MOVING BEYOND "THE BLANK WHITE SPACES": ATWOOD'S GILEAD, POSTMODERNISM, AND STRATEGIC RESISTANCE

Marta Caminero-Santangelo

One of the primary issues embedded in the debate between modernism and postmodernism involves the tension between "mass culture and high art" (Huyssen 267); both detractors and advocates of postmodernism position it at the former pole. Andreas Huyssen, for example, argues that "the most significant trends within post-modernism have challenged modernism's relentless hostility to mass culture" (241). Fredric Jameson reads this as the demise of a resistant or adversarial position from which to speak to the dominant culture ("Postmodernism" 29); Linda Hutcheon, in turn, suggests that "perhaps [postmodernism] questions any such easy repudiation [of dominant culture], and does so in the light of its own inescapable ideological implication in precisely the contemporary situation of late capitalism" (50). This last position highlights what I see as a crucial difference between modernism and postmodernism: the desire, on the one hand, to take a stance of alienation that would reject all systems (linguistic codes, literary conventions, etc.) seen as part of an oppressive dominant order, versus, on the other hand, the recognition that there is no pure "outside" of that order (or that if there is, one can only "speak" from there in silence). At its worst, the latter position has "abandoned any claim to critique, transgression or negation" (Huyssen 241); at its best, it is looking for ways to resist oppressive ideologies from *within*.[1] I intend to argue, within the context of this debate, that *The Handmaid's Tale* represents a particularly *postmodern* feminist sensibility in its conceptualizing of resistance to a dominant order and of the constraints upon such resistance.

It is a commonplace that modernism, at one time "an opposi-

tional and anti-social phenomenon" (Jameson, "Reflections" 209), became institutionalized itself in universities and museums that alone could provide an interpretive context. For postmodernist writers—especially feminist writers—who want to effect real social change in whatever form, the prospect of speaking to an audience of a privileged few would seem bleak indeed. The necessity of a larger audience—one that does not need the context of the academy to understand a text—might well be one consideration that has motivated "an alternative postmodernism in which resistance, critique, and negation of the status quo were re-defined in non-modernist and non-avantgardist terms" (Huyssen 241).

It is interesting, given this theorizing of postmodernism as working within mass culture, that much postmodern *theory* has inspired accusations of unintelligibility and intellectual elitism. Take for example, a critique that recently appeared, *not* in a literary journal, but in *Z Magazine*:

> It . . . ought to be possible for literary theorists to describe, popularize, and generally make understandable what their results are so the rest of us can know there is something real going on behind all the obscure terminology. Even the most difficult physics can be described so average persons get a good idea of the main results and questions. If it can be done for theories about quarks, gluons, big bangs, and black holes, it ought to be able to be done for theories about everyday culture and communication. (Albert 15)

Such a criticism suggests that much postmodern theory is in fact attempting to preserve the privileged institutionalized position often challenged by the literature that is its subject. Like the academicians of *The Handmaid's Tale*'s epilogue who wish to remain politically detached from their subject matter, such theorists ignore the very pragmatic concern of many postmodern artists, as well as of feminist theorists of the postmodern concerned explicitly with dismantling patriarchal systems that oppress women: "For those of us who want to understand the world systematically in order to change it, postmodern theories at their best give little guidance" (Hartsock 159).

Margaret Atwood has positioned herself on the latter side of this debate in her theoretical text, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, which is labeled "controversial" precisely because it "addresses itself to the common rather than to the scholarly

reader" (St. Andrews 47). The packaging of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* promotes it as an item of popular culture—a "#1 Bestseller" sporting rave reviews from such publications as *Time, Newsweek, Ms., Playboy,* and *Glamour.* It is precisely the novel's popular success which has made it a target of Chinmoy Banerjee's scathing indictment:

> Criticism and critical forms are routinely absorbed into mass culture and become the basis of entertainment, as a look at television and movies will confirm. Dystopia as such, however grim, is by no means necessarily disturbing: it is a very popular form of entertainment. . . . [T]he passive reception of information through mass media is the base on which entertainment, and particularly critical entertainment, is constructed. Such entertainment, needless to say, doesn't challenge, transform, or advance consciousness. . . . Its function is ideological in that it denatures criticism by making it consumable and comfortable. . . . (75)

Banerjee assumes that anything which is entertaining or which participates in mass culture loses any critical function; such a position, however, seems dangerously close to reinscribing modernist elitism. To speak to many is necessarily to inhabit the forms of mass culture; the alternative is to speak to only a few (but to remain self-satisfied about the purity and lack of compromise in one's position). As video artist Douglas Davis declares, "If I want to address my art to the world, I must address it through the system, as must everyone else. If this sounds suspiciously like liberalism and compromise, so be it: liberalism and compromise is the only way any true revolutionary has ever worked, save through the sword" (22).

A recognition of complicity with mass culture, along with an understanding that only within this arena can effective resistance be waged, marks *The Handmaid's Tale* as what Huyssen might call a resistant postmodern novel. The text presents itself as a hybrid of two highly popular fictional forms, science fiction and the woman's romance. The latter elements have drawn much negative criticism from feminist critics who ask, along with Sandra Tomc, "Why . . . does Atwood choose to resolve her drama of women's oppression by implementing a paradigm of the female romance, such that the telos of the heroine's journey becomes her introduction to Mr Right?" (73). Tomc subsequently answers her own question by drawing upon the conflict between elitist academic discourse and popular culture:

> The 'Historical Notes' indicate that a tribute to the 'low brow,' to forms of culture inadmissible to scholarly exchange, is part of her project. It is no accident that Offred's tapes are discovered among other tokens of popular passion and bad taste—Elvis Presley tunes, folk songs, Mantovani instrumentals, and the screams of Twisted Sister—nor that all of these are laughed at and dismissed by Professor Pieixoto. (82)

What is at stake, however, is more than just an arbitrary "tribute" to low culture. It is the postmodern recognition that popular culture is the only field of effective ideological battle.

Within the narrative, media—whether in the Gileadean "present" of most of the novel or in the handmaid's "past"—are never approached in a purely adversarial relation. Although films, news broadcasts, etc., are presented as tools for ideological indoctrination, popular songs and ladies' magazines "from the time before" (81) have a peculiarly subversive potential in Gilead; and even the news is not rejected outright as misinformation. The narrator (whom I will refer to as "Offred" for lack of a better name) acknowledges the possibility that the footage she is shown is "faked," but she hopes nevertheless to "read beneath it" (105). The mass media are certainly a technology for the production of (the dominant) ideology, but they also hold the potential for a locus of resistance to that ideology. Rejecting the characteristically modernist stance of alienation from institutionalized discourses, the resistant postmodern speaks, and attempts to subvert, from within; though Offred initially refuses to call the room where she sleeps "my room" (11), and thus positions herself outside the Gileadean order, eventually (in the wake of the Commander's invasion of her room) she responds by claiming a space for herself: "My room, then. There has to be some space, finally, that I claim as mine" (66).

Davis's comparison of "liberalism and compromise" to "the sword" points to a further tension present under the surface of much postmodern work, and certainly of *The Handmaid's Tale*: the fear that revolution "through the sword" in a fragmented society may no longer be possible. Moira is the figure for direct and violent rebellion; it is she who would know how to "reduce [a fan] to its cutting edges" (221) and for whom Offred would like to project a "daring and spectacular" ending (325). But in fact Moira ends up firmly entrenched in the system. (Jezebel's might seem subversive, but it is not: Moira's playboy-bunny outfit is only "govern-

ment issue" [315], like Offred's own costume.) Indeed, Barbara Hill Rigney observes that Moira "is intended to recall Moira Shearer who dances herself to death in 'The Red Shoes,' a film to which Atwood refers with great frequency" (117), suggesting both that Moira's efforts at violent rebellion are as futile as dancing, and that her outcome will be nothing more subversive than death. Offred notes her own desire to steal a knife (126), but never actually engages in this form of resistance; there is a sense that even a stolen knife, ultimately, would belong in the same category as a stolen packet of sugar (118)—infinitessimally small against the enormous and diffused power system. Resistance by the sword is not condemned by the text—it is merely seen as useless.

The direction of resistance in the postmodern consequently changes from a one-directional struggle against the dominant order to a more flexible resistance that is context-specific (and, therefore, contradictory: what is resistant in one context could be seen as complicit in another). Hutcheon argues that postmodernist (I would add "resistant") art and theory "share . . . an awareness of the social practices and institutions that shape them. Context is all" (54). (The latter statement is echoed verbatim by Offred herself [Atwood 187].) The postmodern emphasis on context has affected, also, feminist theorizing of language. The credence that many modern women writers gave to the "adversary function . . . of breaking linguistic codes" (Huyssen 261) was shared by subsequent French feminist theories. As Sally Robinson explains, for example, Julia Kristeva identifies the

> 'semiotic disposition' [as] a language function that involves preverbal operations . . . [from] the period before the subject gains access to patriarchal law and language. . . . The eruption of the semiotic can disrupt language by opening up gaps in meaning. . . . Women are in a position to disrupt the symbolic order and to transform language. (110-11)[2]

The place from which (female) subjects might speak their resistance to patriarchy would accordingly be "preverbal," and the voice of resistance would constitute "gaps in meaning"—in other words, the resisting position would be one *outside* the symbolic order. Offred's own expression of faith that "whatever is silenced will clamor to be heard, though silently" (196) already suggests, in the word "though," that this silent resistance in the "gaps" of the

symbolic order might not be satisfactory. Indeed, Offred's recollection that in her former life she lived in "the blank white spaces at the edges of print . . . the gaps between the stories," seems to carry with it an ominous warning about such a position (especially when read retrospectively in the light of the epilogue, in which we discover that the entire narrative has been a reported "story"). To live outside discourse (as much as this is possible) might be to remain outside of the dominant ideology, but it also removes one from the platform where resistance can be waged. The existence of Offred's very unsilent narrative on tapes intimates the compelling need to go beyond silent or preverbal forms of disruption. The "war," such as it is, must be waged within stories, within discourse.

Some recent feminist theory, rewriting the French feminists, rejects the supposition that language is inherently patriarchal and that resistance can only be spoken in "gaps." Toril Moi argues (from Kristeva's own writings), firstly, that "an implacably authoritarian, phallocentric structure" *cannot* be disrupted

> through a straightforward *rejection* of the symbolic order, since such a total failure to enter into human relations would, in Lacanian terms, make us psychotic. We have to accept our position as already inserted into an order that precedes us and from which there is no escape. (170)

But Moi goes on to point out that, given the postmodern understanding of

> *all* meaning [as] contextual, it follows that isolated words or general syntactical structures have no meaning until we provide a context for them. How then can they be defined as either sexist or non-sexist *per se*? . . . The crudely conspiratorial theory of language as 'man-made', or as a male plot against women, posits an *origin* (men's plotting) to language . . . for which it is impossible to find any kind of theoretical support. (157)

We must understand language differently—that is, contextually. Frances Bartkowski has observed that the genre of feminist utopia is marked by the possibility of changes in language usage produced by a different social context. To conceive of language as flexible, acquiring an ideological cast only through the context in which it is used, is to understand also the way in which it can be

reappropriated by bringing a *different* context to its interpretation. Moi argues that such an approach

> posits that we all use the same language but that we have different interests . . . political and power-related interests which intersect in the sign. The *meaning* of the sign is thrown open . . . and though it is true to say that the dominant power group at any given time will dominate the intertextual production of meaning, this is not to suggest that the opposition has been reduced to total silence. The power struggle *intersects* in the sign. (158)

By reclaiming language not only as inescapable but as the locus for ideological struggle, this theoretical position offers an alternative to the self-defeating aims of modernist writers who hoped to create meaning with the tools of the symbolic order while trying to position themselves outside of that order.

To understand how the subject can engage in this struggle, we must turn to postmodern feminist notions of subjectivity. The subject is no longer conceived as "a unique self and private identity, a unique personality and individuality, which can be expected to generate its own unique vision of the world and to forge its own unique, unmistakable style" (Jameson, "Postmodernism" 17). But postmodern feminist theories are virtually unanimous in rejecting also the "modernist litany of the death of the subject" (Huyssen 264) for a notion of the subject as *both* constituted by the discourses into which it is variously inserted (including "sexuality and gender" [Moi 169] as well as "class, race, ethnicity, sexual preference, education, social role, and so on" [Hutcheon 59]), *and* as constitutive of meaning precisely by its location at the intersection of such discourses. Thus Nancy Hartsock observes, "we need to recognize that we can be the makers of history as well as the objects" (170-71), and Iris Young argues that the subject is always "producing meaning through the play between the literal and figurative, representational and musical aspects" of any utterance (304). (It should be noted that if even "literal" meaning is multiple and contextual, depending upon the discourse in which it is located, and if the subject is located at the intersection of the multiple discourses that have constructed her/him, then the subject can produce meaning "through the play" among literal meanings alone.)

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the ideology of Gilead identifies sub-

jects by their location in only one context, thus attempting to reduce the multiple construction of subjectivity. Offred and the other handmaids are defined not even by the category of gender, but quite narrowly by that of female fertility. Aunt Elizabeth (whose purpose it is to indoctrinate the handmaids in the new, singular discourse), says "Identify with your body" (159); and Offred does, although she expresses unhappiness that it is "something that determines me so completely" (82). This dissatisfaction with such singular identity points toward yet another tension between French feminist thought and (what I would characterize as) the more "postmodern" feminist thought that has revised it: the status of the body as the site for resistance. Ann Rosalind Jones has noted that "the female body hardly seems the best site to launch an attack on the forces that have alienated us from what our sexuality might become" (368); such a reduction of the (sexual) subject seems to postmodern feminists to limit the possibilities of subversion offered by a subject located within and identified by *multiple* categories of discourse. In Gilead, the identity of the handmaids is defined by their body *exclusively*. Interestingly, Offred never identifies herself racially, in opposition to the formerly African-American "Children of Ham" (107), as white. Her subjectivity is constructed within the ideology of Gilead by the single category of sexual difference, not of race—she considers herself a woman, not a white woman. Black women are not handmaids (or wives, or Marthas) but "Children of Ham" (that is, defined by the single category of race), and their fate is thus entirely different; despite the pressing need for fertile women, they are resettled elsewhere. The same is true of Jewish women, who, defined by their religion rather than by their gender, have been designated "Sons of Jacob" (a designation which ignores the category of female gender, though Offred makes a point of describing the women included under it) and allowed to "emigrate" (259)—or "simply dumped into the Atlantic" (389).

But it is precisely because Offred and the other handmaids are a "transitional generation" (151)—that is, because their subjectivity *has* been constructed at the intersection of many different kinds of discourses, both dominant and subversive—that, for them, "there is . . . a place from where [the prevailing] ideology can be seen for what it is" (de Lauretis 9). It is this place that is implicit in Offred's complaint: "I am not being wasted. Why do I

want?" (9). Her subjectivity has been constructed by many discourses besides that of the Gileadean ideology that produces the phrase "Waste not want not" (9). Consequently, that subjectivity is not completely contained within or explained by the prevailing ideology—something is left outside, unaccounted for. In contrast, the future generations of handmaids, who "will have no memories of any other way" (151), will consequently have no place from which to resist; all other discourses, all categories of subjectivity other than the body, will have been erased. Those who "still . . . remember" the other discourses that constituted their subjectivity still have multiple contexts from which to produce (resistant) meanings and thus to speak their resistance—those who "won't" remember will "always have been silent" (283).

Offred's early forms of "resistance" constitute local and seemingly internal choices about meaning; Offred shifts from one context to another as a sheer demonstration that she can still draw on multiple discourses. When first describing Nick, she recalls, "Smells fishy, they used to say; or, I smell a rat. Misfit as odour. Despite myself, I think of how he might smell. Not fish or decaying rat; tanned skin, moist in the sun, filmed with smoke" (24). The word "smell" can no longer officially take its meaning from the interpretive context of sexuality, now excluded from the prevailing ideology. Offred's recollection of actresses from "before" invokes the same strategy: "They wore blouses with buttons down the front that suggested the possibilities of the word *undone*. These women could be undone; or not. They seemed to be able to choose. We seemed to be able to choose, then" (33). What women could once choose was not only whether to be undone, but also which option from among "the possibilities of the word." Not to be able to choose is to be completely within one ideology—one context of discourse. Here, the possibilities of meaning among which Offred moves all work against Gileadean discourse (women as physically revealed; women as sexually undone). Similar possibilities are suggested by Offred's pun on the word "loose" to describe Moira's escape—loose as liberation from the regime, loose as sexually promiscuous: "she'd been set loose, she'd set herself loose. She was now a loose woman" (172). Within the officially sanctioned discourse, all these meanings would be reduced to one, subversiveness, just as all exchanges sanctioned within that discourse have remarkably little meaning aside from signalling orthodoxy. Clearly "Blessed

be the fruit" and "May the Lord open" (25) refer obliquely to the constitution of the handmaids' identities by their fertile bodies; but the phrases are noticeably truncated—what fruit? open what?—rendering them nothing more than "fixed" signifiers for ideological adherence. Offred struggles within her own mind to preserve the multiple possibilities of words and to choose between them. It is indicative of the extent to which Offred and the other handmaids are increasingly located within Gilead's ideology (that is, have internalized the official discourse) that they find the possibility of being "loose" (in both senses) "frightening" (172). Even though Offred observes that "choice" is a metaphorical "salvation" from Gilead, it is nevertheless "the choice that terrifies [her]" (80).

Increasingly, Offred's choices about meaning work more deliberately against the Gileadean discourse (even as to some extent she internalizes the ideology produced by that discourse); as Carol Beran observes, "Offred's power is in language" (71). Offred's adherence to the philosophy "*Give me children, or else I die*" is perhaps suggestive of the extent to which she is constituted by that discourse; but she also distinguishes "more than one meaning" to the biblical quotation (79). If handmaids do not give birth, they may well quite literally die (in the colonies), for they are considered dispensible to the regime. By being able to recall this second, illegitimate meaning, Offred subverts the discourse used to define her. She uses a similar strategy when she recounts Aunt Lydia's indoctrination:

> A thing is valued, she says, only if it is rare and hard to get. We want you to be valued, girls. She is rich in pauses, which she savors in her mouth. Think of yourselves as pearls. We . . . make her salivate morally. We are hers to define, we must suffer her adjectives.
>
> I think about pearls. Pearls are congealed oyster spit. This is what I will tell Moira, later; if I can.
>
> All of us here will lick you into shape, says Aunt Lydia. . . . (145-46)

The ideological indoctrination produced by Aunt Lydia's discourse includes notions both of the "value" of the women and, by extension, of the legitimacy of exchanging the handmaids among various owners (as with all things of material value). But the handmaid's re-definition of pearls as "congealed oyster spit" gestures towards an alternative meaning: pearls are an irritation which the oyster

attempts to smooth over, to neutralize. Furthermore, it is in Offred's own representation of the incident that Aunt Lydia, as the speaker of the defining discourse, "salivates" to produce the handmaids-as-pearls. Offred's capacity to stand outside the official ideology enough to interpret Aunt Lydia as its mouthpiece and the transitional generation of handmaids as its irritant is, despite its subversive potential, only enacted internally—but reporting her reinterpretation to Moira, as she hopes to do, extends that interpreting outwards, beyond herself (and retrospectively we know that she has reported it to a larger audience, through its reconstruction on tape). Similarly, the subversive message "*Nolite te Bastardes carborundorum*" is torn by Offred's predecessor from its original, highly patriarchal context (an exclusive boys' school) and from the context in which she learned it (the Commander's office) to acquire a new subversive meaning through its *extension outwards*, to the narrator herself (242).

In the latter part of the narrative Offred begins to extend her resisting rejections of Gileadean discourse by "reporting" them to others. Her reply in the negative to Ofglen's question "Do you think God listens . . .to these machines" (217) is her first true verbal transgression in the new order (remarkably, this occurs only after she has been reinserted into disallowed discourses through the Commander's gift of banned women's magazines). By the time Offred is confronted with Ofglen's replacement, her movement among the various discourses that shape meaning has become deliberate and self-conscious:

> "Let that be a reminder to us," says the new Ofglen finally. I say nothing at first, because I am trying to make out what she means. She could mean that this is a reminder to us of the unjustness and brutality of the regime. In that case I ought to say *yes*. Or she could mean the opposite, that we should remember to do what we are told and not get into trouble, because if we do we will be rightfully punished. If she means that, I should say *praise be*. (364)

The new Ofglen's words might belong to one discourse, that of subversion, or to another, that of the regime. The handmaid, constructed at the intersection of these discourses, can insert herself into one or the other through her response. Her choice—"I take a chance. 'Yes,' I say" (365)—is a verbalization of her contextualiz-

ing strategy of resistance. Eventually, as I will discuss further, this strategy leads to the imperative of reporting.

If all meaning depends on context, then postmodern writing must reflect "the context-dependent nature of all values" (Hutcheon 90)—and, it might be added, of all resistances. No act is *inherently* resistant, as Baudrillard suggests with the concept of "strategic resistance" (219). Offred's linguistic resistances are often of this contextually contradictory nature, and the text suggests that they cannot be judged by the "feminist" standards of the (contemporary) reader's present. For example, Offred's seemingly innocuous comment, "I never looked good in red, it's not my color" (11) is subversive on two levels in the context of Gileadean society. The act of her statement is to position her outside the dominant ideology: she disowns "the color of blood" (11)—with its strong associations with the (female) body—that "defines" the handmaids in officially-sanctioned discourse. But Offred is also making a statement that runs contrary to Gileadean ideology itself, for she is no longer supposed to be concerned about how she "looks"; and the very purpose of the red uniforms is to make everyone uniform (i.e. not individuated by appearance).[3] Thus, in the context of her society, the handmaid's statement is ideologically subversive, even though in our own many socialist-feminists would object to the values it represents: a concern with the feminine image, a competitive and individualist pride (in appearance).

Furthermore, this passage is contradictory in a more problematic manner. While Offred linguistically rejects her place in the dominant ideology by refusing to call red "my color" or the room where she sleeps "my room," what she insists on *possessing* linguistically is her body: "my feet" as opposed to "the chair," "my hands" to "the red gloves," "my face" to "the wings," "my arm" to "the shopping basket" (10-11). In a society that "defines" the handmaids by their bodies, such identification with them may seem merely an internalization of the dominant ideology—but the handmaids' relations to their bodies are somewhat more complex. In Gileadean society, the handmaids are cut off from their senses. Offred explains that the "white wings . . . are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen" (11). Elsewhere she complains, "I hunger to commit the act of touch" (14), which is also forbidden; and we have seen in her presentation of Nick that even smell has become an illicit indulgence. This alienation from her senses

reinforces the quite obvious point that, though the handmaids are defined by their bodies, they are not in control of them in Gilead. Within *this* context, her linguistic possession—her reappropriation, as it were—of her body can be seen as an act of resistance.

Even so, such resistance is the product of Offred's earlier positioning within a different (and arguably also oppressive) ideology; Carole Pateman has argued convincingly that the notion of *ownership* of one's body can lead to a variety of "social relations of subordination" (148), including the wage contract, prostitution, and, notably, surrogate motherhood. Offred's resistance, within this context, could be read as complicit in an oppressive ideology of contract and property. The point, however, is that it must be read within its own context, rather than ours, just as her temptation to "steal something" (Atwood 103) cannot be read as a desire "to experience forms of greed and avidity" (Bartkowski 154). Context is indeed all. An ideology of individualism may be critiqued by much contemporary feminist and leftist thought within the context of capitalist society; but within a different context, "collectivity can be perceived as manipulation as well as activism" (Hutcheon 47). (Indeed, Iris Young argues forcefully against a particularly unpostmodern "ideal of community" that "privileges unity over difference" [300].) In a society whose government uses precisely such a strategy of creating and manipulating a collective subjectivity (during birthings, salvagings, and particicutions), struggles to resist such a subjectivity cannot so easily be branded with the weighted term "individualism."

This contextual understanding of resistance informs *The Handmaid's Tale*'s very postmodern conceptualizing of the production of ideology through technologies of discourse, and of the resistance possible within such technologies. Teresa de Lauretis argues that ideology, "both as representation and as self-representation, is the product of various social technologies, such as cinema, and of institutionalized discourses, epistemologies, and critical practices" (2). Ideological production in Gilead takes place through the discourse offered by the television news broadcasts (105), the "soul scrolls" (216), and the films used to indoctrinate the handmaids at the Re-education Center (146).[4] Offred compares the latter to geographical films of her youth, also used in the production of ideology—specifically, of an ideology that objectified and marginalized the "uncivilized" to show the superiority of the "civilized." Clearly the ideology of technological advancement is

internalized by the child, who "thought someone should just give them the technology and let them get on with it" (152).

But if such technologies can produce the discourses of a dominant ideology in order to interpellate subjects into that ideology, they can also be used to produce *competing* ideologies. Offred notes that it is through the technology of the cassette tape-recorder—already outdated by the time she was grown—that she listened to, and can now recall, ideologically subversive songs "that use words like free" or that invoke an "outlawed" conception of sexual relations ("I feel so lonely, baby") (71). The women's magazines that the Commander presents to Offred constitute a similar subversion of Gileadean doctrine, albeit a contextual one (in the time of their own production through the technology of print media, they constitute an oppressive ideal image of "Woman" impossible to meet). Even the technology that controls the production of the dominant ideology can be used against it: print-outs from Gilead's computers were "smuggled to England, for propaganda use by the various Save the Women societies" (385). As I have already argued, the point is that technologies of discourse can only be subverted by being used. Offred's former job, notably, was itself firmly inserted in the technological production of discourse: she "worked transferring books to computer discs" (223).

The reader finally learns that it is through such technologies that Offred commits her most subversive act: she *reports* her narrative. Barbara Hill Rigney points out the imperative of reporting in an earlier Atwood novel, *Bodily Harm*:

> To tell, to report, to bear witness . . . is Rennie's moral obligation; by the end of the novel, Rennie realizes that she 'is a subversive. She was not once but now she is. A reporter. She will pick her time; then she will report' . . . For Atwood, writing itself becomes a political act; the writer is always a reporter. . . . (110-11)

Reporting takes up the struggle within—rather than outside of—the arena of the symbolic order. Its subversive potential lies in the fact that it provides another, a competing, discourse; it offers the possibility of a multiply-constructed subjectivity even for those of future generations, provided they listen. But this provision is essential, and Offred seems to recognize that her reconstruction of events is meaningless if it is without an audience. The despair

that her story will after all only be internal musing seeps through her narration: "If it's a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. You don't tell a story only to yourself. There's always someone else. Even when there is no one . . ." (52-53). Even if these words are read as a retrospective interjection into her story from the "future" point at which she makes the tapes, the sense of potential hopelessness can be regarded as authentic; nothing in the text or epilogue indicates that the handmaid knew she was guaranteed an audience. It is perhaps such despair that motivates the opposing impulse Offred occasionally feels to "withdraw . . . to go so far in, so far down and back, they could never get you out" (291)—that is, to refuse to engage with the world. If no one is listening anyway, "Why fight?" Yet even when characters question the value of narrating their stories, they persist in doing so; when Offred asks Moira to "'Tell me everything[,]' Moira shrugs. 'What's the point?' she says. But she knows there is a point, so she does" (316). And if a reported narrative can reach "more than one" other person, or even "thousands" (53), then the act of local (and, at its worst, internal) resistance is extended to the point where it can have concrete social and political effects. As the narrative progresses Offred comes to reject the possibility of withdrawal (and to condemn those who accept it: Janine's "withdrawal" from her context through apparent madness is characterized as an "easy out" by Offred [361]). Offred gives more faith to her power to *create* an audience, simply by the act of her own reporting: "By telling you anything at all . . . I believe you into being. . . . I tell, therefore you are" (344). Reporting by its very nature creates the subject-position of a receiver, which real people can then come to inhabit. But the handmaid's more hopeful expression here suppresses the possibility that in fact there may never be real people to inhabit the space her discourse opens for an audience, or (worse?) that her audience will find her "document" of no value.

The problematic posed by *The Handmaid's Tale* is that reported speech can always be appropriated and subsumed by another discourse, as Offred's is by the discourse of academia. This is a particular danger with speech reproduced through "technology (tape recorders) [that] makes possible the survival of the record or trace of voice, but not of the speaker" (Turnbull) (as Offred's disembodied voice is preserved for the historians of Nunavit). The many voices (of Luke, her mother, Moira) reported by Offred's

narrative without quotation marks but distinguished from Offred's own voice, as well as her voice itself, a form of reported speech transcribed to tape, mark *The Handmaid's Tale* as a metadiscourse. "Reported speech," V.N. Volosinov tells us, "is speech within speech, utterance within utterance, and at the same time also *speech about speech, utterance about utterance*" (115). As reported speech, Offred's tapes comment on the capacity of any linguistic frame to accurately preserve the integrity of an original voice while paradoxically serving as the only record of that voice. Indirect discourse poses, simultaneously, the threat of appropriation of another's voice and the promise of its preservation. Luke's words are preserved only through Offred's reconstruction of them; but what she chooses to report often seems highly colored by her present context. For example, she tells us that Luke "liked knowing about . . . details" such as the fact that there is "no corresponding word [for *"fraternize"*] that meant *to behave like a* sister"; but her narrative implies that he missed the insidious point of such a detail and wrote it off as an example of "curious usages" (15). Or again, she remembers that Luke insisted "there are some differences" (83) between men and women, a position particularly ominous from the point of view of a handmaid identified by the essential differences between her body and a man's. Because there are no quotation marks around Luke's speech, Offred's voice seeps into his, and at times we are unaware of who is speaking. (Is it *Luke* who conceives of his hobby as a knowledge of "curious usages," or is it Offred after all?)

Offred's reconstruction of Moira's story is a similar blending of voices; indeed, Offred emphasizes her own interference in the story: "I can't remember exactly. . . . I've filled it out for her as much as I can: we didn't have much time so she just gave the outlines. . . . I've tried to make it sound as much like her as I can" (316). In the narrative that follows, it is impossible for the reader to distinguish between the moments of more accurate transcription and the places that have been "filled out" for Moira or made to sound like her. What we are receiving, Offred tells us, is not Moira in her immediacy, but Moira highly mediated by Offred's own narration (this self-consciousness in reporting is never present in her reconstruction of Luke's words). Ironically, by calling explicit attention here to a reconstructive process that has in fact been at work throughout the text, Offred minimizes the degree to which

she has re-appropriated Moira's voice. It is not only Offred's reporting of Moira's reporting that is "a way of keeping her alive" (316); it is also her painstaking attention to her own status and responsibility as narrative-maker. It is because the audience of such a narrative knows it to be a reconstruction that we will not mistake it for Moira's (unmediated) voice.

Professor Pieixoto, in the novel's epilogue, similarly admits to his own interference in the reconstruction of the voice he has appropriated—it is a reconstruction, he tells his audience, based on "guesswork" that is consequently "approximate, pending further research" (383). Yet even as the word "approximate" acknowledges the re-created status of the narrative, it undermines its significance (that which is "approximate" is "close enough"). At the same time, because Pieixoto implies that the document's "approximate" status will be resolved by "further research," he grants the possibility of a reconstruction that is exact, not approximate; objective, not appropriative. But the way in which his own biases shape his reportage of the handmaid's tale work constantly to undermine his assumption. His supposition of an objective truth leads him to try (as Offred did with Moira's story) to fill in the gaps he perceives in the handmaid's narrative: the historical facts that are left out. The difference between this reappropriation and Offred's is that he privileges what is added into the gaps—what he considers the more objective historical background of the narrative—over what is provided by Offred's voice. Thus he repeatedly points to the "facts" that are left out of Offred's story:

> What else do we know about her, apart from her age, some physical characteristics that could be anyone's, and her place of residence? Not very much (387). . . . She could have told us much about the workings of the Gileadean empire, had she had the instincts of a reporter or a spy. What would we not give, now, for even twenty pages or so of print-out from Waterford's private computer! (393). . . . Our document . . . is on these subjects mute. (394)

In fact, Pieixoto's "historical notes, like any scholarly afterword . . . serve to validate the text that they follow" (Davidson 114). Pieixoto is engaged in a process of legitimation which will convert the handmaid's tale from a reported narrative for which he "hesitate[s] to use the word *document*" (381) to a document indeed, a proper subject for

academic attention. But the legitimating details are his own, not Offred's; as Arnold Davidson points out, "retrospective analysis by a Cambridge don—male, of course—is ostensibly more authoritative than a participant woman's eyewitness account" (114). It is Pieixoto's reconstruction that, by privileging more "legitimate," "objective" fact over what the story provides, renders Offred "mute." Davidson is surely right that "there is something ominous in that claiming of the right to have the last word" (114). The danger of waging resistance within the symbolic order is precisely that, that the resistant text can be appropriated by the dominant discourse.

But if it is true, as Barbara Godard suggests, that "the biting irony of the gap between original and appropriated meanings, between embedded tale and frame tale reveals [that] such an activity rebounds on the expropriator," it is nevertheless *not* true that what is then advocated is a return to a purified "search for authenticity" (62). Godard assumes that "authenticity" *can* survive without being reconstructed or appropriated in some fashion; but the entire text of *The Handmaid's Tale* suggests that-*only* that which is reconstructed and reported can survive in any form. The epilogue's revelation that the entire preceding story has been itself a retrospective reconstruction, rather than immediate, internal narrative, places the novel in the category of what Linda Hutcheon would call metafiction (or even more appropriately, metanarrative) through its suggestion that any narrative, even that which appears most immediate (or most objective) is inevitably a subjective reconstruction. "Authenticity" is a concept challenged by postmodern fiction (Hutcheon 46), and in *The Handmaid's Tale* nothing is ever authentic—it is presented as always passed through a series of reconstructions. The twin imperatives are then to be self-conscious about one's reconstructions, so that the reported voice is not muted by the reporting voice; and to understand that the "local, the limited, the temporary, the provisional are what define postmodern 'truth' " (Hutcheon 43).

Hutcheon argues that the provisional nature of truth is suggested in the postmodern text that "self-consciously uses the trappings of what Fish calls 'rhetorical' literary presentation (omniscient narrators, coherent characterization, plot closure) in order to point to the humanly constructed character of these trappings" (45). *The Handmaid's Tale* makes this point not only by undermining the "objectivity" of Pieixoto's reconstruction in order to under-

score its provisionality as a historical vision, but also through Offred's gestures towards the provisionality of her own narrative and her own vision. What appears in the early part of the novel to be a conventional first-person narrative voice increasingly undermines its own immediacy through textual clues that distort the illusory continuous "present" of the story line. When, for example, one chapter begins "Yesterday morning I went to the doctor" and then switches to the present tense to describe the incident, the manipulation of tenses suggests that within the "present" established by Offred's narrative voice she is already "reconstructing" a past event. Of course this textual trick immediately casts doubt on the present-tense narration that has gone on until this point to describe Offred's life in Gilead, and, as we eventually learn, that too was a reconstruction.

Offred further casts doubt on the accuracy of her reconstructions by becoming more self-conscious about them. As the narrative progresses, she frequently revises what she tells us about the "present" of the tale—calling attention to what she leaves out (174), what she inserts afterwards (180-81), and what she invents (338, 340). Indeed, Offred's dream within a dream explicitly proffers the possibility that even what she understands as her reality is just a "paranoid delusion" (139). Offred cannot transcend the limited nature of her own subjectivity, and we as readers can understand her truth only as provisional. The potential for resistance in such a presentation lies in the recognition that even "Truth" institutionalized in the form of "History" is always open to challenge and revision by other "truths." This is not an abstract potential but a highly material one: witness the raging debates between traditional and revisionist historians that are occuring at the present time.

The postmodern text, then, blurs the boundaries between history and fiction through "its paradoxical combination of metafictional self-reflexivity"—such as the deliberate emphases on the provisional, reconstructed nature of narrative in *The Handmaid's Tale*—with "historical subject matter" (Hutcheon 19). With reference to the latter point, we must recall that Offred's reconstruction of the events that have led to Gilead include "real" historical events of the recent past and present: book burnings, abortion protests, even the Nazi extermination camps. Hutcheon suggests that it is exactly through such non-discriminating mixing of pure fiction with history that the postmodern text asserts "that

both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems" (93). Yet, as she observes, this is not to say that history is "obsolete" (16); history is itself an imperative not to be abandoned, for it is a system "by which we make sense of the past" (89). We do not discard a particular kind of discourse because it is a reconstruction. Rather, we recognize the constructed nature of reality, and use constructions and reconstructions as provisional systems of understanding while pointing attention to their provisional nature as a strategy for undermining the dangerous claims of any discourse to absolute truth.

It is against Gilead's attempts to instill "historical amnesia" (Jameson, "Postmodernism" 28) into its citizens by obliterating any official memory of the recent past ("It's . . . the more recent history that offends them," Offred tells us [41]) that Offred herself insists on reconstructing a historical narrative (albeit a provisional one) which will attempt to explain the relationship between events of her past and her present situation. Yet the narrative structure of Offred's tale suggests that she too risks (what Jameson calls) the "fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presents" ("Postmodernism" 28); her memories of the past are often not differentiated from her present at all. Consider, for example, her description of waiting for the Commander before the ceremony: "We wait, the clock in the hall ticks, Serena lights another cigarette, I get into the car" (108). The last phrase is a jolting transposition to a different time frame: "It's a Saturday morning, it's a September, we still have a car. . . . My name isn't Offred" (108). In a society with no contextual historical memory, there is always the threat that Offred will lose her own understanding of chronological cause and effect, and that her relation to the past will become only an arbitrary recollection of former moments without their larger context—thus mirroring Gilead's own relation to the past.

I have been concerned in this paper with the ways in which *The Handmaid's Tale* suggests a particularly *postmodern* feminist space for resistance—a space located *within* the discourses of the symbolic order (including technologically produced and disseminated discourses) rather than in opposition to them. Such a position, as I have suggested, depends upon postmodern insights about the contextual nature of meaning and value, the multiple construction of subjectivity, the provisionality and at the same time the necessity of historical frameworks. We have seen also that the

text never loses sight of the risks involved in using, to coin a phrase, the tools of the oppressor. But given that these risks are taken, I am still left with a problem: what material effects of such resistances does the novel finally offer? The handmaid's reported narrative has not changed the course of Gilead, which, we are told in the epilogue, only got worse; it is, further, effectively subsumed under Pieixoto's neutralizing academic discourse. Yet again, if the novel itself, as a cultural production working within popular culture, offers certain resistances, these are lost in its translation into film. The motion picture of *The Handmaid's Tale* flattens the self-reflexive, reconstructed nature of the narrative into straight, unmediated chronology; it deletes Offred's "sense of history" between Gileadean present and past (indeed, it provides no connection between historical *here* and dystopian *there* whatsoever, thus tearing Gilead itself out of context); and it substitutes for complex and problematic resistances (such as the imperative of reporting) an unproblematically easy and "Hollywoodized" happy ending (Nick gets girl, girl kills bad commander, girl gets baby). Indeed, the poster that promotes the movie surely operates within what Irigaray would call the "dominant scopic economy" which turns woman into "the beautiful object" (101): the image of an Offred with bare shoulders, holding a red cloth to her breasts with a hand sporting nicely manicured nails seems nothing less than a gross re-appropriation of the voice that speaks in the novel. Viewed in this context, the text of *The Handmaid's Tale* might offer an example of what E. Ann Kaplan has called "subversive subject-positions" which are "swept up in the plethora of more oppressive ones" (Kaplan 36-37). One of the many paradoxes of resistant postmodern literature is that behind its pressing concern with effecting concrete social change lies a fear that "resistance," not subversion or change, is all that is possible.

NOTES

[1] I cannot agree with Linda Hutcheon that *all* postmodern art is resistant (or, as she would have it, "didactic" [41]). Huyssen's distinction between uncritical and resistant postmodernism is a useful and important one to preserve.

[2] The preceding is Robinson's gloss on Kristeva's position in *Desire in Language*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez, ed. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1980).

[3] For a discussion of the function of uniform in Atwood, see Lorraine York, "The Habits of Language: Uniform(ity), Transgression and Margaret Atwood."

[4] I am indebted to Gordon Turnbull's (unpublished) written comments to me for this section of my paper, and especially to his observation, "Voice, magnified by the technologies of print, electronics, and visual media, expresses the values and beliefs of the social structures which produce, own, and maintain those technologies, and create the conditions in which listeners internalize its messages." As Turnbull suggests, media are seen to play an essential role in Gileadean control, as well as (I argue) in resistance to it.

WORKS CITED

Albert, Michael. "Venting Spleen: Getting By." *Z Magazine* (May 1991).

Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. New York: Ballantine, 1985.

Bartkowski, Frances. *Feminist Utopias*. Lincoln, Nebraska: U of Nebraska P, 1989.

Banerjee, Chinmoy. "Alice in Disneyland: Criticism as Commodity in *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Essays on Canadian Writing* 41 (Summer 1990): 74-92.

Baudrillard, Jean. "The Masses." *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*. Ed. Mark Poster. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1988.

Beran, Carol L. "Images of Women's Power in Contemporary Canadian Fiction by Women." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 15.2 (1990): 55-76.

Davidson, Arnold E. "Future Tense: Making History in *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms*. Ed. Kathryn Van Spanckeren and Jan Garden Castro. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1988.

Davis, Douglas. *Artculture: Essays on the Post-Modern*. New York: Harper & Row, 1977.

de Lauretis, Teresa. *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987.

Godard, Barbara. "Tales Within Tales: Margaret Atwood's Folk Narratives." *Canadian Literature* 109 (Summer 1986): 57-84.

Hartsock, Nancy. "Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?" *Feminism/ Post-modernism*. Ed. Linda J. Nicholson. New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, 1990.

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 1988.

Huyssen, Andreas. "Mapping the Postmodern." *Feminism/Postmodernism*. Ed. Linda J. Nicholson. New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, 1990.

Irigaray, Luce. *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985. Excerpt rpt. in *New French Feminism: An Anthology*. Ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron. Amherst: U of Massachusett s P, 1980.

Jameson, Fredric. "Postmodernism and Consumer Society." *Postmodernism and its Discontents*. Ed. E. Ann Kaplan. New York: Verso, 1988.

—"Reflections in Conclusion." *Aesthetics and Politics*. By Ernst Bloch. London: New Left, 1977.

Jones, Ann Rosalind. "Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of *l'Écriture féminine*." *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature & Theory*. Ed. Elaine Showalter. New York: Pantheon, 1985.

Kaplan, E. Ann. "Feminism/Oedipus/Postmodernism: The Case of MTV." *Postmodernism and its Discontents*. Ed. E. Ann Kaplan. New York: Verso, 1988.

Moi, Toril. *Sexual / Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Pateman, Carole. *The Sexual Contract*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1988.

Rigney, Barbara Hill. *Margaret Atwood*. London: Macmillan Education, 1987.

Robbins, Bruce. "Modernism in History, Modernism in Power." *Modernism Reconsidered*. Ed. Robert Kiely. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983.

Robinson, Sally. "The Anti-logos Weapon: Multiplicity in Women's Texts." *Contemporary Literature* 29 (Spring 1988): 105-24.

St. Andrews, B.A. "The Canadian Connection: Frye/Atwood." *World Literature Today* 60 (Winter 1986): 47-49.

Tomc, Sandra. "'The Missionary Position': Feminism and Nationalism in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid 's Tale*." *Canadian Literature* 138 (Fall-Winter 1993): 73-87.

Turnbull, Gordon. Unpublished written comments to Martha Caminero on *The Handmaid's Tale*. May 1988.

Volosinov, V. N. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Trans. Ladislave Matejka and I. R. Titunik. New York: Seminar P, 1973.

York, Lorraine M. "The Habits of Language: Uniform(ity), Transgression and Margaret Atwood." *Canadian Literature* 126 (Autumn 1990): 6-19.

Young, Iris Marion. "The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference." *Feminism/Postmodernism*. Ed. Linda J. Nicholson. New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall Inc., 1990.