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Kiley Kapuscinski

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Negotiating the Nation: The Reproduction and Reconstruction of the National Imaginary in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

Kiley Kapuscinski
Queen's University

[A]lthough in every culture many stories are told, only some are told and retold,
and ... these recurring stories bear examining.
Margaret Atwood, *Strange Things*

What a society buries is at least as revealing as what it preserves.
Margaret Atwood, "Mathews and Misrepresentation"

IN A LECTURE DELIVERED AS PART OF THE CLARENDON LECTURE SERIES at Oxford University in the spring of 1991, Margaret Atwood discusses the building of national mythologies and prompts her listeners to re-examine a central Canadian emblem and their thoughts on Canadian national identity by provocatively questioning, "You thought the national flag was about a leaf, didn't you? Look harder. It's where someone got axed in the snow" (*Strange Things* 14). Through this simple semiological exercise, Atwood invites a radical shift in the perception of Canada's collective consciousness and a re-evaluation of what she terms "the great Canadian victim complex" (Gibson 22) in order to reveal both the capacity of Canadians to do harm to others and the violence that exists unremarked

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KILEY KAPUSCINSKI

recently completed her
PHD in English Literature
and is currently a
Sessional Adjunct at
Queen's University. Her
work has been published
in the *University of
Toronto Quarterly*
(forthcoming), the *Essex
Human Rights Review*,
the *Trans-disciplinary
Journal of Emergence*,
and in the digital project,
*Historical Perspectives
on Canadian Publishing*.
Her areas of interest
include contemporary
Canadian social fiction,
women and marginality,
ethics and ambivalence,
gender and genre theory.

at the heart of the Canadian signature. This renegotiation of national discourses is similarly demonstrated in Atwood's use of the violent woman as a destabilizing figure who, through her brutality, points toward broader social trends and reconfigures centralized myths of Canadian identity.¹ Atwood's formulation of the violent woman as an individual who reconceptualizes the dominant national imaginary, or the limited set of ideals and images that Canadians frequently draw on to construct and maintain their sense of national identity,² may *prima facie* appear an inconvenient and anomalous configuration. Yet Atwood, through this gesture, builds upon long-established cultural frameworks linking the nation to gender and violence, not only insisting on the enduring relevance of nationalism and national conceits but also the need to see the nation's genius as a construct in constant flux. Exemplifying such matters, the frequently brutal narrator of Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) uncovers how the reputed vulnerability central to the Canadian identity is open to interrogation and re-interpretation; despite her marginal status within society, the violent woman is here depicted as a meaningful and revealing figure that forces a reconsideration of Canada's central mythologies. What emerges from this critical endeavour is not a reformed or corrective image of Canada's national identity, since no singular figure can possibly signify the cultural heterogeneity existent within a country, but a recognition of the need to "look harder" and to question those national narratives that Canadians hold timeless and of themselves.

Contemporary critics and theorists of nationhood have endlessly struggled against the inherent difficulties of thinking nationalistically, and Canadian scholars in particular at times contend with the self-effacing possibility that the very conceit they attempt to analyze and delimit may in fact not exist at all.³ One of the fundamental reasons for the apprehensiveness surrounding discussions of the nation and national identity is the

- 1 Paul Goetsch has similarly observed Atwood's concern for "questioning the concept of a monolithic, stable [national] identity" (175).
- 2 More broadly, the national imaginary can be understood as a socially constructed metanarrative that organizes and enables national identity through exclusive ideological, political, and socio-historical frameworks, yet that also encourages Canadians to overlook how "our national identity is neither unified nor natural but something we work at reinventing and protecting everyday" (Brydon, "Reading" 172). Also see Roxanne Rimstead (7).
- 3 Sarah Corse, in her comparative analysis of Canadian and American national identities, states that "the overriding focus of the national identity debate is 'Does Canada have a national identity?,' looking to English-French cultural tensions as the primary reason that "a unitary identity is problematic" (111). Also see Charles Taylor's *Reconciling the Solitudes* (25).

shifting conception of what constitutes nationhood; Philip Spencer and Howard Wollman find that the “criteria for deciding on what constitutes a nation are highly contested, involving complex issues relating to identity, culture, language, history, myth and memory, and disputed claims to territory” (2), and Michael Ignatieff adds that “There is only so much that can be said about nationalism in general. It is not one thing in many disguises, but many things in many disguises” (9). Unlike a state, which concerns matters of governmental jurisdiction, and the powers held by a polity over a defined geographic area, a nation refers to the more abstract relations between people who envision themselves as connected through time, space, and an underlying set of values and principles, thereby highlighting the complex and recondite systems of meaning that combine to create the effect of national identity.

Yet it is despite, or perhaps due to, such evasiveness and impenetrability that nationalist discourses and identification continue to be of relevance, since it is this “chameleon quality of nationalism” that, for Sita Ranchod-Nilsson and Mary Ann Tétreault, permits its being “couched in multiple and, at times, competing organizational forms” (7).⁴ The myth of a postnational world that was popularized in the years following the Cold War, and which posited that the modern world had surmounted tribalism and divisive religious and racial thinking, has been replaced with what many have observed is a recent resurgence of nationalist sentiment.⁵ Ignatieff and others, such as Gopal Balakrishnan, have found that ethno-nationalist identification and cultural nationalist sentiment are particularly acute amongst those who feel their nation to be imperiled, thereby suggesting a *raison d'être* for the tendency toward the durability of national identification in Canada. Encroached upon from without by weighty American cultural influences and threatened from within by unsettling ethnic conflicts, including those between French, English, and Native populations, Canadian nationalist values have frequently held centre stage within Canadian discourses and have been championed by several influential cultural figures. Despite her depiction of Lesje's and Elizabeth's deep-seated suspicions of nationalist alignment in *Life Before Man*, Atwood herself has frequently voiced her support for, and allegiance

4 Jonathan Kertzer similarly suggests that “the nation persists because it is protean,” adding that “Nationalism is so deeply ingrained in modern thinking that it can hardly be considered just one indispensable ideology among others” (174).

5 See John Hutchinson and Anthony Smith's “Preface” to *Nationalism* and Ranchod-Nilsson and Tétreault's “Introduction” to *Women, States, and Nationalism*.

to, the Canadian nation.⁶ Claiming Canada as her own, Atwood explains that “Refusing to acknowledge where you come from ... is an act of amputation: you may become free floating, a citizen of the world ... but only at the cost of arms, legs or heart” (“Travels Back” 113).⁷ Frequently hailed as “the” voice of Canada, or as a personification of Canadian literature, Atwood has been placed by critics and the Canadian public into a metonymic relationship with Canada, and while she may at times reject the title of “nationalist” for fear of appearing an ideologue or having her novels mistaken for sermons (“Defying” 63),⁸ she has been widely influential in shaping the way Canadians view themselves.

Atwood’s *Survival* (1972), a thematic guide aimed at prompting national self-awareness, has arguably held the greatest impact of all her works on the developing Canadian consciousness. Published during a period of burgeoning nationalism, Atwood’s early work of cultural criticism extends from the premise that national life generates a community ethos marked by specific beliefs, values, and characteristics, and that “the central symbol for Canada ... is undoubtedly *Survival*” (32), thereby encouraging Canadians to imagine themselves in terms of their vulnerability and victimhood. Reproducing and extending Canada’s symbolic heritage of “peace, order and good government” initiated by the Canadian Charter, *Survival* further entrenches notions of Canadian peacefulness which, like the Charter’s implied contrast with the American ideals of “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness,” stand in direct opposition to the violence and the “taking in or ‘conquering’” (*Survival* 31) spirit native to the American genius. The essentially dialogic nature of national identity that Atwood espouses suggests that gestures of self-recognition are based on difference, and that establishing national identification in a cultural vacuum is a difficult, if not impossible, task. The Hegelian dialectic of self and Other appears in Atwood’s criticism when she locates qualities oppositional to, and thus stimulative of, Canadian identity in the body of

6 For example, see Atwood’s interview with Peter Gzowski, “Closet Cartoonist.” Also see Goetsch’s “Margaret Atwood: A Canadian Nationalist” and Sandra Djwa’s “The Where of Here: Margaret Atwood and a Canadian Tradition.”

7 See Coral Ann Howells’s “It All Depends on Where You Stand in Relation to the Forest” (48) and Frank Davey’s *Reading Canadian Reading* (63), respectively.

8 While Atwood concedes that “everything is ‘political’” and that “it would be impossible to be a Canadian writer of [her] generation without developing a political consciousness” (“Evading” 137), she further explains her reluctance to write from within ideological frames, given that “Writing and *isms* are two different things ... art is uncontrollable and has a habit of exploring the shadow side, the unspoken, the unthought” (“If You Can’t” 21).

the national Other and when she argues that “the reason for wanting to have a Canada is that you do not agree with some of the political choices that have been made by America and that you want to do it a different way” (“Where Were You” 90).

The proliferation of discourses depicting Canadians as innocents in contrast to Americans indicates how Canadians have established a sense of unity in imagining common ways of being. Such rhetoric surfaces in George Grant’s discussion of how Canadian reticence and “stodginess” have made Canada a society of greater “innocence than the people to the south” (70) and in Katherine Morrison’s comparison of Canadian and American cultural identities, in which she insists on a “traditional Canadian aversion to using [violence] to solve problems or even to achieve worthy objectives” (245).⁹ This belief in the processes of peacefulness has become an integral aspect of national identification and, in many ways, this mythology of non-violence and mutualism has come to underwrite other myths similarly central to the Canadian consciousness, such as the valuing of ethnic tolerance and multiculturalism. While Atwood’s criticism and interviews reveal her participation in disseminating conceptions of Canadian pacifism and the vulnerability this frequently entails when one holds “a will to lose” (*Survival* 35), her fictional writing complicates this uni-dimensional depiction of the Canadian ethos and the binary structures upon which it is premised. Within such imaginative spaces, Atwood highlights the reductiveness of imagining Canadian identity as a negative, or of defining Canada by what it is not, and explores the possibility that the differences marked by national borders are not eroding but never really existed. In her unsettling of national mythologies, Atwood allows Canadians to see the violence they enact against others, and even against their fellow citizens, under a myriad of guises, producing victims that are as numerous as they are diverse. Moreover, such disruptions reveal how Canadians are not as inculpable as they envision themselves to be and suggest the necessity of keeping constructions of national identity open to renegotiation.

Recognizing the instability of nations and the collective identities they contain is not only necessary before Canadians can perceive in themselves the violent potential they imagine in others, but also essential to a broader understanding of nationhood as a synthetic construct and a processual, rather than static, entity. Benedict Anderson, looking to print capitalism and shifting conceptions of time as the historic events contributing to the

⁹ Also see David Thomas’s (ed.) *Canada and the United States: Differences that Count*.

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genesis of nationhood, in many ways revolutionized thinking about the nation when he conceived of it as an “imagined community,” given that “members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (15). In addressing the critical oversights of Anderson’s theory and exposing the exclusivity of race, class, and gender ideologies at the heart of such imagined communities, Tricia Cusack both continues and disrupts Anderson’s ideas, arguing that “national culture is in a sense a fiction, since the culture of any nation-state is likely to be diverse rather than unitary,” and further positing that “‘national culture’ is necessarily a ‘selective tradition’ and reflective of particular interests” (9).¹⁰ Yet this recognition of nationhood as an imaginative construct, and thus acknowledgement of how national narratives are built around certain qualities and characteristics but not others, has been impeded by the rhetoric of authenticity often underlying nationalist discussions. Discourses of antiquity are frequently utilized by nationalists in an attempt to “place their own country in an ‘immemorial past’ where its arbitrariness cannot be questioned” (Brennan 45) and to present national identity as that which is natural, indisputable, and self-evident. Moreover, this naturalization of national identity is compounded by the use of mythic narratives to perpetuate a nation’s sense of itself, given that myths, according to Roland Barthes, “ha[ve] the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear external” (142), and by national emblems, such as flags, maps, uniforms, and national buildings, which work to suggest the fixity and immutability of national identity.¹¹ In *Surfacing*, David’s drawing attention to the hailing of Canada as “The true north strong and free” (13) inadvertently reveals how many Canadians have similarly attempted to secure their nation’s legitimacy through discourses of authenticity, despite Canada’s relative youth as a polity.¹²

In moving beyond such myths of genuineness, one can begin to see the nation as endlessly emergent through process, and as a social construct of no less importance or influence for its continual reinvention. While national myths certainly possess an enduring quality that offers the illu-

10 For a further critique of Anderson’s theory, see Himani Bannerji’s “Geography Lessons.”

11 See Paula Hasting’s “Branding Canada.”

12 While this construction of Canada as an authentic northern space is by no means uniformly held by all Canadians, Sherrill Grace suggests the pervasiveness of this representation in stating that “we have located North everywhere within our national borders” (*Canada* xii). Also see 45–76.

sion of permanence and stability, they are more broadly subject to gradual shifts and reconstructions that destabilize efforts to link a specific citizenry with inherent qualities or characteristics.¹³ As both a means and a sign of shifts in national identification, literature and other cultural institutions often demonstrate the volatility of semiotic systems and insist on the need for individuals to look both *inter*-nationally and *intra*-nationally in order to recognize themselves. Moreover, while the continual reformulation of national narratives may suggest the need to discard static and clichéd representations of national identity, Atwood contends that such constructions are not wholly dispensable. Discussing her own efforts at refashioning Canadians' self-understanding, Atwood suggests the need for such anachronistic national visions "before art or literature can play with them, that is, make variations on them, explore them more deeply, utilize their imaginative power ... or turn them inside out. What art can't do is ignore them altogether" (*Strange Things* 10).

In various works by Atwood, including *Surfacing*, *Cat's Eye* (1988), *The Robber Bride* (1993), and *The Blind Assassin* (2000), it is frequently the violent woman who reminds us of the impermanence of national identity and who consistently challenges myths of vulnerability and other narratives central to the Canadian imaginary. As both an ex-centric and centric Canadian figure, the violent woman engages in acts of brutality that often render her a social pariah, yet such acts simultaneously gesture toward the broader trends of violence in Canadian society that are frequently masked by Canada's national metanarratives. To the extent that Atwood's violent woman is relegated to the margins of society while paradoxically typifying the behaviours and attitudes of many Canadians, she occupies an insider/outsider position that enables her to destabilize the national genius in powerful ways. While Atwood's use of the brutalizing woman as a vehicle for social critique and re-evaluation may appear an unconventional

13 According to Homi Bhabha, recognizing the fluidity and narrativity of national identities exposes how the nation-space is "in the *process* of the articulation of elements: where meanings may be partial because they are *in medias res*; and history may be half-made because it is in the process of being made; and the image of cultural authority may be ambivalent because it is caught, uncertainly, in the act of 'composing' its powerful image" (3). Bhabha's positioning of the nation as an edifice of ideological ambivalence and his insistence on the contingency of established national meanings leave open to doubt those qualities upon which communities imagine their borders and belonging and suggest the constant deferral of a definitive national identity. Myths of an immutable national consciousness and a unified national culture disallow us to see how the "other" is never outside or beyond us" (Bhabha 4), and it is this collective blindness that is integral to nation-building.

construction, this figuration is prefaced by the cultural imagination and the connections already established between the nation and violence and between the nation and gender constructs. Emergent from this use of the brutalizing woman is not only the recognition of how tradition and cultural change are potentially connected but also an awareness of the violent woman's suitability as national soothsayer. As a figure variously denied and disclaimed by her society, the violent woman stands as the ideal subject to expose the similarly unacknowledged aspects of the national genius.

While Canadians have tended to imagine themselves as a peaceable people and as eschewing violent conflict in favour of a more passive or moderate approach, there exist long-standing connections between the constructs of nationhood and violence.¹⁴ Cindy Ness's reference to "the bloody task of nation building" (89) and Spencer and Wollman's assertion that "competition, conflict and violence have been central to the emergence of nation-states from the outset" (45) testify to the advent of the nation-state in war, civil struggle, inter-denominational violence, and brutalities which often persist in the maintenance and expansion of national boundaries.¹⁵ The historical and conceptual affiliation between citizenship and military service, where one's ties to the nation and the sacrifices and sufferings one makes in its name are mutually reinforcing, extends from the logic that the willingness to risk one's life for one's homeland is required in exchange for full membership within a polity and the promise of future protection and security.¹⁶ While violence is typically imagined as divisive and destructive, this link between nationhood and violence suggests how common sufferings, like common victories, can incite a spirit of unity and solidarity¹⁷ and how political brutality, like that

14 Atwood appears to be drawing on such connections in "Variations on the Word *Love*," where soldiers sing of their love for their nation, while "raising / their glittering knives in salute" (82).

15 Arthur Redding similarly argues that violence "forms an integral, vitiating ground of any dynamic system whose purported equilibrium is merely a pretense" (5).

16 In acknowledgement of this simultaneously symbolic and bodily economy, women in countries such as the United States, Israel, Nicaragua, Lebanon, Sri Lanka, Turkey, Chechnya, and Iraq have insisted upon their participation in violent political struggle, and various insurgency groups, such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia (FARC), the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), the Shining Path, and the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Ealaam (LTTE), have been significantly strengthened by the inclusion of women fighters. See Nira Yuval Davis (89), Mia Bloom "Female Suicide Bombers," and Ness "The Rise in Female Violence."

of the violent woman, can perform as a sign that marks the extension and reconstruction of national boundaries.

Similar to the extant conceptual frameworks linking nationhood and violence, cultural constructions connecting the nation to gender help readers to situate Atwood's use of the violent woman in re-evaluating national narratives. While the individual has frequently been employed by Atwood and others to illuminate the nation and vice versa, where the individual concretizes the abstraction of nationhood and the nation illuminates and projects subjective experience,¹⁸ the consciousness of the nation has more specifically been articulated through the female gender.¹⁹ E.J. Pratt's "Towards the Last Spike" (1952), Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* (1966), and Susan Swan's *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* (1983) exemplify the continued use of the female figure to engage Canada and its geography in Canadian literature. Yet it is the numerous American feminists assuming that nationalism is an "all patriarchal, male-dominated boys' [game]" ("Evading" 139) that have particularly piqued Atwood's attention, as well as Western feminists in general, who have frequently appraised women's widespread conscription for the reproduction of the nation and its borders²⁰ rather than the powerful potential for subversion this implies.²¹ While Cusack argues that women are relegated "to symbolic rather than active roles in the polity" (2), where women's designation as national emblems allows them to perform in the mythology of nationhood, but not in its everyday lived experience, others, including Nira

17 Atwood accedes to this notion in *Lady Oracle* when Joan compares her mother to a national crisis and reflects on how her mother's bringing the family closer together is similar to the ways in which "a national emergency, like the Blitz" (181) keeps a nation intact.

18 For example, Atwood insists on the necessity of "discovering your place" in order to "discover yourself" ("Travels Back" 113) and employs individuals as national metaphors in *Power Politics* when she states that her central poetic figures "are hostile nations" (37). Also see Spencer and Wollman (6) and Kertzer (43).

19 For example, see Sunera Thobani's *Exalted Subjects*, where she examines how Canada's social welfare system defines the nation through a female ethics of care and "the feminized characteristics of compassion" (108).

20 Robin Morgan further elaborates on this feminist resistance to constructions of nationalism in stating that "women seem, cross-culturally, to be deeply opposed to nationalism—at least as practiced in patriarchal society" (23).

21 The subversive and satiric national commentary that Atwood offers through her "Kanadian Kultchur Komiks" (a comic series featuring Survival Woman that Atwood published between 1975 and 1980 under the pseudonym Bart Gerrard) in *This Magazine*, a left-nationalist publication, signals her understanding of the subversive role that woman can play in (re)producing the nation.

Yuval-Davis, insist on the agency of women within the nation-state. In her influential and insightful writings on the gendering of the nation, Yuval-Davis outlines the primary ways in which women actively participate in the development and maintenance of the nation through their roles in the military, the reproduction of citizens, ideology, and national boundaries, and in performing as “symbols of national ‘essence’” (116).²² Yet even for Yuval-Davis, larger patriarchal forces govern such reproductive roles for women, and power is only granted to women as “social power” to “exert control over other women who might be constructed as ‘deviants’” (37). In other words, while Yuval-Davis draws upon this latter point to suggest how “women are not just passive victims” (37) within national frames, her observation of women’s policing for the inappropriate behaviours of other women indicates how, for some, women’s subversion is always already contained within the larger dictates of patriarchal standards of gendered behaviours.

Forcing readers to see beyond women’s passive and circumscribed roles within the nation, Atwood’s fictional rendering of the violent woman maintains the concept of women as variable reproducers of the nation but further recognizes the violent woman’s capacity for insubordination within this role. Contrasting with Walter Seymour Allward’s statue of Mother Canada in the Canadian National Vimy Memorial in France, which personifies Canada as a young mother mourning the loss of her fallen sons and thus reiterates myths of Canada’s vulnerability and victimhood, are the numerous cultural artifacts of the violent woman that have been produced in various countries over the past two centuries in an effort to articulate national identity.²³ Such monuments, however, typically display the violent woman as a sword-wielding figure who perpetuates traditional national themes, such as liberty, justice, and the victorious spirit of the nation, rather than one who exposes the less exalted realities that such themes belie. Diverging from this convention of aligning the bellicose woman with popular national narratives, Atwood’s violent women are agents of both the *reproduction* and *reconstruction* of the national consciousness.

22 For further elaboration on the five roles of women in the nation, see Umut Özkirimli’s *Theories of Nationalism* (2005).

23 Such artifacts include Ludwig von Schwanthaler’s “Bavaria” (1837–48), Rolf Adlersparre Zink’s depiction of Sweden in “Moder Svea” (1892–94), Yevgeny Vuchetich’s rendering of Russia in his effigy “The Motherland” (1967), and the various references to Britain through Pallas Athene. For examples of the last, see Anne Helmreich’s “Domesticating Britannia: Representations of the Nation in *Punch*: 1870–1880.”

More precisely, what Atwood's violent women, as modern mythographers, reproduce and disseminate is an unsettling re-conception of Canada's various mythologies, including the understanding of Canadians as figures of vulnerability and passivity. Resisting the traditional relegation of female deviancy to the margins of literary narratives, Atwood's violent women frequently manipulate the role of woman as stalwart gatekeeper of the nation's ethos by admitting unsettling images into the national consciousness, thus enabling a recognition of the less venerable aspects of both the Canadian genius, and of women themselves.

As one of Atwood's earliest and most widely read works of fiction, *Surfacing* has accumulated much scholarly attention, a significant proportion of which views the narrative as contributing to the development of a distinctive national identity.²⁴ The publication of the novel in the early seventies during an era of centennial fervour and in the same year as *Survival* has prompted many critics to read *Surfacing* as a treatise that reflects Atwood's early critical work in urging the self-consciousness of Canadians and inciting them to acknowledge the heritage of victimhood that is distinctly their own.

Coral Ann Howells posits this connection between the two texts in suggesting how they "exist in a symbiotic relationship for although the novel was written first, it was through writing it that Atwood realised certain common themes that her fiction shared with other Canadian writing, and *Survival* in turn shows Atwood creating the critical context in which to read her own fiction" (*Margaret Atwood* 39).²⁵ Yet such endeavours to see the two works as congruous narratives overlook the manner in which the novel tentatively aligns with, but more broadly undermines, the critical position Atwood develops in *Survival* concerning Canadians' relative innocence and the nation's "superabundance of victims" (39), thereby contributing to, rather than solving, the cultural unrest of the period, constructing and destabilizing the Canadian signature in the same narrative gesture. While many critics have endeavoured to question the validity, accuracy,

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24 Frank Davey confirms this observation in stating that *Surfacing* "was widely read as a nationalist novel when published in Canada in 1973" (*Post-National* 9), and Coral Ann Howells similarly finds the novel to be a "[product] of 1970s English-Canadian cultural nationalism" (*Margaret* 37).

25 George Woodcock similarly finds that Atwood's "criticism is not separate from her fiction and her poetry; it is another facet of the same whole, and it constantly inter-reflects with them" ("Bashful" 224). Also see Philip Marchand's contribution to "Surviving *Survival*" (21) and Nathalie Cooke's *Margaret Atwood: A Critical Companion* (68).

and scope of *Survival*,²⁶ little has been said of this disjunctive and uneasy relationship between the “victim theme” (111) of *Survival*, which includes Atwood’s model of the four “Basic Victim Positions,”²⁷ and the construction of Canadian female violence in *Surfacing*. Moreover, there appears little acknowledgement of the ways in which Atwood’s critical work—which she admits was conceived as a “hundred-page leaflet squeezed from [her] lecture notes” (“After Survival” 133)—is reductive in its discussion of issues that are more adequately and thoughtfully explored in her novel.²⁸ By allowing Canadian vulnerability and Canadian violence to share centre stage, this discussion makes apparent that what “surfaces” in the novel is the ambivalent nature of the Canadian genius,²⁹ and the need to seek an alternative third position that moves beyond frameworks of violence.

Appraised by Atwood as a type of Canadian ghost story (Gibson 29), *Surfacing* shifts between the present experiences and indeterminate memories of a young and unnamed first-person narrator who is returning to the Quebec wilderness of her youth in order to uncover the reason for her father’s recent disappearance, which we later learn is due to his drowning in the lake while searching for Native rock paintings. The narrator, accompanied by her lover Joe and her friends Anna and David, settles into her father’s recently abandoned cabin before beginning her search, only to discover that what she is really seeking is an understanding of her own elusive and tenuously held past. However, the narrator’s search for

26 For a critical overview of such objections, see Walter Pache’s “A Certain Frivolity”: Margaret Atwood’s Literary Criticism.”

27 Atwood characterizes her four victim positions as follows: “*Position One*: To deny the fact that you are a victim,” “*Position Two*: To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim, but to explain this as an act of Fate, the Will of God, the dictates of Biology ... the necessity decreed by History, or Economics, or the Unconscious, or any other large general powerful idea,” “*Position Three*: To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim but to refuse to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable,” and “*Position Four*: To be a creative non-victim” (my emphasis, *Survival* 36–38).

28 In *Survival*, Atwood’s admission that she makes a “sweeping generalization” in her claim that each nation possesses a “single unifying and informing symbol” (31) highlights her ability to see beyond her own frameworks at the time of their composition and performs as an invitation for readers to engage with, and contest, her propositions. Moreover, it is likely that such dissent is an intended rhetorical effect of *Survival*, given that such opposition generates lively critical conversation and controversy around the topic of Canadian literature that Atwood felt had hitherto been denied as an area of study.

29 The alternate titles for *Surfacing*, which include *Camouflages* and *A Place Made of Water* (quoted in Sullivan 287), further suggest Atwood’s interest in exploring the deceptiveness and malleability of individual and national identity.

identity is never exclusively a pursuit of self-knowledge but, rather, appears at times as her search for a definitive Canadian identity.³⁰ Numerous critics, such as June Schlueter, have noted the ways in which the narrator remains in dialogue with the nation, imagining her as a revealing figure who makes evident the ways in which Canadians are rendered “vulnerable, consumable, and oppressed” (2). Yet it is only in looking beyond this framework of victimhood that one is enabled to see how the narrator’s recognition of her violent tendencies prompts her awareness of the violence that similarly mars Canada and its historic past. As a harbinger offering a new understanding of Canada and the ghosts it conceals, the narrator catalyzes a rethinking of the Canadian imaginary and illuminates how the (re-)emergence of national identity occurs continually in the everyday.

Exemplifying Atwood’s assertion in *Survival* that the organizing sentiments of the Canadian mythos are the feelings of “hanging on, staying alive” and of an “intolerable anxiety” (33) resultant from the perception of ubiquitous threat, the narrator of *Surfacing* is a figure multiply marked by her vulnerability, particularly as a Canadian and as a woman. In the opening paragraphs, the narrator’s notice of the burned out “R” in a sign that resultantly reads “the oyal” (7) on the main street of a small Quebec town gestures toward the rapidly fading imperial presence in Canada and the simultaneous disappearance of a sense of protection under a larger and more established governing body. Shortly after viewing this symbolic reminder of Canada’s susceptibility, the narrator registers her general feeling of anxiety and her compulsion to “keep [her] outside hand on the door” (8). In this instance, the narrator’s feelings of vulnerability while traveling on an uncertain road in an unreliable vehicle with untrustworthy fellow passengers are conflated with, yet paradoxically help to illuminate, her skepticism and sense of defencelessness as a citizen in a newly postimperial nation. In other words, the narrator recognizes that a nation’s independence from one imperial power can be a prelude to the attacks of others. Yet such fears of national vulnerability are nothing new to the narrator. As a child during World War II, the narrator anticipates her later fears of foreign invasion by creatively envisioning Hitler as “the great evil, many-tentacled, ancient and indestructible as the Devil” (139), further imagining his influence to reach her through her brother’s comic books and the swastikas in his scrapbook. The considerable impact of

30 Sharon R. Wilson insists that this duplicitous search for identity is a common motif in Atwood’s writing, where “the narrators or personae of virtually all Atwood texts join readers on quests for self and national identity, and for understanding of the past” (220).

The
vulnerability
that the
narrator
repeatedly
recognizes in
herself as a
Canadian
reiterates a
fundamental
assertion of
Survival that
“Canada as a
whole is a
victim.”

this perceived threat on the narrator as a child is similarly reflected in her imaginative play with her brother, in which they would wrap their feet in blankets, pretending that “the Germans shot [them] off” (8).³¹

Years later, the narrator recalibrates the source of national threat in sensing Canada’s vulnerability to an invasion by Americans, whom she initially envisions as a “disease ... spreading up from the south” (7) and later synecdochically imagines through Bill Malmstrom, who admits to having his eye on her father’s land “for quite some time” (102). While vulnerability has been recognized as a constituent element of national independence and an ineludible aspect of citizenship, Shannon Hengen notes that vulnerability in *Surfacing* is presented as “truer somehow to the Canadian than to the American mythos” (61), resulting in the appearance of Americans having power and Canadians being devoid of it. The vulnerability that the narrator repeatedly recognizes in herself as a Canadian reiterates a fundamental assertion of *Survival* that “Canada as a whole is a victim” (35). Yet the narrator proceeds to complicate this claim in her early, albeit unsustainable conception of violence as that which firmly establishes Canadian identity through its absence. Similar to Atwood’s observation that “in none of our acts ... are we passive” (*Survival* 246), the narrator early on suggests that victimhood is not a form of passivity but a gesture of national identification that distinguishes her from others and that remains untainted with the brutality of the Other.

Extending her victim status to her identity as a woman, the narrator further suggests that Canadian women face an increased risk of becoming victims, given the multiple vulnerabilities encoded by their nationality and gender. Recollecting her previous role as a vessel for her former lover’s child, the narrator regards her possession of a womb as a weakness that permitted her ex-lover to impose upon her an unwanted pregnancy: “[A]ll the time it was growing in me I felt like an incubator. He measured everything he would let me eat, he was feeding it on me, he wanted a replica of himself” (37). The narrator’s perception of her unwanted fetus as cannibalistically feeding “on [her]” reveals how she had registered the betrayal not only of her body and her lover but also of her unborn child, indicating the similitude between the narrator, who feels preyed upon from all directions and who suffers from what Alice Palumbo identifies as an “unvoiced, but lurking, anxiety” (75), and Atwood’s Canadian subject

31 Similarly, the narrator’s childhood drawings of “people-shaped rabbits” (97) living inside of suspended eggs that they could exit through rope ladders hanging from the roof and sit upon in “safety” (98) suggest her early, albeit misconstrued, interpretation of air raid shelters.

in *Survival*, who is faced with omnipresent perils. It is only in retrospect that the narrator recognizes the irony of thinking that answering “‘A lady’ or ‘A mother’” (97) would be a “safe” response to the question of what she wanted to be when she grew up. Yet the narrator’s obstinate return to images of her female victimization and to the threats impressed upon Canadians, and thus her repeated identification with the second victim position which indicates her victimization by socio-political forces beyond her control, betrays her attraction to vulnerability as a paradoxical position of ascendancy. Atwood’s insight that “People can be morally superior when they are in a position of relative powerlessness” (“Just Looking” 122) and the narrator’s belief that “failure ... has a kind of purity” (62) offer a rationale for the narrator’s attraction to feelings of impotence. The profound reversals implied by this reasoning signal the multidimensionality of, and the advantages potentially offered through, Canadian, female, and other positions of vulnerability. However, Atwood’s additional casting of doubt on the a priori inculpability of women,³² and more broadly on the notion of Canada as a “goody-goody land of idealists” (“Just Looking” 122), signals the complexity and culpability that lies beneath the surface of gender conventions and national narratives.

Since her childhood, the narrator has imagined the violent Other as slowly encroaching, envisioning “the great evil” to migrate from Hitler’s Germany to contemporary America. Yet her later recognition that violence is not approaching but is already present in her forces her to acknowledge that her vulnerability is coexistent with her own violent potential and incites an important realization: that the dichotomies of good and evil rarely exist in their unadulterated forms in individuals or in nations. Further, the narrator’s growing awareness of her violent capacities marks the departure of *Surfacing* from the theoretical premise of *Survival* and signals how the novel renders inadequate “the ever-present victim motif” (*Survival* 95) proposed by the criticism, including the four victim positions that underestimate Canadians’ potential for violence.³³ The narrator’s initial distancing from and hostility toward brutalizing agents and cultures

32 For example, see Atwood’s “The Curse of Eve” and “Spotty-Handed Villainesses.” While these critical essays appear several years after *Surfacing* (1978 and 1993, respectively), they help to contextualize Atwood’s critique of constrictive gender conventions and indicate her early fictional exploration of topics that appear in her later criticism.

33 While Atwood’s theory of victim positions acknowledges the potential for individuals associated with positions one, two, and three to demonstrate “anger,” this distemper remains indelibly connected to, and contingent upon, one’s ex-

dramatizes how “The Other is frequently a dumping-ground for anxieties, or a way of unloading [one’s] moral responsibilities” (*Strange Things* 47), where the characteristics that the narrator most fears and abhors in others are uncannily reflective of characteristics she sees in herself and in her fellow Canadians. This unsettling recognition of culpability forces a reconstruction of the Canadian mythos of vulnerability and exposes the deep ambivalence of the Canadian signature. National differences imagined to distinguish between political bodies are used in *Survival* to offer citizens a unified and cogent national narrative, yet such differences are to a large extent revealed as imaginative constructs fabricated to evoke a false sense of unanimity and an allegiance to a distinctive polity. Moreover, the Canadian potential for brutality indicates the capacity for violence to emerge from unexpected entities and the similarities between individuals and nations that are frequently masked by powerful narratives of gender and nationhood.

Opposing traditional constructions of violence that configure it as the assailing of one human on the mentality or physicality of another, the narrator’s violence frequently takes the form of an attack on nature. Primarily insisting on the value of the natural world in and of itself,³⁴ *Surfacing* further challenges Atwood’s observation in *Survival* that while it is possible to recognize animals on their own terms, an animal is rarely “liked or disliked for itself alone; it is chosen for its symbolic anthropomorphic values” (79). The novel’s insistence on the need to recognize animals outside of their human resemblances and the frailty of non-human life reveals its layered stance toward victimhood, wherein human and non-human life forms are portrayed as vulnerable and violence is not exclusively that which is enacted against sentient objects or materials.³⁵ In this light, the narrator’s childhood decision to throw leeches into the campfire, from

perience of being victimized, and there is little to suggest the potential for this anger to manifest as violence.

34 An early epigram for *Surfacing*, which drew on John Holland’s 1651 text, *Smoke of the Bottomless Pit or A More True and Fuller Discovery of the Doctrine of Those Men Which Call Themselves Ranters or the Mad Crew*, offered a pantheistic vision in declaring that “God is essentially in every creature, and that there is as much of God in one creature as in another.... I saw this expression in the Book of Thieves, that the essence of God was as much in the Ivie leaf as in the most glorious Angel” (quoted in Sullivan 288). Despite the editorial decision to delete this epigram from the published text, evidence of Atwood’s pantheistic beliefs remain evident in her valuing non-human life.

35 Elaine Scarry similarly renders problematic the easy division between the constructs of sentience and non-sentience in asserting that “Live vegetable tissue

which they would “writhe out and crawl painfully, coated with ashes and pine needles, back towards the lake” (142), and her later uprooting of weeds that “resisted, holding on or taking clumps of soil out with them or breaking their stems,” and that left “green ... weed blood” (83) on her hands, can be viewed as acts of violence against nature. Like the mutilated heron, which stands most powerfully as a testament to the potential victimhood of nature, the animals and vegetation that the narrator variously annihilates suggest how violence against the natural world is no longer a matter of survival or indifference but a manifestation of the human desire to inflict torture and suffering and the willingness to end life in order to satisfy one’s own appetite for destruction. With a few exceptions,³⁶ the general failure of Atwood scholars to locate the destruction of the natural world within frameworks of violence has limited criticism to an examination of nature as an insensate entity or as a multivalent metaphor for human experience. Similarly, it has prevented critical analyses from moving beyond the acts of violence themselves in order to speculate on the communicative intent behind such behaviours.

Proclaiming the dangers inherent in “other people telling [her] what [she] felt” (78) and of externally- or historically-imposed constructions of her identity, including those imposed through discourses of nationhood and gender, the narrator describes her destruction of nature as violence in an effort to avow her blameworthiness for the atrocities she had exclusively associated with others. While similar violations against nature may have been previously committed by the narrator, it is her recognition of such acts *as violence* that indicates her “opt[ing] for life and responsibility” (Hutcheon, “From Poetic” 29) for both the destruction of individual life forms and the endangerment of the ecosystem as a whole. More broadly, the narrator’s descriptions of her violence against nature draw attention to Canadians’ participation in the natural ruination that has widely been attributed to Americans’ behaviours and lifestyles. While Canadian readers are led to believe that stories of “Senseless killing” and of horrific loon chases in powerboats that continue “until [the loon] drowned or got chopped up in the propeller blades” (131) are distinctively American,

occupies a peculiar category of sentience” (66) and in observing how objects that humans help shape are regarded as “extensions of sentient human beings and as thus themselves protected by the privileges accorded sentience” (174). Also see Ronald Hatch’s “Margaret Atwood, the Land, and Ecology” (187).

³⁶ Such as Janice Fiamengo in her essay “‘It looked at me with its mashed eye’: Animal and Human Suffering in *Surfacing*.”

the narrator's admittedly more subtle, yet nonetheless similar, acts of violence bring Canadians into chilling alignment with their southern neighbours. Here, national differences are not of type but of degree. The willful forgetfulness of Canadians to what David identifies as the founding of Canada "on the bodies of dead animals" (43), such as beaver, seals, and fish,³⁷ and their oversight of how Canadian development has left "rocks blasted, trees bulldozed over, roots in the air, needles reddening" (15), has hitherto permitted Canadians to overlook how violence coincides with the birth of their nation and is woven throughout Canada's past and present. The selective processes that characterize memory and national self-consciousness indicate how incomplete narratives have shaped the national genius. Given that the female body has traditionally been utilized as a signifier of nationhood, and the boundaries of this body a variable marker of the safety and security of the nation,³⁸ the destabilization of the narrator's bodily margins on account of her emaciation following her rejection of food, her shedding of her "false body" (191), and her consequent attempts to grow fur, function as a portent of this shift in Canada's mythos, registering on a symbolic level the challenge Canadian violence poses to the national consciousness.

While violations against the natural environment and its inhabitants stress the importance of expanding notions of vulnerability and of recognizing the Canadian culpability that lies beyond myths of the nation's "collective victim[hood]" (*Survival* 111), such abuses simultaneously operate in a more traditional manner as figurative devices that suggest the violence humans enact upon one another. Functioning as a conceptual gateway that enables her to recognize her potential to enact violence against human bodies, the narrator's use of simile in describing her brutality against animal bodies indicates her mindfulness of how, in certain capacities, "[animals] are substitute people" (150). After impaling a frog on David's fishing lure and listening to its audible protestations, the narrator watches as the lure sinks and the "frog goes down through the water, kicking like a man" (68). While the simile drawn here may initially appear isolated or inappreciable, the narrator's later perception of the dead heron as "strung ... up like a lynch victim" (125) signals her growing awareness

37 While David is generally associated with biased evaluations and misogynist perceptions, he in this instance prompts a moment of national memory that is unnerving on account of both its source and its veracity.

38 See Zillah Eisenstein's "Writing Bodies on the Nation for the Globe" (43).

that “Anything we could do to the animals we could do to each other: we practiced on them first” (130).

Increasingly aware of her brutalizing capacities, the narrator can no longer assume the alterity of violence, making the painful discovery of her capacity to inflict harm on various non-sentient and sentient surfaces, including those of humans. Recollecting the hard truth of her abortion that she had hitherto denied incites her to envision that this termination paradoxically birthed in her the capacity to harm others. In this sense, the narrator’s pregnancy performs dually as an event that in one instance reinforces the propositions of *Survival* concerning the ubiquity of threat yet in another signals a movement *beyond* such codes of vulnerability: “[I]t was hiding in me as if in a burrow and instead of granting it sanctuary I let them catch it. I could have said no but I didn’t; that made me one of them too, a killer” (155). Once again, the narrator’s tendency to imagine violence against nature prior to acknowledging her potential for violence against humans is made evident through her analogy of her fetus as a defenseless animal, yet her admission of guilt is ultimately partial and in denial of her earlier enactments of violence against humans, real or otherwise.

In imagining her abortion as the origin of her brutality, the narrator overlooks her childhood play with her brother in which they “killed other people besides Hitler” and “gnawed the fingers, feet and nose off [their] least favorite doll, ripped her cloth body open and pulled out the stuffing ... [and] threw her into the lake” (140).³⁹ According to Marie-Françoise Guédon, such acts indicate how “the [narrator’s] return to childhood is not the way to redemption” (102). Given the narrator’s early exposure to violence against the human form, later indications of her capacity for brutality present themselves without surprise. While seeking the source of her father’s drawings, the narrator wishes “evil” on her fellow campers, whom she presumes are American, by praying for events which will leave them stranded in the lake and that will “Let them suffer ... burn them, rip them open” (133), revealing how the narrator’s adult impulses toward violence are influenced by her early practices. Before learning that the “American” campers are in fact Torontonians, the narrator is similarly enraged by one of the men’s suspected involvement in the death of the heron and avows her compulsion to “swing the paddle sideways, blade into his head: his eyes would blossom outwards, his skull shatter like an egg” (138).

39 While the narrator, in describing this memory, offers the caveat that her doll was not a sentient being, she further insists that “children think everything is alive” (140).

The
vandalized
border sign that
the group passes
in
entering
Quebec ...
can be read as
a palimpsestic
cultural marker
that carries
conflicting
official and
unofficial
messages.

That the narrator repeatedly recollects her father's teachings concerning the legitimacy and even rationality of "killing" certain things, such as "enemies and food" (140), further indicates her later adherence to her childhood lessons and suggests that she is motivated in her atrocious imaginings by a spirit of environmental and national defence. Yet her perceived need to safeguard her country fails to remain constant and is destabilized by her recognition of Canada's ongoing history of violence; as with the narrator's destruction of nature, her admission of her proclivity for enacting harm against humans incites her to look more broadly to recognize Canada's similar potentiality. In these moments of concession, the horrific brutalities enacted on Canadian soil are recalled,⁴⁰ alongside the various ways in which these acts of violence have been effaced by both conceptions of national vulnerability that Atwood fosters through her criticism and to a lesser extent by Atwood's inconsistency in *Survival* in connecting human casualties in Canadian literature with those of Canada's history.⁴¹ In particular, the novel's setting in Quebec augments David's observation that Canada is founded on violence by revealing traces of English Canada's historic brutalities against the French⁴² and of the hostility that continues between them. The vandalized border sign that the group passes in entering Quebec, which reads "BEINVENUE on one side and WELCOME on the other" and "has bullet holes in it" (11), can be read as a palimpsestic cultural marker that carries conflicting official and unofficial messages⁴³ and that indicates the necessity of further searching within Canadian national borders to determine Canada's relationship to violence,⁴⁴ rather than exclusively looking beyond them. In later confessing that she was raised knowing very little about "what the villagers thought or talked about, [she]

40 Such brutalities include, but are certainly not limited to, the Seven Years War and the battle on the Plains of Abraham, the War of 1812, the elimination of Newfoundland's Beothuk people, the persecution of Louis Riel, the institution of residential schooling, and the Japanese internment. Also see Linda Hutcheon's "A Spell of Language" (11) and J. A. Frank, Michael Kelly, and Thomas Kelly's "The Myth of the 'Peaceable Kingdom.'"

41 See *Survival* (92).

42 Atwood further examines this history of English–French conflict in her short story "The Bombardment Continues."

43 The narrator's recollection of her brother, joined by his classmates, participating in similar acts of hostility by throwing "snowballs at [the French Catholics] in winter and rocks in spring and fall" (60) suggests how this inimical relationship between French and English Canadians is learned through early behaviours.

44 See Atwood's "Where Were You When I Really Needed You" (87).

was so shut off from them" (58),⁴⁵ the narrator highlights English Canada's disavowal of responsibility for its oppressions of the Québécois⁴⁶ and what Carole Gerson argues is the English-Canadian perception of Quebec as "both 'us' and 'not us.'" Gerson's further characterization of Quebec as a "place where the narrator strips away ... false surfaces" helps to illuminate how Atwood's use of the Quebec setting extends from a logic similar to that which informs her use of the violent woman. As an insider/outsider province, Quebec occupies an advantaged position to expose other facets of Canadian identity, such as its marred and bloody past, that have been similarly denied and abnegated.

There are, of course, others beyond the Québécois whose suffering has been overlooked due to English Canada's attempt to cultivate "a national myth which emphasizes nonviolence even at the expense of historical truth" (Djwa, "Deep Caves" 178). While seeking the Native rock paintings that had captivated her father, the narrator envisages her father's lineage extending from the "original ones, the first explorers, leaving behind them their sign, word" (136). Yet this reference to Natives as the "original ones" establishes their opposition to later intruders,⁴⁷ disrupting what appears a fluid historical connection between the narrator's father and the land's earlier inhabitants by calling to mind what Himani Bannerji terms Canada's "colonial and imperialist nature and aspirations" (80). Bannerji has further said of *Surfacing* that it "follows a literary and artistic tradition already in place" in which "indigenous peoples are either not there or are one with the primal, non-human forces of nature" (80). However, given the narrator's recollection of how, as a child, there were very few Natives "on the lake even then, the government had put them somewhere else, corralled them" (92)⁴⁸ and her interpretations of the Canadian penny as displaying "leaves

45 The narrator's father and Paul attempt to overcome this cultural divisiveness through "ritual" (22) exchanges of vegetables, which enabled them to communicate in a deeply meaningful manner that circumnavigated the language barrier.

46 In creating and marketing habitant carvings that "sell in tourist handicraft shops" (21) and ornamental barometers with a "woman in her long skirt and apron ... [a] man ... carrying an axe" (26), English Canadians further deny the veritable experiences of French Canadians, imagining them as reified objects without a lived history.

47 Here, I diverge from the critical analysis of Cynthia Sugars and her sense that "In these moments the father's ghost becomes explicitly fused with the Aboriginal ones," thereby creating the effect of "a single legitimating genealogical line" (150).

48 While the novel's opening paragraphs suggest how the imperial presence is

on one side and a [red] man's head chopped off at the neck on the reverse" (91),⁴⁹ it is perhaps more accurate to read the general absence of living Native characters as a critique of Canada's oppositional politics and its brutal history of colonialism and erasure. In other words, what Bannerji in her critique fails to address is the potential for textual absence to argue on the behalf of the absent and the possibility that the poignant omission of living Natives in *Surfacing* is an attempt to draw attention to, rather than overlook, the atrocities endured by indigenous populations.

Seeking a third position as *deus ex machina* that would offer an alternative to traditions of violence and vulnerability, the narrator attempts to discover a way to live in harmony with her human and non-human surroundings and to see beyond the binational options she had previously imagined: "To immerse oneself, join in the war, or to be destroyed. Though there ought to be other choices" (203).⁵⁰ Given Atwood's sense that the Canadian "genius is for compromise" ("Using" 223), this pursuit of equilibrium through alternative positioning reveals how the narrator's national identification persists despite her unsettling of the Canadian mythos and how she can be loyal to the nation while fighting within it for rectification and transformation. The narrator's exclusive reliance toward the end on people and constructs evincing the qualities of process and dynamism suggests that her conception of balance is not defined as a place one achieves but a strategy of living perhaps best exemplified by Paul and Madame, whose Québécois identity has forced them to practise cultural negotiations as a survival strategy. Yet there has been little critical evaluation of the untenability of this third option as a viable solution. Elsewhere, Atwood explains the impossibility of having a "character who is fully liberated ... in a society which is not. Unless we make that person a mystic and withdraw them from the society" ("The Empress" 189). But for the narrator, "withdrawing is no longer possible" (206).⁵¹ The narrator's uncertainty at the novel's close intimates a deferral of the enlightenment

fading in Canada, it is observations such as these that indicate how its legacy continues in the present day.

49 This image anticipates Atwood's later attempt to read violence in Canada's emblems and to view the Canadian flag as an ideograph of the violence enacted within the nation.

50 In an early interview, Atwood similarly notes that "you can define yourself as innocent and get killed, or you can define yourself as a killer and kill others. The ideal would be somebody who would neither be a killer or a victim, who could achieve some kind of harmony with the world" ("Dissecting" 16).

51 Also see Atwood's "A Question" (22).

and clarity traditionally accompanying the achievement of a harmonious life, and her notice that there is “No total salvation, resurrection” (204) suggests that she has not merely pursued the wrong solution, but that there are no solutions to be had.

While Frank Davey argues that Atwood sacrifices “depth of characterization” in *Surfacing* in order to espouse the “profound unnaturalness of ... human exploitation” (*From There* 34), it is perhaps more discriminating to assert Atwood’s construction of individual wrongdoings and violence as behaviours which are *natural*, essentially human, and which “[are] in us too” (*Surfacing* 142). Observing how “the average” human life is linked to a “needless cruelty” (203), the narrator reluctantly acknowledges the impossibility of transcending the deeply human codes of violence and vulnerability, gradually replacing the rhetoric of violence as evil with an understanding of violence as mortal and explaining that “The trouble some people have being German ... I have being human” (141). From this, it becomes clear that position four of Atwood’s victim theory—which proposes the “*creative non-victim*” (*Survival* 38) mentality as the most ethical and liberating response to victimization—is an unachievable ideal and a misrecognition of the potential for violence, and *ipso facto* the susceptibility to harm, at the centre of the human condition. In her later critical writing, Atwood concedes that what renders us “all-too-human” is our “potentially hard and icy and monstrous ... hearts” (*Strange Things* 88). Framed by such admissions, the novel’s final vision becomes simultaneously optimistic and realistic, nationalistic and humanistic, and brutality is recognized as indelibly tied to the ways of human being. Moreover, while the narrator’s violence forces a re-evaluation of the victimhood central to both the Canadian mythos and *Survival* by exposing Canada’s participation in, and collaboration with, violence, this same vulnerability remains ineffaceable by the end of the narrative, given what Catherine Rainwater identifies as humanity’s “universally murderous traits” (17). If the narrator’s transcendent third option is, by the novel’s end, a qualified hope and more an idealistic goal than an immediate possibility, it has nonetheless provoked recognition of the multidimensionality of Canadians, whether they like it or not, and indeed of humankind.

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