionally much larger. He continually presses Oryx for details, and his participation is more intrusive than in *The Blind Assassin*, perhaps because the realistic tone of the tale deceives him into believing that its truthfulness can be checked and verified:

> 'There were canals in this city?' Jimmy asked. He thought maybe that would give him a clue as to which city it had been. In those days he'd wanted to know whatever it was possible to know about Oryx, about anywhere she'd been. He'd wanted to track down and personally injure anyone who had ever done harm to her or made her unhappy. (Atwood, *O & C* 135)

Generally, the storyteller herself skilfully fends off this kind of attempt to pin her down and retreats into ambiguity:

> 'Tell me just one thing,' he'd say, back when he was still Jimmy.
> 'Ask me a question,' she'd reply.
> So he would ask, and then she might say, 'I don't know. I've forgotten.' Or, 'I don't want to tell you that.' Or, 'Jimmy, you are so bad, it's not your business.' Once she'd said, 'You have a lot of pictures in your head, Jimmy. Where did you get them? Why do you think they are pictures of me?'
> He thought he understood her vagueness, her evasiveness. 'It's all right,' he'd told her, stroking her hair. 'None of it was your fault.'
> 'None of what, Jimmy?' (Atwood, *O & C* 114)

Oryx's evasiveness helps her retain some control of the story against her demanding narratee, but at other times she retaliates in a similar vein to *The Blind Assassin*. She accuses Jimmy of naiveté concerning the issue of sexual slavery, very much as Alex did to Iris when she expressed her distress that children should become assassins: "'Oh Jimmy, you would like it better maybe if we all starved to death?' said Oryx, with her small rippling laugh" (Atwood, *O & C* 119). Here as well the storyteller (Oryx) is the more experienced and mundane of the pair, the one who has knowledge and insights, and perhaps even a touch of cynicism, to transmit.

Yet, Jimmy/Snowman broadly exerts a will to dominate and control that goes far beyond the realm of discourse and the walls of the room. He is typically shown in the act of surveillance and in the attitude of the voyeur. In fact, Jimmy's narcissistic will to discursively and visually "possess" Oryx can be read as deriving from the loss of his mother that he suffered as a child. Although she abandoned her family, Jimmy's mother remains elusively but stubbornly alive in images, either in the postcards he occasionally receives or in the news clips he gets to watch. He first spied the image of the person he identifies as Oryx while surfing on the web, and this started him on an endless but ultimately elusive search for her, for Oryx proved at first as unreachable as his mother. Later, when he finally meets her, he watches her through the camera as she interacts with the Children of Crake during her teaching sessions with them. His obsessive surveillance of Oxyx's explicitly sexualized body (practising sex in the early images and naked among the Children of Crake later on) is structured as the empowered "male gaze" defined by Laura Mulvey:

> In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. (19)

Consequently, the hypodiegetic or second narrative level of Atwood's novel appears to actualize the erotic or sexual metaphor described by Hutcheon for narcissistic texts, in which the act of storytelling seduces and lures, whereas "[r]eading becomes... an act of possession, of control" (*Narcissistic Narrative* 85).

Bound by Jimmy's obsessive desire, Oryx's voice is less powerful than Alex's, and the narrative act of communion less successful here than in the previous novel

because they are performing the literary act less collaboratively and more hierarchically. In *The Blind Assassin* Alex and Iris, as writer and reader but also as characters, were similarly placed in a position of relative disempowerment. A subversive writer on the run and a victimized wife managed to come together in the neutral space of a succession of rented or borrowed rooms, and colluded in a wilful act of fictionalizing their lives and their worries. However, in *Oryx and Crake* Jimmy/Snowman is comparatively more empowered both as reader and as character, perhaps stemming from the combination of visual and aural control. A male voyeur that subjects the female object of his obsession to scrutiny and a sole survivor to a global holocaust with the status of a demi-god or high priest among the Children of Crake, Jimmy/Snowman attempts to impose phallocentric order in the midst of the utter chaos he is living through. As described above, he exerts (or tries very hard to exert) a double kind of power on the female object/narrator, as voyeur and as narratee. Concerning voyeurism, in *Oryx and Crake* the computer and the TV screen enhance the terrifying feeling of secret surveillance being carried out over individuals and the possibility of its being used for violence against them. In true dystopian fashion, they behave very much like the TV screens in Orwell's *1984* and the slogan "Big Brother is watching you." Atwood's interest in visual technology has been long apparent in her writing. Typically, mirrors and cameras in earlier Atwood's texts allowed her to explore issues of distortion and ways of seeing as well as recording and transmitting what is seen. Although the objectifying gaze remains an issue, Wilson has argued that in this later phase Atwood has turned towards the related problem of physical or symbolic blindness, and that "[b]oth Crake and Jimmy are monsters in their contrasting ways of seeing without seeing" ("Blindness and Survival" 187). Concerning narrative dynamics, Jimmy the reader resists Oryx's telling of her story and denies her the wilful suspension of his disbelief. It is also significant that the lovers' room in this novel is Jimmy's room, which further suggests the stronger power of the reader as interpreter of the text and as the ultimate repository of meaning.

This brief analysis of the writing triangle as cast in the chronotope of the lovers' room in both novels has attempted to show how the storyteller (Alex, Oryx) has the ability to keep the narratee enthralled, but the audience is far from powerless, since for them (Iris, Jimmy) listening becomes an act of (psychological versus physical) possession, whereby they appropriate and 'consume' their loved ones. They can prompt the narrators, interrupt and sometimes redirect the story, or challenge its verisimilitude, and in the process they highlight the constructed and polyphonic nature of narrative. Thus the interaction of the lovers entails a kind of communion of the soul and the body that mirrors that of the literary act, though neither is deprived of tensions or struggles for power.

This in itself is not so much a novelty in the context of Atwood's writing as it is yet another example of her postmodern treatment of fiction. In The *Canadian Postmodern*, Linda Hutcheon pointed out that:

> Her novels are thematically and formally obsessed with the tension between art as kinetic process (its writing and, again, its reading) and the final result —'Art'— as inevitably a fixed and final product. And this tension remains unresolved. There is

no dialectic or even real dichotomy, just postmodern paradox. (Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern* 138)

Among the many previous instances of this paradox in Atwood's writing, perhaps the closest one to those under analysis today is the short story "There Was Once", where the tension between process and result is embodied by the dialogical friction between a bedtime storyteller and an opinionated narratee who disrupts the flow of the tale and tries to modify it. Patricia Merivale has described this story as "a metafictional fairy tale on narrative method, which demonstrates the difficulties of carrying on with a story that is being interrupted and corrected one word at a time" (259). In the story, Atwood is certainly at pains to show the importance of the collaboration of the reader for literature to exist at all.

One might argue that this issue features prominently as well in the 1996 novel *Alias Grace*. There an eager young doctor, Simon Jordan, has long interviews in a secluded room with the convicted murderess Grace Marks, whom he attempts to draw into telling her own story, but he consistently fails to obtain from her the revelations he so fervently expects. As Ingersoll has remarked, *Alias Grace* is a metafictional novel because of "its foregrounding of Grace as a storyteller, or author, standing in for her creator. Time and again, the narrative licenses Grace to reveal her own craft in choosing to tell or not to tell what she is presumed to know" (394). Moreover, as a close antecedent of the two novels under discussion here, *Alias Grace* displays early insights into the power differential between narrator and narrate and how it can be re-negotiated, and it conveys once more the impossibility of the discovery of "truth" in Simon Jordan, an earlier draft for Jimmy/Snowman.[6] However, *The Blind Assassin* and *Oryx and Crake* have a much more complex narrative structure than those two earlier works as well as their own distinctive scope and goals, since in them Atwood is not overtly concerned with the impact of political correctness on literature and neither is she tied down by the weight of true events. Rather, the paradox becomes enhanced by the way in which the framing and the nested tales build a dialogue of sorts, and give the lie to each other.

Nevertheless, Atwood's agenda in these recent works deserves further probing, particularly regarding the treatment of race. *The Blind Assassin*'s self-reflective strategies are put to the service of a liberal feminist position that portrays the historical victimization of white middle-class heterosexual women by means of what Bouson has called "the traumatic sexual sacrifice of the two sisters, Iris and Laura Chase" (251). In *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood's metafiction ushers in the problematics of race, both in the character of Oryx and in the creation of a new human species, the Children of Crake. Yet, her handling of this topic is less than satisfactory. It is

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[6] In her article "'That is what I told Dr Jordan,'" Siddall has described in some length the strategies of control deployed by Grace in her conversations with Simon in order to redress the power imbalance between them. Lovelady in turn has connected narrative issues to the gendered spheres of public and private speaking in "'I am telling this to no one but you.'"

important to note that Oryx is the only person whose race is even obliquely alluded to. She is isolated from siblings or friends. The two other main characters, and the ones she mostly interacts with, Jimmy/Snowman and Crake, are raceless, and therefore implicitly part of the Caucasian norm. Snowman/Jimmy became fascinated with Oryx many years before their actual meeting, as he and Crake came upon her image as they were browsing a sex website. A little girl of around eight, on her knees and licking whipped cream off a naked adult male, this Asian child is positioned as the pliable sex object of heterosexual male fantasies. Pliability and mystery, those two clichés of the Asian woman's stereotype, are the features that Snowman seems to value in her.[7] In contrast to this orientalist portrayal of Oryx, in the Children of Crake Atwood imagines a new race that comes in all skin colours, and that has been engineered not to register skin colour at all. Thus, we are led to imagine a society in which no racism exists. But this utopian resolution of difference and its ensuing inequalities is in fact only an erasure of difference. It is noteworthy that the absence of racism does not result from a higher amount of human tolerance over difference, but from the genetically engineered choice of sameness, which amounts very much to the absence of 'race' while maintaining a range of skin colours. After all, racism springs not merely from colour, but from its connection to social (dis)advantages. Moreover, the fact that hierarchical stratification is non-extant at present does not rule out that they might not develop later on.

These two novels attest to the strong currency of metafictional approaches in Canada's contemporary literature.[8] "Metafiction" was an ever-present buzzword in academic circles of the 1980s that has lost most of its fashionable appeal by now. Yet, Canadian authors appear to continue to find self-reflective fiction a powerful tool to explore a variety of issues, but most remarkably the role of author and reader in the literary act. As described above, and despite a certain inability to move beyond the script of liberal feminism, Atwood has created in her recent novels a fragile and complex structure that highlights heterogeneity and dialogue, where truth and lies need each other, just as the two lovers do, just as the writer and the reader do too. The text thus created surely becomes a shared act of love.

[7] One might even go further and contend that the orientalist portrayal of Oryx is the result of the power differential established within the nested tales (as described above) as well as the one established between both narrative levels, that is, between her voice in the nested tales and the Eurocentric, masculinist memories of Snowman in the frame. By choosing Snowman to control the narrative, Atwood is endowing him with authority and simultaneously denying Oryx's.

[8] Indeed, other interesting examples of self-reflexive fiction have been published in Canada in the last fifteen years. A case in point is Hiromi Goto's first work, *Chorus of Mushrooms* (1994), a novel in which dialogism, genre hybridization and collaborative storytelling also feature prominently. Thus, Ty has remarked that "[t]he multiple narrators and the fictional documents create a multilayered perspective, which has the effect in the novel of what Mikhail Bakhtin calls 'heteroglossia'" (154).

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