

# The Sex-cited Body in Margaret Atwood

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I avoid looking down at my body.... I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely.

— Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*

My work has always been undertaken with the aim to expand and enhance a field of possibilities for bodily life.... To conceive of bodies differently seems to me part of the conceptual and philosophical struggle that feminism involves, and it can relate to questions of survival as well.

— Judith Butler

WITHIN THE CONFINES of a heterosexist culture, what is *the attractive woman*, the woman who excites men? Is the attractive woman's body an anatomical phenomenon, a corporeal surface, an aesthetic effect, a rhetorical figure, a cultural artifact? In her fiction, Margaret Atwood explores the gendered body as surface, teasing out the mechanics of *attraction*. In the process, she explores the implications in capitalist culture of women either having or not having the "right" surface. She builds conflict around the conventions that polarize the "right" surface against abject surfaces, but she inevitably comes to a reading of attraction as just that — a reading — variable, unstable, contextual, the body a sex-citing text.

Many critics have recognized Margaret Atwood's work as theoretically interested in embodiment. For instance, Patricia Waugh, in her *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern*, suggests that Atwood's characters develop a critical consciousness of how their bodies are socially constructed and thus divert the full force of gender. In her analysis of *The Edible Woman*, Waugh calls the body "the fundamental site of alienation for women" and claims that Atwood pushes representations of the body "to the limits of the signifying order, attempting ... to envision an alternative subjectivity." (186, 169). And yet Waugh steps back from a radical reading of Atwood's embodied characters. Similarly, Hilda Hollis

hesitates to read Atwood's bodies radically: "Charting a difficult course, she disputes universalizing moral and social interpretations, but simultaneously recognizes corporality" and is thus "able to halt proliferating indeterminacy" (118).

In contrast to this moderate view, two recent articles read Atwood's bodies as radically unstable, socially constructed locales.<sup>1</sup> Pamela Cooper notes that in *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Edible Woman*, and *Lady Oracle*, Atwood's "intractably gendered" characters consistently grapple with "the determining boundaries of the flesh"(97). Offred, the narrator of *The Handmaid's Tale*, for instance, is "poised in irresolute conferral with her own materiality," an unstable materiality deployed against the unified humanist self encased in its essential body. Cooper notices that material "indeterminacies fuel each novel's interrogation of subjectivity as unified or integral" (99). Like Cooper, Glenn Willmott argues that Atwood constructs the body as "a set up, a made thing," shifting, in process (179). This body "is constructed and disintegrated and reconstructed in the linear flow of the written narrative. It is never grasped except in this piecemeal way" (175). Willmott shows how Atwood undoes the essential body by using narratives as challenges to an "ocular epistemology" that promotes "ideological closure" around a strictly controlled image of the body (178-79). For these critics, the body is a cultural product (a commodified site), and the closed signs of this cultural product make the body a sight — a narrowly prescribed visual image done up, as John Berger reminds us, to be an acquisition — a desirable object: "Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves." A woman is "an object — and most particularly an object of vision: a sight" (47).

In postmodern idiom, this sight is only a citation — a discursive construction that perpetuates particular, restricted ways of thinking about things. Judith Butler's theories suggest productive ways to read these citations at the site of the body — a prescribed sight, studded with fantasy expectation and tattooed with capital's power. Butler's radical constructivist theories prove useful as we read gender and bodies in Atwood's early fiction, "The Man from Mars," a 1977 story in *Dancing Girls*, and *Lady Oracle*, the novel that came out the previous year. Butler's post-modern theory reveals Atwood's bodies at their shifting, unstable limits. This radical reading of the body does not foreclose a feminist politics of materiality. For to understand the material body is to understand how it is disciplined by discourse.

Like Atwood, Judith Butler explores the relation between material

and citational being. Butler describes the regulatory processes that operate like legal imperatives. These “laws,” cited over and over in everyday practices, construct sex and shape the ways we are able to think about bodies. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler argues that

the category of “sex” is, from the start, normative; it is what Foucault has called a “regulatory ideal.” In this sense, then, “sex” not only functions as a norm, but is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs, that is, whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce — demarcate, circulate, differentiate — the bodies it controls. (1)

She goes on to describe this power to produce and control, a power that depends on repetitive social practices: “Crucially, then, construction is neither a single act nor a causal process initiated by the subject and culminating in a set of fixed effects. Construction ... operates through the reiteration of norms; sex is both produced and destabilized in the course of this reiteration”(10). Thus reiteration *is* body, and citation *is* being. Atwood’s fictions illustrate the gendered body’s social “birth” through citation and invite a feminist reading of the heterosexual body as a material effect of this citation.

But in addition Butler emphasizes that bodies slip and thus undermine their own seeming naturalness and stability. The body, as a citational being, is unstable and thus revisable. Butler asks us to consider the consequences of this slippage: “What would it mean to ‘cite’ the law to produce it differently, to ‘cite’ the law in order to reiterate and coopt its power, to expose the heterosexual matrix and to displace the effect of its necessity?” (15). Moving from the essentialized, stable body produced by the law of social convention to a RE-citing of the body as unstable and thus revisable breaks the hold of the law over the body. Let’s call Butler’s forced citation of the law *sex-citation*, and let’s call the coopted, irregular version of the body *RE-citation*. Forced into sex, regulated, and seduced into mass production, the sex-cited body is trapped. It needs a RE-citing which “coopts,” “exposes,” and “displaces” in order to make space for bodies outside of the clichés of the heterosexual binary. Disturbed, unstable, law-breaking productions yield the RE-cited body, a confusing, contradictory body that is “destabilized in the course of this iteration.” Butler emphasizes the paradoxical process of the body’s construction:

As a sedimented effect of a reiterative or ritual practice, sex acquires its naturalized effect, and, yet, it is also by virtue of this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such

constructions, as that which escapes or exceeds the norm, as that which cannot be wholly defined or fixed by the repetitive labor of that norm. (10)

These gaps and fissures underpin Butler's promise of the body's ultimate unfixability, a promise that empowers us to RE-cite the body, to imagine bodies beyond the heterosexual binary.

Butler and others, especially those in queer theory, describe the exemplary bodies beyond the binary as *abject*, including "fat" bodies, "perverted" bodies, "queer" bodies, "sick" bodies; that is, those bodies that have been excluded, ignored, denied, or feared. These abject bodies are outside of heterosexual norms — "unsightly" and thus uncited. In a 1998 interview in *Signs*, Butler clarifies what she means by this concept: "bodies that matter' simultaneously materialize, acquire meaning, and obtain a legitimate status. Bodies that do not matter are 'abject' bodies. Such bodies are not intelligible ... nor do they have legitimate existence.... Hence they fail to materialize" (Meijer and Prins 279). Butler argues that the abject status of some bodies (often the "no-bodies" of this world) has serious material consequences, consequences that are linked to "questions of survival":

The abjection of certain kinds of bodies, their inadmissibility to codes of intelligibility, does make itself known in policy and politics, and to live as such a body in the world is to live in the shadowy regions of ontology. I'm enraged by the ontological claims that codes of legitimacy make on bodies in the world, and I try, when I can, to imagine against that. (277)

Atwood's fictions also "imagine against" stabilized codes of legitimacy. Her most powerful early fiction features characters teetering on the edge of abjection, their materialization problematic. Inhabiting abject bodies, these characters are outside of the heterosexual binary where women are defined by sight/cite: where to *be* is to be seen, and to be seen is to be pursued as a desirable object. But whether abject bodies are invisible or spectacular, they go unacknowledged as "women." Atwood gives us these "unsightly" creatures (not men, not women), un-cited as bodies because abject and thus un-sited (immaterial) and un-sighted (unacknowledged as sexed). Then, through a process of the abject character aligning itself with heterosexual norms of gender, these characters are engendered — the heterosexual she-body comes into being. Atwood describes this process of moving from abjection to heterosexual being as a comedic horror show, taking full advantage of parody as she develops

abject characters beyond the binary and then moves them into attractive bodies — i.e., bodies pursued by men — and observes the consequences.

In an interview with Elizabeth Meese, Margaret Atwood comments on the connections between body and body-concept and between body-concept and culture: “The body as a concept has always been a concern of mine . . . . I think that people very much experience themselves through their bodies and through concepts of the body which get applied to their bodies” (104). These “concepts of the body” are enmeshed in language, genre, and other cultural systems of signification. Further, Atwood suggests that the ways these body concepts are imposed, compelled, and internalized are central to her work. When we see these sex-citations at work, we can reflect on the network of pressures that produce the two sexes, the only two, and nothing but the two, and we can imagine alternative bodies beyond the binary and work politically to ensure that those bodies-beyond — what Butler and others call “abject bodies” — can claim status as “real.”

Joan Foster in *Lady Oracle* and Christine in “The Man from Mars” inhabit abject bodies which, under social pressure and the circumstances of the fictions, migrate toward the narrow ideal of the heterosexual she-body. Atwood’s fictions allow us to watch this migration of bodies from the realm of the abject to the realm of the “real”: i.e., the categorical, the conventional, the legitimated, enforced “normal.” Many of Atwood’s key female characters inhabit bodies that immigrate into and emigrate out of the she-body. Under sexual pressure, Karen in *The Robber Bride* and Grace in *Alias Grace* enter and exit their bodies. And Zenia in *The Robber Bride* assumes one attractive body after another in a parade of destruction for the other characters in the novel. Atwood’s intrigue with the body as a shifting sexual cipher expands the possibilities of sexual subjectivity. In this vein, Molly Hite argues that Atwood is “in a position to emphasize the contradictions within the construct of the body, contradictions so acute that they may well make it impossible for anyone to *be* the sexed woman of conventional representation” (123).

*Lady Oracle*’s Joan Foster certainly emphasizes the “contradictions within the construct” as she migrates between bodies. At the beginning of the novel, she inhabits the abject body of obesity. In this abject body, she occupies a paradox: she is both invisible and spectacular, both a bodiless cipher and a hyper-bodied monster — her body writ large on the wall of culture. J. Brooks Bouson explains in *Brutal Choreographies* that “through its focus on female obesity, then, *Lady Oracle* rebels against the social discipline and male control of the female body. But it also depicts the unregulated and undisciplined female body as a grotesque spectacle”

(69). One example of this abjection occurs in Atwood's description of Joan as a child in her dance costume: "with my jiggly thighs and the bulges of fat where my breasts would later be and my plump upper arms and floppy waist, I must have looked obscene ... indecent; it must have been like watching a decaying stripper" (46). The characterization of a child's body as *obscene* and *indecent* and the link between the fat body and the hypersexualized body are rife with paradox as well as abjection. The paradox of sexualized innocence in fact links directly to the abject, which disgusts while it fascinates; we deny it as we dream repeatedly of it.

Fear, censure, and repudiation follow all forms of abject, transgressive bodies. These bodies are easily confused, not because they are corporally similar but because they elicit similar, strong responses. When Atwood superimposes the "decaying stripper" onto the fat little girl, she is layering one abject body onto another — both bodies outside the frame of the norm and thus somehow joined. In another example, we see how this dynamic works in Joan's confusion of obese bodies and hypersexualized bodies when she accompanies her Aunt Lou on excursions to the Expo. Ordinarily tolerant, Lou prevents Joan from entering two tents:

One had women in harem costumes and enormous jutting breasts painted on it, and two or three of these women would pose on a little stage outside the door in their gauzy pants with their midriffs showing, while a man with a megaphone tried to get people to buy tickets. The other was the Freak Show, and this tent had ... the Rubber Man, the Siamese Twins, JOINED HEAD TO HEAD AND STILL ALIVE, the man said, and the fattest woman in the world. (90)

The freaks and the dancing girls are exhibitions that make public comment on bodies. For the abject freaks, the generic conventions that structure "normal" bodies are broken or mixed or reflected frightfully. But though these freak bodies are different from the dancing girls (the clichés of sexiness), all of these bodies are under scrutiny by the paying public, simultaneously advertised for viewing and forbidden. As Joan tries to recall these tents, she reflects, "What I couldn't remember was this: were there two tents, or was there only one? The man with the megaphone sounded the same for freaks and dancing girls alike. They were both spectacular, something that had to be seen to be believed" (90). Here the confusion of freak with sex object centres on their similarity as sights — calling attention and causing revulsion simultaneously. Finally, Joan's memories of freak and sex spectacle merge: "I used to imagine the Fat Lady sitting on a chair, knitting, while lines and lines of thin gray faces filed past her, looking, looking. I saw

her in gauze pants and a maroon satin brassiere, like the dancing girls, and red slippers” (90). The abject, “freak” body in this description is spectacular in the extreme, the sight-object of an unending public. However, in other descriptions the obese body is a cipher — unnoticeable, outside of citation. Arturo Madrid describes the postcolonial subject using the same contradiction: “On the one hand, being *the other* means being invisible ... On the other hand, being *the other* sometimes involves sticking out like a sore thumb. What is she/he doing here?” (23).

Three examples serve to illustrate this contradictory phenomenon, which becomes obvious as Joan’s body is read and reread while it shifts from abjectly obese to heterosexually attractive. The first example describes the invisibility that abject subjects encounter as those affiliated with the norm turn away from them:

I saw a number of *Adult* pictures long before I was an adult, but no one ever questioned my age. I was quite fat by this time and all fat women look the same, they all look forty-two. Also fat women are not more noticeable than thin women; they’re less noticeable, because people find them distressing and look away. To the ushers and the ticket sellers, I must have appeared as a huge featureless blur. If I’d ever robbed a bank no witness would have been able to describe me accurately. (82)

As “a huge featureless blur” and an unidentifiable being, Joan is unsighted: she seems to have no body. This invisibility is the result of her not casting a reflection in the social mirror. She is a gap in the social text of bodies, an *aporia* of citation.

The second illustration of the unstable, contradictory body occurs during Joan’s transitional period between bodies. She has been induced, through a contingency in her aunt’s will, to lose weight. As her surface begins to shift, men begin to read that surface differently: “Strange men, whose gaze had previously slid over and around me as though I wasn’t there, began to look at me from truck-cab windows and construction sites; a speculative look, like a dog eying a fire hydrant” (123). In fact, at this point, Joan herself begins to reinterpret her body: “I stood in front of the full length mirror on the back of the bathroom door and examined myself, much as a real estate agent might examine a swamp, with an eye for further development” (137). Though she is “still overweight” and “still baggy,” she recognizes herself in this mirror image as a potential she-body. Her subjectivity here depends on her own and others’ readings of her body as it begins to take shape along the lines of particular recognizable scripts. As swamp is to real estate agent and as hydrant is to dog, Joan’s emerging body

is to heterosexual men. Here Atwood shows Joan interrupting her old interpretations of her body as it slims toward potential sexiness. (Clearly, the alternative sexualities of, for instance, the butterball pinup do not register in Atwood's fictional world where dancing girls define what can be interpreted as attractive.)

In *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*, Atwood discusses “the intersection of art with power” by raising the issue of interpretation — a primary human activity embedded in language and desire: “We all interpret, every day — we must interpret, not only language, but a whole environment in which *this* means *that* ... and if we didn't interpret, we'd be dead” (111). To interpret is to survive. Without “correct” interpretation — the decoding of meaning according to power's complex system — the interpreter will suffer, will be relegated to outsider status and viewed as other. Interpretive skill, determined by one's relation to culture and power, shapes desire and the degree of access one has to what one is expected to want. Atwood's characters fail in their interpretations and, through this failure, offer the slippery contradictions of the body.

The third illustration of the body as a slippery interpretative problem is a retrospective one: Joan has assumed the slim, sexy shape of a pursuable body in the heterosexual economy, but reflects on her confusion about how to operate within such an economy. She is unused to the mental and emotional scripts that accompany such bodies, and she lacks the interpretive skills to function *as a woman*. It is as if she needs remediation in another language so that she can learn to read her own surface:

It was on these bus trips that I first discovered there was something missing in me. This lack came from having been fat; it was like being without a sense of pain, and pain and fear are protective, up to a point. I'd never developed the usual female fears: fear of intruders, fear of the dark, fear of gasping noises over the phone, fear of bus stops and slowing cars, fear of anyone or anything outside whatever magic circle defines safety. I wasn't whistled at or pinched on elevators, I was never followed down lonely streets. (139-40)

Joan, here, is at a disadvantage because she has lived outside of the dominant models of signification for bodies in her culture. As such, she has experienced herself as other. The postcolonial critic Arturo Madrid defines otherness: “it means being outside the game, outside the circle, outside the set. It means being on the edges, on the margins, on the periphery. Otherness means feeling excluded, closed out, precluded, even

disdained and scorned. It produces a sense of isolation, of apartness, of disconnectedness, of alienation" (23).

As Madrid argues, the colonized subject is other. However, Atwood draws striking similarities between immigrant men who experience themselves as other and the abject bodies of obese persons who then shift into women. This treatment of otherness intensifies Atwood's representation of an oppressive social world. For instance, we see the parallels between Joan and the man who finds her fat body attractive. He is a "foreign" man who misreads her body as desirable. Atwood implies that he pursues her because he lacks the ability to interpret her body. He does not understand the shape of heterosexual desire in North America. It is as if he is having ESL trouble. Since the commonplace conventions governing the ways that bodies can be read are heavily scripted, subjects must acquire idioms and be familiar with the clichés for reading the attractive body within the heterosexual binary of any given culture, automating them through repetition, like any language. This clichéd citation of the attractive body is not the same from culture to culture but instead is the imaginary script concocted and presented as an end toward which subjects must aspire to clarify themselves *as women* and to be read, unequivocally, as such by others, especially men.

However, some bodies are not such easy reading. They are incoherent or difficult to make out, as if written by a dyslexic; they seem illegible or "foreign," the letters themselves unfamiliar, unreadable. These abject bodies either go unread or are misread; they do not conform to the scripted citations that produce "legitimate" objects of desire. In order to be deciphered as desirable, bodies must be read according to the conventions of the particular locale they inhabit. Subjects of a given culture are pressed to employ a common system of deciphering what counts as sexy, but those from *elsewhere* read differently. Atwood takes special advantage of the destabilizing forces of postcolonial reading of bodies. In a 1997 interview in *Critique* with Danita Dodson, Atwood links "the goals of feminism and what is now called postcolonialism" indicating that they are "both concerned with the rearranging of previous power structures" (102).

Misreading of the female body by a cultural outsider is one of Atwood's most effective means of demonstrating how sex-citation works. At her heaviest, Joan is pursued by a cook at the restaurant where she works, a "foreigner, either Italian or Greek, I wasn't sure which" who asks her to coffee. "He helped me on with my coat and opened the door for me, darting around me like a tugboat around the Queen Elizabeth; he was five inches shorter than I was and probably eighty pounds lighter." On

this first date, he proposes in his unidiomatic English: “I require for you to marry me.” But Joan rejects him after she “imagined the expression on my mother’s face as I loomed down the aisle in white satin with the tiny foreign man slung over my arm like a purse.” After her rejection, he continues to court Joan. She reflects that “the whole thing had the air of a ceremony, a performance . . . . I knew I didn’t merit such attentions, and besides, there was something absurd about them; it was like being pursued by Charlie Chaplin.” But after Joan quits the restaurant, she still fantasizes about her pursuer although she “never did learn his real name . . . . For the most part I saw him merely as a landscape, a region of blue skies and balmy climate . . . a place that would be in dour contrast to Toronto . . . a place where I would fit in at last, where I would be the right shape” (99-101). These fantasies blend with the one of “the Fat Lady from the freak show” in pink tights with spangles, a short fluffy pink skirt, satin ballet slippers and, on her head, a sparkling tiara” (102). Here Joan’s longing to “fit in at last” is artfully balanced against her wishes to escape the traps of generic gender through a balancing act that shapes Joan’s character and the plot of the novel through RE-citation.

Another of Margaret Atwood’s fictions exposes these bodies as products of sex-citation and RE-cites them. In the same way that Joan materializes through being pursued in *Lady Oracle*, Christine is compelled into an attractive body in Atwood’s short story “The Man from Mars.” Atwood again uses the rigidly heterosexualized body as provocative object of desire with the complementary hot pursuit of the desiring man. This engineering of desire is familiar: in Western culture, from the Greek’s Cressida to Atwood’s Christine, male pursuit is a dominant convention of women’s sex-citation. Christine, as she is transformed during the course of the story from a *no-body* — an abject body beyond the binary — into a sexually exciting body, exemplifies the conventional construction of sexiness and demonstrates how a gendered body comes into being through iterative citation of these conventions.

Timothy Melley, in his examination of stalker novels, including Atwood’s, details the conventions of pursuit. He declares that being stalked feminizes humans; and the complement also holds, that stalking masculinizes. The act of stalking composes the masculine and its male body; and of course the opposite is also true — that being stalked composes the feminine and its female body. Melley proclaims his use of a “paranoid” reading, a methodology to reveal representations of the stalker that “make visible the violence involved in the production of ‘normal’ heterosexual relations” (96). Melley’s argument in “‘Stalked by Love’: Female Paranoia

and the Stalker Novel” complements Butler’s readings of gender and Atwood’s plotting of her short story to show how stalking, as the ultimate convention of heterosexuality, calls the heterosexual body into being.

At the beginning of the narrative, Christine’s body and her own attitude toward it are protectively asexual. She is painfully aware that she will never be desirable, thinking to herself that she “could not possibly ever be beautiful even if she took off weight” (15). Meditating on her childhood views of herself, she becomes uncomfortably aware that “she had identified with the false bride or the ugly sister; wherever a story began ‘Once upon a time there was a maiden as beautiful as she was good,’ she had known it wasn’t her” (23). She is outside of the potent paradigm of the fairy tale — a text that powerfully repeats hetero-plots. These tales display feminine beauty, desire, and male pursuit in a definitive code that calls the heterosexual body out. But no man has wanted Christine. She feels “plain as bread. To her sisters she was the plain one, treated with an indulgence they did not give to each other: they did not fear her as a rival” (23). Unbeautiful and unpursued, she is a no-body, an outsider to the iterative practices that engineer desire and sex the body:

she was an exception, she fitted none of the categories [men] commonly used when talking about girls; she wasn’t a cock-teaser, a cold fish, an easy lay or a snarky bitch; she was an honorary person. She had grown to share their contempt for most women. (24)

Here Atwood again places Christine outside of categories that call the hetero-sex-cited body forth. Christine is outside of the attractive and thus occupies a position as “an exception” and an “honorary person” beyond the ordinary “contempt” for women written into the script of heterosexual men. Her outsider status makes her safe; she does not fear men because she is not a “woman”; and she is not a “woman” because heterosexual men don’t pursue her. “There was nothing devious about her and nothing interesting” (23). But when she is unexpectedly approached and insistently and hotly pursued by a “strange” French-speaking “oriental man,” a “person from another culture” (14), she is for the first time sex-cited and through the course of the story repeatedly thrust into a materiality with which she is unfamiliar. The normative script for Christine’s new sex-cited body advertises its pleasure and offers the safety of the norm, but as Timothy Melley points out, since “normative heterosexuality contributes to antifemale violence, then a woman’s own desires may be threatening to her” (72). For Christine, becoming attractive goes hand in hand with being targeted as a site of desire and thus threatened.

From their very first encounter at the story's outset, the Man from Mars pursues Christine as she tries to elude this "stranger" whose "country is very far":

"Goodbye." she said, turning away from his puzzled face and setting off at what she hoped was a discouraging jog-trot....

Although she did not look back she could tell he was still following. (12)

This initial chase is the first in a series of pursuits. The convention is repeated until, as the story approaches its climax, Atwood sets the pursuit in a public place and again uses comic convention, as she has in *Lady Oracle*, to illustrate the relation between Christine and her pursuer:

As the weekdays passed and he showed no signs of letting up, she began to jogtrot between classes, finally to run .... She was aware of the ridiculous spectacle they must make, galloping across campus, something out of a cartoon short, a lumbering elephant stampeded by a smiling, emaciated mouse, both of them locked in the classic pattern of comic pursuit and flight .... (22)

The sex-citing Man from Mars is mis-citing Christine, making a comic mistake because he is "foreign" and does not understand the narrow idioms governing desire in white, Western culture. For no other man has found Christine attractive in the least. Her sex-citation has been void because North American men read the text of her body as outside of heterosexuality. Ironically, only another outsider, like herself, could misread her body this way. This mis-citation seems criminal or crazy to those assimilated into the dominant culture. As her racist mother says, "the thing about people from another culture was that you could never tell whether they were insane or not because their ways were so different" (26). In fact, at the beginning of the story, Christine herself is at first confused about her pursuer's intentions when the Man from Mars asks her to write down her name for him: "If this had been a person from her own culture she would have thought he was trying to pick her up. But then people from her own culture never tried to pick her up; she was too big" (11). Christine denies the pursuit that has just begun because, within the pursuit convention, she recognizes herself as a misquote, an unfitting element in the suspect performance. But no matter that the strange man from a strange land has misread her as desirable; no matter that he has therefore failed as an interpreter because he has not understood the language. His mis-citation is, finally, irrelevant.

Despite his cultural “otherness,” his citation *as a man desiring a woman in a heterosexual economy* is so powerful that it obscures his “alien” identity and forces Christine to materialize as sex-cited body. His desirous chase is the commonplace that identifies the alien Man from Mars *as a man*. Furthermore, his manhood, proved through his repeat performance of the sex-citing chase convention, certifies Christine as a sexed woman. This alien man sets in motion the conventional construction of the female body as he practices the regulatory norm of pursuing it. Christine is compelled into a “normal” heterosexual body through her position as object of that pursuit — her suddenly sex-cited body realized as desire’s focus.

As the story progresses, the process of repeated sex-citation has its cultural effects. Christine materializes as she moves from unbeautiful, ambiguously gendered “person” to “irresistible,” embodied woman. The manufacturing of the difference between uncited, unsexed “person” and sex-cited, sexy “woman” depends on two different citations of the same object. Pursued Christine’s transformation from nobody to sex-cited woman is especially evident in two contrasting bathtub scenes, one before the advent of her pursuit and one after. Early in the story, we are told, “She was not prone to fantasy but when she was in the bathtub, she often pretended she was a dolphin”(15). Later in the story, when her desiring admirer is at the height of his pursuit, we see a very different version of the female body in the tub: “In the bathtub she no longer imagined she was a dolphin; instead she imagined she was an elusive water-nixie, or sometimes, in moments of audacity, Marilyn Monroe” (24). Acted out in male desire and pursuit, the power of convention transforms the body from a fish of indeterminate sex to the sexual icon, Marilyn Monroe, paradigmatic Western emblem of embodied hetero-sex-citation. We can see here that male desire, articulated in an exaggerated courtship pursuit, sex-cites the unsexed body into social being. But as Atwood says in *Negotiating with the Dead*, “turning from a nobody to a somebody is not without its traumas . . . . As Marilyn Monroe is rumoured to have said, ‘If you’re nobody you can’t be somebody unless you’re somebody else’”(134). The hilarious and horrifying thing is that after the alien Man from Mars sex-cites Christine’s body conventionally, other men begin to sex-cite it too, and finally Christine, the target of desire, herself sex-cites it and feels that she has become somebody else. She has been seduced into her own body.

Christine’s sex-citation produces her as female body. The fact that she is rude to her pursuer, shuns him, and runs from him does not inhibit his attentions. In fact, her resistance emphasizes the highly conventional (and frightening) terms of the pursuit citation, and, within that emphatic

sex-citation, her body becomes ever more compelling. This exaggerated pursuit, performed publicly and repeatedly, generates desire among men for the pursued body, a contagion of sexual competition regardless of the Man from Mars's alien status. Men of her own age, class, and culture are suddenly and unaccountably attracted to her:

there was something about her that could not be explained. A man was chasing her, a peculiar sort of man, granted, but still a man, and he was without doubt attracted to her, he couldn't leave her alone. Other men examined her more closely than they ever had, appraising her, trying to find out what it was those twitching, bespectacled eyes saw in her. They started to ask her out, though they returned from these excursions with their curiosity unsatisfied, the secret of her charm still intact. (24)

Even Christine's father is caught in the citation. After the police have apprehended the alien pursuer with Christine's cooperation, her father reports to her: "They tried to find out why he was doing it; following you, I mean.' Her father's eyes swept her as though it was a riddle to him also" (28). The father's visual sweep of Christine's body affirms that the citation has had its effect. The body both accounts for pursuit and is brought into being on account of pursuit. Christine, herself, "often wondered, inspecting her unchanged pink face and hefty body in her full-length mirror, just what it was about her that had done it" (28). All of the male characters gaze at Christine's new body, trying to uncover its power, all of them confused but caught up in the gaze produced by and productive of the sex-cited body. But the power lies in the citation of pursuit, a curious sex-citation, impossible to grasp fully. That which sex-cites the female body is slippery. Since the body is produced through citation, it is not surprising that her materialization as sexed woman evaporates when her pursuer leaves town.

Not only is the desire that sex-citation provokes contagious among males but also the pursuit citation *turns on* the woman. The pursuit citation excites while it accuses the female body of provoking desire and thereby pursuit. With Christine's desirability comes this backturning, dangerous manifestation. She convinces herself

that it was she herself who was the tormentor, the persecutor. She was in some sense responsible; from the folds and crevices of the body she had treated for so long as a reliable machine was emanating, against her will, some potent invisible odour, like a dog's in heat or a female moth's, that made him unable to stop following her. (25)

Here, in Christine's new view of her body, is the ultimate in essentialism — a biologism that attributes male desire and pursuit not to culture but to inescapable body chemistry. Both pursuer and pursued are unable to control their bodies' effects, which appear to be outside of discourse and construction — seemingly simply magnetic. In this scheme, the citation of the female body turns on the woman, betraying her for what she excites in men. The sex-citation of pursuit does turn on Christine: she blames herself for turning on the Man from Mars. For she has continuously triggered his desire (has turned him on), and she has turned him in to the police (has turned on him).

In addition to his being turned on, this citation also turns on Christine, in the double sense of exciting her sexually and of scaring her. Sexless and unbeautiful, on one hand, Christine has no currency in the heterosexual economy; desired and pursued, on the other hand, she becomes a sexed body. She gains currency through her sex-cited body as it wrecks a havoc of desire over which neither she nor her pursuer seems to have any control. The end logic of this citation, however, is rape. And in fact Christine is, throughout the story, afraid that the Man from Mars will sexually assault her. For instance, early in the story, as Christine is making her first get-away, she reflects that "It was like walking away from a growling dog: you shouldn't let on you were frightened. Why should she be frightened anyway? He was only half her size" (12). Although clearly she is more physically, socially, and culturally powerful than he, Christine is frightened. Another instance of Christine's fearing her pursuer comes in the middle of the story, after the Man from Mars invites himself for tea. Waiting for him, Christine "suppressed a quick impossible vision of herself pursued around the livingroom, fending him off with thrown sofa cushions and vases of gladioli" (17). At the end of the tea, he wants to take her picture and surprises her by setting the camera on automatic and getting into the photo himself, "his arm around her waist as far as it could reach, his other hand covering her own hands ... his cheek jammed up against hers" (19). This comical performance of a lovers' pose emphasizes the very conventionality of the images that drive the Man from Mars. Christine realizes that it is an image that her pursuer pursues. Nevertheless, she is thoroughly absorbed in the image: "She had been afraid he would attack her, she could admit it now and he had; but not in the usual way. He had raped, *rapeo, rapere, rapui, to seize and carry off*, not herself but her celluloid image" (20).

The story seems to conclude with the sex-cited body's return to ambiguity and with Christine's disillusionment. On the penultimate page, she finds out that the foreign man whom she had thought of as "a romantic

figure, the one man who had found her irresistible” had a habit of pursuing other women, including a sixty-year-old Mother Superior. With this information she can no longer hold her illusion of her own body’s unique desirability, and her sex-cited body ebbs away due to lack of citation:

Christine’s aura of mystery soon faded: anyway, she herself no longer believed in it. Life became again what she had always expected. She graduated with mediocre grades and went into the Department of Health and Welfare; she did a good job, and was seldom discriminated against for being a woman because nobody thought of her as one. (30)

Christine has tasted conventional desire’s power and its concomitant fear, has felt her hetero-sex-cited body materialize, only to be cut off from the power that produced it. She is left with the sad memory of potency and with the relief of the unsexed, contemplating that mysterious urgency that her body had inspired, her own powerlessness in the face of that urgency, and the intense pleasure of that powerlessness. Here is the hetero-turn-on of being done-to, for women. This is the underbelly of all those *attractive* sex-cited she-bodies that adorn advertising where attraction shows itself for what it really is, the passive element under the influence of the active.

The ambiguous body which is not pursued as desirable is a sex-exile, the sex-cited body a fearful habitation. But this is not the end of the story. Atwood concludes more ambiguously after having explored the body as cultural locale, with its interpretations and compelled citations. As she says in her interview:

I’m interested in where you feel your body can go without being conspicuous or being put into danger. How you see the adornment of your body, which every culture does, to some extent, in different ways. Whether you see that as something forced upon you or as something that you do of your own free choice. Whether you see beauty as a tool, which, of course, women in this country are taught to do. Whether you see it as part of your stock in trade that you have to use to get what you want. All of those things. And it is very central to everybody. (Meese 104)

The story ends on a Butlerian note: bodies are not the unmediated, “real” abode of a biologically determined identity, not the essential home of the self, but a cultural artifact, “a tool,” a “stock in trade,” “something forced.” Finally, Christine is, again, a cipher, as she has been in the beginning — a trace element of gender, an ambiguous “honorary person” empty of sex-citation — the proverbial blank page in the canon of desire. She is homely

Christine, at home on the last page anxiously watching for her pursuer in televised images of the war in Vietnam until she can't stand it any more. Having been bodily transformed by his pursuit, she now pursues his image. Both pursue; both are pursued until their images collapse into each other, both alien. Only in the last two paragraphs of the story, however, does Christine realize that her alien pursuer's home is Vietnam. This locale is never specifically named, just as the man himself is nameless, his name "an odd assemblage of Gs, Ys and Ns" on note paper — for Christine, unspoken and unspeakable (11). The site of Christine's body, by the end of the story, is similarly ambiguous, fragmented, conflicted, and unspeakable. Out of her post-pursuit life, an accelerating dull sequence in which "the years were used up," come "nightmares and obsessions." In her dreams, "he was coming through the French doors of her mother's house in his shabby jacket, carrying a packsack and a rifle and a huge bouquet of richly coloured flowers" (31). This collage of images — guerrilla soldier, dangerous pursuer, romantic lover — reflects a complex subject, multiply determined and impossible to describe in any singular, reductive way. He is the alien, the other, the marginalized man against whom white, upper-class North Americans discriminate. He is the frightening stalker and rapist, insane, obsessed, sex-crazed. He is the love-sick Romeo, the beggar-lover, the man whom the Belle Dame ought to pity. He is the product of each of these conventions, and yet is none. All citations slip.

In the last three sentences, Christine thinks of the Man from Mars after trying unsuccessfully to repress his memory:

When, despite herself, she would think about him, she would tell herself that he had been crafty and agile-minded enough to survive, more or less, in her country, so surely he would be able to do it in his own, where he knew the language. She could not see him in the army, on either side; he wasn't the type, and to her knowledge he had not believed in any particular ideology. He would be something nondescript, something in the background, like herself; perhaps he had become an interpreter. (31)

As an interpreter, he would be a cultural and linguistic go-between, a code-switcher, a negotiator of meaning, a liminal agent — not here, not there, but in both places at once. Like him, Christine is a survivor. Like him, she has no fixed identity, no "particular ideology." Both are "something nondescript," ciphers, occupying languaged space in the territory of the unobvious, "the background." Both live on the borders, in between, shifting languages and images. The last clause, "perhaps he had become an in-

terpreter,” indicates that he dwells between languages and between cultures: always multiple, always alien — like Christine. As an alien interpreter, he RE-cites conventions, twisting them unintentionally. She and he together question the split territory of gender, the separation of North and South, male and female, the oppressive binary of hetero-sexist culture.

“There needs to be some kind of model that is not binary” argue Judith Butler and Gail Rubin: “Even the notion of a continuum is not a good model for sexual variations; one needs one of those mathematical models they do now with strange topographies and convoluted shapes” (71). From these strange topographies and alien reiterations, Butler’s “gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions” (10). But what do bodies beyond the binary look like? How do they act?

In her 1990 essay “The Female Body,” Atwood plays satirically with bodily gaps and fissures, jolting and thereby RE-citing the body. She begins with a direct response to the *Michigan Quarterly Review*, then launches into an explosive discourse that explodes the sex-cited body. She quotes the editors’ letter of solicitation which indicates that the issue will be “entirely devoted to the subject of ‘The Female Body.’” The editors have asked, deferentially, for an essay: “Knowing how well you have written on this topic ... this capacious topic.” In response, Atwood absolutely takes off:

I agree, it’s a hot topic. But only one? Look around, there’s a wide range. Take my own for instance.

I get up in the morning. My topic feels like hell. I sprinkle it with water, brush parts of it, rub it with towels, powder it, add lubricant. I dump in the fuel and away goes my topic, my topical topic, my controversial topic, my capacious topic, ... my badly behaved topic, my vulgar topic, my outrageous topic, my aging topic, my topic that is out of the question ... scuttling along the sidewalk as if it were flesh and blood, hunting for what’s out there, an avocado, an alderman, an adjective, hungry as ever. (9)

Atwood’s initial question “I agree, it’s a hot topic. But only one?” shatters the conventional sex-citation of the female body. This body is not figured as an essential, material object but as a multiple citation, a body-burst. Atwood breaks and enters the discursive body, merging the citational and material through the conflation of topic and body. Her body becomes a series of topics, a multiple RE-citation. In addition, this Female Body/Topic violates convention as it *hunts*. It is the pursuer, seeking to satisfy itself through delectable and alliterative food, man, or word: “An avocado,

an alderman, an adjective.” This figure of the Female Body as hungry hunter is at odds with the convention of the Female Body as object of male pursuit. The rhetorical effect of these devices is that the “legal,” normatively produced Female Body becomes a slippery RE-citation which, as Butler would have it, “coopts,” “exposes,” and “displaces” the cultural regulations governing normative sex-citation. With topic on top of topic, body on top of body, Atwood RE-cites the body at the intersection where women’s material bodies and the topical citations of the female body come together. Thus she points to a transgressive space that the “normally” heterosexed body might occupy. Similarly, in *Lady Oracle*, Joan Foster testifies to the slippage of a single essential body attached to a single essential life:

There was always that shadowy twin, thin when I was fat, fat when I was thin, myself in silvery negative, with dark teeth and shining white pupils glowing in the black sunlight of that other world .... But not twin even, for I was more than double, I was triple, multiple, and now I could see that there was more than one life to come, there were many.  
(246)

Here, too, Atwood moves exponentially out into an explosion of stable identity and body.

Atwood’s “The Female Body” illustrates how parody and satire work toward the ends of RE-citation. Here, she shows the sex-cited body as citation and thus as RE-citable. In other texts, such as “The Man from Mars” and *Lady Oracle*, she traces the heterosexual body as it materializes through citation. This normative sex-cited body takes shape as it is cited. If we see bodies as unstable social constructions, we can begin to see through the rigid binary that has governed our thinking about sexuality. Even Butler’s detractor, Martha Nussbaum, grudgingly admits that Butler is “right” in saying “that a binary division of sexes is taken as fundamental, as a key to arranging society,” but that this binary “is itself a social idea that is not given in bodily reality” (7). This is precisely what Margaret Atwood recognizes: the trap of sex-citation and the possibilities of bodies beyond that oppressive binary, and we must thank her for the freedom and opportunity this explosive reading of bodies brings.

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Along with these critics who argue that Atwood mediates the tensions between a postmodern theoretical reading and a materialist reading of the female body, others have appreciated the body as site of fictional experiment in Atwood’s work. For instance, see the ar-

ticles by Suarez and Meindl in Colin Nicholson's collection. The work on the ocular in these selections is especially interesting in this regard.

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