

## *Reception: texts, readers, audiences, history*

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Charlotte Templin, “Americans Read Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*: Literary Criticism and Cultural Differences”

In literary circles, Margaret Atwood is a superstar with a large reputation in Canada, the US, Great Britain, and many other places around the globe.

Culturally, these countries are quite dissimilar, and certainly Atwood is read differently in the various countries. The study of the reception of her work must include consideration of the cultures that provide the context for the reputation.

American readers admire Atwood, but they do not read her work in a realm in which art is insulated from its cultural context. When the subject of American-Canadian relations arises in Atwood’s novels, some reviewers respond defensively, with attitudes towards Canada appearing in some cases to affect their evaluations.

Many of Atwood’s reviewers comment only on such things as psychological themes, characters and artistic achievements, so the number of reviews that engage Canadian-American relations is limited. However, these reviews do indicate a continuing tension between the two nations, even a complicated love-hate relationship, as Chantal Allan suggests in *Bomb Canada and Other Unkind Remarks in the American Media*.<sup>1</sup> This paper examines how American

assumptions and attitudes toward Canada may find their way into literary criticism. Analysis of a community of American reviews of Atwood's *Surfacing* offers insight into the effects of national identity on literary evaluation and into American attitudes to Canada within particular discourse communities.

My focus is on one group of influential American readers of *Surfacing*, a novel which makes specific reference to the US and which provoked a significant response on both sides of the border. This group participates in two discourses: the discourse of appropriation or co-optation and the discourse of dismissal. These discourses appropriate themes in the novels for American uses and may ignore a critique of America that is a recurrent theme in the novels, or repudiate the critique. Theories of discourse are, in general, based on the central contention that all discourse is social, located in a particular social context. Taking a cue from Michele Foucault, Sara Mills explains that discourse consists of groupings of utterances which are "enacted within a social context, which are determined by that social context and which contribute to the way in which that social context continues its existence" (10). The social dimension of discourse and its relevance to fundamental attitudes is illustrated in the reviews I have chosen to examine.

The concept of the "situated reader" has also become important in some recent literary criticism. As Barbara Herrnstein Smith points out, we can't read anything without being affected by the needs, purposes and interests we bring to

bear on our readings. Readers are influenced by culture, nationality, genre, age, experiential background, aesthetic tastes and education. Every reader reads with her own beliefs, attitudes and personal biases firmly in place.<sup>2</sup> Some American reviewers, for instance, see Canada as a vacant space onto which they project their own concerns, and some take a dim view of Canadian criticism of the US.

In my study I focus on such book reviews, the earliest stage in the evaluation process. Book reviews, especially those from prestigious publications, have an important role in establishing the reputation of a novel.<sup>3</sup> Of course the reviews I cite are just a select group of the many reviews of Atwood's work (just as the newspaper sources analyzed by Chantal Allan represent just a portion of all coverage of Canada in the American press).<sup>4</sup> Some might say that analyses that call attention to the role of national attitudes is not important, given the generally high value placed on Atwood's work in the US and elsewhere. And problematical American attitudes do not dominate every review of a Canadian work. In the large body of reviews of Atwood's numerous published works, reviewers more often than not focus on thematic, formal, and psychological analyses. However, my study of a community of American reviewers teases out a discourse that illuminates American attitudes to Canada (as well as the politics of literary evaluation). Attention to those attitudes may help to explain, for example, why Americans have often ignored Canadian writers, except for a few stars.<sup>5</sup> And why

is it that concerns that get top billing in Canadian reviews—nationalism in reviews of *Surfacing*, for example—do not figure in American reviews?

Cynthia Sugars has done a similar study of British responses to Canadian works, outlining the nationalistic agenda British readers bring to their readings of Canadian literature. She comments that readers “all too eagerly seize on the anti-American streak in the material, sometimes even inserting it when it is not present” (95). For these readers Canada is a “location of desire”—in other words, “a vacant space onto which can be projected various fantasies of (post) imperial desire” (93). For them Canada is Edenic--the North American good place-- in contrast to the US, which is viewed as the source of political, environmental, and economic ills, and demonized accordingly. The British, who have lost an empire and a position of world leadership, have an axe to grind, but what about American readers?

Americans often think Canadians are “like us” and, more often than not, we don’t think of them at all. Diana Abu-Jabar speculates in *Belles Letters* about the existence of a curtain at the US-Canadian border that “selectively [releases] tourist information but [withholds] so much else.” She writes, “Those who can tell us about Canada, by which I mean its writers, are scandalously ignored or trifled with in American academia.” Americans appreciate Canada’s natural beauty and recreational opportunities, but that’s all: “Somehow the American perception seems to divide Canada’s mind from its body, probably to maintain our nostalgic

fables of uncluttered spaces—the ways some people prefer the mind of a beautiful blonde ‘uncluttered’—as well as to preserve the illusion of an American literary supremacy on the North American continent” (2).<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, Edward Said finds axiomatic the characteristic of imperial powers to be oblivious to the fact that colonized peoples have their own culture and integrity, their own agendas, so to speak. In his important work *Culture and Imperialism*, he uses the examples of Conrad, Kipling, Austen, Dickens and others, and points out that novelists in the "metropolitan center" undergird the ideology of imperialism through their seemingly uncritical acceptance of that ideology. They do not set out to promote empire, but, as they are shaped by and also shape their cultures, their role in maintaining empire is not negligible. This type of “soft” imperialism is endemic to the discourses I analyze in this study.

In a 1993 review of *The Robber Bride* Canadian critic Linda Hutcheon suggests, for example, that American readers may not know Atwood is Canadian, even though the author insistently positions herself as Canadian in the novel. *The Robber Bride* contains criticism of the Gulf War of 1991, and Hutcheon wonders if Americans will get the point. She wonders if Americans will understand that, when the three protagonists in the novel speak of “us,” they are referring to themselves as Canadians, while “they” are Americans. Hutcheon is pretty disgusted with Americans, whom she suggests are ignorant and self-obsessed. She

comments that Canadians reading Toni Morrison may not get all of her allusions, but “Canadian readers don’t usually mistake Morrison for ‘one of theirs’” (737).

According to Carol Rosenthal, Professor of North American literature at the University of Constance, Hutcheon’s analysis is on the mark. Rosenthal collected syllabi and queried many American and Canadian professors and found that American academics often include Atwood in courses but rarely identify her as a Canadian author. Rosenthal said in an interview that “Americans assume that anyone famous, who sounds remotely like them, must be American” (Owens).

In addition, judging from Atwood's reviews, some American reviewers turn to Canadian novels and find their own myths and preoccupations. They tend to claim Atwood's themes for the US, finding in *Surfacing* for example what they label as the "American" theme of the preference for nature over civilization, or reading the novel as a feminist document. In their appropriation of the novel’s content for American themes and their dismissal of criticism of the US, there is in some American reviews a distinct note of co-optation and/or dismissal.<sup>7</sup>

Responses to *Surfacing*, with its setting in the wilds of northern Quebec, elicited comments about the human relationship to wilderness. It is impossible to overestimate the importance of wilderness in American myth. It is a symbol for freedom and human possibility, a freedom that is not so much an avenue for escape from poverty as the freedom to be and to do. A source of rejuvenation, wilderness

is associated with the fostering of the individual—providing a proving ground for the development of self-reliance and rugged individualism.

Annette Kolodny points out that “America’s oldest and most cherished fantasy“ is a vision of “harmony between man and nature based on an experience of the land as essentially feminine” (4). Edenic dreams have been a strong cultural influence in American life from the earliest days of European settlement of the continent. A dream of democracy, brotherhood and harmony has existed in conflict with other dreams of domination and possession. Kolodny argues for a founding vision of a nurturing landscape, which can be found in American literature from Philip Freneau’s eighteenth-century poetry to Nick Caraway’s musings at the end of *The Great Gatsby*.

American attitudes to wilderness have evolved during the past centuries. Responding to threats in the New World and also taking their cue from a contemporary European attitude to wild nature, Puritans and other early settlers feared what they saw as the savage forest. With the coming of the pre-Romantics and Romantics, and especially the American Transcendentalists, a new attitude to wilderness was born, one that still captures the American imagination today. Americans came to look at wild nature as important to the genesis and the preservation of what came to be seen as a distinctive American character, involving a cluster of values including individualism and a democratic rejection of

social hierarchies. Emerson saw nature as the arena for soul-making. According to him, knowledge of nature, achieved in the isolation made possible in the New World, is necessary for successive generations of individuals and for the nation in order to achieve the national destiny.<sup>8</sup> *Walden*, a founding document of the American view of wilderness, celebrates wildness, as Thoreau luxuriates in his home in “the young forest” with “no path to the civilized world” (89, 90). There he finds great beauty, a source of vitality, and space to celebrate his freedom and develop himself.

While neither America nor Canada should be viewed as having a univocal response to wild nature, Canadian attitudes provide a genuine contrast. In Atwood’s exhaustive mapping of Canadian literature in *Survival*, she asserts that, when added up, Canadian images of nature, “depict a Nature that is often dead and unanswering or actively hostile to man” (49). She begins her survey of Canadian literature with a chapter entitled “Nature the Monster,” though she readily acknowledges the victim mentality is itself an obstacle to survival. (The burden of her book is to combat the victim mentality.) Atwood’s austere vision of nature’s gods in *Surfacing* is at odds with the widespread American view.

In “The Rites of Assent: Rhetoric, Ritual, and the Ideology of American Consensus” Sacvan Berkovitch (who grew up in Canada) offers a stark, general contrast between American and Canadian mythology—or between American

mythology and Canadian lack of mythology. The American vision of a special mission and a belief in continuing progress was bequeathed to the nation by the Puritans, and this vision conveniently served to underwrite conceptions of territorial expansion and free enterprise. According to Berkovitch, myth was used to “justify imperialism before the fact” (8), with an implied “teleology reaching from Genesis to the Apocalypse” (9-10). That some aspects of this American myth are still alive is evident in some reviewers’ responses.

In contrasting American and Canadian attitudes to the frontier or wilderness, Berkovitch also asserts that Americans and Anglo-Canadians shared a cultural heritage, but when Canadians established their identity in relation to the frontier or wilderness, there were very different conclusions. They saw the frontier as a barrier (rather than an entry), and figured as “the bush,” an antagonistic place far from culture, where settlers huddled together in small settlements, with the law seen as protection from the menace of a vast universe. In *The Bush Garden*, Northrop Frye explores the “garrison” mentality of Canadian settlers, and asserts that they experienced a “terror of the soul” toward nature (227). Atwood recounts numerous examples of that “terror” in *Survival*.

In *Surfacing*, which is set in the forest of northern Quebec, there are also frequent references to the threatening nature of the surroundings, usually referred to as the “bush.” The narrator refers to frequent instances of people disappearing

in the bush, the need for machetes to chop a trail, lore about how to stay alive in the bush. The narrator has returned to her childhood home to search for her missing father, whose body is eventually hooked by fishermen. In truth she seems to be searching for something from her past that she has lost. She is racked by guilt over an abortion and the rift with her parents. She dwells on the victimization of the innocent and sees herself as a victim-- of the father of her aborted child and of modern civilization as controlled by Americans. She identifies with the Canadian landscape, exploited and damaged by people she identifies as "Americans" (though the exploiters turn out to include Canadians as well). She appears to share the virulent anti-Americanism of her companions. After a period of mad behavior in which she seeks nature's gods (often compared to the descent to the underworld in a quest narrative), she eventually comes to an acceptance of death and of her own power. She can no longer excuse her actions by defining herself as a victim.

The Canadian reception of the novel was wildly enthusiastic as readers found in the novel something authentically Canadian, a heady experience in the days of burgeoning Canadian nationalism. For these readers the novel performed the role of "[legitimizing] Canadian distinctiveness" (23 ), to use Leon Surette's phrase. These reviewers give a warm welcome to Atwood's evocation of things Canadian, and some express their personal gratitude to Atwood for addressing

issues that engage them as Canadians. Christine Newman is impressed with Atwood's ability "to deal with the country that made her," to write "with the ease of total acceptance from right inside the culture, authenticating our experience . . . [in] this space, this place," providing "an answer to the famous Northrop Frye question "'Where is Here?'" She comments, "Now I can't think of another country where this would be described as an unusual feat because what she's doing, of course, is fulfilling the novelist's function"--which Newman says she finds unique to Atwood among Canadian novelists (*Maclean's* 88). Douglas Barbour's description of the novel is similar: "It says so much about our condition now, in such a trenchant and truly memorable manner . . . that we can only give thanks that we're lucky enough to have Margaret Atwood around to write books like this for us" (*Canadian Fiction Magazine* 74).

There is considerable attention in the Canadian reviews to what Douglas Barbour calls "Americanization as a form of spiritual imperialism" (78), as well concern with the menace of American corporations and disgust with Canadians willing to sell out to the exploiters. Barbour hopes the novel will "contribute to the change inside our heads that must take place if we are all to see, as the narrator does, just how important and difficult our destiny of becoming non-victims is" (79). Christina Newman welcomes Atwood's aid to "a country that's been colonized so long in its own mind" (88). William French thinks the novel is

centrally concerned with Canadian- American relations, but he is not sure whether the main point is criticism of the Americans or a satiric comment about Canadian anti-Americanism. Some reviewers cite Atwood's *Survival* in discussing whether the victimization is external or self-imposed. There is deep concern about American business influences in Canada, and memories of Canadian criticisms of American involvement in Vietnam.

American reviewers comment on a number of themes, such as the evils of superficiality, the dehumanizing life of the city, the nature of dementia, and importantly, feminist ideas (discussed below). However, as a whole the reviews are conspicuous for their seeming lack of awareness of the political ferment simmering north of the border—or of Canadian culture, for that matter. They participate in a discourse altogether different from the Canadian nationalist one, sometimes an appropriative one that focuses on how the novel might be interpreted in the light of familiar American ideas or on the new feminist interpretations of literature.

David H. Rosenthal, writing in the *Nation*, describes *Surfacing* as a "serious book about North America" and invokes the myth of America as a nation with a special mission. "In its own way," he says, it is a "genuine Great American Novel--one of those books which give us a broad view of our hopes, our lives as we live them, and our sense of a special destiny here" (374). The powerful themes

in the novel for Rosenthal are what he sees as the shared myths of the U.S. and Canada but what are in reality American myths that he applies to Canada . He invokes the idea of the noble individual formed by wilderness: “In the course of this story, Margaret Atwood brings up for reconsideration some of the strongest myths of our American childhood, in particular those of a lost communion with nature and of the pioneer-philosopher, living alone in the woods with his own thoughts” (374).

The review is worth quoting at greater length. Atwood, Rosenthal comments,

suggests to us the power that still resides in our old dreams. For our sense of the past remains real. The question, however, is what to make of these dreams, which we in the United States also have, by way of authors like Thoreau and through our national experience. In *Surfacing* the vision of an innocent harmony with nature—in some ways the best, most original vision we have —becomes the occasion for a fit of lunacy, or the other side of a basic distaste for people.

Quite possibly this is what we have come to. The recent experience of various hippie-farmers, characters somewhat like the heroine and her friends, in Vermont and elsewhere certainly suggests that it is (375).

Atwood, he concludes, has "[brought] us up to date on how we are related now to some of our deepest hopes, for ourselves and for our continent" (375). Rosenthal does acknowledge that the characters in the novel experience America as a menace, but this observation is merely bracketed. No disjuncture is noted between an American menace and (his assumption of) a benignly shared destiny, or rather a distinctive dream of progress and harmony with nature that he applies to Canadians equally with Americans. Rosenthal does not acknowledge that the Canadian fear explored in the novel is of sharing a destiny with Americans as defined and determined by Americans.

In a similar vein, Benjamin DeMott identifies the central focus of *Surfacing* as "the oldest North American literary theme--that of 'lighting out for the Territory,' finding yourself by losing others, trading culture for nature" (85). DeMott finds in the novel a mere rehash of traditional American ideas: "a familiar pattern, to repeat--but the execution is extraordinary" (86). Identifying Atwood's theme as redemption through a return to nature ignores Atwood's depiction of the evil inherent in the human condition, the need to claim a lost past and the ecological theme. He is not only unaware of Canadian nationalist themes and issues of Canadian victimization but makes slighting remarks about the view of America expressed in the novel, finding the subsidiary theme of "America as locus of universal corruption" poorly managed. In his interpretation of *Surfacing*,

DeMott reads the novel from the point of view of the American myth of the flight to the freedom of the frontier and the development of character in a natural setting.

We see in the reviews cited above some examples of American readers undertaking a kind of mapping of Canadian mentality in which Canadians are seen as having the same the same problems and aspirations as citizens of the United States. Their assuming sameness results in the erasure of Canadian identity.

Novelist Diane Johnson's review in the *Washington Post* ranks as the most sarcastic about the Canadian themes and the representation of the US in Atwood's novel, and Johnson gives a low evaluation of the novel. Johnson's review exemplifies a discourse that some American readers will find familiar, one based on the idea that Canadians who criticize the US are out of line, an attitude illustrated many times in Chantal Allan's book. Johnson rejects what she calls Atwood's highly romanticized view of nature, which is contrasted with a debased culture whose ills are laid at the door of America. Noting that America symbolizes "various aspects of The Worst," she adds, "American readers will not mind that of course" since they "are quite used to being the culture villains and have internalized the role" (B8). Johnson's claim that the narrator is self-indulgent and naïve seems to be an indictment of Canadian culture as a whole. She writes, "If the cultural innocence of this innocent book is meant to stand for that of Canadians as a whole, then one is obliged to fear that they are quite unprepared for

the sinister culture shocks in store for them" (B8). In Johnson's review we have a striking contrast between an American reading of the novel as naive and a Canadian reading of the same work as a momentous step toward cultural maturity. The dismissal of Canadian concerns goes hand in hand with a low evaluation of the novel's quality.

A discourse that acknowledges Canada's legitimate concerns about its neighbor to the south is difficult to find. However, Eugenia Thornton mentions Atwood's critique of America in a way that suggests an ability to imagine what America might look like from beyond its borders. She thinks that American readers might be surprised to find that Atwood's theme of survival includes "survival against 'Yankee' infiltration" (*Plain Dealer* H8) and that Atwood is "as concerned about the spreading of second-hand Americanism in Canada as she is with the survival of her heroine" (H8). The heroine's plight has a parallel with the plight of the nation: "If a person may sell himself into spiritual bondage and regain freedom only by facing his own part in the sale, so may a nation" (H8). Peter Altman also seems to accept that there might be resentment of America on the other side of the border. He notes that Atwood's novel is "militantly nationalistic" (*Minneapolis Star* B5), commenting that "she expresses Canadian dislike, fear, and resentment of Americans more vividly than any writer I've read" (B5). However, he gives high praise to the novel, which he identifies as "emphatically a novel by a

poet,” and asserts that Atwood’s various concerns, including her feminism, never cause the novel to “deteriorate into invective or proselytizing” (B5).

For many reviewers *Surfacing* was seen through the lens of the feminist ideas that were a focus of attention in the US in the early 1970s. Feminist reviewers latched gleefully onto the novel, but a number of male reviewers also viewed the novel through the lens of feminism, as did Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, who welcomes the profoundly feminine story and is pleased that the author avoids the trap of presenting “mere anti-masculine propaganda” (*New York Times* 41). Similarly, for Newton Koltz, Canada is merely a setting for the novel which offers “rich perceptions of what it’s like to live inside a woman’s skin” (*America* 562).

Some American reviews of *Surfacing* participate in a backlash discourse directed against the profound social changes associated with Second Wave feminism. David Gleicher in the *New Leader* sees “so simplistic a thesis” that the novel loses all impact. He dismisses the novel as a feminist screed: “If anything comes to the surface of this thoroughly unconvincing novel, it is probably the need for those at the forefront of the Women’s Movement to reassess their roles in respect to those for whom they speak . . . . By repeating the same tired phrases . . . they risk serving neither their art, nor women, only themselves” (19). Similarly,

Patricia Coyne in the conservative *National Review* can see only trendy feminist rant.

As Judith McCombs has pointed out, feminists provided key recognition in the United States for Atwood's *Surfacing* ("Introduction" 6). The protagonist's search for a personal meaning that would counter her despair attracted the interest of those feminists who had turned their attention to women's spiritual and psychological nature. Feminist theologians of the time noted that traditional theology is rooted in male experience. Some feminists looked to pre-history for deep psychic meanings. Feeling excluded from male spiritual traditions, they also welcomed literature exploring women's spiritual experience (just as Canadians welcomed books that spoke to Canadian experience and fostered Canadian identity).<sup>9</sup>

For instance, Joan Larkin's review in *Ms.* came from a feminist perspective that praised Atwood's advocacy on behalf of life on the planet and applauded her critique of the destructiveness of private and public relationships. From Larkin's response it was a short step to essays embracing the novel as an exploration of feminist theology, as Francine du Plessix Gray does in the *New York Times Books Review*. Atwood's novel drew the attention of *Signs*, the prestigious women's studies journal, which presented dueling essays on Atwood's feminist theology by Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow. Christ sees Atwood's protagonist as

“awakening from a male-defined world” (325) and undergoing a conversion to a feminist theological viewpoint involving a kind of nature mysticism. Plaskow cautions that emphasizing a connection between women and nature can be “an ideological basis for a continued subordination of women” (331). In the years that followed, Atwood’s work inspired a great number of articles by American feminists.

Francine du Plessix Gray is thrilled to find in *Surfacing* a novel that satisfies her feminist yearnings for a female religious vision:

The relentless centrality of a woman’s search for religious vision in Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing* (published in 1972) makes it a novel unique in our time. And the singular prophetic power with which she depicts her heroine’s quest makes it, for me, one of the most important novels of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (*New York Times Book Review* 3, 29).

Gray sees the protagonist as returning to northern Canada “to search for some power of communing with nature” as well as for her missing father. Atwood is praised for “[reversing] the stereotypes of male and female behavior more radically than any other novelist who comes to mind” (29). In her religious quest she “substitutes naturalistic epiphanies of prehistoric character” (29) for the traditions of patriarchal religion. Gray concludes: “The female religious vision that she presents in her utterly remarkable book also marks the surfacing, I believe, of a

future tradition of religious quest in women's novels" (29). Gray mentions that the female protagonist identifies "her body with the virgin wilderness threatened by male technology" (29), but instead of foregrounding the plight of a colonized Canada, like many Canadian reviewers, she sees the wilderness as a symbol that elucidates the situation of the woman. The novel functions like the image that can be either a duck or a rabbit, one thing for Canadian nationalists and another for American feminists.<sup>10</sup>

Many feminists of the time put the social goals of feminism in the forefront. The political causes of the early seventies included support for the ERA, legalized abortion, enforcement of Title IX, a lengthy anti-discrimination campaign directed at AT&T, affirmative action for women, and many others.<sup>11</sup> This viewpoint is represented by feminist novelist and poet Marge Piercy in her review article in the *American Poetry Review*. Piercy recognizes that the northern Quebec setting is "a colony inside a colony," but her focus is the woman "who must make herself alive again to heal together her animal and conscious selves" (43). However, Piercy, who has consistently supported social reform in gender relations as well as various New Left causes,<sup>12</sup> is afraid that the narrator will not succeed in finding her way without a stronger vision of how she can carry her insights with her into the city. Piercy sees Atwood as somewhat of a feminist manqué and hopes that she will

“also come to help consciously define a growing body to which her work in many of its themes belongs: a woman’s culture” (44).

In their appropriative discourse, feminist reviewers and academics (sometimes one and the same) are emphatic in claiming Atwood for feminist uses, primarily those of psychological and religious exploration. In fact, they contributed to making her reputation in the US by adapting her work to interpretative strategies fashionable in the American academy at the time. Are such efforts or accomplishments imperialistic? Atwood seems to think so. She characteristically distances herself from US feminists and has commented many times that it is a distortion and a limitation to read her work as a product of the feminist movement, since all writing actually comes from “experience and imagination” (“On Being a Woman Writer,” 192). She insists that any particular feminism be defined; feminism means some things to some people that she would not want to associate herself with. In an interview with Karla Hammond, she calls her portrayal of women's plight "social realism" and says her concern for women is part of a larger issue: human dignity (102). In short, U.S.-style feminism is too narrow in vision for her broader concern with injustice.

In a 1981 introduction to her first novel, Atwood explained that she wrote the book before there was a feminist movement:

*The Edible Woman* appeared finally in 1969 four years after it was written and just in time to coincide with the rise of feminism in North America. Some immediately assumed it was a product of the movement. I myself see the book as protofeminist rather than feminist. There was no women's movement in sight when I was composing the novel in 1965 ("Introduction," 370).

Atwood goes on to say that she does not think things have changed all that much for women since the writing of the novel.

In an interview with Elizabeth Meese in 1985, Atwood makes clear that she is not only not signing on to American feminism; she is rejecting it as a white, American, middle-class movement:

There isn't just one story, there are lots of stories. It's the same thing that black women writers complained about early in the movement. They were saying: This is a white middle-class women's movement. You're trying to tell us that our experience is like this, and it is *not* like this. It's like that. And that's what you have to keep on saying . . . . If I have anything to say to the American feminist, it's that they've been too parochial. They haven't looked at, well America is very big, you can get lost in it, but they haven't looked enough outside." (98-99)

Atwood went so far as to reply to the essays in *Signs*, pointing out that *Surfacing* was reviewed “almost exclusively” as a feminist document in the US, and “almost exclusively” as a nationalist document in Canada. She seems critical of the American reading, but her main point is that novelists are not writing treatises.<sup>13</sup>

In her introductory remarks in *Survival*, Atwood deplores the fact that Canadian students have been taught to focus on the personal and the universal while skipping over the national or cultural. She encourages Canadians to read Canadian literature because “it gives you a more complete idea of how any literature is made: it’s made by people living in a particular space at a particular time, and you can recognize that more easily if the space and time are your own” (15). Further, one’s own literature can be a mirror: “The reader looks at the mirror and sees not the writer but himself; and behind his own image in the foreground, a reflection of the world he lives in” (15). A reader that lacks a mirror treads in darkness, not recognizing himself and handicapped in his ability to know others, Atwood says.

Americans tend to have a problem opposite to the one Atwood attributes to Canadians: they are often prone to see their own reflections. Thus even in the minor genre of the literary review some reviewers co-opt the content of Canadian works and make them the basis for “American” readings or dismiss criticisms of the US that might offer a valuable perspective.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Allen, a journalist who has chosen to report on journalism (commonly called the “first rough draft of history”), sees the beginnings of tension between the US and Canada in the earliest days of the republic. In her view the “roots of negativity toward Canada unavoidably trace back to the United States’ turbulent relationship with Britain” (xii). The War of 1812 exacerbated tensions. Canadian values have continued to resemble European values. The end result is “A nagging sense of mistrust or anxiety” (xii). Canada has a way of irritating the US, or rather, Americans have a way of taking offense at what Canada does--trading with Cuba, for example or questioning American defense initiatives or stance toward Vietnam. And Americans have had a penchant for saying the wrong thing. As late as 1971, a U.S. diplomat who was evidently a little defensive about trade and investment practices said that Canadians are “hewers of wood and drawers of water because that is what they want to be” (62). Americans don’t like to take advice from Canadians, as a writer in the *Los Angeles Times* made clear in 1969, pointing out that as a great power, the US “need not feel obliged to take their advice” (58). Allen acknowledges that her book covers only a fraction of US press coverage of Canada but contends that the one strand of attitudes she has focused on is deserving of attention.

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<sup>2</sup> See also the work of Tony Bennett, who points out that “different reading formations . . . produce their own text, their own readers, their own context” (69).

<sup>3</sup> The enthusiasm of some early supporters and the backlash provoked among some detractors gave the novel a visibility that affected its bid for literary reputation. In fact, in Canada, information about the reception of the novel became "news," as worthy of media comment as the book itself.

<sup>4</sup> The reviews I selected include examples from the most prestigious publications and reviewers in the US. Perhaps one could argue that in isolated cases, such as the reviews in the *Minneapolis Star* and the (Cleveland) *Plain Dealer*, proximity to Canada generates more sympathy for a Canadian critique, since there is at least some recognition of a Canadian viewpoint in these reviews. However, analysis of reviews from all over the US reveals no general dynamic that is a function of geography.

<sup>5</sup> The larger subject of American responses to Canadian writers (often non-responses) is a subject for another paper. One finds a large number of reviews of Canadian books in publications from England, Ireland, Scotland, Australia, New Zealand, even *The Singapore Times*, but few—often none-- from the US (except for the work of a few stars). It is difficult to argue with Abu Jabar’s claim that Canadian writing is not valued as it should be in the US. The response to Timothy

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Findley is an interesting case in point—and Findley actually got reviews in the *New York Times* and elsewhere. Anthony de Palma gives high praise to Findley in an obituary in the *Times* and observes that although Findley's works won best-seller status and critical acclaim in Canada, "fame in the United States eluded him" (B6).

<sup>6</sup> Abu-Jabar has a degree from Windsor University. When she wrote the review she was a Ph.D. student at the State University of New York at Binghamton.

<sup>7</sup> When she was a young and brash poet, Atwood commented that she turns to Canadian novels and poetry "when I want to know who I am and what my country is like." Of American novels she said, "I don't read them to find out about me--I read them to find out about Americans, whenever I happen to want to know about Americans, which isn't wildly often. I already know more than I want to" (Irving 89).

<sup>8</sup> For further discussion of these issues, see the books by Nash and Madsen.

<sup>9</sup> See *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow.

<sup>10</sup> While American feminists saw the protagonist's attempt to connect with ancient spirituality through the lens of feminism, Canadian reviewers saw the references to Indian gods as an evocation of specifically Canadian spirituality. Kent Thompson suggests in *Fiddlehead* that "the heart of the Canadian consciousness is a pre-

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historic pagan consciousness" (116), and Barbour calls the narrator's

"confrontation with the mysterious powers of the land," a Canadian moment.

<sup>11</sup> See *Feminist Chronicles 1953 – 1993*, by Toni Carabillo, Judith Meuli and June Bundy Csida.

<sup>12</sup> Piercy is associated with left-wing causes including participation in Students for a Democratic Society, protests against the Vietnam War, the formation of a Latin America study group, and others. She also identifies as a Jew, has written poetry springing from that identity, and joined with others to form a havurah, a Jewish congregation that functions without a rabbi. However, it is clear from her imaginative writings and her memoir *Sleeping with Cats* that, whatever her multiple subject positions, what she calls the "social quest" for gender equality and democracy has always been central to her work.

<sup>13</sup> 340. The discourses I have noted surface again in reviews of novels dealing with themes that could be viewed as feminist or with content making explicit reference to America. Responses to *The Handmaid's Tale*, set in Cambridge, familiar to Atwood from her sojourn at Harvard University, provide an obvious example. Most American reviewers assume that the future that is projected for America is just "the future" for everybody and discount that Atwood may be alluding to the violence and extremism that have a place in American culture. Some take exception to various aspects of Atwood's imagined future of an America in the

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grips of right-wing Christians, as do Mary McCarthy (*New York Times*) and John Updike (*New Yorker*). Updike trivializes the critique of American culture with a characterization of the novel as “curious poem to the female condition” (121) and the horrors of Gilead as “a living checklist of a feminist liberal’s bugaboos” (118). Some American feminist reviewers of the novel claim Atwood for their side in the wars among feminists.

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