The imaginary girlfriend: a study of Margaret Atwood's The Handmaids' Tale, Cat's Eye, The Robber Bride, and Alias Grace

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The Imaginary Girlfriend: A Study of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale, Cat's Eye, The Robber Bride*, and *Alias Grace*

by

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ABSTRACT

The feminist vision of harmonious relationships and politically effective alliances between and among women is frequently complicated and obscured by the multiple contradictions of power structures which form and inform women’s relationships. Margaret Atwood’s recent novels offer dynamic sites from which to explore how women’s oppressive condition(ing)s are inextricably linked to dominant social structures and practices. In turn, each demonstrates how these structures and practices, and many women’s unwitting complicity therein, effect schisms between and among women. In doing so, however, the novels simultaneously reveal the multiple layers beneath the hegemonic cover story. A reading of the condition(ing)s of Atwood’s female protagonists in relation to the other(ed) female characters makes audible the historical and present silence and silencing of alliances between and among women, and points to an “imaginary” space that acknowledges women’s differences, the various levels of oppression and/or privilege between and among women, and the duality, multiplicity, and inevitable contradictions of the imaginary girlfriend—each of the protagonists’ own (suppressed) self, and each of the women to and from whom she turns.
I especially want to thank Dr. Helen Buss for her encouragement, advice, aid and sense of humor throughout this study's development. Also, many thanks to Dr. Jeanne Perreault, Dr. Susan Rudy, Dr. Aruna Srivastava and Dr. Janis Svilpis for taking the time to assist me with research questions and/or for the dialogues we had about this project.
DEDICATION

To imaginary girlfriends
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>APPROVAL PAGE</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION: The Imaginary Girlfriend</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>THE HANDMAID'S TALE</em>: Imagining Female Alliance in the Face(s) of Contradiction</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>CAT'S EYE</em>: Re-viewing the Feminine, Recognizing the Difference</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>THE ROBBER BRIDE</em>: Finding the Other Woman in the Self</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>ALIAS GRACE</em>: Women Out of Bo(u)nds</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Imaginary Girlfriend

This study utilizes the recent novels of Margaret Atwood to explore how structures of power effect schisms between and among women. Central to my study is the feminist conviction that although women have been friends for millennia, positive relationships between and among women are negated in both the sociopolitical system and cultural symbolism of contemporary North American society.¹ In other words, within the public realm of politics, and despite the second wave feminist movement that began in the late 1960's,² women are not constituted as a cohesive group that might effect political change; further, and for the most part, absent within mainstream cultural representations of women and women's relationships are positive images that might serve as an impetus for women's solidarity. The result of this negation is complexly tied up with issues of power and, by extension, to many women's sense of non-identity and thus to women's lack of political autonomy. To complicate matters, women's internalization and thus frequently unconscious complicity in prevailing hegemonies³ not only interfere with the processes of self-naming and autonomy in women, but affect in a number of complex and frequently destructive ways their interpersonal relationships and dangerously perpetuate the status quo.

Atwood's recent novels capture some of the obstacles to positive and politically effective alliances between and among women.⁴ Some of her critics may not agree. In discussing Atwood's recent fiction and topic of study with friends and colleagues, all of whom are white women academics and feminist activists, one
either admires her novels as I do, or dismisses them for what some argue is their generally bleak and/or repetitive representation of the struggles heterosexual white women of certain classes undergo. More critically, these representations, some argue, participate in power structures that work to keep women oppressed—particularly women who are not white, middle or upper class and/or heterosexual—and thus participate in and perpetuate the problematics of women’s relationships within and across hegemonic lines. As I argue in the context of this study, however, to dismiss Atwood’s recent works for these reasons is to miss both their value and optimism. More critically, a dismissal of the works on these grounds paradoxically helps to elucidate the political implications for women and women’s relationships that are encoded in Atwood’s recent projects, and thus some of the reasons for which schisms between and among women exist and continue to exist.

To clarify, my strategy for analysis, while it in large part entails a focus on the (white) female protagonists, depends on the dynamic that occurs, or the fissures that open up in the contradictions and ironies that arise, when taking into consideration Atwood’s characterization and positioning of the female characters in relation to one another. As I argue, Atwood’s positioning of her female characters in relation to one another is not random, but accurately exposes how this positioning is dictated by power structures and/or by those who enforce those structures, including (some of) the protagonists. Yet, to complicate matters, the novels also make explicit that not all of the main characters fit neatly into a white, middle-class, and heterosexual paradigm. Although explored at length throughout this project, a note here to introduce Atwood’s positioning of her female characters.
as well as the many differences between and among them, will serve to clarify my argument.

While all of the protagonists are white, and thus automatically have privileges that women of color do not have, not all are from the same WASP and class background. Indeed, while each of Atwood’s recent works interrogates white racist structures, and the protagonists’ complicity in white racism, each also makes explicit that the experiences of oppression and privilege on the part of the protagonists are as various as their differences are. Moreover, while all of the main characters appear to be or might be presumed to be heterosexual, the novels also interrogate hegemonic assumptions about heterosexuality. Significantly, aside from Offred in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, none of the main characters celebrates her (hetero)sexuality, but struggles with her psycho(hetero)sexual conditioning (as is the case for the narrator in *Cat’s Eye*) and/or struggles (as is the case for the main characters in *The Robber Bride*) with her dependency on men and/or with her dependency on the “safety” of a traditional and thus heterosexual relationship. Atwood’s depiction of her protagonist in *Alias Grace*, moreover, makes explicit that women of Grace Marks’s status are not given a chance to explore their sexuality (whatever that might be) on any terms. Incarcerated for most of her life, she has, upon her release from prison, little if any choice but to enter into a traditional (heterosexual) marriage if she wishes to survive.

In terms of Atwood’s characterization and positioning of (in literary terms) the “minor” or, in feminist terms, the “other(ed)” female characters of the novels, not all of them are white, not all of them are from the dominant classes, and not
all of them are heterosexual. As I will explore at length, while Zenia’s racial and/or ethnic identity remains significantly ambiguous in *The Robber Bride*, the character Shanita in the same novel is definitely not white. Mary Whitney in *Alias Grace*, the protagonist’s best friend, is not only of the lower class, but, as Grace Marks reveals, is of “Red Indian” descent. In *Cat’s Eye*, Atwood opens for questioning the white narrator’s account of her encounters with the Middle Eastern woman and what appears to be a First Nations woman, as well as those she has with lesbian and heterosexual feminists of her own class and race. Rita and Cora, the Marthas of the household in which the narrator of *The Handmaid’s Tale* is placed, are clearly of the lower class and further biased against because of their ages. Finally, the character of Moira, the narrator’s best friend in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, is not heterosexual, but a white woman of the middle class who is self-identified as a lesbian.

As I argue, Atwood’s characterization and positioning of her female characters demonstrate that while all women are oppressed because of their sex, and while white and (presumably) heterosexual women of the dominant classes have privileges that are undeniable, women who are not simultaneously white and heterosexual and of the dominant classes and young are biased against on a number of complex levels and in a number of ways. Ontario-born to white middle-class parents, indoctrinated into heterosexist and/or Catholic codes of behavior, I identify on many levels with (some of) Atwood’s protagonists. I thus explore, at least in part, and particularly in my chapters on *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Cat’s Eye*, what Barbara Christian describes as “the tangle of background, influences, political
perspectives, training, [and] situations that helped form and inform" (51) the protagonists of the novels and thus myself. A reading of the novels on these terms makes it impossible, at least for this reader, to ignore the various levels of women’s oppression within and across hegemonic lines, as well as the various ways in which women, particularly those who are privileged by and in hegemonic culture, are complicit in their own and other(s’) oppression.7

Atwood’s novels nonetheless offer additional layers for interpretation. In my reading, each of the novels, including The Handmaid’s Tale and Cat’s Eye, participates in a feminist dialogics that serves to expose for imaginative re-vision some of the hegemonic force relations that serve to suppress all women’s subjectivities and thus to complicate women’s alliances. Yet, in taking into consideration the various differences of all of the female characters, and the contradictions and ironies that arise in a reading of their positions of privilege and/or oppression in relation to one another, I do not suggest that the novels presume an ideal (and thus solipsistic) space that assumes to incorporate all women’s differences. Nor do I suggest that they assume to solve the problematics of women’s relationships. Rather, and as I will show, the novels demonstrate in a number of ways why this space cannot be assumed, and/or how existing hegemonies ensure that women do not collectively claim this space.

At the same time, however, through the novels’ demonstrations of the dangers involved in assuming this space, and through their exposure of many of the hegemonic barriers that attempt to ensure that women do not collectively claim this space, a fissure is created. This fissure, I argue, not only acknowledges the
existence and complexities of women's differences, but also provides (or offers) a
dynamic site in and from which to continue the feminist dialogue on the
complexities that continue to obstruct alliances between and among women.

Throughout this project, I refer to this dynamic or fissure as an "imaginary"
site or space in which what I call the "imaginary girlfriend" is both located and
complicated. I explicate my use of the term "imaginary" through the concerns and
considerations of a number of women writers and activists. Luce Irigaray theorizes
that women's uncovering of what culture has forced them to repress or suppress
might create a cultural space for a feminine imaginary, or, to put it another way, for
"an otherness for women that is self-defined, a difference . . . to be given symbolic
and social representation by and for women" (Showalter 337-38).

Importantly, however, while Irigaray (in some of her work) borrows from
Lacan's Imaginary and Freud's pre-Oedipal in her imaginative rewritings of
traditional morphologies of the (white) female body, and while I draw on some of
her work for my analysis of the white narrator's psychosexual conditioning in Cat's
Eye, I do not unequivocally align myself with her work. Rather, and for my
introductory purposes here, Irigaray's concept of a feminine imaginary—insofar as it
is "deliberately ill-defined and as richly connotative as possible" (Whitford, "Luce"
5)—is most valuable if understood as constituting that which is glimpsed when
various traditional and thus white masculinist structures—such as linguistic, social,
and literary structures—are exposed for imaginative re-vision. In other words, an
analysis of the biases inherent in traditional structures serves to expose how these
structures have not and do not speak to the plurality and multiplicity of women's subjectivities, sexualities or alliances.

My use of the term "imaginary" is thus linked to Cordelia Chavez Candelaria's considerations of the "wild zone" thesis. Drawing on the work of American anthropologists Shirley and Edwin Ardener, Candelaria explains that the Ardener "wild zone" thesis "posits that women's experience has evolved distinct female-identified cultures necessarily marginalized within, and simultaneously outside of, dominant male-identified culture" (249). Complicating this, Candelaria demonstrates how the "wild zone" thesis--not unlike my use of an imaginary thesis in that it serves to acknowledge "marginalized cultures" (such as the entire culture of women and the various levels of oppression in groups therein)--complements expressions of her own (marginalized) Chicana/o culture. As she explains, "The very terms of its definition as a space among others underscores the "wild zones'" explicit acknowledgment . . . of a multiplicity of other zones of experience, idea, and culture" (251).

Gloria Anzaldúa's considerations of la mestiza in "La conciencia de la mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness" is useful for a further delineation of my use of the term "imaginary," and paves the way for my considerations of the "imaginary girlfriend." As Anzaldúa writes, la mestiza--"an Aztec word meaning torn between ways"--is "a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another" (766). Tracking the struggles la mestiza undergoes with a focus on white culture's attack on her own indigenous Mexican culture, as well as the sexism that goes along with this, she asserts that the "answer to the problem
between the white race and the colored, between males and females, lies in healing
the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our
languages, our thoughts. A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking” on the part of
the individual and within the collective unconscious is needed (767).

Moving to the consideration that collective change first requires individual
change and/or individual awareness of how power structures operate, Anzaldúa’s
consideration of la mestiza --one who is “torn between ways” because she (or he) is
“a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to
another” (766), serves to elucidate my notion of the “imaginary girlfriend.” First,
Luce Irigaray’s call for women’s uncovering of their culturally suppressed female
Other--or what Janice Raymond refers to as “original woman,” the woman “who
searches for and claims her relational origins with her vital Self” (6)—is not
dissimilar from Audre Lorde’s call for women’s reconnection to the “erotic,” to
“those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and
strongest and richest within each of us” (56). As Lorde reminds us, however, for
women, “the contradictions of self, woman as oppressor” (130)--complicates this
process, a process that is further complicated by women’s various condition(ing)s,
and/or position(s) of oppression and privilege. Drawing on Anzaldúa’s
considerations, then, while all women are products “of the transfer of the cultural
and spiritual values” of the patriarchy, when taking into consideration issues of
race, class, sexual preference and so forth, not all women are “torn between” the
same ways.
The complexities involved here are inextricably linked to my notion of the "imaginary girlfriend." As I will show, despite their condition(ing)s, each of the protagonists (consciously or not) desires a (re)connection to her suppressed or repressed self and to other women. On one level, then, and in my reading, "the imaginary girlfriend" is for each of the protagonists that part of her vital self which is suppressed or repressed, and with which each (consciously or not) desires a reconnection. At the same time, the imaginary girlfriend is also for each of the protagonists each of the women to and from whom she turns.

To clarify, my use of the term "the imaginary girlfriend," in all of its singularity, is meant to be ambiguous, contradictory, and connotative. Each of Atwood's protagonists is "torn between ways." All of the protagonists (consciously or not) are on various levels resistant to and in various ways privileged, oppressed, and influenced by hegemonic culture. How each negotiates these contradictions, then, is further dependent on the ways in which each is privileged and oppressed in and by dominant culture. Significantly, however, the tension these contradictions create for each of the protagonists is tapped in relation to other(ed) women—to other(ed) women who are also "torn between ways." For some of the protagonists, a recognition and negotiation of "the imaginary girlfriend" points to "other" and/or new possibilities for themselves and thus for (their) relationships with other women. In other ways or on other levels, particularly for the narrator of Cat's Eye, a recognition or negotiation of "the imaginary girlfriend" points to the "same" and/or the limited possibilities for themselves and thus for (their) relationships with other women. In other words, the imaginary girlfriend ends up being a mirror image or a
projection of her own and/or others' internalization of hegemonic prescriptions. The differences here depend on a multitude of factors.

In an attempt to summarize my strategy for analysis, I provide a brief outline for the chapters that follow. In my chapter on *The Handmaid's Tale*, I examine first the obstacles to alliances between and among women by exploring the dilemmas and paradoxes or intersection between existing social hegemonies and what became a numerically dominant white and middle-class second wave feminist movement. The cautionary tale offers a macrocosmic view of the very real potential for a worst-case scenario for women and women’s relationships in North American culture. While the sociopolitical system of Gilead—formed after a group of right-wing fundamentalists launch a successful coup in the U.S.—is dependent on white women and on white women “working together” for its success, (white) women’s subjectivities and alliances are violently repressed and all Others are either marginalized, exiled and/or (eventually) executed.

Moving a Foucaultian framework of power relations into a feminist positioning, I attempt to show that while it is the power of a white masculinist socioeconomic system at the root of women’s oppression and (many) women’s complicity in this oppression, an exploration of the ethos out of which various hegemonies sprang is crucial if we are not to fall into the essentialist trap of simply blaming men, or, by extension, white heterosexual women of the dominant class(es). Nonetheless, an elucidation of the reasons for which second wave American feminism became numerically dominated by white (heterosexual) feminists of the middle class will also serve to demonstrate how the novel cautions
against both a hegemonic and feminist politics of gender that does not account for race, class, ethnicity, age, religion and sexual preference.

The novel's satirical "privileging" of the figure of the white handmaid, formerly a married heterosexual woman of the middle class, and product, participant and inheritor of existing hegemonies and exclusive white middle class feminist politics, works further to elucidate its implicit warnings. While the narrator gains a nascent awareness of the need for women's solidarity, her (unwitting) complicity with and resistance to Gileadean or existing structures of power complicate this awareness. As the novel makes clear, however, all alliances between and among women in Gilead are violently repressed. Indeed, as the novel ironically demonstrates, the Gileadean regime, while it breeds paranoia and distrust between and among women (not yet exiled or killed), it also ensures that any hope for women's solidarity on the part of the characters remains suppressed in their imaginations.

In Cat's Eye, I move from an analysis of power in public politics to an analysis of the seemingly innocuous white and middle-class community of pre-adolescent girls. The story revolves around the narrator, Elaine Risley. A white woman artist in her 50's, Elaine reveals that she is traumatized in childhood by the cruelty of her "girlfriends" and by one of their mothers. Less self-consciously, she reveals that her past not only continues to haunt her in adulthood but also affects profoundly her adult relationships with women and men. Indeed, although she begins to come to terms with her past and her (lost) relationships to her mother and childhood friend, Cordelia, the novel makes explicit that the problematics of her
relationships are grounded in the same-sex, same-class and same-race socialization to which she is subjected in childhood and to which she inevitably still adheres.

Drawing on feminist critiques of the hegemonic assumptions inherent in Freudian and Lacanian schemas for female (non)identity formation, then, my analysis considers how young girls of the ruling order are socialized to perpetuate the status quo or white bourgeois femininity and heterosexuality. A reading of the narrator’s few “friendships” and relationships with the women of her past will demonstrate how each mirrors or reinscribes biased hegemonic and psychoanalytic prescriptions for (white) women and (white) women’s relationships. Prior to her move south, Elaine has notions of an imaginary girlfriend. Yet, these notions are gathered from elementary school readers that depict a traditional “world” of white girls (and boys) from the middle class, the very same world she enters and in which she makes girlfriends for the first time.

While the narrator recognizes on many levels the gender biases of her condition(ing), and while she attempts to some extent to (re)connect with her self and with the women of her past, her condition(ing) also ensures that she does not imagine “friendships” or imaginary girlfriends “other” than those she has known or knew in her childhood. Optimistically, however, while the narrator’s treasured childhood possession of the cat’s eye marble allows her to form a nascent awareness of that which “isn’t known but exists anyway,” Cat’s Eye itself is an imaginary symbol that acknowledges, and/or allows the reader(s) to access further, that which the narrator cannot or does not.
The Robber Bride takes a different turn. In this novel, the impetus for the main characters' process of reconnection with their suppressed selves and with other women is Zenia, an Other woman. In this novel, Zenia as the subversive imaginary girlfriend not only awakens in each of the protagonists her own suppressed other, but is the impetus for their move towards individuation, to a process of awareness and integration of their own and other(s') realities. My reading of the novel necessarily begins with a focus on (white) masculinist and feminist conceptions of the Other Woman. The narrative revolves around three adult white women, who, although considered white, are not of the same class, religious and/or ethnic background. Each of their relationships with their male partners are threatened or destroyed by the beautiful and seductive Zenia. As the sexual Other Woman of North American culture, Zenia is exoticized rather than marginalized because she represents to the men the culturally constructed and sanctioned (white) femme fatale, the seductive and attractive cultural symbol for (white) male heterosexual desire. However, through the multiple stories that track her various racial and/or ethnic backgrounds, juxtaposed with her position of culturally sanctioned femme fatale, Zenia comes to represent for the three women what Elizabeth Berg calls the "third" woman: she who "is recognized and affirmed as an affirmative power. . . . And it is no longer man who affirms her" (13).

To further clarify my argument, I rely on feminist extensions of the Jungian individuation process, the process by which the divided or conscious and repressed self is integrated by an awareness of the multiple or duplicitous nature of our own and other(s') psyches, and of the contradictions and ambiguities of the
established sociopolitical and cultural order that attempts to thwart this process. That is, while each of the protagonists is psychically split between her desire to rebel and her fear of rebellion, their ironically enforced processes of individuation because of an Other woman is for each the impetus for personal change and growth and thus for friendship and alliance.

For my analysis of *Alias Grace*, Atwood's most recent novel, I adopt a feminist dialogic approach. Drawing on the extant historical accounts of the 1843 double-murder of the wealthy Thomas Kinnear and his housekeeper/mistress Nancy Montgomery, Atwood reveals that the text beneath the sensational cover story of a brutal double-murder is a pessimistic and optimistic story about women and women's relationships. Grace Marks, the servant of the Kinnear household, is convicted of the murders along with her fellow servant, James McDermott. While McDermott was hanged for the crimes, and while he maintained Grace's complicity until his death, public opinion concerning her involvement was divided. Instead of receiving the death penalty, then, she was incarcerated in the Kingston Penitentiary as well as the Lunatic Asylum in Toronto until she was granted a pardon in 1872.

I begin my analysis of the novel by demonstrating that implicit in Atwood's depiction of Grace Marks within the classist, racist, and male-supremacist culture of late nineteenth-century Toronto society is the idea that, despite Grace's innocence or guilt, she is powerless over the public's desire to construct an identity for her. According to public opinion, she was either an innocent and naive waif or a ruthless and evil seductress who goes as far as murder when another woman gets in the way of what she wants. At the same time, Nancy Montgomery remains in the
public eye the wanton mistress of Kinnear, who desired (white) privileges unbefitting of her class and lowly status. For much of the novel, Grace is not exempt from this kind of binary thinking. She chooses to censure rather than to reward both Nancy Montgomery and Mary Whitney--her best friend who meets her untimely death after a botched abortion--for their desire, as confused and contradictory as it is, to subvert the status quo. After several years in the Kingston Penitentiary or metaphorical prison of her constructed identity, however, Grace begins to expose for herself the cover story of life and of her relations with women by creating her own story or text through her creation of a quilt. Indeed, for Grace Marks, her only resource for survival is her imagination. Using her imagination, then, she weaves a story about Mary Whitney, the girlfriend she once had, and about Nancy Montgomery, the girlfriend she thought she did not have.

The novel’s predominant motif of the quilt or quilting offers additional layers for interpretation. A feminist extension of M.M. Bakhtin’s theory of heteroglossia will serve to demonstrate that Alias Grace functions as a text(ile) and in doing so not only exposes the historically-silenced multivocal nature and power of women’s literary and domestic art, but also disrupts the culturally mandated and culturally assumed notion that women’s solidarity is an impossibility or unimaginable. Indeed, a reading of Alias Grace as one block in a multitude of women’s text(ile)s points to an imaginary space that exposes the biases of hegemonic structures, and, in turn, demands that the multiplicity of women’s voices, text(ile)s, and relationships be known and heard.
The oppression of second victim position involves the responsibility of anger, (dis)ability, my sense of white sexuality. It is important to define women's unity, women have been referring to "cultural, moral and political considerations in feminism ended in the 1920s." She also includes Sara Evans's claim that in its trajectory from civil rights to women's liberation, the second wave recapitulated the history of first wave feminism in the sense that a struggle for racial equality was the midwife to both feminisms. Although Evans's claim is accurate, my focus here is on how numerically dominant second-wave feminist politics tend(ed) to mirror hegemonic structures.

I borrow the term "hegemonies" from Antonio Gramsci to refer to dominant ideology and cultural practices, and to prevailing dominant white, bourgeois and heterosexual rule and practice in North American culture. As David Forgac explains further, while the term might be understood as referring to "cultural, moral and ideological leadership over allied and subaltern groups," Gramsci also linked it throughout his work to "the chain of associations and oppositions to 'civil society' as against 'political society,' to consent as against coercion, to 'direction' as against domination" (423).

This is not to suggest that positive relationships between and among women do not exist; as noted, women have been friends for millennia. However, it is to explore how systemic power structures define and thus affect many women's relationships, as well as how they ensure that women do not unite as a political force. It might be argued further that positive relationships between and among women within and across hegemonic lines would not necessarily result in politically effective alliances and thus would not necessarily change the system. While I think this argument is valid and important, I would also argue that because hegemonic structures have for ages ensured and continue to ensure the suppression of women's alliances or women's solidarity, it is crucial that we continue to strive for what has always been denied us: the chance at changing the system, together.

This is not to suggest that heterosexuality is pathological. Rather, I suggest that Atwood does not privilege heterosexuality so much as she demonstrates how it is the cultural norm, and thus why and how some of the protagonists, particularly those who are focused on their male partners and their sense of inadequacy in their relationships, are unable to make the connection between identity and sexuality.

This is not to negate the fact that (lesbian) women of color are oppressed in many more ways than white (lesbian) women are. Considerations of class, ethnicity, religious background, physical (dis)ability, age and so forth produce many more combinations. Rather, I am simply trying to set up my argument that all women are oppressed, but in various ways and on various levels.

In *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, Atwood postulates a number of victim positions which are readily linked to the idea that all women need to take creative (or imaginative) responsibility for oppressive structures, and for their complicity in their oppression and/or in their oppression of others. The first position involves a denial of victimization that entails "suppressing anger, and pretending that certain visible facts do not exist... for fear of losing... privileges"; the second victim position involves explaining victimization "as an act of Fate, the Will of God, the
dictates of Biology (in the case of women, for instance)... or any other large general powerful idea" which "displaces the cause from the real source of oppression to something else"; the third, potentially dynamic, entails an acknowledgment of the fact of victimization and a "refusal to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable." Atwood posits here that one's anger in identifying for the first time "the real cause of oppression" either prompts one to "become locked in [her] anger" leaving no energy to initiate change, or it catapults one into position four, into the position of "creative non-victim." Here, Atwood observes, one is "able to accept [her] own experience for what it is, rather than having to distort it to make it correspond with others' versions of it (particularly those of your oppressors)." Here, "creative activity of all kinds become possible." Atwood intends this model to be purely suggestive since "experience is never this linear; you're rarely in any Position in its pure form for very long--and you may have a foot, as it were, in more than one Position at once." Atwood's model of victim positions is a useful one to keep in mind when tracking the obstacles to women's solidarity, and one by which the protagonists and the novels' messages might be better understood. See pp. 36-40 for Atwood's full delineation of this model.

8 Irigaray privileges gender over issues of race, class and sexual orientation in her theory that gender biases need first to be uprooted since all women are oppressed because of their sex. As she notes, "a long history has placed all women in the same sexual, social and cultural situation"; [w]hatever may be the inequalities between women, they all suffer, even unconsciously, the same oppression, the same exploitation of their body, the same denial of their desire" ("Women's" 86). As I will show throughout this project, however, when considering women's differences and some women's privilege in terms of class, race, sexual orientation and so forth, it is clear that women are not in "the same sexual, social and cultural situation," and thus are exploited and oppressed in various ways.
Margaret Atwood's cautionary depiction of a fascistic theocracy in *The Handmaid's Tale* makes it difficult for us to imagine a better world. The Republic of Gilead, formed after a group of right-wing Christian fundamentalists launch a successful coup in the United States, is violently repressive of forms of self-empowered female subjectivity, self-governed sexuality and any kind of alliance between and among women. While the male characters of the novel are also portrayed as victims of the new order, it is the women who are ruthlessly and most effectively controlled. Most unsettling, however, is the implication of warning in the *Historical Notes*. As the character Professor Pieixoto states: "there was little that was truly original with or indigenous to Gilead: its genius was synthesis" (289). Indeed, the novel warns that if the oppressive practices which exist in the present system were brought together, Gilead would be the result. As Atwood comments, the novel is set in the near future, in a United States which is in the hands of a power-hungry elite who have used their own brand of 'Bible-based' religion as an excuse for the suppression of the majority of the population. It's about what happens at the intersection of several trends, all of which are with us today: the rise
of right-wing fundamentalism as a political force, the decline in the Caucasian birth rate in North America and northern Europe, and the rise in infertility and birth-defects, due, some say, to increased chemical-pollutant and radiation levels, as well as to sexually-transmitted diseases. . . . [T]here is nothing in it that we as a species have not done, aren’t doing now, or don’t have the technological capability to do.¹

With the re-implementation of a ‘Bible-based’ religion in Gilead, traditional (white) notions of reproduction, family, and female sexuality become the power bases of a renewed theocratic and patriarchal order. In order to maintain the new order, a hierarchy of women is established which effectively eliminates the threat of women’s alliances and thus the threat of a rebellion. If not exiled from Gilead altogether, women serve the system in various roles such as handmaid, Wife, Aunt, worker or whore. Indeed, as Professor Pieixoto further states, “the best and most cost-effective way to control women for reproductive and other purposes [is] through women themselves” (290).

In order to use The Handmaid’s Tale as a lens through which positive and politically effective alliances between and among women might be imagined, it is necessary to understand the ways in which Atwood interrogates or, to use her word, “judges” existing structures of power within contemporary North American society. Through her imagined world of Gilead, Atwood avoids promoting what Teresa de Lauretis warns is the ineffective “feminist conceit” of “the end of politics” (12), and resists aligning herself directly with the second-wave feminist movement. Rather, she tracks through the novel (among many things) the paradoxes and dilemmas, or the contradictions and impasses, that have directed the course of contemporary feminism(s) and thus the course of women’s relationships.
An explication of second wave feminism, in reaction to which Atwood has continued to write, will serve to demonstrate that although she defines her feminism in her public statements as “human equality and freedom of choice” (Ingersoll 142), as a writer she is concerned with delineating the obstacles that continue to obscure this vision. In agreeing with her theory that “it is by the better world we can imagine that we judge the world we have,” my analysis of the novel is optimistic. I will show that while the story is indeed bleak, the optimism lies in the contradictions of the narrator’s position in Gilead and the story she tells from that position. Treated as a site of contradiction, her story reflects, at least in part, the ambiguities, conflicts and paradoxes that emerged out of second wave feminism and which continue to obscure and thus to strengthen the feminist vision of politically effective alliances between and among women.

In an essay that addresses the paradoxes and dilemmas of the woman writer, Atwood states that “Woman and Writer are separate categories: but in any individual woman writer, they are inseparable” (Second 195). As far as Atwood is concerned, to the extent that novelists “are lenses, condensers of their society,” a woman writer in her work “may include the [Women’s] Movement, since it is so palpably among the things that exist”: however, “[t]he picture that she gives of it is altogether another thing, and will depend, at least partly, on the course of the Movement itself” (Second 204).

The picture Atwood gives of the contemporary feminist movement in *The Handmaid’s Tale* illustrates first that while biblical precedents for reproduction and family have been instrumental in supporting white patriarchal rule in Western
culture, and while they in turn become the power base of the Gileadean regime, issues of family and reproduction, or women's rights concerning sexuality and traditional roles, are the very issues that took precedence at the beginning of the second wave of American feminism. At the start of the political movement, the struggle for women's rights produced slogans such as "Sisterhood is Powerful" and "The Personal is Political." These adages were and are important. With the advent of these catch-phrases to which many women could and wanted to relate, second-wave feminists, like women of the first wave, encapsulated the truth of women's existence: women were segregated from the realm of public politics and divided from one another, a segregation that effectively denied them power to implement change in the personal, sociopolitical and economic realms.

Significantly, however, while initial stirrings of a contemporary feminist reawakening appeared after World War II when many women of the white middle class began to question their roles as housewives and mothers, it was out of the radical protest movements of the 1960's--particularly the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement and the new Left--that the fight for women's rights evolved. Despite many white women's involvement in the struggle against sexism, racism, classism and cultural homophobia, second wave feminism would nonetheless become characterized as predominantly white, middle class, and heterosexual. The tensions that inevitably emerged resulted in major schisms within the movement, ironically rendering powerless the ideology of "Sisterhood" as powerful. That is, on top of existing political structures that work to oppress women, (dominant) feminist politics were beginning to operate in much the same way.
When it became clear that the rhetoric of liberation within the civil rights movement and within the New Left was the rhetoric of men, which continued to exclude women, the women involved began forming independent groups. Yet the complex intersection of class, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation within a politics of gender did not bring women together. Women of color were not only aware of the inextricable link between (hetero)sexism, capitalism and racism, and how this intersection affected and affects them in different ways than it does white women, but they were underrepresented by and in comparison to white women in the women's liberation sector, causing them to draw together to form their own organizations. White women involved in the new Left, moreover, split over ideological differences: while the "politicos" or socialist feminists blamed capitalism for women's oppression, the radical feminists, although they did not eschew socialism altogether, perceived women's oppression as rooted in psychological rather than economic subjugation. The issue of sexual orientation also became a matter of dispute. Groups such as the Radicalesbians split from their heterosexual counterparts when it became clear that their sexual orientation not only went unaddressed, but also remained a locus of discrimination.

In an attempt to address the schisms that emerged within the movement, women activists from various backgrounds and in various ways have undertaken the crucial struggle to articulate "the various, interwoven strands of a tension, a condition of contradiction, that for the time being, at least, will not be reconciled" (de Lauretis 15). Atwood is no exception. The schisms and divisions that exist between and among women continue to be profoundly problematic nonetheless.
Although it would seem obvious that there is little use and much danger in negatively criticizing feminist notions that are inherently though unconsciously essentialist, racist, classist, hetero- or homosexist (to name a few)—indeed, that such notions should be treated as a critical site of knowledge for potential change rather than a site of interrogation—there is frequently a fine line between constructive and destructive criticism.

Speaking from my own position of privilege and contradiction as a white woman of the middle class, and as a graduate student relatively new to feminist theory, I first hesitated to assert that there is frequently a fine line between constructive and destructive criticism. To be sure, the effort on the part of women, and I now include myself, from various backgrounds and in different contexts (in the family home, within academia, within the community and so on) to address and to reconcile a feminism or feminisms that account for differences between and among women demonstrates a widespread resistance to abandoning the hope for politically effective alliances between and among women. However, not new to the problematics internal to my own relationships with women, and thus not new to the ambivalence that comes with this, I have found and continue to find that, for the most part and despite the setting or situation, in discussions with (usually white) women about women's differences—whether with female relatives, with women friends or acquaintances, in the formal setting of the academic classroom, or within a women's reading group whose focus is on women's studies—there is indeed a fine line between constructive and destructive criticism. While I read or continue to try to read the resulting tension as positive and dynamic, and while I have witnessed in
some women's relationships and experienced in some of my own a shift towards stronger and empowering bonds as a result of this tension, I have also witnessed and experienced relationships that have not withstood the contradictions and conflicts and which, at least now or still, are or seem irreconcilable.

Juliet Mitchell, among many others, suggests that women "have to assess the weakness of women as a political force in order not to succumb to it" (qtd. in Chesler 274). To use Adrienne Rich's term, however, the "solipsism" or "tunnel-vision" on the part of (privileged) women and men—that which makes it difficult for us to perceive the ways in which we internalize power politics and are thus complicit in our own and/or other(s') oppression—is a direct result of the myriad contradictions and various socialization processes within a culture that has been long riven by various biases, but that is grounded in gynephobia.8

In order to explicate how dominant second-wave feminist politics are mirrored in the hegemonic structures of The Handmaid's Tale, it is necessary to look at some of the ways in which these structures have been and continue to be grounded in Western culture. Barbara Ehrenreich makes the useful observation that the novel warns "about a repressive tendency in feminism itself" (34). She calls the novel "an intra-feminist polemic" which "reminds us that, century after century, women have been complicit in their own undoing" (35). Like Stephanie Barbe Hammer, Ehrenreich also contends that the novel critiques and contests women's (and men's) passivity and/or indifference to political issues by characterizing the narrator as a typical "yuppie" of the 1980's. While I agree with Ehrenreich and Hammer insofar as the novel addresses the dangers involved in (white) women's
indifference towards and thus complicity in structures of power, I would also argue that missing in their studies is an interrogation of why this is possible at all, and why this is possible particularly on the part of the narrator who is white, married and of the middle class.

Although it is clearly the power of a patriarchy that directs women to oppress one another, patriarchal agents, institutions, and operations change over time and in different regimes. Thus, I do not undertake an analysis of the origins of patriarchy, but rather attempt to delineate how (white) masculinist power politics in Western culture are in part grounded and able to perpetuate themselves. An analysis of women’s oppression within the novel does not point solely to men as oppressors, but rather to what Hammer calls in her use of Foucaultian terminology “the technology of power” which, in Gilead, “is at once invisible and pervasive” (45). Useful as a starting point for an analysis of power, Hammer draws on Foucault’s theoretical considerations in *Power and Discipline* to demonstrate that the novel warns “of the imperceptible technology of power, of the subtle domination of women by men, and of our unconscious imprisoning of each other and ourselves by ourselves” (47). Nonetheless, while she notes that the “instruments which serve to make docile [men and women] . . . seem to be aimed at [women], probably because they represent the most subversive threat” (46), she addresses neither the force relations that operate to maintain the oppression of women (by men or women), nor the reasons for which women represent the most subversive threat.
Within what Foucault refers to as the “chain” or systems of power are “disjunctions” and “contradictions” that point not to the invisibility or imperceptibility of power and its relations, but to a potential site from which change might be initiated and oppressive structures abolished. As Foucault writes, the “real strength of the women’s liberation movement is not that of [women] having laid claim to the specificity of their sexuality and the rights pertaining to it, but that they have actually departed from the discourse conducted within the apparatuses of sexuality . . . formulating the demand for forms of culture, discourse, language, and so on, which are no longer part of that rigid assignation and pinning-down to their sex which they had initially in some sense been obliged to accept in order to make themselves heard” (Power 219-20). As Foucault states further, then, and as Atwood’s novels demonstrate, it is from sites of disjunction or contradiction that we need “to imagine and to bring into being new schemas of politicisation” (Power 190).

Drawing on Foucault, implicit in the overt (hetero)sexism of Gileadean rule is a disturbing program of eugenics that does not preclude classism and all other hegemonic biases. As Foucault cautions, however, it is necessary to understand that “there is no ‘given point’ at which ‘power’ is located or from which it emanates” (Power 198). Rather, power

must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions
which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of law, in the various social hegemonies. *(History 92-93)*

Throughout *The History of Sexuality*, and for my purposes here, Foucault tracks the nineteenth-century discourse on the construction of sexuality to demonstrate how it is the one "endowed with the greatest instrumentality" (103): it not only worked to pave the way for a state-controlled sexuality, but simultaneously justified the "programs of eugenics" or "racisms of the state, which at the time were on the horizon" (118, 54). Since "power" must "act" and thus "acts by laying down the rule" (83), it comes as no surprise that up until the end of the eighteenth century the construct of sexuality was rooted in "canonical law, the Christian pastoral, and civil law" (37). In turn, white power politics pertaining to sexuality and thus to ensuing gender roles were reinscribed or grounded in Western or Freudian psychoanalysis (150), and have, throughout the history of Western civilization, been "maintained through language, or rather through the act of discourse that creates, from the very fact that it is articulated, a rule of law" (83).

Moving this framework into a feminist positioning, the inextricable link between the various hegemonies of Gilead is made explicit through the State’s warning that the community at large is in danger of extinction due to a decline in Caucasian birthrates. As Professor Pieixoto further reveals, however, "[t]he reasons for this decline are not altogether clear"; but "whatever the causes, the effects were noticeable" (286). Although some of the reasons cited for this decline may in part be true--Pieixoto cites environmental disasters and sexually-transmitted
diseases as potential links to sterility--each is taken out of a larger context which effectively elides a revaluation or interrogation of prevailing power structures. Obscuring the State’s “programs of eugenics,” and thus the sexism and class issues therein, issues of sexuality and reproduction become paramount in the “remedying” of this ostensible threat to the Caucasian population. Gender roles are once again defined overtly according to biblical ideology, relegating (white) women even more prescriptively to the domestic sphere in the role of Handmaid, Wife, or Martha, servants in the homes of the elite. In turn, and as I discuss below, “defective individuals”--those who do not fit into the system’s political schema--are either further marginalized or altogether eliminated.

How power gets played out in interpersonal relationships proves to be just as complex. As Foucault explains, “Between every point of a social body, between a man and a woman” and, I would add here, between women, “there exist relations of power which are not purely and simply a projection of the sovereign’s great power over the individual; they are rather the concrete, changing soil in which the sovereign’s power is grounded, the conditions which make it possible for it to function” (Power 187). In Gilead, Caucasian men hold all positions of power. Yet they too are embroiled in the “state apparatus” or complex political organization of the Gileadean regime. Like the women, the men who are useful to the system are socially stratified by functionary roles that need filling and are caught up in what Hammer calls “a network of surveillance and counter-surveillance”: throughout the novel, there is a constant emphasis on “the omnipresence of the scrutinizing gaze: the word “eye” is everywhere; the secret police are called “Eyes,” and the farewell
greeting “under his eye” refers to the divine gaze but also testifies to the fact that everyone is indeed under the eye of someone else” (45). Of the men who are used to fill the functionary role of “Guardian,” then, the narrator notes that they are not “real soldiers” but “either stupid or older or disabled or very young” (21). Even the Commander’s reaction of alarm to what he thinks is Offred’s arrest for “Violation of state secrets” indicates that he too might be “a security risk” (276).

Although ostensibly in a position of great power, the Commander also gives “evidence of being truly ignorant of the real conditions under which the handmaids must live” (149). Although on one level this should be read as evidence of the Commander’s unconscious or conscious misogyny and his wielding of white male power and privilege, his ignorance concerning the present system and his need and desire for companionship, impossible in the present system, also demonstrate what the narrator herself perceives as “a small crack in the wall, before now impenetrable” (130). Indeed, as Amin Malak writes, “the Commander appears more pathetic than sinister, baffled than manipulative, almost, at times, a Fool” (12).

This is not to suggest that ignorance acts as a caveat for the white men (or the white women) of the novel. Certainly, the novel warns against the dangers in not recognizing and attempting to actively change oppressive systems in which one participates, from which one benefits, and thus which one perpetuates. Nonetheless, because the characters are formed and informed by cultural practices from which they benefit, the difficulty lies in first making this recognition, and then in interrogating assumptions that have, to use Adrienne Rich’s words, “glided so silently into the foundations of our thought” (“Compulsory” 34). As Foucault
demonstrates, while domination of a particular group over another group—in the case of The Handmaid's Tale, the white race over the colored, males over females, and finally white women over white women—is "certainly the effect of a number of pre-meditated tactics operating within the grand strategies that ensure this domination," there is little use in saying that on "the level of its ideology and project," the dominant group has "invented and forcibly imposed this strategy" (Power 203). Indeed, as Offred herself says of the situation in Gilead, "Maybe none of this is about control. Maybe it isn't about who can own whom, who can do what to whom and get away with it. . . . Maybe it's about who can do what to whom and be forgiven for it. Never tell me it amounts to the same thing" (126-27).

The political implications of the narrator's statement here are made more explicit through an analysis of what appears to be an established hierarchy of women in the novel. While the handmaids are subject to the monthly "Ceremony" in which they are "two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (128), the Wives, although subject to the humiliation of participating in the Ceremony, at least have what appears to be the privilege of Wives' luncheons, the luxury of illness and of black-market items such as liquor and cigarettes, and an outdoor garden of their own. The Marthas, moreover, seem to be better off insofar as they are in charge of household duties and not subjected to degrading sexual practices. Indeed, the Commander seems to be accurate in his statement that "Better never means better for everyone. . . . It always means worse, for some" (198). Yet, in the long run, the (new) system of Gilead is not better for any group of women.
Significantly, it is the novel's visible Commander of the regime's Caucasian elite who makes the claim that "Better never means better for everyone. . . It always means worse, for some." While on one level his words echo the sexism and power that is relegated to the Caucasian men of the elite—"better" means better for these men and worse for all women—at the level of our contemporary culture, they also speak to a numerically white-dominated feminist movement which, by extension, mirrors and reinforces the State order. As a Caucasian male of the elite, there is little mystery in why the Commander holds the position he does. Yet the fact that the narrator is university educated, white, middle-class, heterosexual and still in her youth suggests that while she is in no way to be envied in her position as handmaid to the elite, she is at least given a position within the new order.

Marginalized, exiled or altogether eliminated from Gilead are the elderly and children (ironic since reproduction becomes mandatory to counter the plummeting birthrate), as well as women and men from all Other backgrounds. "Better" in Gilead, then, also means better for white women of the middle or upper classes—and lower classes if still useful: Wife, Aunt, Handmaid, Econowife, Martha, in that order. All Others who are of no use to the regime are either tortured, hanged or deported to the Colonies—communities for the exiled or dispossessed—which resemble Nazi concentration camps and ensure death in two or three years. Indeed, while Offred learns from Moira that the Colonies are filled "mostly with people they want to get rid of"—old people, "incorrigibles," "discards," and "gender traitors" (232-233)—she herself reveals that the regime does not tolerate various religious sects (188-89).
Although this list would obviously include racial Others, Offred and Moira, as white women, unconsciously exclude race as a factor here. The failure on the part of the characters to mention some Others, however, as well as the marginalization or absence of all Others in Gilead, does not point to any kind of solipsism or anti-feminist stance on the author’s part; indeed, that would be to confuse the author with the characters. I would therefore argue against what Chimney Bannerjee has posited as Atwood’s “aesthetic enjoyment of a particular kind of victimization, and not with a critical examination of its determinant factors” (80). In “Alice in Disneyland: Criticism as Commodity in The Handmaid’s Tale,” Bannerjee asserts that the novel fails as a serious and persuasive dystopia because the story is a “surface that conceals no depths” (80); that is, it does not address “the question of political liberty” but “the condition of the Handmaids, or, rather, the question of politics only to the extent that they affect the condition of the Handmaids” (79). I assert that Atwood’s goal, through a concentration on the figure of the white handmaid in white patriarchal structures, is to offer an explication of the problems that emerged within the women’s movement and thus the dangers therein. Through a concentration on the figure of the white handmaid, Atwood demonstrates that while it was the dissatisfaction of white, heterosexual women that took center stage during the second wave, these women, by virtue of the color of their skin, their class, and (presumed) heterosexual orientation, also to some extent benefited from various social hegemonies.

The overarching presence of white, healthy and young heterosexual women (and men) of the middle or upper classes, juxtaposed with the multiple
oppression, marginalization or absence of all Others, clearly illustrates Atwood's dedication to capture and critique in the novel *that which exists* so that something better might be imagined. In order to demonstrate the complexity of the problems that emerged within the women's movement, problems that mirror the power dynamics of the past and present sociopolitical system, Offred's perspective—or a 1980's perspective from an apolitical white heterosexual married woman of the middle class—is the only one which could possibly expose how hegemonic ideologies of oppression and liberation have been and, considering Atwood's inclusion of the *Historical Notes*, continue to be (historically) grounded on exclusion or opposition.

Addressing the feminist paradox of "equality in sameness," Judith Butler writes that the difficulty in "either redefining or expanding the category of women itself to become more inclusive . . . requires also the political matter of settling who gets to make the designation in the name of whom" ("Gender" 325). Atwood is not claiming for herself such a task. Just as the *Historical Notes* of the novel exemplify the sexism, classism, racism and general superficiality of an unchanged future, the novel proper exemplifies, through the narrator's own plight and her (un)awareness of other(s') plights, that which has been officially marginalized or elided all along.

To decide that the novel focuses only on the victimization of the white handmaiden is to miss first the significance of the means by which she is controlled and subordinated. Although all women (still) in Gilead are victims of dehumanizing practices and rules directed for the most part at women, and while the white handmaids have at least been given a 'position' within the (new) system, it is the
handmaids who are overtly, visibly and systematically controlled by sexual means. The message here is a complex one. The monthly “Ceremony” in which the narrator must participate is nothing short of rape; and, insofar as rape is the extreme of sexist practices against all women, the officially-sanctioned rape of the handmaid points on one level to women’s shared sexist oppression, despite the privileges some women may have.

At the same time, the systematic rape of the white handmaids also serves as an ironic cautioning against the (early) white feminist assumption that the experience of women’s oppression is the same for all women—that women’s liberation depends on subverting gender biases that deny women the right to decide for themselves what sexuality, reproduction and motherhood might mean. Adrienne Rich writes that “[w]hite women are constantly offered choices or the appearance of choices. But also real choices that are undeniable. We don’t always perceive the difference between the two” (qtd. in Lorde 103). Clearly, the fact that the handmaid is not offered any real choices, that her consent is not asked for under any circumstances, and certainly not concerning the “Ceremony,” serves as an ironic reminder of how, for instance, “rape, white on black, was not a crime under slave law” and that, not unlike the Historical Notes of the novel, “many scholarly histories of slavery do not mention the word” (Sterling 24).

The paradoxes of the Other/Same dialectic in women’s oppression are further elucidated in the reversal of racism, and yet underlying cross-cultural sexism, that occurs when Offred and Ofglen find themselves objects of fascination for a group of Japanese tourists. Reversing white Western assumptions about
women’s oppression in Asia—particularly the tendency on the part of many white women to assume that Asian women are worse off in the arena of sexism, and the white male (and thus often, by extension, white women’s) exoticization of Asian women—the group’s male interpreter relates to this Japanese group which is ironically “out for some local colour” (27) that the women in Gilead “have different customs,” and “that to stare at them through a lens of a camera is, for them, an experience of violation” (28). The narrator’s assumptions concerning the oppression and/or exoticization of Asian women are exposed when she reveals that she “knows” what the group’s interpreter will ask of her and Offred before he speaks. Following her comment that she “know[s] the line,” the interpreter, at the request of one of the male tourists, turns to them and says. “He asks, are you happy”:

I can imagine it, their curiosity: *Are they happy? How can they be happy?* I can feel their bright black eyes on us, the way they lean a little forward to catch our answers, the women especially, but the men too: we are secret, forbidden, we excite them. (28)

That Atwood has her narrator readily anticipate or *imagine* what the group of Japanese tourists are thinking, as well as what the tour guide will say before he speaks, is also optimistic. By exposing through satire and irony the criss-crossing of exoticization and/or subjugation of women across cultures, in the context of Gilead, Atwood shows that despite the benefits women like Offred may reap or have reaped from their inclusion and participation in various social hegemonies, and despite the appearance of or the real choices they have been given, they are clearly not liberated or free until all women are free. Indeed, the narrator herself begins to realize in
In an attempt to delineate further how to imagine from the novel's contradictory sites more meaningful and politically effective alliances between and among women, I turn to a more in-depth analysis of the contradictions of the narrator's story. The end of Offred's story is an appropriate place to start, for complexly tied up with her nascent awareness of the necessity for female solidarity is not only her choice to form an intimate alliance with a man, but also her acceptance of certain differences between women and her continued suppression of or blindness to others.

Significantly, the appeal or apology the narrator makes to her imagined interlocutor near the end of her story is made after she forms a sexual alliance with Nick, the male chauffeur of the household in which she has been placed. In order to clarify my argument, it is necessary to provide the full passage:

I wish this story were different... I wish it showed me in a better light, if not happier, then at least more active, less hesitant... I wish it were about love, or about sudden realizations important to one's life... Maybe it is about those things in a sense; but in the meantime there is so much else getting in the way, so much whispering, so much speculation about others, so much gossip that cannot be verified, so many unsaid words, so much creeping about and secrecy... I'm sorry there is so much pain in this story. I'm sorry it's in fragments, like a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force. But there is nothing I can do to change it... So I will go on. So I will myself to go on. I am coming to a part you will not like at all, because in it I did not behave well, but I will try nonetheless to leave nothing out. After all you've been through, you deserve whatever I have left, which is not much but includes the truth... I went back to Nick. Time after time, on my own... for myself entirely... Each time I would expect him to be gone; or worse, I would expect him to say I could...
not come in . . . Or even worse, tell me he was no longer interested. His failure to do any of these things I experienced as the most incredible benevolence and luck. I told you it was bad. (251-52)

Several critics, although not pointing specifically to this passage, use Offred’s relationship with Nick as a springboard for a discussion about her passivity and/or activity in the circumstances in which she finds herself. Elaine Tuttle Hansen refers to Offred as an “odd princess” (33) who, “in the end . . . simply waits, to be destroyed or rescued, by a man” (36). Hammer contends that in Offred’s “awareness of the disastrous implications of her relationship with Nick,” she nonetheless makes a “conscious choice in favor of a romanticism which . . . becomes even more disturbing when we scrutinize her behaviour throughout her story” (42). Drawing on French feminist theories of l’écriture feminine and women’s jouissance, Coral Ann Howells writes that “[w]hat Offred emphasizes is the transforming power of sexual desire, as under Nick’s touch and gaze she feels released into the ‘marvelous text of herself’” (143-44). Similarly, Lucy Frieben asserts that “Offred’s real breakthrough to her courageous and sexual self comes . . . with Nick . . . Her joyous reaction to her desire embodies precisely the French jouissance” (285); indeed, “Atwood demonstrates through Offred that women, able to take risks and tell stories, may transcend their conditioning, establish their identity, joyfully reclaim their bodies, find their voices, and reconstruct the social order” (288).

While I would agree more with Howells and Frieben, I raise the specific question of why the narrator apologizes for her behavior at all, and in turn attempt to discern what precisely Offred means when she says “I told you it was bad.” In
my reading, the narrator's appeal or apology is made neither in the face of (internalized) cultural oppression nor subversive feminism, but rather in the face of both existing hegemonic and feminist contradiction. Offred is apologizing to her imagined interlocutor for the inability to find the right feminist stance vis-à-vis the various male (and female) agents and victims (sometimes held in the same bodies) of (white) patriarchy while reaching out through her confession to other females within the same contradictory position.

All women of Gilead, not only the narrator, are in some way caught within the complex web of the Foucaultian force relations that make a Gilead possible. I thus assert that by allying herself with Nick and acting on her heterosexual desire, and in admitting that she perceived his attentions as "benevolence and luck"—she does not say whose—she positions herself in a dynamic rather than a static space. To be sure, although Offred admits that she tells Nick too much—"I tell him things I shouldn't. I tell him about Moira, about Ofglen" (253-54)—she does not reveal to Nick the code-word "Mayday" (M'aidez or "Help me") which has been passed to her by Ofglen, another woman. Indeed, when Nick helps her to escape and reveals the code-word as a means to assure her that he is not an Eye, Offred reveals that she has never revealed this password to him: "My suspicion hovers in the air above him... Why shouldn't he know about Mayday?" (275).

The narrator's dedication to tell her story at all, in the face(s) of existing hegemonic and feminist contradiction, also reverses or subverts Gileadean power dynamics, and gives "future women a ground of identity" (Buss 83). The fact that she is speaking to an imaginary female interlocutor and that her story is recorded in
the oral tradition (taped recordings) imply modes of communication that women have for centuries relied on as a means to survive and subvert not only their oppression, but the suppression of women's creativity, and women's exile from one another. That is, women have not only formed alliances for centuries but have been recording their experience in any way possible—by way of oral stories, rituals of song, dance, drama, textiles and so on. Offred's desire to communicate with an imaginary interlocutor thus highlights her statement that "it will never do not to tell" the story (211), and "I will hear yours too if I ever get the chance, if I meet you or if you escape" (251).

Further aware that the radical feminist politics of her mother and Moira would censure her alliance with a man, Offred nonetheless "includes the truth" and wishes for a story that were different, one that "showed [her] in a better light, if not happier, then at least more active, less hesitant" (252). Hesitancy and passivity are not the same, however. While she subverts patriarchal power politics by telling her story at all, she is not only aware of how powerful these politics are, but aware of how dangerous and counter-productive white exclusionary feminist politics can be. After her shopping partner, Ofglen, commits suicide to avoid the Colonies and/or instant death, as well as to avoid implicating others in her involvement in what appears to be an underground force, Offred says: "I feel, for the first time, their true power" (300). Conversely, Offred is aware that a separatist women's culture as advocated by her mother and best friend, Moira—as she says to Moira, "Men were not just going to go away" (161)—not only offers little revolutionary hope but ultimately denies human equality and freedom of choice, and equality in difference.
In her position as both product of the feminist backlash and inheritor of a feminist movement that in many ways mirrored the system meant to be undermined and changed, then, it is Offred who makes the ironic statement of the resulting order: “Mother, where ever you may be. You wanted a women’s culture, well now there is one” (120).

Offred’s relationships with women in Gilead remain paradoxical and contradictory nonetheless. Despite the situation in which she finds herself, and despite her struggle to disengage herself from dualistic notions, she is still a white heterosexual woman of the middle class who is caught up in what Rich calls “the doublethink many women engage in and from which no woman is permanently free.” As Rich explains, “However woman-to-woman relationships, female support networks, a female and feminist value system are relied on and cherished. indoctrination in male credibility and status can still create synapses in thought. denials of feeling” (“Compulsory” 48). In Offred’s case, while her circumstances in Gilead provoke her to recognize and to embrace certain differences between and among women, the myriad contradictions of her position also work to ensure that she suppresses or remains blind to others.

A reading of Offred’s desire to bridge the opposition between herself and her mother points to what Rich calls women’s desire for “survival relationships” with other women, beginning with our relationships with our mothers and/or daughters (“Compulsory” 56). However, while her circumstances in Gilead serve as the impetus from which she begins to identify with her mother--an identification of which that optimistically reverses patriarchal politics which have denied and
continue to negate the potentially powerful bond between mothers and daughters--
Atwood's depiction of the relationship between Offred and her mother simultaneously exposes and interrogates the early feminist tendency of focusing on the daughter to the extent of excluding the mother, as well as the early assumption (sometimes still assumed) that the experience of the mother-daughter relationship is the same for all women.

For many contemporary feminist thinkers, new forms of self-empowered female subjectivity, self-governed sexuality and alliances might be imagined by focusing on the mother instead of the daughter. As Julia Kristeva asks, "If it is not possible to say of a woman what she is (without running the risk of abolishing her difference) would it perhaps be different concerning the mother?" (161). Marianne Hirsch writes that the "multiplicity of 'woman'" is nowhere more obvious than for the figure of the mother, who is always both mother and daughter" (12), and adds that the critical focus on the mother-daughter relationship thus far has generally been "on daughters rather than mothers, on female development as the daughter's apprenticeship to the mother," which "serve[s] as a screen, obscuring maternal subjectivities" (19).

In an attempt to delineate the "maternal," Hirsch deliberately relies on the adjectival term as "it signals . . . there is no transparent meaning of the concept" (13). She clarifies further:

In calling for a more focused study of maternal subjectivity, I am not suggesting that the maternal story is the female story or that it offers a privileged access to femininity. But I am arguing that it is one, in itself multiple, story among others, and that excluding it causes particular blindesses. The
implications of such a conceptualization of a maternal subject which is more than an object in relation to the child’s process of subject-formation are enormous. Rather than daughters having to “speak for” mothers, mothers would be able to speak for themselves, perhaps “with two voices.” Only thus can mothers and daughters speak to one another. Only thus could the plots of mothers and daughters become speakable.

(197)

The idea of conceptualizing a maternal subject that might speak new stories or plots “with two voices” is important for the conceptualisation of new forms of politicisation. But there remains the question of what motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship signify to various women of various backgrounds, and thus how motherhood or the mother-daughter relationship is taken up or signified within the sociopolitical order.  

Addressing the paradoxes and problematics involved in theorizing the relationship between mothers and daughters in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood first puts a spin on the second wave notion that “[d]uring the height of the women’s movement . . . [w]e knew . . . we were fighting to open doors that had been closed to our mothers” (Eichenbaum and Orbach 32). In the novel of course it is the narrator’s mother who struggles to “open doors” for her daughter. A radical white feminist of the second wave, Offred’s mother is continually disappointed by her daughter’s indifference towards the women’s liberation movement:

You young people don’t appreciate anything, she’d say. You don’t know what we had to go through, just to get you where you are. Look at him, slicing up the carrots. Don’t you know how many women’s lives, how many women’s bodies, the tanks had to roll over just to get that far? . . . Now, Mother, I would say. Let’s not get into an argument about nothing . . . Nothing, she’d say bitterly. You call it nothing. You don’t understand, do you. You don’t understand at all what I’m talking about. (115)
While the narrator’s mother accurately attributes her daughter’s indifference to the backlash of the 1980s—"As for you, she’d say. You’re just a backlash. Flash in the pan"—she also states that "History will absolve [her]" (115). Yet it does not. As Susan Fauldi notes, “the reactive nature of a backlash”—the (white) patriarchy’s systematic attempt on all cultural and sociopolitical levels to make (white) women once again identify solely with the patriarchy—"can exist only in response to another force" (465). While Offred’s story (and indeed the novel itself) demonstrates a feminist “force” by virtue of its existence, the novel’s concluding *Historical Notes* show that, at least up until the end of the twenty-second century, history absolves neither Offred nor her mother. Although the narrator’s story is “on record,” and indeed has been placed there by a woman, as the subsequent sociopolitical system of Nunavit shows, the future is still predisposed to a repeat of a Gileadean regime that is not only (hetero)sexist, but which remains overtly classist and racist.

Professor Maryann Crescent Moon, the woman who introduces the male keynote speaker at the “International Historical Association Convention” held in Nunavit in the year 2195, is a working academic in the University of Nunavit’s Department of Caucasian Anthropology. Ironically, a First Nations female professor whose area of specialization is anthropology, she is limited within or has limited herself to a “department” or area in which the focus is on Caucasian studies. Her character and position in relation to white male culture both mirrors and cautions against a future repeat of the relentless white (man’s) attempt (sometimes
successful) to assimilate First Nation groups or individuals in colonial North America.\textsuperscript{16} Since sexism is not separate from this issue, it is also notable that Crescent Moon is not only peripheral to the main issues that are addressed at the Symposium, but is responsible for introducing the male “keynote” speaker, as well as to remind the (predominantly male?) audience of the need for “rain gear and insect repellent” for the fishing expedition planned for the next day.

The implicit warnings of the \textit{Historical Notes} do not negate the significance of Offred’s desire to bridge the opposition between herself and her mother, a desire that yields some success. By the time she has the memory conversations with her mother, which suggest a renewal or strengthening of their bond because of the horrors of Gilead, she too is a mother, a mother unable to communicate with her own daughter. Nor is it to negate the importance of the agency Offred’s mother is given in the novel. Arguably, the words of Offred’s mother are spoken “for her” and not “by her” throughout the narrative, thus screening what Hirsch calls a “maternal subjectivity,” which in turn poses the danger of negating and denying the diversity of women’s experience. Yet I would argue that in Offred’s appropriation of her mother’s voice, she is not speaking “for her,” but rather is allowing her mother to speak for herself under circumstances in which all women’s voices are silenced. At the same time, in giving her mother a voice, Offred begins to perceive that “No mother is ever, completely, a child’s idea of what a mother should be, and I suppose it works the other way around as well. But despite everything, we didn’t do badly by one another. . . . I wish she were here. so I could tell her I finally know this” (170).
For "the record," however, while the narrator's renewed or strengthened bond with her mother is certainly optimistic, the dynamics of their relationship and, by extension, of their relationships with other women mirror some of the politics that took precedence at the start of the second wave women's movement, thus demonstrating how limited and ultimately limiting they were even for the women who numerically dominate(d) the movement. The novel's statement on the ironic "decampment" of white women activists, and thus on the estranged relationship between (white) mothers and daughters, is captured first in Offred's statement that she once disapproved of the radical feminist politics espoused by her mother and her mother's friends because she wanted from her mother "a life more ceremonious, less subject to makeshift and decampment" (170). In the "women's culture" of Gilead, however, Offred's life is nothing but ceremonious. While the monthly sex ritual or rape to which Offred is subjected is referred to as the "Ceremony," the other bizarre "ceremonies" that the (white) women must attend reinforce the state power or "apparatus" by giving them a displaced sense of belonging, as well as a displaced sense of women's solidarity. Indeed, at Participutions, the handmaids are given the opportunity to kill (presumably white) subversive men while the rest of the women watch. At Salvagings, the audience of women watch (presumably white) subversive men and women hanged.

The white radical women of the novel do not, moreover, agree on the same feminist agenda. While one of the rights fought for at the start of the second wave was the right for legal abortion, Offred's mother chooses to have a child in her late thirties. Yet, she is not only censured for this choice by her women friends but
reacts in a dangerously predictable way. When her “oldest buddy” Tricia Foreman accuses her of being in the pronatalist camp, Offred’s mother resorts to calling her a “bitch,” and puts the accusation down to “jealousy” (114). Not only mirroring the “decampment” of women within the feminist movement, or the schisms that emerged even within groups that were ostensibly formed on a theory of sameness, the behavior of Offred’s mother and her friends mirror what the patriarchy have said about women’s relationships all along. As Block and Greenberg write in *Women and Friendship*, “[a]ccording to popular culture, women don’t trust each other, women don’t work well for other women, and women are inherently in competition” (2). As the surname “Foreman” indicates, then, the Aunts of Gilead, who serve as the system’s spokes(wo)men and train the girls at the Red Centre, are not the only ones needed to keep an eye on and to censure unacceptable behavior: women together, even as friends, do that themselves.

We might also scrutinize here some of the assertions made in the name of feminism on the part of Offred’s radically separatist feminist mother. In her assertion that she neither wants nor needs “a man around, what use are they except for ten seconds’ worth of baby. A man is just a woman’s strategy for making other women.” and that she could make it as a single mother because she could “afford daycare” (114), she reveals that her position of privilege makes her unaware that many women marry or “have married because it was necessary, in order to survive economically. [and if mothers] in order to have children who would not suffer economic deprivation or social ostracism” (Rich, “Compulsory” 59). In their participation in pro-abortion marches and riots (169), moreover, the narrator’s
mother and her friends remain unaware of the dangers abortion laws or rights pose(d) for women of color and their communities. To be sure, while white feminists "insisted that all restrictions on abortion should be lifted . . . black women feared the overuse of abortion (and sterilization) in the black community for 'population control'" (Schneir 171).

Finally implicit in her disappointment over her daughter's indifference towards the feminist movement, then, and in her attribution of this indifference to the backlash of the 1980's, is her unexamined assumption that the obstacles to women's liberation are located solely in the sexism of the (white) patriarchy. Speaking to white activist women in an attempt to demonstrate that there are "[s]ome problems we share as women, [and] some we do not," however, Audre Lorde states, "You fear your children will grow up to join the patriarchy and testify against you. we fear our children will be dragged from a car and shot down in the street, and you will turn your backs upon the reasons they are dying" (119).

While Gilead serves as the impetus for the narrator's nascent understanding of the crucial necessity for alliances between and among women, her white, classist and heterosexist conditioning, as well as her formative past experience with her radically separatist feminist mother, work together to complicate this understanding. Like her mother, Offred suppresses racial and class difference. As noted above, her failure to mention the fate of racial Others in Gilead is indicative of her suppression of racial difference and/or her elision of white privilege. However, to conflate the narrator's practice with the author's beliefs, as some critics do, is once again to confuse the writer with her characters. I assert that
by making difference explicit through the narrator's solipsism, Atwood warns of
the dangers involved in a feminist politics that maintains the discursive practice of
focusing on sexism only, and also demonstrates the optimism and indeed necessity
for imagining women's solidarity despite and because of (imposed) differences.

The narrator's descriptions of Rita and Cora (the Marthas of the household
in which she is placed), as well as her appropriation of their speech, first reveal that
they are of a lower class than she is. What is also revealed, however, are the ways in
which Offred thinks of the Marthas as Other, and how, on some levels and because
of Gilead, she is able to identify with them. As Offred states:

Rita is . . . standing at the kitchen table. . . . She's in her
usual Martha dress, which is dull green . . . [and] is much
like mine in shape, long and concealing, but with a bib apron
over it and without the white wings and the veil. She puts the
veil on to go outside, but nobody much cares who sees the
face of a Martha. Her sleeves are rolled to the elbow showing
her brown arms. She's making bread. . . . (9)

Since we can assume that racial Others are wholly absent in Gilead, the reference to
the "brown arms" of Rita, a labourer, hints at the hard labour from which the
narrator and those of her class have been traditionally exempt. Her assertion that
"nobody much cares who sees the face of a Martha" thus takes on a great deal of
significance. While on one level Offred's statement suggests that, like those in
power, she too thinks of lower class women as objects to be utilized in terms of
economic but not sexual politics, it is a further irony that she and all of the white
handmaids, when allowed to go outdoors, must now be covered by the veil while
certain Others are exempt from this rule.
hinting further to the class difference between the narrator and the
Marthas is Offred’s appropriation of the Marthas’ speech:

Sometimes I listen outside closed doors. . . . Once . . . I heard
Rita say to Cora that she wouldn’t debase herself like [me].
Nobody asking you, Cora said. Anyways, what could you do,
supposing? Go to the Colonies, Rita said. They have the choice.
With the Unwomen, and starve to death and Lord knows what all?
said Cora. Catch you. (10)

The obvious variations in speech patterns between the narrator and the Marthas
point to their differences in terms of class and/or education.17 Yet, also striking here
is the fact that, unlike the passage in which the narrator reveals what the *male
interpreter* for the group of Japanese tourists says, Atwood does not include
quotation marks when she has her narrator reveal what Rita and Cora say. Indeed,
this is also the case when Offred “speaks for” her mother and Moira. In my reading,
then, Atwood again makes the subtle suggestion that all women share an affinity by
virtue of their oppressed sex, and that the problematics of “difference” between and
among women are the result of long-established structures of power.

All women of Gilead are in some way caught within the complex web of
the Foucaultian force relations that make a Gilead possible. For the women not yet
exiled or killed, the system, which is intent on its program of eugenics, breeds only
paranoia in terms of who to trust. This paranoia and distrust forces Offred and the
Marthas to resist and suppress their desire and indeed hope for alliance, which
might serve to change the system. As Offred reveals: “I would like to stay, in the
kitchen. . . . [W]e would sit at Rita’s kitchen table, which is not Rita’s any more
than my table is mine, and we would talk, about aches and pains . . . all the different
kinds of mischief that our bodies... can get up to. We would nod our heads as punctuation to each other’s voices... How I used to despise such talk. Now I long for it” (10-11). At the same time, however, she even resists the temptation to smile at Rita, for, as she states with irony, “Why tempt her to friendship?” (11). Nor do the Marthas make any overt attempt to befriend her. When Cora is startled to find Offred on the floor in her room, and subsequently drops the breakfast tray, she is willing to lie to the Commander’s wife if Offred still wants breakfast (142). Even this willingness is double-edged, however. By not telling the Commander’s wife of the incident, Cora is also protecting herself. Thus, just as Offred is unable to imagine what it is like to be in the Marthas’ position, the Marthas cannot imagine what it is like to be her. As Cora says of Offred’s position as handmaid, “It’s not what you’d call hard work” (10).

While the narrator and her culture suppress the (in)visible difference of the Marthas, Moira’s lesbian orientation is not only made explicit by Offred, but is encouraged at the underground brothel where she is placed. Offred’s willingness to assert her friend’s sexual orientation is significant on two levels. On one level she seems willing to ignore ‘difference’ if it does not implicate or directly affect her in any way. She observes that “There was a time when we didn’t hug, after she’d told me about being gay; but then she said I didn’t turn her on, reassuring me, and we’d gone back to it” (161). On another level, however, although she does not explicitly point to Moira’s lesbian sexuality, she and the women at the Red Centre admire Moira for what they are not: “Moira was our fantasy. We hugged her to us, she was with us in secret, a giggle; she was lava beneath the crust of daily life. In the light of
Moira, the Aunts were less fearsome and more absurd" (125). The ambiguity of this statement is striking. Moira as fantasy, described as a "secret" in the female context of the sexually suggestive Red Centre, as well as in terms of a physical embrace, is suggestive of a repressed lesbian fantasy, a repressed desire to subvert the rigid heterosexist rules of Gilead, which are ironically imparted at the Red Centre and through the Aunts, the guardians of the Red Centre who epitomize patriarchal spokes(wo)men.

The suggestion of a repressed lesbian fantasy on the part of the narrator illustrates first the optimism of her ability to imagine an alternative to the (hetero)sexist structures of power in Gilead. Pointing to what Rich theorizes as the lesbian continuum--"a range--through each woman's life and throughout history--of woman-identified experience, not simply [by] the fact that a woman has had or consciously desire[s] . . . sexual experience with another woman" ("Compulsory" 48)--Moira as fantasy for Offred subverts her prior unquestioning of the heterosexist status quo. Yet, Rich also explores the ways in which women indoctrinated in conventional structures and institutions, such as heterosexuality and marriage, are not equipped to determine for themselves what lesbian sexuality might mean to them in different circumstances. This is not to suggest that Offred is unequivocally, or even unconsciously, a lesbian. Rather, that the institution of heterosexuality would not be so suspect if not for the politics that ensure this is the norm.

To be sure, the narrator also tends to exoticize and appropriate Moira and/or her lesbian identity for her fantasy of heterosexual rebellion, a practice
which again mirrors and reinforces the very structures white heterosexual feminists of the second wave hope(d) to undermine and abolish. Upon meeting Moira again at the underground brothel named “Jezebel’s,” Offred is frightened to think that Moira may be giving up the feminist struggle in which she has long been engaged. Her description of Moira’s “bravery” and past “heroics,” however, is derived from a white male heterosexual paradigm: “I don’t want her to be like me . . . . I want gallantry from her, swashbuckling, heroism, single-handed combat” (234).

The power structure of the underground brothel also mirrors that of the hegemonic order, and in turn affects and implicates Offred, a heterosexual white woman, and Moira, a white lesbian. While lesbian sexuality at the underground brothel is both accepted and encouraged--“women on women sort of turn [men] on” (234)--prostitution is enforced. In “Dangerous Sexualities,” Judith Walkowitz tracks the social structure of nineteenth-century prostitution in Europe and the United States and demonstrates how it mirrored and indeed depended on the class structure and racial segregation of urban centres. As she explains, prostitution as the “necessary evil” not only “justified male sexual access” to women (376), but worked to form and inform the perceptions of the white bourgeoisie. Indeed, for domestic white women of the middle and upper classes, the prostitute became a cultural symbol for the “degraded Other, the debased sexualized alternative to domestic maternal femininity” (381).

Beneficiary to men, the ideology of the brothel in underground Gilead points first to Rich’s reminder that for centuries “women have been used as objects or entertainers to facilitate male transactions” (“Compulsory” 38). In turn, and
as might be expected, while the group of men at Jezebel's are heterogeneous--Offred notes the presence of senior officials, trade delegates, and/or Japanese businessmen in suits, as well as Arab men who maintain their custom of wearing a white robe--the women remain homogeneous. In other words, the "collection" of women, as the Commander puts it, resemble each other in body and looks. Although the group is composed of professional prostitutes who could not be "assimilated," as well as intellectuals--a sociologist, a lawyer, and a business executive--no one is exempt from the task of 'watching her weight': "Gain ten pounds and they put you in solitary" (223). Since most Others who are of no use to the regime are sent to the Colonies, and since Moira does not appear to be a professional of any kind, it is safe to assume that Moira, despite her past rebellion, is sent to Jezebel's (rather than to her death) because she can be of some sexual use. As she tells Offred, she has "three or four good years before [her] snatch wears out and they send [her] to the boneyard" (234).

In keeping with the dilemmas and paradoxes of hegemonic and early feminist ideology, however, I would also argue that unlike women of color in Gilead, whose fate both characters do not mention but who, presumably, particularly in light of the regime's program of eugenics, have been altogether exiled, Moira is able to find a niche in the order because she is white. As Rich comments, "White feminists and lesbians are not, on the whole, immediately identifiable: they have to be pointed out. Women of color are, on the whole, immediately identifiable; but they aren't supposed to be here anyway, so their
presence, and whatever we have in common as women, must be erased from the record” (“Disobedience” 78).

This is not to suggest that white lesbians within the hegemonic order are not oppressed in more complicated ways than white heterosexual women are. However, because Moira is white, she is able to “pass” as heterosexual—indeed, she ironically passes as one of the Aunts, a spokes(wo)man for the system. Dressed in one of the Aunts’ uniforms, she leaves the Red Centre and walks by a group of male guards undetected (229). Moira’s ability to pass as heterosexual because of the color of her skin, juxtaposed with the fact that lesbianism is exoticized and thus encouraged at the Club in which she is presumably fated to spend the rest of her days, demonstrates that all her position in Gilead finally secures is her eventual exile and death. Indeed, although appearing to have some freedom in which to express her sexuality—she calls the Club “butch paradise”—she must also prostitute herself to men every evening. Offred’s situation is not dissimilar. Juxtaposed with her opportunity to express her sexuality with Nick, she is also a victim of the officially-sanctioned rape that constitutes the “Ceremony” or forced to prostitute herself to the Commander.

Offred is nonetheless the only woman of the novel who escapes Gilead. As revealed, Moira will be sent to the Colonies when she is no longer of use at the underground brothel. Ofglen is dead. Offred’s mother goes missing at the time of the coup. And Janine, the only character who successfully reproduces children for the new order, goes mad. Yet, the narrator’s escape does not suggest that she goes free because of (what was once) her privileged position in terms of race, class or
heterosexual orientation. Her position of privilege prior to the coup means nothing in Gilead: she too would be exiled or put to death if caught trying to escape, a possibility that was not precluded in the event she produced children and thus served the regime well.

Significantly, moreover, there also remains the suggestion that Offred does not remain free. As Pieixoto reveals, “the fate of our narrator . . . remains obscure” (293). Although it is Offred’s voice or story that gets passed down through history, which again mirrors hegemonic and dominant second-wave feminist practices, the reader is given no guarantee that either she or other (once privileged) women survive. Indeed, through Atwood’s inclusion of the *Historical Notes*, the reader is also privy to the ways in which Offred’s story is trivialized when it is heard. The novel’s satirical demonstration of the power structures that both form and inform a system like Gilead, through its concentration on the figure of the white handmaiden, ironically points to an imaginary site in which the narrator’s voice is not the only one heard. As the (dangerous) future voice of Pieixoto ironically reminds us, “the past is . . . filled with echoes” and “[v]oices may reach us from it”; yet “try as we may, we cannot always decipher them precisely in the clearer light of our own day” (293). *The Handmaid’s Tale* requires us to decipher today the inherent biases of prevailing hegemonies and thus the suppressed voices of the past and present if a better world might be imagined.
Women, held in New York in 1970. The women of twenty lesbian feminists used consensus that "men could heterosexist culture.

Morgan, 383, 394. comment of every in certain women's groups), society that is both racist and sexist. Contesting the ideology of a white present a paper titled 'The Position of Wornen in the movement, the response they received in fact women of the movement, the response they received was and are acutely aware of their double oppression in a white heterosexist culture. As Joan Mandle explains, white lesbian activists disputed the general consensus that "men could be persuaded to accept some measure of equality for women--as long as women would parade their devotion to heterosexuality" (163). A major schism was effected when twenty lesbian feminists wearing T-shirts imprinted with "Lavender Menace" (a term reportedly used by Betty Friedan when, ironically, she articulated the potential "counter-revolutionary" danger of lesbian groups within the movement) staged a dramatic show at the Second Congress to Unite Women, held in New York in 1970. The women orchestrated a blackout and were on stage in front of 400 women activists when the lights came up. The group, who later separated and called themselves Radicalesbians, spoke about discrimination against lesbians within the movement and
called for support among the audience. While some members of the audience immediately joined the women on stage, many more came forward the next day. See Schnier. 161-62.

7 Chimney Bannerjee asserts that “Atwood’s world [of Gilead] is grounded on a media-generated awareness of the threat of Christian fundamentalism and a somewhat retrospective sense of women’s oppression in North America”; indeed, that in “ignor[ing] history” Atwood’s “premise requires us to forget the immense gains made in the last 20 years by the women’s movement.” I would argue, however, that Atwood does not negate the gains made by the women’s movement so much as she demonstrates how the contradictory power politics of Gilead or our own culture—constructed and grounded precisely in and throughout history—operate to reverse any gains made and thus work to negate any historical consciousness or awareness that the narrator and/or other women like her might otherwise have.

8 Adrienne Rich discusses solipsism and gynephobia in her essay “Disloyal to Civilization: Feminism, Racism and Gynephobia.” In attempting to open a dialogue between white women and black women, she draws on the historical conditions of ‘women’s oppression in North America”: indeed, that in nineteenth-century England, theories of natural and sexual selection were grounded and in part served to justify the sexism and racism of the State. Janet Oppenheim demonstrates that Darwin’s Origin of Species (1859) and The Descent of Man (1871), as well as Herbert Spencer’s Principles of Sociology (1876), were instrumental in grounding in “truth” theories of sex and women’s “natural” inferiority (Shattered 183-84). The link to classism and racism is clear. Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English note that in affirming the female as the inherently weaker sex, whose function was to bear and raise children, (white) women of the middle and upper classes were kept at home while millions of poor and working-class women were defined as “fit” for jobs that needed filling (Complaints 12). Moreover, defended in evolutionary terms for the survival and improvement of the race, rather than, as Foucault notes, “[i]n the name of a biological and historical urgency,” the discourse on sex also “promised to eliminate defective individuals, [and] degenerate and bastardized populations” (History 54).

9 For discussions on the origins of patriarchy, see Marilyn French, Beyond Power: On Women, Men and Morals, esp. chapter two.

10 In nineteenth-century England, theories of natural and sexual selection were grounded and in part served to justify the sexism and racism of the State. Janet Oppenheim demonstrates that Darwin’s Origin of Species (1859) and The Descent of Man (1871), as well as Herbert Spencer’s Principles of Sociology (1876), were instrumental in grounding in “truth” theories of sex and women’s “natural” inferiority (Shattered 183-84). The link to classism and racism is clear. Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English note that in affirming the female as the inherently weaker sex, whose function was to bear and raise children, (white) women of the middle and upper classes were kept at home while millions of poor and working-class women were defined as “fit” for jobs that needed filling (Complaints 12). Moreover, defended in evolutionary terms for the survival and improvement of the race, rather than, as Foucault notes, “[i]n the name of a biological and historical urgency,” the discourse on sex also “promised to eliminate defective individuals, [and] degenerate and bastardized populations” (History 54).

11 As Nancy Harstock notes, in Foucault’s theorization that “[p]ower is everywhere” it is “ultimately nowhere” (170), which thus effectively elides the role men and women play in their own oppression and in the oppression of others. In her consideration of theories of power for women, then, Harstock calls for the need on the part of women, particularly privileged women, “to recognize that we can be the makers of history as well as the objects of those who have made history” (170-71). Drawing on Harstock’s consideration that the real sources of oppression—systemic power structures and those who participate in and perpetuate these structures—must be recognized, I move Foucault’s framework into a feminist positioning and analyse how the narrator of the novel, and those like her (men and women), are complicit in their own and all others’ oppression.

12 This is not to suggest that men do not have the power to oppress women. Rather, as Atwood notes, “women have to take the concerns of men as seriously as they expect men to take theirs. . . . One encounters, too often, the attitude that only pain felt by persons of the female sex is real pain, that only female fears are real fears. That for me is the equivalent of the notion that only working-class people are real, that middle-class people are not, and so forth.” As Atwood stresses, this is not to negate, for instance, the fact that “women’s fear of being killed by men is grounded in authenticity, not to mention statistics”; nor is it to advocate “a return to door-mat status for women. . . .” Indeed, “[t]o understand [men] is not necessarily to condone [sexism]”: “women have been ‘understanding’ men for centuries, partly because it was necessary for survival. . . . But
'understanding' as a manipulative tool . . . is really a form of contempt for the thing understood." Thus, while "some women are not in the mood to dish out any more understanding, of any kind . . . one cannot deprive any part of humanity of the definition "human" without grievous risk to one's own soul" (Second 428-29).

13 I disagree with both Howells's and Bannerjee's assertion that the Handmaids are not subjected to "rape" or physical violence. Bannerjee writes that the Handmaids, despite "the monthly ritual fucking," are not "subjected to any physical abuse" but rather to "excruciating boredom" (77). Howells writes that the monthly "Ceremony" in which Offred is implicated "is not rape" since the narrator herself says "Nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for" (138). Read in light of Atwood's project of irony here, this assertion of Offred's is necessarily complicated. Drawing on Kathleen Barry's theoretical consideration of a cross-cultural "rape paradigm," Adrienne Rich writes that implicit in this paradigm is the notion that "the victim of sexual assault is held responsible for her own victimization" which leads to "the rationalization and acceptance of other forms of enslavement where the woman is presumed to have 'chosen' her fate, to embrace it passively, or to have courted it perversely through rash or unchaste behavior" ("Compulsory" 44). To be sure, shortly after the military coup at which time Offred is fired from her job, and prior to finding herself in the position of the handmaid (and not 'signing up' means death). Offred acknowledges that she "took too much for granted," that "she trusted fate, back then" (27). At the same time, however, she wonders: "What was it about this that made us feel we deserved it?" (166).

14 For an overview of French feminist theories concerning l'écriture feminine and women's jouissance (women's imaginary desire and fulfillment of this desire through their writing or acting from/of the body), see Ann Rosalind Jones, "Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of l'Écriture Feminine."

15 Lauretta Ngcobo's "African Motherhood: Fact and Fiction" and Joan Nestle's "My Mother Liked to Fuck" are just two of countless examples that track differences of the mother-daughter relationship within a traditional white middle-class paradigm.

16 For discussions about assimilation policies and the complex effects of these policies on First Nations groups, see James Axtell, The Invasion Within; Olive Dickason, The Myth of the Savage: Emma LaRoque, Defeathering the Indian.

17 Rita's "brown arms" and the speech of the Marthas struck me first as hints of racial difference. Even Rita's mention of the Colonies brings to mind the colonial history of the U.S., as well as the deportation of African slaves to the United States. While the reference to Rita's "brown arms" remains for me highly suggestive of racial difference and black (domestic) slavery in white Gilead, the Marthas' speech points to class and/or education differences between whites.

18 Interestingly enough, in the film based on The Handmaid's Tale there is not a single woman of color depicted.
Cat’s Eye: Re-viewing the Feminine, Recognizing the Difference

The only exile I have known came from my condition, and not my body. That’s the difference.
Nicole Brossard, The Aerial Letter (45)

The cat’s eyes are my favorites. . . . The cat’s eyes really are like eyes, but not the eyes of cats. They’re the eyes of something that isn’t known but exists anyway. . . .
Margaret Atwood, Cat’s Eye (67)

While The Handmaid’s Tale provides a demonstration of the ways in which second-wave feminist politics tend(ed) to mirror and reproduce prevailing structures of power, Atwood’s subsequent novel, Cat’s Eye, demonstrates how social hegemonies are played out and reconstituted in what is widely presumed to be the innocuous white and middle-class community of pre-adolescent girls. By tracking the ways in which the white female characters perpetuate the hegemonic order--and in turn learn to distrust and compete with one another--Cat’s Eye demonstrates the failure of social hegemonies to allow for fissures large enough for women’s alliances within hegemonic boundaries. Indeed, despite the narrator’s imaginary “knowing” that something is wrong with the hegemonic cover story under which her subjectivity (or what that might be if the story were different) has been officially buried, her white psycho(hetero)sexual conditioning is far-reaching and extensive enough that female friendship or alliance remains a constant absence throughout her narrative.

An analysis of the narrator’s story in terms of her socialization process yields surprising results nonetheless. Noting the reasons for which she decided to write Cat’s Eye, Atwood states: “I sometimes get interested in stories because I
notice a sort of blank—why hasn’t anyone written about this? Can it be written about? Do I dare to write it? *Cat’s Eye* was risky business, in a way—wouldn’t I be trashed for writing about little girls, how trivial? (Ingersoll 236). In my reading, this “blank” to which Atwood gives words and form exposes further that which goes without saying in our culture, and in turn creates an imaginary space from and in which to explore some of the obstacles to women’s solidarity.

Set in Toronto, and spanning over four decades, the novel revolves around the first-person narrative of painter Elaine Risley. A white Canadian woman in her 50’s, Elaine returns to the site of her childhood for her first art retrospective and begins to negotiate what has been throughout her life an absence of female friendship and alliance. As her story unfolds, we learn that between the ages of nine and 10 she is traumatized by the cruelty of Cordelia, her “best friend,” as well as by the complicit behavior of Mrs. Smeath, another friend’s mother, and by her own mother’s inability to comfort and defend her. Profoundly affected by this experience, Elaine nonetheless takes a step towards female solidarity when she makes peace with Cordelia and begins to understand better the gulf that has existed between herself and her mother. Without wishing to negate the optimism of these steps she takes, however, the denouement here does not and cannot bring into sharp relief the intense and deep-seated ambivalence she experiences within herself and towards other women throughout the novel.

The narrator does not form a single friendship or alliance with another woman. The peace she makes with Cordelia and the better understanding she comes to concerning her mother’s position are first complicated by the fact that they are no
longer a presence in her life: Elaine has not seen Cordelia since adolescence and her mother is no longer living. Indeed, during their final visit together, Elaine longs to make a connection with her dying mother but is held back from doing so. To be sure, her adult encounters with other women (and men) raise for her a number of contradictions and thus raise for Atwood’s readers a number of questions. With women from her own and other backgrounds--with her classmate and social acquaintance, Susie, with lesbian and heterosexual feminists of the white middle class, and with what appears to be the First Nations drunken woman and Middle Eastern beggar woman she encounters on the street--the narrator oscillates between a sense of longing, revulsion, guilt and self-deprecation, or, she relies on cruelty and/or indifference as a means to maintain some sense of control and power. Oscillating between these contradictory postures, however, she cannot quite articulate what it is or whom it is she must defend herself against.

My task as a reader of Atwood’s satiric projects is to use Cat’s Eye as a vehicle by which to articulate what the narrator cannot. As I argue, the narrator’s ambivalence towards women and women’s relationships is grounded in both her resistance to and internalization of cultural mandates that work to establish a specifically white and bourgeois mode of femininity which, in turn, works to consolidate the hegemonic order. Elaine’s paradoxical position in the social order affects significantly her relationship to women. While her gender renders her a target of power structures that work to ensure that she internalizes and thus maintains a non-threatening mode of white femininity and thus, by extension, prevailing social hegemonies, her class and race position her as a privileged
member of the novel’s cultural milieu. Read as an interrogation of the means by which various political structures work both to marginalize and privilege the white narrator, then, as well as how she negotiates this contradiction, the novel serves as a vehicle by which the problematics of women’s alliances within and across lines of sex, class, race, and sexual orientation might be further elucidated. Indeed, while the narrator’s treasured childhood possession of the cat’s eye marble allows her to form a nascent awareness of that which “isn’t known but exists anyway,” *Cat’s Eye* itself is an imaginary symbol that allows Atwood’s readers to access further that which the narrator cannot.

Atwood emphasizes the devastating effects of Elaine’s initiation into a culturally mandated white femininity by depicting her as essentially untouched by rigid social roles and expectations until she reaches the age of eight. Prior to her eighth birthday, her father’s profession as a forest-insect field researcher allows the family to lead nomadic and rather unconventional lives in the uninhabited north of Ontario. When the family moves south to Toronto, however, to the structured order of a white middle-class neighborhood, she enters the world of girls and her socialization process begins in earnest.

This process, or initiation into what constitutes culturally accepted modes of femininity and masculinity, corresponds directly to traditional morphologies of the (white) female body. While Freud’s model of identity-formation focuses on the oedipal phase to explain the child’s progression from the pre-oedipal or maternal to the phallic or paternal, Lacan’s linguistic model posits that this (illusory) move occurs at the “mirror stage.” Briefly, Freud’s biological schema posits that the
female child naturally turns from the maternal to the paternal when she realizes her clitoris is an inferior penis. Up until this point, the boy derives pleasure from his penis and the girl derives pleasure from her clitoris, the vagina being undiscovered by both sexes (Irigaray, "Women's" 83). The vagina, however, soon becomes the focal point for both sexes. As Freud put it, once girls “recognize [the penis] as the superior counterpart of their own small and inconspicuous organ,” they inevitably fall victim to penis-envy (187). Thus concluding that the girl abandons and accepts her clitoris as ‘lack’—the clitoris nonetheless being what Freud posited as her primary erotogenic zone (Irigaray, Speculum 29)—she abandons fusion with the mother and/or pre-oedipal and directs her needs and desires towards the father and, later, towards other males. Indeed, according to Freud, what she now (sexually) desires is the same compensation her mother has received: the father/husband and the child or compensatory substitutes for her ‘lack’ or biologically-determined inferiority.

Characterized as the “deflection of the specular I into the social I” (Lacan 5), the Lacanian mirror stage marks the child’s negotiation of or entry into the Symbolic order. Since the Symbolic is the cultural domain in which laws are sanctioned by phallogocentric logic—logocentric in that signs and words are assumed to have fixed meaning, and phallocentric in that language privileges the “masculine as rational and universal and . . . the feminine as its complementary or negative pole” (Felski 42)—the image of the mirror serves to demonstrate the process by which the child comes to understand or perceive sexual difference. For Lacan, it is a given that the Imaginary (unlike Freud’s pre-oedipal) is also
sanctioned by symbolic law or phallogocentrism, signifying by extension that the child's sense of mother-fusion prior to the mirror stage is an illusion. Lacan thus theorizes that when the child perceives the mother as having needs and desires of her own, or that it is no longer the mother's primary object of love or object of her gaze, it begins to use language in order to regain her attention (Hengen 30). The child now perceives itself as both subject (I) and object (me), or as an "other" perceived by the (m)other. That is, while its first recognition of itself as separate from the mother marks its "first sense of a coherent identity," the very same recognition or image "divides its identity into two" (Rose 2). As Lacan acknowledges, however, since phallogocentric law sanctions both the Imaginary and Symbolic, the moment at which the female child becomes aware of her split-identity is highly problematic. Since, for Lacan, the "masculine" is the privileged discourse and privileged in discourse--structures which remain static in his work--the child now perceives the mother as desiring of the phallus, which again "becomes the signifier of lack and establishes substitutive desire" (Lorraine 65).

In both morphologies, the male is able to assume a subject-position because he possesses a penis and/or the symbolizing power of the phallus or language, and the female can only "passively enjoy phallic power through association with a man" (Lorraine 68). Importantly, however, while these models of female (non)identity formation or "sexual difference" are not exempt from the long list of patriarchal tools that have worked to organize a rivalry between and among women, both are dependent on classism and racism for their coherence and thus elide the class and race postulates on which they depend. As Judith Butler writes:
"the domain of socially instituted norms . . . is composed of racialized norms, and . . . they exist not merely alongside gender norms, but are articulated through one another" ("Passing" 279). For Butler, then, among many other feminist thinkers, "it is no longer possible to make sexual difference prior to racial difference or, for that matter, to make them into fully separate axes of social regulation and power" ("Passing" 279).

Of the Freudian matrix in particular, Hortense Spillers points out that the "Father's law" or "the prestigious Oedipal dis-ease/complex" is founded in and perpetuates "a specific locus of economic and cultural means" ("Permanent" 129). While the Law of the Father passed down through Freud is clearly problematic for the white bourgeois female subject, Spillers explains that, first of all, "[t]he original captive status of African females and males in the context of American enslavement permitted none of the traditional rights of consanguinity"; furthermore, while "[t]he laws of the North American Slave Code stipulated that the newborn would follow the status of its mother . . . that stroke of legal genius, while assuring hegemony of the dominant class, did nothing to establish maternal prerogative for the African female" ("Permanent" 129). As she summarizes, then,

Freud could not see his own connection to the "race" and culture orbit, or could not theorize it, because the place of their elision marked the vantage from which he spoke. Because it constituted his enabling postulate, it went "without saying." Perhaps we could argue that the "race" matrix was the fundamental interdiction within the enabling discourse of founding psychoanalytic theory and practice itself. ("All" 139)

Of the Lacanian process of differentiation, Helene Moglen points out that "[t]he process of differentiation through which the [white] subject is constructed
finds stark expression in the fears of difference that inform sexual, racial and socioeconomic stereotypes (202). Challenging the assumptions of “whiteness”--“that elusive color that seems not to be one” (Abel, “Black” 119)--which constitute Lacan’s theory of the child’s encounter of both itself and the mother as Other at the mirror stage, Jean Walton reminds us that a large part of American history includes the racialized history of child care, where the tasks of the “mother” so typically described in psychoanalytic accounts of early development (nursing, cleaning, eroticizing certain zones of the body, assisting in the acquisition of language, mediating in the mirror stage) were (and continue to be) undertaken by black women in the white slave-owning or servant-employing household. (225-26)

In accounting for the class and race biases of the Lacanian mirror stage, then, that which the (white) female child perceives at the mirror stage extends far beyond the politics of sexual difference. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon raises the question of the race of the *imago* encountered by the child at the mirror stage and articulates how “different” this stage would look in a racialized context:

> It would indeed be interesting, on the basis of Lacan’s theory of the mirror period, to investigate the extent to which the *imago* of his fellow built up in the young white at the usual age would undergo an imaginary aggression with the appearance of the Negro. When one has grasped the mechanism described by Lacan, one can have no further doubt that the real Other for the white man is and will continue to be the black man. (qtd. in Walton 234)

While this suggests that “the appearance of the Negro” for the white male child would call into question the white politics of the Symbolic, matters are further complicated for the white female child. In the context of Fanon’s statement, and keeping in mind that Lacanian theory does not account for persons other than or to
whites, or to classes other than or to the (white) middle or upper classes, the splitting of the white bourgeois female subject at the mirror stage secures first her estrangement from her mother, and, in turn, from all other women who are the same and Other. This is not to elide white female racism. Rather, and as we shall see, it demonstrates that white women like the narrator and her friends mirror what they are conditioned to see and in turn act this out together and with all Others.

In terms of the female body, while the physical body and/or the language that defines the body has been the site from which “sexual difference” has been traditionally theorized, the body has also been “precisely the location of difference in genetic and biological theories of white superiority” (Frankenberg 144). Not only was black slavery justified “on the grounds of suppositional “natural” difference (Homans 77), but as Jean Walton explains, the “racialized trope” of the Hottentot nymphae—“the supposedly enlarged female sexual organs [including the overdevelopment of the clitoris] that black women in Africa were reputed to possess”—justified the public exhibition and dissection of African women’s bodies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, fostering the stereotype that African women and their sexuality are “primitive,” “pathological” and “atavistic” (232-33).

Not surprisingly, the same labels were given to European white women who deviated from the psychoanalytic “norm”: prostitutes and lesbians (Walton 233). Thus when Freud’s theory helped to consolidate the notion that the natural function of ‘Woman’ was to bear and raise children, and thus that her place was in the home, a very small segment of the (white) female population was considered.
As Ehrenreich and English note, not taken into account were the millions of poor and working-class women for whom staying at home to bear and raise children was not an option (Complaints 46).

Since traditional morphologies of the white female body reflect white patriarchal ideals or projections of a white bourgeois femininity, my analysis of the psycho(hetero)sexual conditioning of the narrator reflects her experience only—or the experience of women like her. Optimistically, however, by identifying the narrator’s relationship to women in terms of the analytic models that have formed and informed her experience as specifically white and middle class, an imaginary fissure is created, providing not only a space in which to continue the dialogue on how power structures affect or obstruct women’s alliances within and across lines of class, race, and sexual orientation, but a space that, ironically, does not privilege the voice or experience of the white subject.

Upon the family’s arrival in Toronto, Elaine states that she longs for “her old life of impermanence and safety” up north (34); that prior to the move south she was happy (22). The distinction Atwood makes between North and South extends, as we shall see, beyond a critical analysis of traditional psychoanalytic models and gender differences; here, however, while South represents the Freudian phallic or Lacanian symbolic, the “impermanence and safety” of Elaine’s “old life” up north corresponds to Freud’s pre-Oedipal and, from a feminist perspective, to Lacan’s Imaginary, the state in which the child senses (albeit falsely, according to Lacan) fusion or symbiotic union with the mother or maternal. Indeed, suggestive of a move from the maternal body or pre-oedipal to the paternal or symbolic, Elaine’s
move from north to south is described in terms of birth metaphors and biological imagery. She says that coming “down from the north” is like “coming down from a mountain . . . descend[ing] through layers of clarity, of coolness and uncluttered light . . . into the thicker air, the dampness and warm heaviness” (73).

Her description of a subsequent vacation up north, moreover, at which time she is away from the social prescriptives handed down through her girlfriends and able to give up the anxious behavior of nail-biting and the peeling of skin off her feet, suggests a re-entering into the pre-oedipal or maternal, or a casting off of the Freudian/Lacanian chains of biology and language in the formation of white female (non)identity. In the words of Nicole Brossard, a casting off of the “laws, interdictions, [and] words” that cover the female body (37). Making a connection between her body and the word that defines her body, Elaine says that upon her return to the north, she has “begun to feel not gladness, but relief”:

My throat is no longer tight. I’ve stopped clenching my teeth, the skin on my feet has begun to grow back, my fingers have healed partially . . . I go for long periods without saying anything at all. I can be free of words now, I can lapse back into wordlessness. I can sink back into the rhythms of transience as if into bed. (153)

In striking contrast to this pre-oedipal comfort or relief, she returns to the south and notes that Toronto is “bloating itself to death,” calling further attention to the city or (language and structures of) the symbolic as “astonishingly noisy” and to her body or self within it as “stiffening, emptying itself of feeling,” as if the “the future is closing on [her] like a door” (165).

In the south, there is a concerted political effort to ‘fix’ Elaine and the other white females who directly inhabit her childhood within a (white) masculinist
paradigm. Speaking only of the (hetero)sexist dimensions of their conditioning, the girls absorb the notion that they are objects to be desired and desirable, rather than desiring subjects. Yet, while they know on some level that they will be ‘fixed’ or ‘punished’ if they step out of patriarchal boundaries, they are also taught that female sexuality and genitalia are shameful and necessary to conceal. Internalizing these contradictions, the girls learn to be enemies or competitors of one another, and thus mirror and reconstitute the status quo. Lining up at school every morning to enter the door marked GIRLS, they know there are swift and severe punishments for anyone who “go[es] in the wrong door,” or steps outside of the established boundaries (49). Indeed, their initiation into an acceptable mode of (white) femininity, presided over by women, takes on formal dimensions in the elementary classroom.

In the chapter entitled “Empire Bloomers,” their schoolteacher, Miss Lumley, serves as both a manifestation of the shame surrounding the female body and as a vehicle through which myths of (white) femininity are imparted and perpetuated. As the irony of the chapter’s title indicates, however, Atwood also makes explicit the intersection of class and race biases in the subtle ‘education’ the girls receive in female pathology. In order to ensure that white girls and bourgeois communities under the British Empire “bloom” in the expected or acceptable way, Elaine and her friends are instructed by the female teacher who rules by “standards” to draw the Union Jack, to memorize the names of male saints and to memorize and sing the lyrics of “God Save the King” (83-84). As Elaine reveals, however, these
standards are somehow connected to Miss Lumley’s "invisible" yet "terrifying" and "deeply shameful" bloomers (85).

Subsequently afraid of Miss Lumley, Elaine is further horrified to learn that girls like Cordelia’s older sisters are ‘afflicted’ with breasts, with the chore of shaving their legs, and with the ‘curse’ of menstruation. Indeed, her growing suspicion that women's bodies are “alien and bizarre, hairy, squasy, monstrous” is in the process of being confirmed (97). Even more disturbing is that while she knows that whatever has happened to these women, “bulging them, softening them, causing them to walk rather than run, as if there’s some invisible leash around their necks, holding them in check . . . may happen to her too (97), she assumes that at the age of eight she is still “safe” (97). The “invisible leash” she fears, however, is already apparent in what appears on the surface to be the ‘games’ the younger girls play. One of the girls’ pastimes involves pasting into their scrapbooks female figures and domestic objects cut from catalogues (57). For Christmas, Elaine receives a Barbara Ann Scott doll whose “slender stick” body horrifies her because it does not resemble the muscular and large body of the real skater (136).

Taught to feel physically inadequate, to be ashamed of her body, to repress her sexuality, and yet to aspire to cultural representations of the "perfect" or "beautiful" (white) woman, Elaine realizes that “there will be no end to imperfection” (148-49). Next to images of the “perfect Woman” in mainstream magazines such as Good Housekeeping are images of “imperfect” women--white women of the middle or upper class who step out of patriarchal boundaries. Represented as “sloppy,” as “gossips” and “busybodies,” these women are figured
with the speaking “watchbird,” that which reminds them of the ever-present patriarchal eye and gaze (148).

Although disturbing, this warning also has an element of subversion to it. The “Busybody” is not only suggestive of an active rather than a passive female sexuality and subjectivity, but that “there will be no end to imperfection” implies there will always be women who challenge the symbolic laws upon which images and/or expectations of the “perfect” (white) woman precariously rest. From an Irigarayan perspective, this push-pull dynamic that characterizes the ‘games’ the girls play are indicative of the holes or fissures of symbolic law. As she argues, the Freudian/Lacanian ‘Woman’ suffers from the pathologization of her body and sexuality, or her fate of ‘lack’ and ‘penis envy,’ precisely because the phallus is the only recognized sex organ of any worth (“This Sex” 99). Literally defined as a “sheath,” or as a “close-fitting cover for a blade or sword” (Concise Oxford), the vagina is valued in terms of “the ‘home’ it offers the male penis,” or as the “hole-envelope” which serves as the instrument for reproduction (of the same) and for the desires of men (“This Sex” 99).

Challenging this, Irigaray theorizes that “Woman’s” clitoris or ‘lack’--“her ‘nothing’ where there should be something”--threatens the patriarchy precisely “because it represents a hole in man’s signifying economy” (Lorraine 77). Ironically, then, the phallogocentric focus on the vagina as the ‘home’ or ‘hole-envelope’ for the penis represents the ‘hole’ within the signifying economy that is presumably filled. The phallogocentric focus on the vagina is thus no longer the barrier that keeps women separated from the maternal/imaginary, but that which,
metaphorically speaking, allows them access to the female imaginary within the male symbolic. As Irigaray writes, the “forgotten vagina” is “the passage that is missing, left on the shelf, between the outside and the inside, between the plus and the minus” (Speculum 341).

The Irigaray dialectic of power between symbolic and imaginary forces is most evident when the girls bury Elaine in the “deep hole” and when Cordelia ‘forces’ her to retrieve her hat in the ravine. Suspect because she is new to the city and does not (yet) act out the scripts which the other girls have already absorbed, and thus a target of their own vulnerability and sense of powerlessness, the girls choose Elaine as the scapegoat for their repressed anger and subjectivity. In another of their ‘games,’ Elaine is the one chosen to be buried in the hole Cordelia has dug in her backyard. In terms of the Freudian/Lacanian morphology of the (white) female body, this burial suggests the death of the narrator’s subjectivity. Her initiation into the symbolic—or imposed severance from her maternal genealogy—is not only complete, but has been successfully carried out by other females. As Elaine says, the burial was “the moment at which [she] lost power” (112).

But Elaine is also a source of deep attraction for the girls. The fact that she is “from outside the city” suggests to them that she has somehow managed to escape the conditioning to which they have been subjected. For instance, “the more bewildered” Elaine is by the customs and representations of the city, the “more and more gratified” Carol becomes (54). Indeed, the girls’ burial of Elaine in the hole does not point to the moment at which Elaine loses power, but rather to an act that
ironically allows her--and the other girls through the act of the symbolic burial--access to (imaginary) power:

Cordelia and Grace and Carol take me to the deep hole in Cordelia's backyard. . . . They pick me up by the underarms and the feet and lower me into the hole. Then they arrange the boards over the top. . . . Nothing happens. When I was put into the hole I knew it was a game; now I know it is not one. I feel sadness, a sense of betrayal. Then I feel the darkness pressing down on me; then terror. (112)

Although Elaine experiences sadness, betrayal and terror, Atwood's depiction of the "burial" connotes neither brutality nor violence. Nor does it connote play. As stated elsewhere in the novel, Elaine and her friends "look like girls playing" (150, my emphasis). Indeed, Atwood's use of language here--the girls "take" or lead Elaine to the hole, they "lower" her into it and "arrange" the boards over the top--suggests instead that the incident is not only some kind of necessary female initiation rite but one that is gentle, methodical and handled with care. As an adult, even Elaine questions whether the sadness, betrayal and terror she remembers "are the right emotions" and whether she experienced these emotions at all: "When I remember back to this time in the hole, I can't really remember what happened to me while I was in it. I can't remember what I really felt" (112).

Despite the power of symbolic logic which tells her and attempts to ensure that her memory of the 'hole' is "the wrong memory," her reappraisal of the "burial" corresponds more to a re-membering of her (un)severed connection to the maternal and/or imaginary or to what Irigaray refers to as "forgotten vagina." Indeed, in my use of the term "re-membering," I point again to the Irigarayan
dialectic of power. Suggestive of what Rich calls women's need to "touch the unity and resonance of our physicality, the corporeal ground of our intelligence" (*Of Woman* 337), the idea of re-membering refers first to women's healing of the enforced separation from their bodies and primordial desire. To re-member, however, also points to the rather crude and indeed repetitious notion and/or act of women being imposed upon by the powerful phallus, or (collective) male "member." In order for women to re-member their own bodies, then, the perlocutionary act of remembering what symbolic laws have imposed upon women is crucial. As is the case for Elaine, although she is not self-consciously aware of her own feminist act of re-membering, her re-appraisal of being buried in the hole connotes a reversal of symbolic law and acts, or an imaginary space in which female genitalia, female sexuality and maternity are not denigrated or defined:

At first there's nothing; just a receding darkness, like a tunnel. But after a while something begins to form: a thicket of dark-green leaves with purple blossoms, dark purple, a sad rich color, and clusters of red berries, translucent as water. The vines are intergrown, so tangled over the other plants they're like a hedge. A smell of loam and another, pungent scent rises from among the leaves, a smell of old things, dense and heavy, forgotten... I can tell it's the wrong memory. But the flowers, the smell, the movement of the leaves persist, rich, mesmerizing, desolating, infused with grief. (113-14)

Elaine's experience in the ravine demonstrates further the imaginary-symbolic dialectic. Like the image of the hole, the ravine is suggestive of the maternal/imaginary realm as well as the girls' imposed separation from this realm. Cordelia tells the girls that the stream in the ravine is "made up of dissolved dead people" (79). Metaphorically speaking, while women suffer the "death" of
their subjectivities upon entering symbolic order, the inversion of this order or the imaginary is suggestive of "life" or self-naming and autonomy.

Symbolic logic nonetheless interferes. As Elaine says of the dead people Cordelia speaks of in their "game": "I believe in them and I don't believe in them, both at the same time" (80). From an Irigarayan perspective, however, the ravine, a deep gorge or cleft, is not dissimilar from a hole and thus carries with it connotations of the womb/vagina. As notable, the girls associate the water of its creek--water being a symbol of the maternal, life and re-birth--with the dead or silenced maternal, that which has suffered a kind of death in the symbolic. Thus, when Cordelia and the other girls coerce Elaine into the ravine to retrieve her hat, they are, by my reading, unconsciously participating in a rite that allows her passage back to the maternal and/or imaginary realm: "Go on then. [Cordelia] says, more gently, as if she's encouraging me, not ordering me" (200). Indeed, once in the ravine, Elaine says that the water "is peaceful, it comes straight from the cemetery, from the graves and their bones. It's water made from the dead . . . dissolved and clear, and I am standing in it (200).

Invoking the anatomy in feminist analyses of any kind nonetheless risks for the theorist, author and/or critic a return to what Elaine Showalter describes as "crude essentialism"; as she states, "there can be no expression of the body which is unmediated by linguistic, social and literary structures"(337). Challenging socially instituted norms, particularly the assumption of a "universal" language that articulates and perpetuates these norms, Irigaray takes as her point of departure her indictment of established traditional psychoanalytic and philosophical models. In
doing so, she “examines the relationship of woman to woman by opening a space in which women “speak female” (“parler femme”) and speak to each other (“parler-entre-elles”) without the interference of men” (Wenzel 57). For instance, in “When Our Lips Speak Together,” the lips being a metonym of female genitalia, Irigaray writes: “You? I? That’s still saying too much. It cuts too sharply between us: “all.” (79); “we must invent so many different voices to speak all of “us,” including our cracks and faults” (75).

While a number of critics argue that Irigaray’s invocation of the two lips of the vagina is a return to (biological) essentialism:⁶ Carolyn Burke argues that the embodied text

> attempts to embody female difference”: “tu and je are not fixed persons. Fluid and changing, they are at once two lovers, two aspects of the self, and more, as the reader is gradually drawn into an exploration of plurality. . . . The conclusion . . . opens itself to all women (e)merging from the old order. (67-68)⁷

As noted, however, Irigaray’s privileging of gender over issues of race and sexual preference in her theory complicates any assertion that her imaginative rewritings open themselves “to all women (e)merging from the old order.” Indeed, her theorization of women’s oppression, through a deconstruction of white bourgeois masculinist structures, does not account for the various levels of women’s oppression, and thus the privileges that many white heterosexual women of certain classes have.

In turning to Cat’s Eye again, it is highly significant that a reading of the gender biases involved in the narrator’s childhood psycho(hetero)sexual conditioning cannot be carried over to a reading of the entire novel. As Atwood
demonstrates, while the girls on some level resist their psycho(hetero)sexual conditioning, their (unconscious) complicity in the racism and classism of this conditioning works to ensure that they get no further, and thus secures first their estrangement from their mothers, then from one another, and finally from all other women. In an attempt to track the (w)hole story of the narrator's problematic relationships to women, then, I turn to the contradictions of her relationships with white girls and women, beginning with her (lost) connection to her mother, and then to an analysis of how her class, race and heterosexuality affect or complicate her encounters with white heterosexual and lesbian feminists, and with racial and ethnic Others.

Recalling the incident in which the girls leave Elaine in the ravine to fend for herself, Elaine asserts that she has a vision of the Virgin Mary, an apparition that disappears the moment her frantic mother finds her. The interchangeability between the Virgin and her mother suggests, at least on one level, that Mrs. Risley embodies for her daughter the potential for rebellion against existing patriarchal structures. That the Virgin Mary is the Catholic construct of the self-less mother of Christ, one that has handed down to the wives and daughters of the Catholic Church a legacy of subservience, does not dispute this. Significantly, Elaine has not "learned the words" for the Virgin Mary (197); a target of Mrs. Smeath's malevolence, she finds a picture of the Virgin Mary and, realizing that the male God to whom the Smeaths pray and have taught her to pray is not on her side, she decides to "do something dangerous, rebellious" (196).
In an Irigarayan sense, her mother and the Virgin represent to Elaine what Domna Stanton calls "the unsaid feminine" (157), that which in imaginary terms is (symbolically) untouched by phallic power and law. In some ways, Elaine perceives her mother as unaffected by symbolic rule. Admiring of her "irreverent carelessness," Elaine suggests that her mother is not like the 'perfect Woman' of mainstream magazines: she likes neither to shop nor sew, nor is she interested in "feminine" or uncomfortable clothing (36. 101. 229). Comparing her mother to Cordelia's "mummy," to the falsely pious Mrs. Smeath, and to the conventional and rather boring Mrs. Campbell, Elaine says:

My mother is not like the other mothers, she doesn't fit in with the idea of them. She does not inhabit the house, the way the other mothers do: she's airy and hard to pin down. The others don't go skating on the neighborhood rink, or walk in the ravine by themselves. They seem to be grown-up in a way my mother is not. (167)

Resistant as both Elaine and her mother are, however, neither is unaffected by the ascribed roles and rules she is expected to fill and follow. Mrs. Risley admits to being powerless when the girls are projecting onto Elaine their own vulnerability and powerlessness and/or the patriarchal scripts that they have internalized (168). She is also silent about her miscarriage, a silence that frightens Elaine (178) and confirms what Elaine and her friends already know:

There's a great deal [mothers] don't say. Between us and them there is a gulf, an abyss, that goes down and down. It's filled with wordlessness. . . . So instead a long whisper runs among us, from child to child, gathering horror. (98)

Unable to grasp the (imaginary) significance of the wordless abyss between herself and her mother, and having internalized some of the same
patriarchal prescriptions that her mother has, Elaine assumes that the invisible leash that seems to hold Cordelia’s sisters (or their bodies) in check does not seem to be an issue with mothers, and certainly not with her own. As Elaine says, it is difficult for her and her friends “to think of [mothers] as having bodies at all” (98). Recalling the Freudian oedipal drama and the problems the white female subject encounters at the mirror stage, Elaine’s perceives her mother as Other or ‘lack’: having obtained the husband and child substitutes for her ‘lack,’ she is no longer desirable and therefore invisible. Elaine experiences the same when she marries for the first time and has her first child. Of her physical appearance, she notes she has put on weight, that the styles of clothing were not designed for women like her: as she states further, “I am no longer young. . . . In a couple of years I will be thirty. Over the hill (359-60). Of her relationship with her husband and daughter, moreover, she says that Jon “has a way of putting” himself and Sarah “into the same camp, in pretended league against me, [which] annoys me more than it should. Also I don’t like it when he calls me Mummy. I am not his mummy, but hers. But he loves her too” (360).

Elaine’s past and present relationship to Cordelia mirrors in many ways her relationship to her mother. Like Mrs. Risley, Cordelia oscillates between modes of (white) female subservience and subversion. Recalling the imaginary significance of Elaine’s burial in Cordelia’s backyard, Elaine says that Cordelia is “very wrapped up in this hole, it’s hard to get her to play anything else” (110). Once the girls are older, Cordelia spends a lot of her energy on “reinventing” herself, “improvising,” “making herself up as she goes along” (320). Indeed, as Elaine says,
"it's hard to tell" which side Cordelia is on because sometimes she is on both (134). For Elaine, then, Cordelia epitomizes the ambiguities or contradictions of the imaginary girlfriend. While Elaine is attracted to Cordelia because she breaks the rules, and thus desires to do the same, she is confused by the fact that Cordelia at the same time complies with how they are "supposed to be behaving" (223).  

Profoundly affected by the contradictions of her relationship to these central female figures of her past, Elaine nonetheless appears to make some kind of peace with them. Wondering what she would do if her own daughters were being traumatized by other girls, she realizes her own mother had "fewer choices," and that there was "a great deal less said" back then (160). At the same time, however, while the narrator acknowledges or assumes her mother's limited options in post-war Toronto, she also reveals that the bridge between them never allows them to connect. Recalling her final visit to her dying mother, Elaine says, "I want to put my arms around her. But I am held back. I'm aware of a barrier between us. It's been there for a long time. Something I have resented" (420).  

In her attempt to come to terms with Cordelia, Elaine returns to the bridge over the ravine and allows herself to experience the old emotions of shame, fear and loneliness. And, in doing so, she appears to let them go: "these are not my emotions any more. They are Cordelia's; as they always were" (443). This "resolution-scene" between the narrator and Cordelia occurs in the final chapter entitled "Bridge," and suggests that Elaine attempts to bridge the gap between herself and the women of her past. Yet, while not wishing to negate the devastation Elaine experiences at the hands of Cordelia, her replacement and indeed
displacement of her emotions to (an absent) Cordelia are an ironically striking imitation and thus reinstatement of how hegemonic structures get played out and reconstituted between and among white girls and adult women of the middle or upper class. That is, her replacement of Cordelia’s projections back onto Cordelia only serve to reproduce the dynamics of Othering that her socialization process ensures she perpetuates. More critically, it exposes that, as a white woman, Elaine is unaware that she (re)acts from a white or “a racially identified body, thinking as a self that is racially positioned in society” (Frankenberg 142).

In terms of sex, class and race, Atwood’s symbols of the ravine, abyss and bridge take on a great deal of significance. That is to say that the barriers which keep Elaine estranged from herself and other women extend far beyond the politics of sexual difference. Elaine’s dream of being separated from her mother and “other people” illustrates the key themes of this section, as well as the linked, yet analytically separable, questions about the intersection between white cultural practices and the construction of white femininity. As Elaine reveals:

I dream that the wooden bridge over the ravine is falling apart. I’m standing on it, the boards crack and separate, the bridge sways. I walk along what’s left, clinging to the railing, but I can’t get onto the hill where the other people are standing because the bridge isn’t attached to anything. My mother is on the hill, but she’s talking to the other people. (155)

Notable first is the reappearance of the ravine and bridge, and the fact that Elaine has this dream while the family is staying up north. Since, as we have seen, the north and ravine represent subversive sites that challenge the (imposed) separation between the (white) mother and daughter in the oedipal and/or mirror
stage, the deteriorated bridge here is indicative once again of the fissures or holes of the symbolic barriers that attempt to maintain this separation.

Complicating this picture is Elaine’s inability to reach her mother and “the other people” to whom her mother is speaking. In terms of the Freudian/Lacanian model which accounts for “sexual difference” only, Atwood’s positioning of Elaine’s mother on and with the Other side corresponds to the narrator’s contradictory acceptance of and resistance to the mother as ‘lack’ or Other, or to the daughter and mother as Other to each other. Thus, the narrator is suspended in a kind of limbo: although she wishes to connect with her mother, both her own and her mother’s internalization of “the places, the roles, the gestures which have been taught to them by the society of men” (Irigaray, “Women’s” 86) works to keep them separated from and Other to one another.

Keeping in mind that notions of the Other are constructed and perpetuated by sexual, racial and socioeconomic stereotypes (Moglen 202), however, there appears to be a striking dualism here. While the narrator does not make explicit who “the other people” that figure in her dream are, she is separated from both her mother and them. On one level, then, Atwood’s positioning of the narrator’s mother with the unidentifiable “others” in the north suggests an imaginary site that is not marked by hegemonic biases. Yet, in keeping with a focus on the socialization process that both forms and informs the narrator, Elaine also participates in ensuring that “from the standpoint of race privilege, the system of racism is made structurally invisible” (Frankenberg 201). Indeed, the narrator’s inclusion of the definite article here—her mother is not talking to other people but to “the other
people" (my emphasis)—subtly exposes that within the hegemonic order, and thus on her own part, "whiteness" is the norm against which all "others" or "differences" are measured and, ironically, collectively erased. Significantly, however, although Elaine speaks from her privileged position as a white woman of the middle class, her dream also reveals that she is not only separated from her (m)other but from all Others that do not have a place within the hegemonic economy.

Atwood's depiction of the north and south thus lends itself to an exploration of the inextricable link between sex, class and race biases. As Claire Harris observes, there is an entire "mythology surrounding the words North and South in the West" (29). Speaking of the "profound marginalization of peoples of the South"—she writes that

[It]he North is up, like heaven/goodness/light/a preserving cool. The South is down, like hell/morally ambiguous/dark/a corrupting heat. On this more-or-less round planet the South is forever, naturally, under the North, the true north. Interesting then that this construct should be applied as a shorthand for naming those who control the world economy and its media, and those who don't. Especially as most of the poor people of the world inhabit nations that lie well above the equator, above the tropic of Cancer, in the northern hemisphere. (29)

Harris's interrogation of what constitutes the true north serves to articulate one of the most powerful motifs of the novel: who precisely is Other? While the narrator's oscillation between the north and south—or between imaginary and symbolic forces—demonstrates her resistance to her psycho(hetero)sexual conditioning, her dream up north serves to reveal the force behind the class and racial dimensions of this conditioning. The contents of the dream that the narrator has up north might thus be read as an ironic spin on the imaginary connotations the north held for Elaine in
childhood, or, more critically, as a warning against positing an imaginary space that accounts for gender only. In other words, without accounting for the race and class biases and cultural homophobia that intersect with the gender politics that make a woman like Elaine Other, the north as metaphor for the imaginary can only serve to mirror, to use Harris's ironic words, the "true north," or the hegemonies of the symbolic.

Atwood's depiction of the narrator's relationship to those Othered in the symbolic illustrates the ways in which Elaine is implicated in the class and race biases of her sexual conditioning. Sensing in childhood that she and the females who directly inhabit her world are Other from and to males, and not yet recognizing that Cordelia, Mrs. Smeath and her mother are on some level acting out internalized patriarchal scripts of (white) femininity, this conditioning to which she is also subjected works to convince her that she must defend herself against members of her own sex. Ironically, however, she not only seeks comfort solely from men, but in childhood and early adulthood seeks this comfort from men who are socially marginalized or Othered on grounds of race and ethnicity. Although she ends up marrying twice and chooses for partners white men of the middle class, she is comforted in childhood by what she perceives to be the heroism of the Jewish boy who lives next door, and by her sense of affinity with her father's East Indian male graduate student. As a young adult, moreover, she desires to protect her East European male art instructor from the ethnocentrism of her male friends, and indeed chooses to become intimate with him despite the fact that he is already involved with her white female classmate and social acquaintance, Susie.
The narrator's identification or sense of affinity with ethnic or racial male Others cannot be attributed solely to a resistance on her part towards power structures that operate to marginalize or exclude, but must be critically analysed in terms of her (unwitting) participation in these structures. For not only does Elaine not assume any kind of connection with another woman, she does not in adulthood maintain a sense of affinity with the male Others of her youth, or with any other marginalized group or person. An exploration of the ways Elaine constructs--or is taught to construct--difference along lines of gender, class, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation clarifies these points.

Elaine's description of Brian Finestein as "heroic" and Mrs. Finestein as "exotic" reveals her internalization of the hegemonic cultural bias against Jewish identities. While her association of "Jewish" with money points to the stereotypical and anti-Semitic assumption that all Jewish persons are financially wealthy--Elaine says that Mrs. Finestein has diapers delivered to the house, gold earrings and candlesticks--she also unwittingly emphasizes the marginalization of Jewish persons or groups within mainstream WASP culture in her comment that "You wouldn't expect to see a Jew every day" (143).

An analysis of Elaine's perception of Mr. Banerji, shaped in part by her parents' racism, serves to exemplify that her childhood sense of affinity with him has more to do with her own subordinate status rather than with his. Paradoxically, she unself-consciously reads her subordinate status as tied up to (white) masculinity and not to white (male) superiority. As Frankenberg reminds us, femininities, "constructed in ways differentiated by race and culture," are simultaneously
“constructed in relation to masculinity” (85). Further demonstrating that one of the axis involved in the construction of white femininity is “white women themselves acting to choose or reject relationships and simultaneously to choose and reject forms of femininity” (89), Frankenberg tracks some of the complexities involved when a white woman’s affiliation with a man of color is tied up to her perception that, because of his difference, he has the “potential to free her from a form of femininity very much tied to her own class and race” (90).11

While Banerji cannot free Elaine in any concrete way from the mode of femininity into which she is initiated, and while she does not appear to have, as she says, “a crush on him,” he does represent to her a kind of escape route. On some level, while she knows they are both oppressed, she seems to understand that his racial oppression differs from the (white) gender biases to which she is subjected. Able to “sniff out misery in others now with hardly any effort at all” (137), she perceives Banerji as “a creature more like herself: alien and apprehensive” (138). Indeed, she states that her “wish to see him is anxiety, and fellow feeling. I want to see how he is managing, how he is coping with his life. . . . [I]f he can deal with whatever it is that’s after him, and something is. then so can I. Or this is what I think” (170).

But ironies abound here. First, that Mr. Banerji speaks with a “BBC voice” clearly points to hegemonic assumptions of difference and assimilation, and specifically to the long history of British colonialism. That is, exemplified here is the white elitist notion that the racial or ethnic Other must learn the laws and language of the British Empire if he or she is to secure a place in the order.
Although this is not unlike Elaine's situation in terms of being an "empire bloomer," she and her parents, their family unit being a microcosm of hegemonic Toronto society, remain either unaware of or elide the connection between race, economics and subordinate status. Although Banerji has a "perfect" English accent, Elaine's mother is still careful to enunciate clearly when speaking to him; Elaine's father, in his superior position as a white man, "sits at the head of the table, beaming like the Jolly Green Giant" and "deals the slices of dark and light" (137).

Moreover, when white racial politics at the university ensure that Banerji is passed over for a promotion, leaving him no choice but to return to India, Elaine's affinity to Banerji appears to be displaced onto her father; indeed, she thinks that her father in some way has been betrayed by the university:

"They wouldn't promote him," says my father. There's a lot behind they (not we), and wouldn't (not didn't). "He wasn't properly appreciated." I think I know what this means. My father's view of human nature has always been bleak, but scientists were excluded from it, and now they aren't. He feels betrayed. (307)

Although this passage is full of contradictions, Elaine does not question her father's position so much as she mirrors it, thus evading issues of power and both her father's and her own complicity therein. Indeed, while Elaine realizes there is "some obscurity" around Banerji's return to India, and while "it is not talked of much" (306), it is never spoken of again between Elaine and her parents.

The narrator's memorialization of Banerji, Mrs. Finestein and Miss Stuart in her painting titled Three Muses illustrates further her unwitting alliance to or complicity in white masculinist and elitist power structures. Critics who comment
on Elaine’s painting *Three Muses* suggest that Elaine memorializes each, and the three together, not only to repay them for the small acts of kindness they showed towards her, but as a way to align herself with oppressed cultures and groups. On one level, Elaine’s memorialization of them suggests both. Yet the fact that she is a financially-independent painter at all raises a number of contradictions and thus questions.

A number of critics read the narrator’s paintings in general as subversive and creative negotiations of her problematic relationships with women, and suggest that this speaks to the feminist pursuit of women’s solidarity. As I argue, however, her university education in the arts, her somewhat successful and financially independent position as an artist, and her mode of art (painting) necessarily complicate any analysis of how she negotiates the problematics of her same-sex relationships, and thus any assertion that her negotiation optimistically speaks to the feminist pursuit of women’s solidarity. As Audre Lorde cautions, “The actual requirements to produce the visual arts also help determine, along class lines, whose art is whose. In this day of inflated prices for materials, who are our sculptors, our painters, our photographers? When we speak of a broadly based women’s culture, we need to be aware of the effect of class and economic differences on the supplies available for producing art” (116).

This is not to suggest that white women of the dominant classes should forego a university education, or should not be painters. Rather, it is to show that the narrator is unaware of her position(s) of privilege, and how this unawareness plays out in her relationships or encounters with other women. Indeed, without
wishing to negate the value of the ways in which Elaine negotiate her sexual conditioning through her paintings, it is notable that, aside from *Three Muses*, she tracks through her paintings the contradictions of her life experience with the white women of the past—a tracking of which that does not, ultimately, resolve her ambivalence towards all other women.

Of her painting *Three Muses* in which Mr. Banerji, Mrs. Finestein and Miss Stuart (one of her elementary schoolteachers) figure, Elaine reveals that they do not appear

as they were, to themselves. God knows what they really saw in their own lives, or thought about. Who knows what death camp ashes blew daily through the head of Mrs. Finestein in those years right after the war? Mr. Banerji probably could not walk down a street here without dread, of a shove or some word whispered or shouted. Miss Stuart was in exile, from plundered Scotland still declining, three thousand miles away. . . . But why shouldn’t I reward them, if I feel like it? Play God. translate them into glory, in the afterlife of paint. Not that they’ll ever know. They must be dead by now, or elderly. Elsewhere. (429)

Striking here is Elaine’s assertion that they do not appear “as they were, to themselves.” and her rhetorical question concerning her right to “play God,” or to “translate them into glory.” In my reading, her assertion and question here expose simultaneously an engagement with difference and an elision of difference. As Frankenberg notes, one’s engagement with difference does not necessarily negate the danger of color evasion and its collateral, evasion of power. As she clarifies, “While certain kinds of difference or differentiation can be seen and discussed with abandon, others are evaded if possible” (152). Elaine’s passing reference to the Holocaust, to the racism of colonialism, and to “plundered Scotland” thousands of
miles away are just that—passing references. Implicit in her comment that these Others will never know about the painting or what she thinks—that they must be dead, elderly, or elsewhere—is the ironic intimation and indeed reinscription of how whites from the dominant classes have always spoken for and continue to try to speak for ethnic and racial Others. Also implicit here is the hegemonic bias against the elderly. That is, where racial and ethnic Others or the elderly might be in the established order remain precisely as Elaine through her painting and words puts them: “elsewhere.”

Again, however, Atwood makes explicit that the ways in which her narrator constructs and/or elides difference correspond to her (imposed) inability to negotiate the far reaching effects or various dimensions of her social conditioning. Her sense of pity for her East European art instructor, Mr. Hrbik, juxtaposed with her willingness to continue an affair with him despite his involvement with another woman of her own class and race, illustrates further the paradoxes of her affinity to power structures. Ironically, Elaine comes to Hrbik’s defense when her male friends call him a DP, a displaced person. While this serves to expose the ethnocentrism of her white male friends, and a confused desire on her part to subvert this bias, Elaine also comes to Hrbik’s defense when he abandons Susie, and indeed participates when he criticizes and lies to this woman: “Josef talks to me about Susie as if discussing a problem child . . . He implies she is being unreasonable. . . . I have no wish to put myself in the same category: irrational, petulant” (316). To be sure, Elaine agrees with Hrbik when he insists that “we are not to tell her about me; we
are to keep it a secret . . . In this there is the satisfaction of all secrets: I know something she doesn’t” (316).

When Susie is impregnated by Hrbik and attempts to perform an abortion alone in her apartment, she calls on Elaine for assistance. Although Elaine has an imaginary sense of affinity to Susie, the myriad layers of her conditioning ensure that the two women never connect. Indeed, while Elaine says that what Susie has done “belongs to the submerged landscape of things that are never said,” and that she knows on some imaginary level that she would have done the same “moment by moment, step by step”(341), “real” or symbolic logic again interferes. As she reveals, “there is also another voice; a small, mean voice, ancient and smug, that comes from somewhere deep inside my head: It serves her right” (341).

This push-pull dynamic between Elaine and Susie carries over to her encounters with white heterosexual and lesbian feminists of the middle class. Of the women artists she meets at the consciousness-raising meetings she attends in Vancouver, all of whom are white and some of whom are lesbians, Elaine oscillates between loneliness and exclusion and, very Cordelia-like, harsh judgment:

A number of these women are lesbians . . . I am ashamed of my own reluctance, my lack of desire; but the truth is that I would be terrified to get into bed with a woman. Women collect grievances, hold grudges and change shape. They pass hard, legitimate judgments. . . . Women know too much, they can neither be deceived nor trusted. . . . They make me more nervous than ever. . . . At times I feel defiant . . . Bitch, I think silently. Don’t boss me around. But I also envy their conviction, their optimism, their carelessness, their fearlessness about men, their camaraderie. I am like someone watching from the sidelines . . . (400-401)
Elaine's ambivalence towards women does not change over time. With the likes of (younger) women like Andrea at Sub-Version, she oscillates between her own tendency to judge and criticize and her fear that this woman is doing the same: "What I hear is what she isn't saying. Your clothes are stupid. Your art is crap. Sit up straight and don't answer back" (95).

Inevitably, Elaine's ambivalence towards heterosexual and lesbian women of her own class and race extends to women of the lower classes and of different races and/or ethnicities. Her brief encounters (for that is all they are) with the woman of Middle Eastern descent who asks her for money and with what appears to be the drunken First Nations woman serves to explicate further the paradoxes of power and women's estrangement from one another within and across hegemonic lines. When the woman of Middle-Eastern descent asks Elaine for money, she oscillates between guilt and suspicion. In response to the woman's statement that "They are killing many people," and that she has two children to feed, Elaine says: "how do I know she is what she purports to be? She could be a dope addict. . . . It's obscene to have such power; also to feel so powerless. Probably she hates me" (335).

Elaine's encounter with what appears to be the drunken First Nations woman is similar. Encountering her on a downtown Toronto street, Elaine notes that the woman's "tanned-looking skin around her brown eyes is red and puffy, her long black and gray hair is splayed across the sidewalk" (162). Pointing to the racism, economic subordination and sexism that intersect with the cultural stereotype of alcoholism in First Nations groups, it is a (presumably white) male
who in passing says "She's only drunk" (163). Horrified and guilt-ridden, and yet unable to walk away, Elaine stops to help her and ends up giving her money. Struck by the woman's words that she does not love her, however, Elaine oscillates between compassion, guilt and helplessness: "I walk away from her, guilt on my hands, absolving myself: I'm a good person. She could have been dying. Nobody else stopped. I'm a fool, to confuse this with goodness. I am not good. I know too much to be good. I know myself. I know myself to be vengeful, greedy, secretive and sly (163-64).

The contradictions of the narrator's brief encounters with women who differ from her in terms of class, race, sexual orientation and feminist beliefs are finally not unlike her encounters with the girls and women of her childhood. That is, Elaine's initiation into a mode of white bourgeois femininity works to ensure that she remains estranged from all women, beginning with her mother. Although her resistance to sexual politics is optimistic and indeed creates a fissure that allows her, at least to some extent, to make peace with Cordelia and to better understand her mother, her inability to negotiate how these politics are inextricably linked to all hegemonic forms ensures that she gets no further. On this level, then, Cat's Eye appears to be the most pessimistic of Atwood's recent novels. Through its demonstration of the sex, class and race biases of the narrator's psycho(hetero)sexual conditioning, however, as well as her limited horizon or vision as a result of this conditioning, a fissure is created. The novel becomes rather an imaginary symbol that allows the reader to access further that which the narrator cannot. In other words, through its disruption of white psychosexual cultural norms,
the novel acknowledges and exposes for re-vision not only the realities of oppression and privilege for young white girls and adult women of the middle or upper class, but the fact that their privilege is contingent on the realities of hegemonic oppression for all other groups.
My use of male theorists throughout this project is not at odds with my feminist project. Indeed, I rely on feminist extensions of Freud, Lacan, Jung, and Bakhtin. However, while I attempt to expose and address the sex, class and racial dimensions of traditional models throughout this project, the work of Freud and Lacan (as well as Jung, whom I address in the next chapter) has also been instrumental in making a cultural space for the complexities of the human psyche. In *Freud and Women*, for instance, Lucy Freeman and Herbert Strean devote an entire chapter to Freud's contributions in bringing to the forefront the importance of mental health, as well as our often untapped intellectual and creative potential. As Jacqueline Rose writes, moreover, and as Irigaray demonstrates throughout her work, “When Lacan is reproached with phallocentrism at the level of his theory, what is most often missed is that the subject’s entry into the symbolic order is equally an exposure of the value of the phallus itself.” In other words, by exposing the biases of white male thought, it becomes an explicit and obvious terrain for exploring ways to subvert these biases. See Freeman and Strean, pp. 197-230; Jacqueline Rose, p. 40; and the collection of essays in *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis. Feminism*, ed. by Abel, Christian and Moglen.

Irigaray notes that “Freudian concepts are on the whole connected to the model provided by thermodynamics” (“Women’s” 90). As Oppenheim explains further, to Darwin’s theory of natural and sexual selection in *The Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871), Herbert Spencer in his 1876 study entitled *Principles of Sociology* applied the scientific theory of energy conservation, or the first law of thermodynamics—that energy can neither be created nor destroyed: it can only change form—to argue that the female body had to conserve its energy for reproductive tasks (44).

As noted in my introduction, I do not suggest that heterosexual orientation is pathological. As June Rule writes, however, since heterosexuality is measured as the “norm” of sexual behavior, “we have no real of knowing what kinds of sexual creatures we would be if we had been allowed to grow up in our sexuality” (130). Irigaray notes further that existing political structures deny women the opportunity to “discover our sexual identity, the singularity of our desires, of our auto-eroticism, or our narcissism, of our heterosexuality and of our homosexuality” (Irigaray 44).

In “‘Meat Like You Like It’: The Production of Identity in Atwood’s ‘Cat’s Eye,’” Stephen Ahern also notes that Atwood’s depiction of the north corresponds to Lacan’s theory of a pre-linguistic state. While his article is useful as a starting point for an interrogation of how psychoanalytic models construct for the narrator “a contradictory subject-position,” and, by extension, how these models are constructed, his argument focuses on a strict analysis of (white) sexual difference, ironically reinforcing the models that ensure this is the case.

“Sameness” refers to Irigaray’s theory of male projection. Since the male’s origin and primordial desire is also located in fusion with the mother, he not only represses in the phallic stage his connection to his origin, but “projects” his primal needs and desires onto the mother-substitute he has been promised for his “assistance” in maintaining phallic law. Since ‘Woman’ in the symbolic exists only in relation to man or as an object of his desires and needs, however, the substitute he looks for is just that—a substitute. Although he desires what has become for him the mysterious mother/feminine/female, the Woman/Object of his desire is only a reflection of himself and of paternal law or what Irigaray calls the “representational economy.” Indeed, as Irigaray writes, “Everywhere he runs into the walls of his palace of mirrors.” See Irigaray, “This Sex” 99: *Speculum* 137.

See Margaret Whitford’s “Luce Irigaray and the Female Imaginary: Speaking as A Woman” for an overview of the various criticisms aimed at Irigaray’s theory, especially pp. 6-8.
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As Emma LaRoque writes, "being poor and having difficulties with alcohol (the two are inextricably related) has made many native people highly visible in Canadian society. . . . At the outset, let me say that Native people do have problems. There are Native individuals who are . . . on welfare, and perpetually drunk"; however, the cultural stereotype that all Native people have these problems not only obscures the imposed economic deprivation of many First Nations persons and groups but the fact that "being non-Native does not remove the possibility of such characteristics" and that alcoholism is indeed "a universal problem" (36-37).

Critical commentary surrounding the relationship between Cordelia and Elaine focuses by and large on the mirroring that goes on between them, and not on how this mirroring is dependent on the elision of racial and ethnic Others. See, for instance, Ahern, Cowart, Hengen, and Staels.

Carol Osborne and Judith McCombs argue that the narrator aligns herself with "Others" because she herself feels so alienated in Toronto culture. Yet, their papers do not question why her childhood sense of affinity to racial and ethnic "Others" is not carried into adulthood, nor how her socialization process attempts to ensure--and to a large extent, is successful in ensuring--that she participates in and perpetuates the status quo. As I argue, then, all of these factors work together and complicate any attempt on the narrator's part to negotiate her sense of identity and thus her relationships to other women and men.

While there is, to use the words of Ruth Frankenberg, "no one way to be Jewish" (217), the narrator assumes otherwise. For a discussion of the complexities of Jewish identities, see Frankenberg, White Women, Race Matters; Adrienne Rich, "Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity."

While Frankenberg draws on specific narratives provided by white women, and while her discussion of white women's involvement with men of color focuses on sexual or intimate adult relationships, her theorization of the complexities involved here is nonetheless useful for an analysis of how Elaine perceives her social landscape in terms of the construction of her femininity along lines of class, race and sexual preference.

Judith McCombs writes that "Three Muses is a triple portrait of the three adults who were kind to the alien child, and who were themselves aliens" (13); Carol Osborne notes that "Elaine includes these figures in her portrait because as a child, not only is she treated kindly by each one, but she identifies with all of them in their alienation from the dominant culture" (103). Coral Ann Howells notes that the narrator's "process of moving from the blindness of consciousness to the insight of imaginative seeing occurs in Elaine's reading of all her late paintings, [which includes] her awareness of mutual limits of understanding in "Three Muses"" (158-59).

See Coral Ann Howells's chapter on Cat's Eye, pp. 148-60; Judith McCombs, "Contrary Re-Memberings: The Creating Self and Feminism in 'Cat's Eye'; Carol Osborne, "Constructing the Self Through Memory: Cat's Eye as a Novel of Female Development"; Martha Sharpe, "Margaret Atwood and Julia Kristeva: Space-Time, the Dissident Woman Artist, and the Pursuit of Female Solidarity."

7 As Burke notes, Elizabeth Abel was the first to use the term "(e)merging" in her essay "(E)merging Identities: The Dynamics of Female Friendship in Contemporary Fiction by Women."

8 While there is, to use the words of Ruth Frankenberg, "no one way to be Jewish" (217), the narrator assumes otherwise. For a discussion of the complexities of Jewish identities, see Frankenberg, White Women, Race Matters; Adrienne Rich, "Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity."

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14 As Emma LaRoque writes, "being poor and having difficulties with alcohol (the two are inextricably related) has made many native people highly visible in Canadian society. . . . At the outset, let me say that Native people do have problems. There are Native individuals who are . . . on welfare, and perpetually drunk"; however, the cultural stereotype that all Native people have these problems not only obscures the imposed economic deprivation of many First Nations persons and groups but the fact that "being non-Native does not remove the possibility of such characteristics" and that alcoholism is indeed "a universal problem" (36-37).
The Robber Bride: Finding the Other Woman in the Self

We are all a part of everybody else . . . . We are all a part of everything.
Margaret Atwood, The Robber Bride (64)

But things are getting more confusing . . . . Who is them, and where do you draw the line?
Margaret Atwood, The Robber Bride (115)

While the Gileadean regime of The Handmaid's Tale forbids women's alliances, and while positive relations between and among women are absent in Cat's Eye, they become a palpable presence in Atwood's subsequent novel, The Robber Bride. Indeed, the three main protagonists form an alliance with each other and with an Other woman, because of this Other woman. On the level of mainstream culture, Zenia represents the beautiful, seductive and seemingly powerful femme fatale, the attractive and seductive Other woman. Because of Zenia, Charis and Roz both lose their men and are initially devastated: a draft-dodger of the Vietnam War, Billy disappears, ostensibly with Zenia, leaving Charis pregnant; Roz's husband commits suicide (or is thought by Roz to have committed suicide) after he leaves his marriage for Zenia and is subsequently abandoned by her. Although Tony's relationship with her husband remains intact, she comes to understand that her marriage is anything but a safety net.

On the level of the imaginary, however, the novel also communicates a resistance to hegemonic structures. An exploration of masculinist and feminist notions of the Other Woman, and, in turn, what the three main protagonists project onto and learn from Zenia, serves to track the ways in which each begins to embrace the female Other(s) that reside in their own psyches, and, by extension,
that which is repressed in or by the collective (white) male psyche of contemporary
Toronto culture. In other words, by exposing the reasons for which Others are either
accounted for, marginalized or erased within mainstream culture, the novel
acknowledges the fact that there are many different or other(ed) zones of experience
and culture within and outside of a hegemonic paradigm.

The notion and/or categorization of the Other or Otherness throughout the
novel is complicated nonetheless. Although all women are what Simone de
Beauvoir theorized as Other to men, Roz, Tony and Charis do not or would not
appear to be oppressed in any way. Roz is a successful businesswoman, Tony is a
university professor, and Charis, although she has to make ends meet, seems to
have the privilege of doing whatever she pleases. At least she is left alone or
dismissed. Yet the women do not fit neatly into the hegemonic mode of white
bourgeois femininity; for one, they are not all of the same WASP background as the
protagonists of Atwood's previous novels are. As the character Charis reveals, each
of the women “ended up here . . . [b]ecause of wars” (75).

While Roz struggles with her Jewish and Catholic identities, she also
negotiates her role as businesswoman within the large corporation she both owns
and runs, and her role as the good wife/mother outside of the workplace.
Underlying all of her struggles, however, is her internalization of what Naomi Wolf
calls the patriarchal “beauty myth.” Tony, who is “part Scottish, part English”
(79)--and not, as Roz keeps forgetting, “pure creme de la WASP” (75)--obsesses
about (male) history and war in order to flee her own volatile past and that of her
parents, and attempts to ignore her rather diminutive stature in both height and
profession. Charis, whose white racial identity is the only one made explicit in the novel, is told that her father was killed in the war; yet, while his identity is never revealed to her, there is also secrecy about her “mother’s wedding, or else the absence of it” (267). Having been physically abused by her mother as a child, moreover, as well as sexually abused by her uncle, she desires to transcend the material world and her physical body altogether, and is simply dismissed by others as a New Age flake or harmless lunatic.

In terms of gender, race and/or ethnicity, Shanita and Zenia appear to be the only Other(ed) women of the novel. Yet there is quite a difference in how each is Othered. Shanita, Charis’s employer, represents the token presence of women of color and/or female ethnic Others in contemporary Toronto society, a tokenization that is further consolidated in her role as owner of a trendy holistic shop which is not mainstream. Indeed, the frequently asked question of where she is from is “a question that bothers her a lot.” Although Charis tries to defend those who ask—“I think they mean, where were your parents from,’ says Charis, because that’s what Canadians usually mean when they ask that question”—Shanita understands that “‘What they mean is, when am I leaving’” (65).

The little agency Atwood gives to Shanita throughout the novel accurately depicts her marginal status in contemporary culture. Conversely, Zenia as the culturally sanctioned Other Woman or femme fatale is the central character around which the three main protagonists’ stories revolve. Significantly, however, Atwood makes explicit that there are very few differences between Zenia, the central character, and Shanita, the most marginal and culturally marginalized character.
First, Zenia and Shanita do not significantly differ in age. Zenia and the three main protagonists meet as university students in the 1960’s, and since the three main characters are now in their 50’s, we can assume that Zenia is around the same age. In one of the sections of the novel which focuses on the present, moreover, although Shanita reveals to Charis that age is all “in the mind and in her mind she was two thousand” (65), Charis reveals that if Shanita’s biological age is not close to her own, she is younger: her skin is “smooth and unwrinkled,” and although she refuses to tell her biological age, she “isn’t young--she must be well over forty” (65).

In terms of race or ethnicity, the color of Shanita’s skin is “an indeterminate colour, neither black nor brown nor yellow ... [nor] beige. ... It’s some other word.” Indeed, Shanita’s racial and/or ethnic backgrounds remain a mystery, for while she “throws out hints,” she also “changes her story”:

Sometimes she’s part Chinese and part black, with a West Indian grandmother. ... [B]ut there are other grandmothers too, one from the States and one from Halifax, and one from Pakistan and one from New Mexico. ... But sometimes she’s part Ojibway, or else part Mayan, and one day she was even part Tibetan. (66)

Zenia also changes her story. Although she is the central figure of the novel around which the protagonists’ stories revolve, her racial and/or ethnic backgrounds, like Shanita’s, are impossible to determine. Ironically, moreover, the hints concerning their maternal genealogies ensure that this is the case. Zenia is at one time, and simultaneously, the daughter of a White Russian woman, daughter of a Romanian gypsy, and daughter of a Catholic and Jewish woman who was victim
of the Holocaust. While the intersection between Jewishness and whiteness raises a number of political questions concerning what Frankenberg calls "racial naming and boundary making," the "gypsy," a member of a nomadic people of Europe and North America, is of Hindu origin and has dark skin and dark hair (Concise Oxford). While "White Russian" is another term for Belorussian, a native of Belarus in eastern Europe, a play on words here also suggests that Zenia indicates to Tony that her mother is a "white" Russian to complicate why she might look "otherwise." As Zenia says to Roz in yet another one of her stories, "[L]ook at me! I'm hardly Aryan" (419).

The name Atwood designates to this character is also significant. In an attempt to track the meaning of the name "Zenia," Tony observes that the "the truth about [Zenia] . . . lies out of reach, because--according to the records, at any rate--she was never even born" (535). In this sense, Zenia is as old as Shanita feels: two thousand years old. What Tony's research reveals, moreover, is that Zenia, like Shanita, could be any number of different things from any number of different cultures:

Xenia, a Russian word for hospitality, a Greek one pertaining to the action of a foreign pollen upon a fruit; Zenaida, meaning daughter of Zeus, and the name of two early Christian martyrs: Zillah, Hebrew, a shadow; Zenobia, the third-century warrior queen of Palmyra in Syria, defeated by Emperor Aurelian; Xeno, Greek, a stranger, as in xenophobic; Zenana, Hindu, the women's quarters or harem; Zen, a Japanese meditational religion; Zendic, an Eastern practitioner of heretical magic . . . (535)

Despite Atwood's characterization of Shanita and Zenia as having multiple stories and/or backgrounds, there remains the question of why a woman
like Zenia, and not Shanita, is the one to have the effect she does on the main characters. First, while the passages that point to the many possible stories or backgrounds of both Shanita and Zenia suggest that they metaphorically represent, to appropriate the words of Shanita, "two-thousand-year-old" women of various cultural, racial and/or ethnic backgrounds. Shanita and Zenia still exist within and/or are products of a culture that operates on a system of the Same, a culture which is theirs and not theirs. As I argue, then, the reasons for which Zenia, and not Shanita, is able to have the effect she does on the three main characters are imbricated in a white politics of female beauty. An exploration of the politics of beauty in terms of Shanita's and Zenia's contradictory acceptance and/or marginalization serves to expose some of the underlying reasons for which women's "differences" are culturally constructed, and thus for what and whose purposes. In addition, it serves to illustrate how these complex political structures get played out between and among women.

Implicit in Atwood's ambiguous references concerning the racial and/or ethnic identities of both Shanita and Zenia--who, ironically, would appear to be the only Other(ed) women of the novel--is how hegemonic biases intersect with cultural notions or constructions of the (white) *femme fatale*. To use Adrienne Rich's term, "gynephobia" is at the root of this construct. First, while the *femme fatale* of popular culture might appear to have power over the men she seduces, a deconstruction of what she represents reveals that she is no more than the beautiful and desirable, and perhaps feared (if the men who use her have a wife or partner kept at home) mistress and/or prostitute.
Serving male fantasies, and, as we shall see, the perpetuation of so-called traditional archetypes (read patriarchal binaries) that have long defined women as good/evil and/or as madonna/whore, the construct is also dependent on classism and racism for its coherence. It speaks to and perpetuates white male elitism in that a small segment of the (white) male population can afford to financially realize this half of the “feminine” fantasy: the keeping of the femme fatale or beautiful mistress, and/or the use of the prostitute, depending on how you look at, requires considerable financial means. Sex, class and race biases enter in another way, however. Since white males have traditionally had and continue to have more access to economic means and all other forms of power than do men of color, it is not surprising that the cultural representation of the femme fatale is usually Caucasian, though not always of the middle or upper classes, and, of course, very young and very thin.5

To complicate matters, while Zenia’s beauty and nothing else appears to be her ticket of ‘freedom’ and ostensible power with men in mainstream culture, Shanita appears to be just as beautiful, if not more so. As Charis observes, Shanita “is the most beautiful woman she has ever seen”:

[her] hair itself is black, neither curly nor frizzy nor wavy, thick and shining and luscious, like pulled taffy or lava. Like hot black glass. Shanita coils it, and winds it... [o]r else lets it hang down her back in one thick curl. She has wide cheekbones, a trim high-bridged nose, full lips, and large darkly fringed eyes, which are a startling shade that shifts from brown to green... (65)

Ironically, the description of Shanita’s physical looks points to various races and cultural differences concerning female beauty, including the white race and white
Western cultural practices. Significantly, however, while Shanita's physical looks connote difference, the countless references to Zenia's beauty throughout the novel point to white Western standards and cultural practices only. However, these references tell us more about the politics involved concerning female beauty than about Zenia's racial and/or ethnic background(s).

Throughout the novel, Zenia's physical looks are associated with the practices and standards of the mainstream (white) fashion industry. Even in her 50's, Zenia "looks, as always, like a photo, a high-fashion photo done with hot light so that all freckles and wrinkles are bleached out and only the basic features remain: in her case, the full red-purple mouth . . . the huge deep eyes and finely arched eyebrows, the high cheekbones tinged with terracotta" (38). Notably, Atwood does not specify here that Zenia has "freckles"--which are suggestive of very fair skin--only that fashion photographs ensure that freckles are erased when present. Indeed, "in [Zenia's] case." this is not the case. Unlike Shanita's "wide cheekbones," moreover, Zenia's high cheekbones are also suggestive of conventional white female beauty. Yet, the "cast of Zenia's high cheekbones," not to mention her "slight accent." are also referred to as Slavic (190), or perhaps Finnish (313).

Zenia is associated with the color white a few times throughout the novel. Contextualized, however, these associations are not only ambiguous but might be read as projections on the part of the characters who make them. Roz examines an "eight-by-ten glossy of Zenia" and, focused on how beautiful Zenia looks, notices how the V-necked dress she wears reveals "the long white throat" (111, my
emphasis). Significantly, Roz is looking at a photograph that was taken in the 1970's for the cover of WiseWomanWorld. Since we cannot be certain of Zenia's racial and/or ethnic backgrounds, it is not clear whether "the long white throat" represented in the photograph points to Zenia's white racial identity or to the white fashion industry's "glossing" over or whitewashing of darker or black skin color for the sake of objectified female beauty. As Susan Willis notes, the more recent strategies of the (white) fashion industry involve the racist and ethnocentric marketing of "the new ethnicity"--the depiction of white and ethnic models as all having "beige" skin; however, "blacks as replicants of whites has been the dominant mass-market strategy for some twenty years" (184). Also significant is the fact that Roz is the character tyrannized most by (white) cultural beauty myths: indeed, while scanning the photo of Zenia, she is not focused on the politics of beauty but simply on what these politics ensure she sees and is threatened by: the Other Woman or (white) femme fatale.

Although Charis first reveals that the apparition which appears to her, at a moment when she feels she has lost her spiritual grounding, is a "woman's face," she also decides that this "woman's face" is Zenia's. As we shall see in more detail, however, since Zenia awakens in Charis her (culturally) suppressed and abused Other, Karen, her assumption that this "white face, indistinct in the murkiness, in the cloudy air" (54) is Zenia's is ambiguous. Subsequent to seeing this apparition which she decides is Zenia, Charis thinks "Zenia will reappear, her white face looming in the glass oblong" (57). While this suggests on one level that Zenia enables Charis to see a reflection of her own (white) repressed self, Zenia as
multiple and ambiguous in the mirror or looking-glass also points to a feminist re-
vision of the *imago* encountered at the Lacanian mirror stage. Although Lacan
would not have it this way, the interchangeability of Charis and Zenia as multiple
female Others in the mirror does not split Charis’s first sense of a coherent identity
into two, but rather allows her to begin integrating what has been culturally
Other(ed) and thus suppressed.

The color white comes up again when Charis learns that Zenia has cancer.
Alarmed by this news, Charis thinks that Zenia’s skin “is white as mushrooms”
(254). Atwood’s simile here is significant. Mushrooms of course are not necessarily
white. Although the *Concise Oxford* defines the color of mushrooms as “pale
pinkish-brown,” which points again to the ambiguities of the color of Zenia’s skin.
this definition does not account for the color of all (foreign) mushrooms on
supermarket shelves, such as the dark Japanese Shitake mushroom. Mushrooms.
moreover, are proverbially associated with rapid growth (”mushroom growths”).
and often with the rapid growth of cancerous tumors. Finally, Charis herself
associates being white with a psychological sense of dis-ease and physical illness:
“Charis is stuck with being white. A white rabbit. Being white is getting more and
more exhausting. There are so many bad waves attached to it, left over from the
past but spreading through the present . . . . It gives her anemia just to think about
it” (66). Her reference to Zenia’s skin as “white as mushrooms,” then, at the very
moment when she learns that Zenia has cancer and invites her into her life and
fragmented psyche, does not necessarily point to Zenia’s white racial identity, but.
and as we shall see in more detail for each of the three main characters, to the ironies, ambiguities and thus significance of what Charis projects onto her.

While Zenia's racial and/or ethnic backgrounds remain a mystery, or, when hinted at, highly ambiguous, there is no mystery in why she has the power to seduce the men with whom she comes into contact. As Zenia tells Roz, "Looking the way I do doesn't help, you know. Men don't see you as person, they just see the body..." (422). What thus becomes significant is that "no matter how much of [Zenia] is manufactured, it makes no difference... You are what they see... Zenia is no longer the original, she's the end result" (118). In other words, the "manufacturing" of (white) female beauty works to ensure the erasure and elision of "difference." or, as is the case here for Zenia, the erasure of "the original." To be sure, many of the numerous references to Zenia's physical appearance indicate that her looks have been manipulated and manufactured by plastic surgery. For instance, implicit in Zenia's comment that she "got [her] nose done" because "[she] didn't want to be Jewish" (422) is the ironic suggestion that her nose once resembled Shanita's: "high-bridged."

Turning to the three main protagonists, and the reasons for which a woman like Zenia and not Shanita is able to have the effect on them that she does, I argue that Zenia is or appears to be conventionally "white" enough to fill or play the role of the culturally sanctioned (white) femme fatale. While Zenia's multiple backgrounds suggest that she does not fit neatly into a hegemonic paradigm of what constitutes the white beautiful woman or white femininity, the countless references to her physical looks suggest the opposite. As we have seen in The Handmaid's
Tale and Cat's Eye, and speaking of women only, all women are Other to men, racial and/or ethnic Others are rendered non-existent and/or, like Others of the lower class(es), are useful for specific purposes of the white (male) elite. The absence of the elderly, moreover, particularly in the context of an analysis of women and beauty, is a conspicuous indication of the hegemonic assumption that they are useless or undesirable. Women like Zenia, however, "conventionally" beautiful or resembling the mainstream fashion model--usually white or, if another color, exoticized, manipulated or manufactured to fit into a white racist paradigm--are frequently given a "pass" or, to complicate matters, attempt to use their physical looks to "pass" through hegemonic barriers.

Whether this is what Zenia has to do and/or chooses to do is not known. But that is one of the significant points here. All we know is what the three main female characters and their male partners project on to her. Since the indoctrination into hegemonic forms on the part of Atwood's female characters attempts to ensure that they do not recognize and/or perceive the (in)significance of "difference" as a hegemonic means to keep women estranged from one another, Tony, Charis and Roz are no exception. At the same time, however, their own stories and backgrounds also reveal the complexities of the ways in which they too are Other within and across hegemonic lines. As a nuanced reading of The Robber Bride reveals, then, while the women are not exempt from indoctrination into (white) male thought, the various ways in which Zenia appears simultaneously to resemble or follow and to differ from or resist traditional notions of the (white) femme fatale
forces them to recognize that there is more complexity to this Other Woman than meets the eye.

The question of whose eye has the power of judgment is thus part of the answer to the complex demonstration and/or categorization of the Other and Otherness throughout the novel. By demonstrating in the novel that “[i]n popular parlance the Other woman is the mistress, the rival, the sexual threat” (Michie 3), Atwood once again creates a site from which to expose and complicate that which “goes without saying” or that which is elided in contemporary (Toronto) culture. Indeed, because Zenia simultaneously represents white, ethnic and/or racial Others, objectified sexual Other, subversive female Other, and ruthless predator, an analysis of what the protagonists project onto her, and embrace in themselves because of her, creates for them an imaginary space in which to begin their own processes of individuation. At the same time, it creates an imaginary space in which all Other women, including Shanita, are accounted for.

This is not to suggest that Zenia epitomizes an ideal female Other. The complexities of her character cannot be conflated with what Mae Henderson explains as “the multiple and complex social, historical, and cultural positionality” of black women from which “black women speak” and “which, in effect, constitutes black female subjectivity” (147). At the same time, however, an exploration of the complexities and positionality of Zenia and Shanita, juxtaposed with the complexities and positionality of the three main characters, resists what Ann duCille cautions as the recent feminist privileging of black difference and how hegemonic norms are reinscribed by way of this privileging.
complexities that (e)merge by juxtaposing Shanita’s cultural marginalization with Zenia’s cultural acceptance, juxtaposed in turn with the various positions of the three main protagonists, yields multiple readings and thus points to the multiplicity and diversity of all women within and across hegemonic lines.

For the remainder of this chapter, I explore the ways in which the three main characters negotiate the entry of the Other Woman into their psyches. In tracking their psychological journeys, I rely on feminist extensions of the Jungian individuation process—the process by which the divided or conscious and unconscious self is integrated by an awareness of the “voices” or “others” which are either repressed within, imposed upon, or invited into the psyche, which in turn necessitates the integration of the self with the community or world at large.

Prior to meeting Zenia and indeed inviting her in, each of the protagonists is psychically split: Tony Fremont, the rational and cool history professor is also Tnomerf Ynot, her rebellious and repressed other; Charis is the rebellious other of Karen, her abused and frightened child-self whom Charis has buried deep in her unconscious: Rosalind Greenwood, her Catholic alias, is Roz Grunwald, her other and culturally othered Jewish self. Yet, in order to provide a reading of the ways in which the protagonists’ repressed Others are awakened and negotiated because of an Other woman, which in turn necessitates their processes of individuation, an analysis of the ways in which traditional Jungian thought does not account for women or difference is necessary.12 Ironically, a re-vision of the Jungian individuation process justifies the search for women’s differences and an imaginary space that acknowledges women’s differences, and indeed provides a generative
and dynamic space from which to begin that search. With an understanding of
Otherness, how it is accepted or elided in our culture, an interrogation and re-vision
of Jung’s theory of individuation is useful.

For Jung, “Individuation means becoming an “in-dividual.”” [an indivisible
self] . . . We could therefore translate individuation as “coming to selfhood” or
“self-realization” (147). The arrival or attempt to arrive at self-realization and
selfhood occurs, according to Jung, with an understanding of universal archetypes
as behavioral guides, which in turn necessitates a negotiation and integration of the
conscious self with the personal and collective unconscious. For Jung, individuation
must first be understood as the opposite of individualism. As he writes, the failure to reflect on and to grasp the so-called universal mysteries that
form and inform our psyches results in individualism, or in a consciousness that is
“imprisoned in the petty, oversensitive, personal world of the ego” which thus
requires compensation by “unconscious counter-tendencies” (152) such as
projection.

As we will see, Jung’s ideas of projection are useful. An understanding of
what we project onto others, as well as what others project onto us, is potentially
liberating on both a personal and collective level. However, Jung’s differentiation
between what he calls the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious is
problematic. While the personal unconscious, or “superficial layer of the
unconscious” (299), contains everything we “know” and everything we have
“repressed but [is] capable of becoming conscious” (140), the collective
unconscious is characterized not as
individual but universal. . . [I]t has contents and
modes of behaviour that are more or less the same every-
where and in all individuals. It is, in other words, identical
in all men [sic] and thus constitutes a common psychic
substrate of a suprapersonal nature which is present in every
one of us. (299-300)

The "contents" Jung refers to here are what he calls archetypes. Although
difficult to define, Naomi Goldenberg writes that the characteristic quality of the
archetype "is the idea that [they] are transcendent to the physical, human world and
that they are, in part at least, not dependent on human or material contingency"
(Resurrecting 97). For instance, Jung posits that the Mother archetype is universally
associated with "fertility" and "fruitfulness," as well as with "[h]ollow objects such
as ovens and cooking vessels . . . and, of course, the uterus"; each of these symbols,
he writes, "can have a positive, favourable meaning or a negative, evil meaning"
(345).

The binary thinking concerning the mother here sets off alarms for the
feminist reader. But Jung complicates matters further. While he asserts that
archetypes are "irrepresentable" (86), he also claims that the effects of an archetype
are manifested in symbols, images or ideas. As he writes, "a symbol is the best
possible expression for an unconscious content whose nature can only be guessed,
because it is still unknown" (302). But as James Hillman states, this cannot be so:

So far all we can say is that because of Freud and Jung
we can now sense symbols where once we couldn't.
They developed our symbolic consciousness. . . . Once
we are in a symbolic attitude, we can indeed see anything
as a symbol. But we have entered this symbolic attitude
and see symbols because we have learned what symbols
are by amplification [by finding a symbol's meaning in a
dictionary or Jungian index], by symbology [by the study
of symbols]. . . . So the symbolic attitude too is based on what we do or have done enabling us to see something as a symbol. (71)

Arguing against this kind of critique, traditional Jungian thought differentiates between semiotics and the symbolic--the former referring to the study of signs and the latter, in Jung's view, to "the symbolic expression as the best possible formulation of a relatively unknown thing [or archetype], which for that reason cannot be more clearly or characteristically expressed" (qtd in Hillman 66). As feminist semiotician Julia Kristeva points out, however, it was precisely semiotics or the study of signs that discovered "there is a general social law, that this law is the symbolic dimension which is given in language and that every social practice offers a specific expression of that law" (25).

As a number of feminist writers have argued, then, Jung's notion of the archetype and/or manifestation of the effects of an archetype is useful for analysing the psychic contents and social practices of the hegemonic order, or, as Carol Christ puts it in her gender analysis of Jungian theory, "the symbol productions of the male psyche, as found in myths, dreams, rituals, and literature created by men" (67). Revising this, however, we might re-read the personal unconscious as constituting an imaginary psychic space--as everything women "know" and everything many of us have "repressed but [is] capable of becoming conscious" (140)--and the collective unconscious as constituting the symbolic order, an order which serves to construct a "common psychic substrate of a suprapersonal nature . . .
that effectively elides the necessity to analyse how power structures inform social practices.

The individuation process might thus be approached not only as an individual goal to assimilate into consciousness (and thus to subvert) the ways in which many women unwittingly internalize hegemonic forms, but as a collective goal to assimilate into the hegemonic or symbolic order the existence and expression of the imaginary. Ironically, then, there is clearly a necessity for "unconsciousness-raising"—for a collective awareness of how social hegemonies or hegemonic models participate in keeping (and speaking of women only) many women estranged from themselves and one another.

Jung was more right than he knew in stating that "on the way to assimilating the unconscious [one] can be certain that he [or she] will escape no difficulty that is an integral part of his [or her] nature" (80). With the introduction of Zenia into their lives, the three main protagonists of The Robber Bride are suddenly forced to begin the process of individuation. Set in present-day Toronto, the opening chapter introduces the women in the context of their monthly luncheon date at the restaurant named The Toxique. Over the years, and because of Zenia, the women "have developed a loyalty to one another" (33). For Tony, these women "have gallantry, they have battle scars, they've been through fire; and each of them knows things about the others, by now, that nobody else knows" (33). For Charis, these women are "part of her pattern, for this life" (50). And for Roz, "these two women are safe . . . nothing's being decided, nothing's being demanded: and
nothing’s being withheld either, because the two of them know everything already. They know the worst (114).

Each believes or wants to believe that Zenia is dead. Reportedly killed in an explosion in the Middle East, each was present some years ago when her ashes were ostensibly buried. Since that time, however, although they no longer speak of Zenia when they meet, she is “here at the table all the same”; the women “can’t let her go” (34). Having never left their psyches, then, Zenia enters The Toxique. Significantly, the name of the restaurant is suggestive of both a poison and toxic and of a pleasurable (or imaginary) intoxicant, and sets the stage for the duality, ambiguity and contradictions that follow. Indeed, for the three main characters, Zenia and her presence have been and continue to be both a threat and a necessity.

The threat Zenia poses lies in the women’s internalization of the binary thought that has for centuries defined (white) women and benefited those in power. Saint or whore, good or bad, (white) women are defined as the archetypal good wife and mother, or the ultimate male sexual fantasy--the femme fatale. Women who fall through the cracks, moreover, are often defined as neurotic, unstable or mad. Jung’s anima-animus model, not unlike his archetypal model of the mother, corresponds directly to this kind of binary thinking. Theorizing that each individual has a contrasexual personality--that there is both a masculine and feminine quality of each individual soul (162)--Jung explains the anima as the man’s unconscious experience of the female or feminine, and the animus as the woman’s unconscious experience of the male or masculine. Arguing that the path to individuation involves a negotiation of the “other” sex that exists in the unconscious psyche.
however, the model itself clearly exposes hegemonic projections of (white) femininity.

While Jung describes the animus as “rather like an assembly of fathers or dignitaries of some kind who lay down incontestable, ‘rational,’ judgments”--“sayings and opinions scraped together more or less unconsciously from childhood on, and compressed into a canon of average truth, justice and reasonableness” (181), the ostensible “numinous” and dynamic qualities of the anima are characterized as evil or angelic:

Everything the anima touches becomes numinous--unconditional, dangerous, taboo, magical. She is the serpent in the paradise of the harmless man with good resolutions and still better intentions. . . . [T]he anima can also appear as an angel of light, a psychopomp who points the way to the highest meaning. . . . (324-325)

This binary thinking again sounds alarms. Indeed, it is not enough that Jung cautioned against taking his concept of the anima and animus literally since, as he maintains, archetypes are finally “irrepresentable,” or that he claimed that the effects of the anima and animus have “a most disturbing influence on the ego” (qtd. in Storr 91). While this assumes a space in which to theorize the effects of culture on the manifestation or symbolic representation of archetypes, Jung also posits that the archetypal nature of the female sex is characterized by the maternal principle of Eros, or the principle of relatedness, and the archetypal nature of the male sex by the paternal principle of Logos, or the analytical principle (Goldenberg, "Feminist" 443).
By unpacking these contradictions and double standards, it becomes clear that while the individuation process requires that women negotiate what Jung posits is our innate and contrasexual personality, women of course have been (traditionally) barred access to the realm of Logos.\textsuperscript{18} Valued for her Eros function only, Jung ranks (white) woman’s “outstanding characteristic” as her ability to “do anything for the love of a man,” and the “[l]ove for a thing” as “a [white] man’s prerogative” (qtd. in Goldenberg, “Feminism” 16). To be sure, a woman who takes on endeavors other than pleasing men is not credited for assimilating into consciousness her animus side, but is, and irritatingly so, in danger of being animus-possessed, of losing the feminine qualities that accord to her nature.\textsuperscript{19}

Prior to the disruption Zenia causes in their lives, Tony, Charis and Roz are willing to do “anything for the love of a man.” While Zenia is for the male characters the “dangerous,” “taboo,” and “magical” (white) \textit{femme fatale}, the three women represent (white) maternal anima figures, the sources to which the white male characters turn for unconditional support and nurturing. For instance, Charis not only financially supports and caters to Billy, but does not question the incongruity between her lack of sexual desire and her willingness to satisfy his sexual “urgency”; indeed, “[h]e loved her the way she was” and “[t]hey both wanted the same thing: for Billy to be happy” (239). As for West, while Zenia is an exotic anima figure or desire incarnate, he thinks of Tony “as kind and beneficent. And forgiving, of course” (16). Which she is. On more than one occasion. Insecure and fearful of abandonment, she does not think of herself, but rather thinks of West as “kindly and susceptible” and in need of protection (129).
Blaming herself for her husband’s infidelities and abandonment, Roz experiences inadequacy for what she is not, and for not knowing what to be: “If she’d only been—what?—prettier, smarter, sexier even, better somehow; or else worse, more calculating, more unscrupulous, a guerrilla fighter—Mitch might still be here” (96). She does not stand a chance, however, since she has always represented to her husband possessions, solidity, the domestic virtues, hearth and home, long usage. Mother-of-his-children. The den. Whereas whatever other body may currently be occupying his field of vision will have other nouns attached to it: adventure, youth, freedom, the unknown, sex without strings. (345)

Although the anima projections on the part of the characters’ male partners expose aspects of the repressed contents and social practices of white male culture, these projections are, by default, also internalized by each of the women. Roz agrees with Charis’s sentiment that Zenia “makes me sick of myself” (39), and Tony, who feels she “could never compete with Zenia” (185), now feels “more than small and absurd: she feels non-existent” (147). The following passage captures this transference and the sexual politics that ensue:

Male fantasies, male fantasies, is everything run by male fantasies? Up on a pedestal or down on your knees, it’s all a male fantasy: that you’re strong enough to take what they dish out, or else too weak to do anything about it. Even pretending you aren’t catering to male fantasies is a male fantasy: pretending you’re unseen, pretending you have a life of your own, that you can wash your feet and comb your hair unconscious of the ever-present watcher peering through the keyhole in your head, if nowhere else. You are a woman with a man inside watching a woman. (456)
What the men project onto the women, and what the women absorb as a result of this projection, is only one piece of a very intricate puzzle. From a traditional Jungian perspective, the women’s feelings of inadequacy and their subsequent rage towards Zenia is a manifestation of what Jung refers to as the archetypal “shadow,” one of the many “inner cast of characters” or “voices” that resides within the unconscious, and which, for individuation, must be recognized and negotiated. Mostly defined by Jung as the “dark aspects of the personality” (qtd. in Storr 91)—archetypal dark qualities such as anger and envy, ostensibly possessed by everyone—he also claims that the shadow is not “wholly bad” but simply that “convention” represses its lighter qualities. As he writes, the shadow “is merely somewhat inferior, primitive, unadapted and awkward. . . . It even contains childish or primitive qualities which would in a way vitalize and embellish human existence, but convention forbids!” (qtd. in Storr 90).

Following this argument through, we might question how “convention forbids” the integration of this part of our psyches, which would “vitalize and embellish human existence.” Jung does approach this question; but since his theory is dependent on the notion of transcendent archetypes, he is forced to circumscribe it. While he notes that collective shadow projection—recognizable in war, for instance—occurs because of a state or State of ego-consciousness due to social, political and religious dogmas that make individuals “ever-ready victim[s] of some wretched ‘ism’” (90-91), he did not make these “isms” accountable for the (universal) oppression of women, for racism, for ethnocentrism, or for anti-Semitism.
Circumscribing an analysis of the effects of culture on the individual, then, Jung theorizes instead that a negotiation of the shadow or inner voices necessitates the annihilation of ego-consciousness or the ever-troublesome ego—"that touchy, egotistical bundle of personal wishes, fears, hopes, and ambitions which always has to be compensated or corrected by unconscious counter-tendencies" (152). However, just as the Jungian notion of universal archetypes is against women, so is the idea of ego-annihilation or Jung's cautioning against individualism.

As Demaris Wehr points out, what women need to annihilate is "the false self system [culture] has imposed on [them]" (103). She thus theorizes that in order for women to understand and negotiate their shadows or voices of envy, anger, self-hatred and self-destruction, they must understand these voices as internalized hegemonic prescriptions and projections (20). The reasons for which the main protagonists of the novel feel threatened by or inadequate next to Zenia might thus be understood in terms of a transference that has to do with something "other" than their underdeveloped and/or petty ego-consciousness. In terms of her characterization as the threatening sexual Other, Zenia is and fulfils, as we have seen, what the women fear as the fantasy "anima" figure of their male partners. Having internalized a sense or voice of inadequacy for not being able to fulfil this half of the male fantasy, the jealousy and fear experienced on the part of the three main protagonists correspond precisely to what they have been taught to feel.

However, if understood as making audible how their so-called universal shadow qualities or voices have been imposed upon them, their voices of inadequacy or self-hatred ironically speak volumes about the various political
structures at play in the hegemonic suppression of all female Others. What “convention forbids” is women’s solidarity, which would “vitalize and embellish human existence” for women. Optimistically, then, the voices of anger and envy, of self-hatred and self-destruction on the part of the three main characters become too loud for comfort upon the arrival of Zenia, the Other woman. Significantly, the Other woman is the impetus for their negotiation of these voices, and their lives because of her (painful as the process is) are not only vitalized and embellished, but they form an alliance.

What the three main characters have repressed is, to use Jung’s words, only “capable of becoming conscious” (140) through a negotiation of an Other woman—an Other woman who is not only foreign to them as a femme fatale, but whose imaginary significance or multiplicity is also foreign to them. Zenia as dark and light shadow, or as a symbolic and imaginary figure, is the impetus for the characters’ negotiation of what on some level they have always known. When Zenia criticizes Roz for controlling both her husband and her son, Larry, for never giving them any credit, and for being Larry’s “problem” (510), Roz wants to kill her—her “own monster” that “broke loose” (111). Yet, Roz is also the one to hire a private detective to track her husband and son, and in her confused attempt to protect Larry, she is not, until she lets Zenia in, able to see his difference, that he is gay and that she has not given him any space in which to confide in her or to come out (528).

For Tony, who is “prone” to “intellectual web-spinning” (151), the figure of Zenia forces her to realize that “[a]ll her wars are hypothetical” and that, until she allows Zenia in, she is “incapable of real action”:
help yourself to some righteous indignation, you little snot. You always were the most awful two-faced hypocrite, Tony. A smug dog-in-the-manger prune-faced little shit with megalomaniac pretensions. You think you have some kind of adventurous mind, but spare me! At heart you're a coward, you hole yourself up in that bourgeois playpen of yours with your warped little battle-scars collection, you sit on poor West as if he's your very own fresh-laid fucking egg! (480)

Zenia awakens Charis's vulnerable and angry child-self, Karen--her "dark core" that has been waiting to "get back into Charis's body and to use it to murder" (498). Of course nothing of the sort happens. Rather, upon the entry of Zenia and/or Karen, Charis hears what she has always known--that she allows herself to be taken advantage of by men and that, like Tony, she is resistant to act: "Billy didn't love you . . . Wake up! You were a free meal ticket! . . . He thought you were so stupid you'd give birth to an idiot. He thought you were a stunned cunt, to be exact": to put it another way, "he was just an excuse for you; he lets you avoid your life" (495).

On the level of culture or the symbolic order, the protagonists' initial focus on their male partners, at the expense of their identities and integrity, must be understood in terms of the(ir) past and present, volatile sites that serve as microcosms of the larger sociopolitical order of Toronto culture. In my reading, Tony's initial obsession with West and with (male) history and war serves as a hegemonic device to "silence the echoes" (178) or voices of her own past and of women throughout history. Her role as care-taker and her obsession with her work serve to repress not only her own rebellious Other--her inner self that allows her to survive a volatile childhood--but, on a broader scale, the potential of women
collectively rebelling in the event that the biases and lies of history and culture were exposed.

Tony is also the first to let Zenia in. Although she works hard to maintain a (false) sense of stability, she also knows that Zenia’s entry is a necessity:

people like Zenia can never step through your doorway, can never enter and entangle themselves in your life, unless you invite them in. There has to be a recognition, an offer of hospitality, a word of greeting. . . . The question she asks herself now is simply: why did she do it? What was there about her, and also about Zenia, that made such a thing not only possible but necessary? Because she did issue an invitation, there’s no doubt about it. She didn’t know she was doing it, but ignorance in such matters is no defense. She opened the door wide, and in came Zenia, like a long-lost friend, like a sister, like a wind, and Tony welcomed her. (133)

The ambiguous “word of greeting” between the two women, or moment of “recognition,” occurs when Zenia asks Tony what her “obsession” is. Startled because she knows that if you have an obsession “you aren’t supposed to admit it.” Tony responds with “Raw” when she has meant to say, or at least thinks she has meant to say, “War” (150). Zenia is intrigued. Wondering which word was the magic word—raw or war—Tony thinks that “[p]robably it was the two of them together; the doubleness. That would have had high appeal, for Zenia” (129).

But doubleness and contradiction also appeal to Tony. Tnomerf Ynot is Tony Fremont’s mischievous, outrageous, and repressed Other. Indeed, Tony’s Other language—her left-handed reversal of words—is “her seam, it’s where she’s sewn together, it’s where she could split apart. Nevertheless, she still indulges in it. A risky nostalgia” (22). Although a “risky nostalgia”—suggestive of both danger
and pleasure--because she fears a psychic split, the invasion of Zenia into her psyche is an impetus for a psychic split that does not disintegrate her sense of self, but rather allows her to begin a process of self-healing and self-empowerment. Gaining entry into Tony’s psyche by telling her that she too is an orphan, that she and her White Russian mother were refugees and that her body was prostituted by her mother for money, Zenia re-awakens in Tony her own volatile past. “Electrified” by the story Zenia tells about her past, Tony is comforted by Zenia’s theory that there are advantages to being an orphan: “You don’t have to live up to anyone else’s good opinion of you . . . You can be whoever you like” (193).

Atwood’s reversal of cultural prescriptions that attempt to make certain that women cannot be “whoever [they] like”--or whoever they are--is exemplified in the Zenia and Tony story through the notion of “foreign” and “foreigners.” While Zenia might be the ethnic “foreigner” in her story and a “foreigner” to Tony as the femme fatale, Tony, who has attempted to live up to rigid parental and, by extension, cultural expectations, is also a foreigner: “a foreigner, to her own mother; and to her father . . . because, although she talks the same way he does, she is--and he has made this clear--not a boy” (169). On the part of Tony’s mother, who is continuously referred to as Anthea to reinforce both her identity and the effects of culture on her identity, Tony is a constant reminder of her own sense of loss and displacement. A pregnant war bride whose parents were killed in a London bombing during the Blitz (167), Anthea emigrates to Canada and projects onto Tony her resentment for being separated from her familial and cultural roots. Her daughter of course absorbs her projections. For instance, while Anthea is infuriated
by Tony’s Canadian accent--"Don’t talk like that!" she hisses at Tony" (169). Tony worries that she is not British enough, that “she hasn’t made [Anthea] enough cups of tea” (175). Finally abandoned by her mother, Tony thus perceives her mother’s leaving as “her own fault, somehow. . . [S]he’s misread the signals”: indeed, like her mother, she too is now “lost” (175).

Tony thus survives her volatile childhood by secretly reverting to her repressed or imaginary self, Ynot Tnomerof, and to the left-handedness and secret language—backward non-words which are forbidden in an official sense—that accompany this imaginary mode. In this mode, Tony senses that “the world was not constructed for the left-handed” (160), but for “right-handedness”—for social correctness, a conservative public politics, and entitlement or privilege, all of which collectively signify the rules on which the hegemonic order depends.

By inviting Zenia in, however, the repressed self Tony loves best—an identity which is conflated with repressed sexual desire and the power of language, or “the hand she loved best” (161)—is re-awakened. As cruel and manipulative as Zenia can be, and as foreign as Zenia is, one equation that Tony makes “at some level below words” is that she must be “Zenia’s right hand, because Zenia is certainly [her] left one” (195). Thus, “Tony looks at her . . . and sees her own reflection: herself, as she would like to be. Tnomerf Ynot. Herself turned inside out” (193). Indeed,

[d]espite her disapproval, her dismay, all her past anguish, there’s a part of her that has wanted to cheer Zenia on, even to encourage her. To make her into a saga. To participate in her daring, her contempt for almost everything, her rapacity, her lawlessness. (213)
Although Tony and her husband reunite, her relationship with Zenia or the Other Woman ensures that she now has “fewer illusions” (219). Moreover, just as Roz’s twin daughters change the historical plot of “The Robber Bridegroom” fairy-tale--the bride has control for a change and is given agency to be as ruthless as the bridegroom--Tony thinks she will write “[a] study of female military commanders” (538). Referring to Zenia’s “touch,” she thinks she will call it “Iron Hands, Velvet Gloves” although she knows that there “isn’t much material” (538).

Prior to inviting Zenia in, Charis’s focus on a healing practice that entails yoga, vegetarianism and a shutting out of anything unpleasant provides for her a false sense of inner peace. Rather than focusing on a process of integration, she makes a conscious effort to keep separate her mind and body, and/or her self and the world around her. Her effort to keep separate these parts which are contingent on one another explains her desire to repress her history of sexual abuse, as well as the violent tendencies and subsequent breakdown of her mother. Yet, it also points to the mind/body split to which all women under patriarchy are subject. and which in turn serves to keep many women politically passive and thus estranged from one another.

Suffering years of physical abuse at the hands of her mother, and sexual abuse by her uncle, Karen “[f]inally . . . changed into Charis, and vanished, and reappeared elsewhere, and she has been elsewhere ever since” (47). At least until she meets Zenia. Prior to meeting Zenia, she is lead to the practice of Yoga and vegetarianism because she “feels that the only thing she herself can change is her body, and through it her spirit” (247). Yet she falls into the traditional Jungian trap
that requires annihilation of the ego, or, from a feminist perspective, annihilation of any sense of self she might still have. Indeed, for Charis, “The furtive scurrying trivial mind must be shut off. The I must be transcended. The self must be cut loose. It must drift” (249).

Aside from the sexism of her culture and the overt sexual abuse of her past, Charis’s inability to integrate her mind and body, and thus her self in the world around her, is first tied up to a hegemonic resistance to and thus subtle force against women seeking alternative healing practices. Even Tony and Roz continually refer to Charis throughout the novel as “absent-minded,” “flaky,” as having “mush for brains.” While Roz and Tony project onto her their own internalized assumptions about women like Charis, more telling is the response Charis gets from the male hot-dog vendor on a busy Toronto street. Although Charis is simply distracted because she sees Zenia with Roz’s son, she is distracting to the male vendor whose stall she stands near: “Crazy broad, shove off . . . Get back in the bin. You’re bothering the customers” (226). Clearly a projection of traditional (white) masculinist definitions of the “crazy” woman or, in traditional psychoanalytic terms, the hysterical, Charis’s incident with the vendor recalls that her mother was not only diagnosed as “crazy,” but was institutionalized after a “breakdown,” in a “building that looks like a school” (292). This institutionalization, moreover, is not only never explained to Charis but is also made final by another woman, her mother’s sister.

While Charis’s mother is locked up for her display of volatile emotions that constituted, according to the establishment, insanity, Zenia’s Romanian gypsy
mother is stoned to death for possessing the ability to “hex” her subjects, or for possessing what her culture calls the “evil eye” (312). Yet, while various cultures use various practices to deal with women’s “insanity” or with women who possess the “evil eye” (Charis’s mother suffers psychological torture and Zenia’s physical), there is little difference between their stories. In both cases, each woman steps out of conventional boundaries and must somehow be dealt with. Ironically, however, upon hearing the story of Zenia’s mother and then learning that her Finnish father was killed in the war, Charis assumes that her connection to Zenia has to do with their fathers and not their mothers. Although Charis does not know her father at all, she tells Zenia that he “was killed in the war, too” and is subsequently “glad they have a bond in common” (313).

Charis’s sense of a common (white male) bond with Zenia, the Other Woman, is tied up to her past relationship to her sexually abusive uncle, and, by extension, to her adult relationship with her male partner, Billy. On the level of culture, however, it is tied up to the numerous ways in which hegemonic structures ensure that women remain estranged from one another, even when or because they think they are “friends.” Without an awareness of how these structures work, and in turn how they are acted out (in the extreme) by her uncle and (less overtly) by Billy, Charis is unable to make the connections or integration she needs to. Indeed, when her uncle goes as far as rape, which forcibly splits her in two. “[a]ll she can do is split in two” (302). Initially resistant to telling her aunt about the abuse—“Karen’s fear of Aunt Vi finding out is greater than her fear of Uncle Vern” (298)—she only gets the response she feared when she finally does so. Unwilling or unable to deal
with this knowledge, her aunt’s response exposes her own internalization of social
prescriptions:

“You’re exactly like your mother,” says Aunt Vi. “A liar. I wouldn’t
be surprised if you went crazy, just like her. God knows it runs
in the family! Don’t you ever say such an evil thing about your uncle!
He loves you like a daughter! Do you want to destroy him?” She
starts to cry. (299)

Through her characterization of Charis’s grandmother, Atwood traces the
ways in which the females of this family have followed the white patriarchal plot
generation after generation. Upon witnessing her grandmother heal the male
worker who is injured by one of the machines on the farm, Charis thinks that her
grandmother is gifted with a mysterious healing power (285). When her uncle goes
as far as rape, Charis imagines that her grandmother comes to her and gives her
some of this healing power: “Karen puts out her own hands and touches her. . .
[And] some of her power stays there, in Karen’s hands. Her healing power, her
killing power. Not enough to get Karen out of the trap, but enough to keep her
alive” (302). Although the “mixture of harsh and soft colors, of pungent tastes and
rasing edges” (288) that the character of the grandmother represents is not unlike
the mixture that Zenia represents, the grandmother’s healing power is not enough to
get Charis out of the “trap” because, like her daughters, she cannot negotiate
precisely what this “trap” is. Although not aware of the sexual abuse her grand-
daughter will suffer when her daughter and son-in-law arrange for Charis to live
with them, she ignores or dismisses the marks left on Charis’s skin at the hands of
her now institutionalized daughter, Charis’s mother. When she notices the marks
and scars, she says: “I wasn’t the right mother for her . . . . Nor was she the right daughter, for me. And now look. But it can’t be helped” (279).

Until the re-entry of Zenia, Charis too thinks it cannot be helped and simply attempts to repress her past. As might be expected, then, not only is Charis frequently referred to as “crazy,” but she also “didn’t believe in politics, in getting involved in an activity that caused you to have such negative emotions” (244). Ironically, though, while she does not, for instance, “understand the Vietnam War or want to understand it” (244), she at the same time offers a haven of safety for an American draft dodger of this very war, a man who not only sometimes abuses her physically and emotionally (238), but who she was, from the start, “expected to go to bed with” (244).

Upon learning that Zenia and Billy are sleeping together, then, Charis does not feel used by Billy, but by this Other Woman for whom she has also provided care and to whom she has also offered a haven of comfort and safety. Clearly, however, while Zenia ostensibly has cancer and while Charis’s practices suggest that she herself is or should be in good psychological and physical health, Charis is incapable of healing another woman. Her own self-healing, moreover, can only begin when she lets the Other woman and thus other women in. Indeed, Zenia helps to heal her. The entry of Zenia and thus Karen is painful nonetheless, and initially brings only the “the ancient shame” (306). As the light shadow “convention” ironically denies, however, Zenia’s entry also allows the disintegration of the unhealthy relationship between Charis and Billy, and allows “banished Karen” to reappear and to speak: “She has travelled a long distance. . . . demanding to enter
her, to rejoin her, to share in her body once again”: indeed, although Charis tries to resist, “Karen will not go under. . . She wants to speak” (265).

Charis’s process of individuation through the Other woman finally reverses the conventional and white patriarchal plot line that her female relatives followed and/or had no choice but to follow. Charis first experiences a sense of grounding in her body and in turn desire. Allowing herself to experience her body during a sexual encounter with Billy, she “doesn’t float away . . . she can feel everything. . . . She can feel pleasure shoot through her like electricity. . . . Everything in her has been fused together” (307). Although she questions this because it is so foreign to her, “deep inside, far inside her body. something new is moving” (307). What is new is her sense of her own desiring self and self-empowerment, out of which her daughter is literally and metaphorically conceived, and through which the Other woman lives: “the mother? Was it herself or Karen, sharing their body? Or was it Zenia, too?” (307). Indeed, Charis’s process of individuation through the Other woman is the impetus that allows her and her own daughter to heal the split between them, leaving Charis to think that “perhaps many people will be born with a fragment of Zenia in them” (52).

While the story of Roz and Zenia appears to be the most complex, it is also the one that demonstrates most clearly or requires the reader to imagine most vividly how the politics of beauty and age, class, race and/or ethnicity, and religion are linked to what Rich calls “gynephobia”: “the age-old, cross-cultural male fear and hatred of women.” Prior to negotiating Zenia’s re-entry, which occurs some years after her husband’s death, Roz continuously struggles with the culturally
imposed contradictions that accompany her Jewish and Catholic identities, and with her roles as corporate owner and, ultimately, single mother. Underlying this struggle, moreover, is her internalization of the white patriarchal beauty myth, or her sense that she is not and will never be attractive enough. As a means to repress these contradictions, she relies on “fixes” of food, nicotine or alcohol, which serve to simultaneously numb and exacerbate her pain. Indeed, Roz “gets hugely, cavernously lonely, and then she eats. Eats and drinks and smokes, filling up her inner spaces. As best she can” (106).

The numerous references to Zenia’s model-like looks are found for the most part in the sections of the novel that focus on Roz and Zenia. Measuring herself by mainstream fashion trends, and married to a man whose infidelities exacerbate her internalized sense of inadequacy, Roz is blind to the politics that constellate around the issue of female beauty. In turn, then, she is unable to negotiate how her sense of (physical) inadequacy is inextricably linked to the contradictions of her Jewish and Catholic identities, and to her conventionally disparate roles as wealthy business-owner and mother.

At least until she meets Zenia. Although none of the main characters by the end of the novel are wholly conscious of the political structures that affect their sense of self and their relationships to men and women, on the level of the unconscious or imaginary, each begins to negotiate these structures because of an Other woman. Significantly, although Roz is aware of the chaos Zenia has caused in the relationships Charis and Tony had or continue to have with their male partners, and although she is threatened by Zenia’s beauty and lives with a man
who has a penchant for beautiful young women, she still invites Zenia in. The "answering beat" she experiences in herself, "[a] sort of echo, an urge to go faster, to be that greedy and secretive and sly (13) subverts first the traditional Jungian notion that in order to individuate one must negotiate her archetypal dark shadow qualities if she is not to project these qualities onto others. While this suggestion appears to make sense, it is also important to note that the archetypal shadow qualities or inner voices of, for instance, anger and greed, have been precisely the qualities women are conditioned to deny, and precisely the prerogative of males who have a place in the hegemonic order (Wehr 60).

The shadow quality of jealousy is also on this Jungian list (Wehr 60). As a feminist extension of Jungian thought requires, however, the reasons for this shadow or inner voice must also be negotiated through an understanding of the social practices that encourage women to be jealous of other women. Upon Zenia's return, Roz paces her office after calling on Harriet "the Hungarian snoop" to find out what Zenia is up to this time:

Roz's hands are damp. and her underarms. Her body smells like rusty nails. Is this a hot flash. or merely the old rage coming back? She's just jealous, people say, as if jealousy is something minor. But it's not, it's the worst, it's the worst feeling there is--incoherent and confused and shameful, and at the same time self-righteous and focused and hard as glass, like the view from a telescope. (336)

Significantly, it is a Hungarian or 'foreign' woman who will put Roz back on Zenia's trail. The reference to the hot flash, moreover, which points simultaneously to the practice of (fashion) photography and to women's aging or menopause, is not disconnected from the "old rage." For Roz, the old rage and
sense of inadequacy she has always lived with is complexly tied up with her contradictory upbringing with her Jewish father and Catholic mother, contradictions of which that mirror the practices of long-established social hegemonies.

Born to a Jewish father and Irish-Catholic mother, Roz says that “[i]t wasn’t that easy growing up with one hero and one martyr. It didn’t leave much of a role for her” (85). While her father is celebrated for his contradictory role in the Second World War—he helped the Nazis to steal valuables from the Jewish, he kept some of these valuable for himself, and also helped to “smuggle Jews out” (405), her mother spends her days cleaning and running a boarding house and, upon her husband’s return, learns to ignore his infidelities.

Roz’s role is thus unclear to her. Although she is listed in the phonebook under her maternal name, Rosie O’Grady, she is called Rosalind Greenwood. At least until her father returns from Europe. Having lived many years as Rosalind Greenwood, she is told upon her father’s return that her name is Roz Grunwald, that “[i]t was the war . . . . That name was too Jewish. It wasn’t safe” (398). Yet, aside from giving up her name that she has received from her mother, she also thinks it is better to give up her mother’s religion, Catholicism. Her classmate Julie Warden, whose ironic name goes along with her ability to reiterate the status quo, tells her she is “not a real Catholic”—indeed, that this is what her “Mum says” (382). The criticisms aimed at her father are also a source of Roz’s fragmentation. As Julie adds, “‘Where’s your father anyways? My mom says he’s a DP [a displaced person]’” (382).
Roz also gets called a DP because of her looks. She has dark hair and "dark skin" (377). Julie Warden bullies Roz for what she thinks is the incongruity of Roz's looks and the role of the (white) angel she has been given in the school play: "I think it's dumb to have an angel with black hair" (382). As Roz argues, her hair is "not black, it's brown," and her anger prompts her to give Julie Warden a "Chinese burn" on her arm (382-383). Her reaction suggests that she both fears her own and others' differences and, at the same time, attempts to assert them. Yet the politics and contradictions of difference affect her throughout her adulthood. Once she inherits her father's fortune and business, for instance, the maid from the Philippines "fills [her] with anxiety and misgiving" (351). Also, "[g]uilt sets in" when she realizes that her bathroom is large enough for "several Southeast Asian families" (344).

Roz nonetheless learns that in order to negotiate the contradictions of her identities she must renounce her assumed connections to her mother and maternal genealogy. Indeed, because she no longer has the attention of her mother when her father returns, she unconsciously thinks this might be a way to regain it. For Roz, her life is now "cut in two":

On one side is Roz, and her mother, and the rooming house, and the nuns and the other girls at school . . . . On the other side is her father, filling the kitchen with his bulk, his loud voice, his multi-layered smell . . . filling up all the space in her mother's gaze so that Roz is pushed off to the edge. (386)

Although the rooming house that Roz's mother runs is also a site of social contradiction, here it might serve as a metaphor for an imaginary site open to possible identities. Yet, Roz leaves this site and, at the same time, leaves the nuns
or "nones" and "other girls." Recalling the Lacanian mirror stage that does not account for differences of any kind, it is also ironic that her father or the paternal is "filling up all the space in her mother's gaze"; indeed, Roz is "pushed off to the edge."

Having renounced her connection to the maternal, and having lost the attention of her mother, Roz also finds out that while she was "once not Catholic enough, now she isn't Jewish enough (399). Yet these contradictions are inextricably linked to her sense of inadequacy with her husband, Mitch. Her marriage to Mitch mirrors that of her parents. Indeed, Roz "would play the saint" and Mitch "the sinner" (445). The ways in which Roz's father treats her mother are not unlike the ways Roz allows Mitch to treat her. At the same time, Roz and her mother (re)act similarly. For Roz's father, his wife and the young and attractive divorcee, Mrs. Morley, are traditional anima archetypes. As Roz's uncle explains to her: "Your mother is a lady. That one [Mrs. Morley] is a babe" (388). In turn, Roz's mother calls Mrs. Morley a "whore" (392), while she herself remains "a constant" (394). Roz's husband, on the other hand, continually affirms his wife's sense of inadequacy and her fear of being Other:

Mitch has always made her feel as if she were just off the boat, head wrapped in a shawl, wiping her nose on her sleeve, lucky to have a sleeve at that. Which boat? There are many boats in her ancestral past, as far as she can tell. Everyone she's descended from got kicked out of somewhere else, for being too poor or too politically uncouth or for having the wrong profile or accent or hair colour. (354)
On the level of the imaginary, however, Roz’s sense of being “an oddity, a hybrid, a strange half-person” (399) does not point to her culturally Othered self, but to her sense of her female Other and female Others. Prior to allowing Zenia in, Roz knows what it is like to be the ethnic or racial Other. Having absorbed social prescriptions, however, she attempts to “fit” in by keeping up with the latest beauty and fashion trends. In other words, “Roz knows very well what it’s like to be them. By now, however, she is us. It makes a difference” (115).

Ironically, Zenia as “them” and “us” subverts the ways in which differences are constructed and perceived. Revealing to Roz that she is a “mischling”—that she survived the Holocaust at the expense of the lives of her German father and Catholic mother (whose female relatives were Jewish)—Roz experiences relief: “So Zenia was a mixture, like herself! (418). Indeed, Zenia’s entry allows Roz to begin negotiating her internalized Catholic guilt and the guilt she has absorbed from her father’s rather suspect money-making schemes in Nazi Europe. Although Roz “has a sense of hands, bony hands, reaching up from under the earth, tugging at her ankles, wanting back what’s theirs” (405), Zenia relates that without Roz’s father, who smuggled her out of Berlin, she would not have survived. For Roz, “this is what she longed for always, an eyewitness . . . who could assure her that her father was really what he was rumored: a hero. Or a semi-hero; at any rate, more than a shady dealer” (368).

Roz’s jealousy for Zenia, then, also provides a site of connection rather than imposed hegemonic contradiction. Despite Zenia’s ruthless take-over of Mitch, Roz would sometimes “like to be Zenia” (457). Indeed, as multiple Others.
Zenia allows Roz to begin the integration of her sense of being a “strange half-person” (399). As is the case for Charis, Zenia ensures the disintegration of Roz’s unhealthy marriage, ironically reversing what had been her mother’s fate: “her parents ended up together and Roz and Mitch did not, so what went wrong? Zenia went wrong. Zenia switched the plot . . . . [W]hen Mitch wanted to be rescued again Roz was no longer up to it” (445).

In keeping with feminist re-visions of the Jungian individuation process, or with the idea that unconsciousness-raising is crucial for the challenging and changing of traditional (archetypal) norms, it is finally fitting that the three main protagonists spread Zenia’s ashes in the lake, once they are “halfway” across, “over the deepest part” (542). For Charis, the cracking of the urn when she throws it overboard signifies Zenia’s and thus her own “continuation. Zenia [too] will now be free, to be reborn for another chance at life” (544-45). Roz “feels something she never thought she would feel, towards Zenia. Oddly enough, it’s gratitude. What for? Who knows? But that’s what she feels” (543). As for Tony, who is now into “self-revelation” (156) and who has developed an “appreciation for confidences” (204), she wonders if Zenia was “in any way like us . . . . Or, to put it the other way around: Are we in any way like her?” (546).

As we have seen, the three main protagonists are both like and unlike Zenia. Optimistically, however, Atwood’s complex demonstration of what symbolically and imaginatively constitutes the Other and/or difference in our culture provides a map by which to recognize the existence of an imaginary space or that there exists a multitude of other forms of culture and experience within and
outside of a hegemonic paradigm. While it might be argued that the individuation process undertaken (and unconsciously for the most part) by the three main protagonists of *The Robber Bride* is not fully realized, it is not only this very process (and not the resulting end of this process) that allows them to form an alliance, but it is the Other woman who serves as the impetus for each of their processes and, in turn, for the connections made.

The psychic journey that each of the three protagonists undergoes with and because of an Other woman optimistically helps each to realize that the mask she has long worn has not been a disguise but rather a manifestation of what hegemonic society has expected and molded her to be. Indeed, the paradox remains: the idea that the women have hidden behind a mask or disguise, or have been kept hidden by what is an enforced cultural manifestation of their “othered” or culturally constructed selves, works as a subtle reminder that female Others are not absent but palpably present.

Atwood’s characterization of both Zenia and Shanita serves to manifest further that which is masked or “goes without saying” in our culture, or the ways in which social hegemonies ensure the marginalization and/or acceptance of women, depending on how they can be used and/or if they can be assimilated into mainstream culture. Tracking the cultural contradictions that allow for the acceptance of Zenia and the more obvious marginalization of Shanita, however, Atwood adds another layer. The contradictions of the different positions of Shanita and Zenia are played out by and between the main protagonists who are both culturally accepted and marginalized. These juxtapositions or the multi-layering of
the novel serve to illustrate how the complex workings of social hegemonies, and thus notions of the Other and/or difference, complicate women’s relationships and obstruct the path to women’s solidarity. To be sure, while some of the female characters might be (or appear to be) more culturally accepted or acceptable than others, all of the female characters’ “original” selves are absent or erased in hegemonic culture. Yet, by exposing this to be the case, precisely through a demonstration of what makes this possible, the “originals,” as it were, are restored, ironically creating a space-between in which to imagine alternate realities.

Atwood’s dedication “For Absent Friends” captures these themes. Paradoxically, “Absent Friends” suggests both a symbolic absence and an imaginary presence of women’s alliances. The “absent” of the dedication suggests that women’s friendships either are missed, missing or non-existent. In each case, however, while “friends” may not be present or known, they are nonetheless referred to as friends—the opposite of strangers. In my reading, then, “Absent Friends” points to the ways in which women’s subjectivities and thus women’s relationships, complicated and negated by the force of power structures within the hegemonic order of North American culture, are rendered “non-existent.” At least, within mainstream cultural representations of women’s relationships, positive relationships between and among women are for the most part absent.

As I have shown in my analyses of The Handmaid’s Tale, Cat’s Eye, and The Robber Bride, however, although women are constructed as Other and thus foreign to one another, they are not strangers. While the main protagonists of the novels are taught from a very young age to depend on men rather than on women,
and thus consciously and unconsciously experience and perpetuate the enforced "absence" of positive alliances--beginning with their relationships with their mothers, and within and across hegemonic lines--within the imaginary or within the realm that exists both inside and outside of the symbolic, women's alliances not only exist but have always existed. We might read the "Absent Friends" of Atwood's dedication, then, as an ironic and subversive statement on the absence of women's alliances--again, one that imaginatively gives words and form to this enforced absence in our culture.
Simone de Beauvoir was the first feminist writer to theorize the female sex as the "second sex" or Other to the male sex. See The Second Sex.

See Naomi Wolf's The Beauty Myth for an exposition of the ways in which culture participates in women's destructive obsession with their physical looks.

As Frankenberg writes: "Several points must be made . . . about the intersection of Jewishness and whiteness. The Jewish women I interviewed, and whom I take to be "white," are all Ashkenazi Jewish women: their families emigrated to the United States from northern, eastern and western Europe. However, as I have argued throughout this book, racial naming and boundary making are historically shifting and highly politicized. Ashkenazi Jews have frequently been viewed by non-Jews as racial Others, and continue to be viewed as such by some, notably the neo-Nazi movement. In this context, and given the persistence of anti-Semitism, some Ashkenazi Jewish men and women have argued they are not white" (216).

Atwood's complex characterization of both Shanita and Zenia brings to mind Bharati Mukherjee's "A-Four-Hundred-Year-Old Woman." Mukherjee tracks the complex lines of her ancestry and position as a now American citizen and writer, crossing centuries and borders and boundaries to demonstrate that she and her characters "are culturally and politically several hundred years old: consider the history . . . witnessed (colonialism, technology, education, liberation, civil war, uprooting)" (26).

For a discussion of the racial and class structure of prostitution, structures of which play out in the public and private and which are therefore not separate from the cultural constructs of the mistress/prostitute/femme fatale, see Judith Walkowitz's "Dangerous Sexualities." Although Walkowitz tracks for her discussion nineteenth-century European and American culture, the issues she raises are readily linked to a discussion of what remains in contemporary Western culture to be the stratification of the prostitute, mistress and/or femme fatale, depending on her age, looks, class, race and so forth. For my own part, however, I am thinking specifically of popular white femme fatale figures such as Nikita and the character Sharon Stone plays in Basic Instinct. On the fashion runway, moreover, women of color are included, but only if they are stunningly beautiful and, of course, stunningly thin.

Susan Willis points out that the "racial homogeneity" of ethnic fashion models is also a form of racism (85). Since Shanita is not the femme fatale of the novel, however, and indeed is marginalized as the racial or ethnic Other, I do not read this passage as participating in this form of racism, but rather as connoting the beauty of women's differences.

Susan Willis notes further that this practice "underscores white supremacy without directly invoking the dominant race" (185).

The scope of this project does not allow for an extensive discussion of the complex link between sex, class and race in a white politics of female beauty. For a discussion of the exoticization of black women in various cultural sites, see Ann duCille's "The Occult of True Black Womanhood: Critical Demeanor and Black Feminist Studies." See also Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye and Song of Solomon for two examples of how white politics (of beauty) affect black women. While Pecola Breedlove in the former goes mad when her wish for blue eyes (so that she might belong to the world of whites) goes unrealized, the beauty Hagar possesses in the latter is not enough to keep Milkman in love with her. Her attempt to alter her appearance and/or self (into a white paradigm), however, is symbolically "trained" upon and causes her death. Susan Willis offers a comprehensive
reading of these themes in Morrison’s novels in her essay “I Shop Therefore I Am: Is There a Place for Afro-American Culture in Commodity Culture?”

9 While women who suffer double or multiple oppression because of race, ethnicity, sexuality and/or class recognize more readily than white heterosexual women of the middle or upper classes the (in)significance of “differences” between and among women, indoctrination or assimilation into mainstream culture does not discount some level or numbers of complicity in groups that are variously Othered. For discussions that take this on in one way or another, see the work of bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, Adrienne Rich, and Judith Butler.

10 Although Atwood resists offering interpretations of her novels, she does state of The Robber Bride that even the portrayal of a “bad woman” “extend[s] the moral range available to [women]. If you define women as nothing but good and good by nature, the roles they can play are very limited, as in Victorian fiction.” See Staels’s interview, p. 207.

11 Ann duCille, among others, raises the question of why black women “have become the subjected subjects of so much scholarly investigation, the peasants under the glass of intellectual inquiry in the 1990s.” Granting that the “attention is not altogether unpleasant,” she warns that this is a dangerous type of “inversion” seen before and thus a “hyperstatic alterity.” As she writes, “Mass culture, as [bell] hooks argues, produces, promotes, and perpetuates the commodification of Otherness through the exploitation of the black female body. In the 1990s, however, the principal sites of exploitation are not simply the cabaret, the speakeasy, the music video, the glamour magazine; they are also the academy, the publishing industry, the intellectual community” (22).

12 Hilda Staels’s reading of the novel has been useful as a starting point for my analysis. Nonetheless, she does not focus wholly on how the novel might be read from a Jungian perspective, and when she does offer a Jungian analysis, she does not question the biases of this thought. In turn, then, while she states that the novel “deals thematically and formally with the return of the repressed” which includes “the embodiment of ‘the other,” the significance of which is multiple and contradictory” (195), her discussion does not include an analysis of how issues of race, class and ethnicity are inextricably linked to the significance of the other, and, in my reading, to Atwood’s characterization of all of the female characters. Shanita, for instance, is not mentioned in her study, and as is the case for many commentaries on Cat’s Eye. Zenia like Cordelia is read as “other” in terms of the protagonists’ mirror images. Coral Ann Howells’s analysis of the novel also differs from mine in that while she notes that “Zenia represents a powerfully transgressive element which continues to threaten feminist attempts to transform gender relations and concepts of sexual power politics” (79), she does not include an analysis of how sexual politics are linked to racism and classism and so forth.

13 Unless indicated otherwise, I quote Jung from Violet de Laszlo’s compilation of his essential works in The Basic Writings of C.G. Jung.

14 This is not to suggest that archetypal theory is not worthwhile, only to explore the biases of traditional Jungian theory for a re-vision of his many useful ideas. For feminist studies on archetypal thought, see the work of Carmen Boulter, Clarissa Pinkola Estes, Estella Lauter and Carol Schreier Rupprecht, and Ginnette Paris.

15 Lauter and Rupprecht note that Annie Pratt was the first to use the term “unconsciousness-raising” (20).

16 Some of my male and women friends have recently argued that this is not the case or no longer the case, that men do not perceive women as either/or. In my argument here and throughout this project, however, I do not point to individual men but to systemic power structures that define women. Such
definitions are frequently manifested in cultural representations of women—predominantly through the media—in the almost exclusive representation of middle- and upper-class white heterosexual women (as either the older maternal good mother/wife or the younger and desirable femme fatale), and in the general non-representation or homophobic and racist exoticization of lesbian women and women of color. For one of the first feminist critiques of the ways in which (white) women who do not follow the status quo are often defined as neurotic, unstable, or mad, see Phyllis Chesler. *Women & Madness*, esp. chapter two.

17 As Jung writes:

> The conscious attitude of woman is in general far more exclusively personal than that of man. Her world is made up of fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, husbands and children. The rest of the world consists likewise of families, who nod to each other but are, in the main, interested essentially in themselves. The man's world is the nation, the state, business concerns, etc. His family is simply a means to an end, one of the foundations of the state, and his wife is not necessarily the woman for him (at any rate not as the woman means when she says "my man"). The general means more to him than the personal; his world consists of a multitude of co-ordinated factors, whereas her world, outside her husband, terminates in a sort of cosmic mist. (183-84)

18 Women have of course made gains in the male professional world. However, there remain the following facts: the number of men in high(er) positions far outweighs the number of women: the majority of men and women in these positions are white (and it goes without saying of the middle or upper class); and not only do many women of color still work in the homes of the white elite, but the majority of women who work outside of the home still take on most of the work in the home.

19 In “intellectual” women, Jung contends that

> the animus encourages a critical disputatiousness and would-be highbrowism, which, however, consists essentially in harping on some irrelevant weak point and nonsensically making it the main one. Or a perfectly lucid discussion gets tangled up in the most maddening way through the introduction of a quite and if possible perverse point of view. Without knowing it, such women are solely intent upon exasperating the man and are, in consequence, the more completely at the mercy of the animus. (182)

20 As Naomi Goldenberg points out, “Archetypal thinking is not peculiar to Jungian psychology. It is present in all forms of theological and religious thought which claims to pronounce eternal and universal truths.” For a further explication of how Jungian thought participates in sexist, racist, and anti-Semitic structures, see *Resurrecting*, esp. chapter six.

21 Naomi Goldenberg provides an overview of the myriad issues surrounding the mind/body split women experience. Perusing notions inherent to traditional or mainstream Western religion and philosophy, to essentialist questions of woman and nature, and to questions about women’s attempts to transcend the body in order to be like men, she summarizes by stating that we must look to “why we associate corporeality with women and why we flee our bodies in the first place.” See chapter five of *Resurrecting*.

22 For a discussion of the myriad contradictions involved in issues of motherhood and “other” professions, see Fauldi’s *Backlash*. For further elucidation of the contradictions Roz struggles with concerning her Jewish and Catholic identities, see Adrienne Rich’s tracking of the myriad and painful contradictions of her own Jewish and Gentile identity in “Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity.” Finally, while Roz’s addiction to tobacco is made explicit, she does not appear to have a “serious” eating disorder or drinking problem. More peripheral to the issue of smoking,
pointing perhaps to the cultural taboo against alcoholism and eating disorders (particularly for women), issues of food and alcohol do come up throughout her story. As a number of feminist writers explore, the reasons for which countless numbers of women rely on "fixes" of food, alcohol, nicotine or drugs—or refuse to eat at all—are linked to the contradictions and biases of culture. See, for instance, Charlotte Davis Kastl's *Many Roads, One Journey: Moving Beyond the Twelve Steps*; Caroline Knapp's *Drinking: A Love Story*; Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth*. 
Alias Grace: Women Out of Bo(u)nds

I am less interested in her guilt or innocence, then in ... the mechanisms at work. It's not the tune played by the musical box, but the little cogs and wheels within it.
Margaret Atwood, Alias Grace (85)

Through its predominant motif of the quilt and/or quilting, Alias Grace weaves a story of intricacy, beauty and depth. Thought of in the conventional sense as a bed cover, in the subversive sense of women's art (domestic and otherwise), and thus as a tool or material that both masks and manifests the “cover story” of women and women’s relationships, the text(ile) motif of Alias Grace reveals the nineteenth-century politics that shaped the life of Grace Marks, and her same-sex relationships. Drawing on the extant accounts of the 1843 double-murder of the wealthy Thomas Kinnear and his housekeeper/mistress Nancy Montgomery, Atwood reveals that at the age of 16, Grace Marks was convicted of the murders along with her alleged accomplice, James McDermott. While McDermott was hanged for the crimes, however, and while he maintained Grace’s complicity until his death, public opinion concerning her involvement was divided. Rather than receiving the death sentence that was originally handed down, then, the 16-year-old servant girl was incarcerated in the Provincial Penitentiary in Kingston, as well as the Lunatic Asylum in Toronto, until she was granted a pardon in 1872.

The “cover story” of Alias Grace involves a woman and a murder. It is not a story of murder. The distinction is important. In her Afterword, Atwood explains that “the written accounts are so contradictory that few facts emerge as unequivocally ‘known’: indeed, all we can finally be certain of is that the “true
character of Grace Marks remains an enigma" (465). Yet public opinion worked to create one of two stories about her, leaving no space between for alternate interpretations or to alternately interpret how opinions were (are) formed. Divided as public opinion was, Grace was defined in terms of the patriarchal anima figure: saint or whore, innocent or guilty. In disrupting the binary thought that characterized Grace and the trial, however, the novel sets up a paradigm in which the reader, text, author and context participate in a kind of dialogue. Indeed, Grace Marks’s innocence or guilt was and is neither proved nor disproved, and although at times irresistible, the search or desire for a definitive verdict is finally futile. What becomes important, then, are the ways in which the dialogue between the participants dislocates or calls into question any claims to definitive or hegemonic “Truths.”

This is not to suggest that the novel eschews notions of truth altogether. To the contrary, my purpose here is to locate the culturally repressed or suppressed truth of women’s connections by tracking the contradictions of subversion and conformity inherent in both the public’s and artist’s construction of Grace Marks and in her relationships to other women. Since the author, protagonist and context all rely on the text(ile) to tell stories “other” than the hegemonic or (w)hole Truth, a reading of the novel as text(ile) provides a site in which women’s connections or alliances are literally, metaphorically and paradoxically woven together. A feminist extension of M.M. Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism or heteroglossia in the novel will serve to demonstrate the connection or dialogue between women’s artistic creations—domestic and otherwise—the imaginary realm and women’s alliances, as
well as the difficulties that obscure that dialogue or connection. Using the quilt(ing) motif to explicate the feminist dialogism of the novel, the novel as text(ile) finally provides a lens for the multivocal nature of women’s art and imaginations, and the ways in which they reflect and continue to reflect alternate realities that exist both within and outside hegemonic discourse or order, and within and across hegemonic boundaries.

Bakhtin conceives of heteroglossia in the novel as multi-languagedness or the dialogue between the many conflicting heard and unheard voices, which is and are, according to Bakhtin, unique to the genre and reflective of real life. Particularly interested in the novel as a literary genre, and using it in its generic sense as a metaphor for the multiplicity, diversity, and contradictions of real life, Bakhtin writes:

I imagine the whole to be something like an immense novel, multi-generic, multi-styled, mercilessly critical, soberly mocking, reflecting in all its fullness the heteroglossia and multiple voices to a given culture, people and epoch. In this huge novel--in this mirror of constantly evolving heteroglossia--any direct word and especially that of the dominant discourse is reflected as something more or less bounded, typical and characteristic of a particular era, aging, dying, ripe for change and renewal. (139)

For Bakhtin, while language is a vehicle by which a given culture attempts to regulate a set of norms and standards. “Language . . . is always languages. . . . [T]here are always many different ways of speaking, many “languages,” reflecting the diversity of social practice, conceptualizations, and values” (Morson and Emerson 140). In the novel, then, this multi-languagedness exposes “a different and
contradictory reality that is otherwise not captured [. . . ]" (Bakhtin, "Prehistory" 139).

From a feminist perspective, the disruption of the "cover story" of Alias Grace or, as Bakhtin puts it, the use of the novel to experience a "different and contradictory reality" is realized in complex ways. In speaking of the novel in its generic sense, Bakhtin demonstrates that in the dialogue between and/or among author, characters, reader and contexts, no single voice is ever privileged. While on the level of the Symbolic this seems to connote fragmentation--traditionally, the novel is read and understood to move in a linear fashion--it is paradoxically suggestive of a (w)hole. Not unlike Irigarayan or Foucaultian theory, different realities and thus truths are located precisely through fragmentation, or within the 'holes' or fissures of the monological or ostensible "whole Truth" of the symbolic. Indeed, the 'whole' is multiplicity--the embracing of fragments or various truths as located in the heard and, in turn, the unheard voices of the text, and in the saying of the already said in a new and thus dynamic way.

Bakhtin supports his idea that the author of the novel comments in a new way on that which has already been articulated through his concept of the "carnival" or "carnivalesque." The author, he argues, is identified as "the agency that orchestrates a multiplicity of distinct and even antithetical voices"; indeed "art is polyphonic--that is, it engenders a textual plurality of unmerged voices and consciousness within the sphere of ideas" (Holquist 44). Thus, when a writer engages in the carnival, she or he may use, for example, parody or irony but is in fact, intentionally or not, critiquing that which s/he parodies or ironizes. As Dale
Bauer adds, then, "The carnival reveals the characters as subjects of their own discourse rather than objects of an official line or finalizing word . . . [and] sets the scene for dialogue" (Bauer 717).

Although Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia does not account for gender or race, feminist extensions of his work provide a useful tool for theorizing the process by which Others are excluded and silenced, a process that, at the same time, makes audible the voices silenced by hegemonic discourse and laws.² In *Alias Grace*, Atwood (intentionally or not) not only makes "ripe for change and renewal" the binary thought that served to confuse the story of a woman and a murder with a sordid and lurid story of a(n) (in)famous murderess, but creates a space-between that ironically exposes a "loss of alibi" on the part of the dominant order and thus "the discrediting of the 'cover story' of the hegemonic institutions" (Rutland 124). In this sense, the carnival that sets the stage for the dialogue throughout the novel implicitly and thus explicitly accounts for the various differences between and among women. As Dale Bauer explains,

> the realm of desire [is] unmasked, taken out of the law of culture, and involved in an economy of difference. While the authoritative discourse demands conformity, the carnivalesque discourse renders invalid any codes, convention or laws which govern or reduce . . . individual[s] to object of control. (716)

*Alias Grace* falls simultaneously within and out of textual and social bounds precisely through the (dominant) motif of the text(ile). In other words, while Bakhtin's theory of "the big novel of life" does not extend past difference within a specific culture and group,³ the quilt as text(ile) does. The pulling back of the text(ile)'s cover story is thus itself a multi-layered process and might be
approached through a rather staged but useful distinction between the past and present, the political and community and/or the personal and individual in order to locate the many lines that blur the edges of difference.

The fact that *Alias Grace* relates and fictionalizes an event that occurred a century ago is significant. From her Bakhtinian perspective, Iris Zavala explains that “the novel uncovers the world-views of its time and itself develops through an historical process” (78). As does the quilt. By uncovering the hegemonic views of early-nineteenth century Toronto, the novel simultaneously demonstrates historical processes of shift and change in terms of women’s oppression and subversion by disrupting dominant notions or paradigms of art, domestic and otherwise. Indeed, it was not until the beginning of the nineteenth century that “[white] women were beginning to enter authorship in small but significant numbers” (Hedges, “Needle” 341), and not until this time that women’s textile culture began to (e)merge.4

On the level of community and politics, however, tracing the history of the quilt is as difficult as tracing the history of women’s writing. In the introduction to *The Quilt Encyclopedia Illustrated*, Carter Houck makes the ironic statement that quilts “were mentioned as part of household goods in British writings as early as the end of the thirteenth century. Unfortunately, fabric disintegrates more rapidly than the written word, so actual examples—even the tiniest scraps—of early quilts are hard to find” (6). Significantly, however, although fabric does disintegrate faster than paper, there are few scraps of women’s writing or women’s “written word” that survived early periods. For instance, much of the poetry of Sappho, the Greek poetess of Lesbos, was destroyed. The patriarchs of the Church because of its
celebration of women and women's relationships up until the late thirteenth century periodically and sometimes publicly destroyed her work. As Susan Gubar writes, the extant texts we do have were excavated in 1895 from Egyptian ruins; they survived as "narrow strips torn from mummy wrappings" (55).

Ironies abound here. While the paper on which women's words were recorded was destroyed or literally and/or metaphorically torn, women were forced to piece together domestic quilts, symbolizing their subservience to the domestic realm. While women's art or writing was traditionally destroyed or literally silenced in the grave, it is a further irony that the early fabrics or materials women did have—if one so desired to screen her creativity through what was considered the domestic chore of sewing or quilting—would disintegrate and thus not outlast them.

The historical ironies and contradictions of women's texts—as racist, classist, exploitative and subversive—and how they paradoxically effect a bond between women in and out of bounds and across borders is exemplified in *Alias Grace* when Simon Jordan tells Grace about the girls who were employed at his father's textile mill:

he said the girls were taught to read, and had their own magazine which they published, with literary offerings. And I said what did he mean by literary offerings, and he said they wrote stories and poems which they put into it, and I said under their own names? He said yes, which I said was bold of them, and didn't it scare away the young men, as who would want a wife like that, writing things down for everyone to see, and made-up things at that, and I would never be so brazen. And he smiled, and said it did not appear to trouble the young men, as the girls had saved up their wages for their dowries, and a dowry was always acceptable. And I said that at least after they got married, they would be too busy to make up any more stories, because of all the children. (68)
In terms of gender, class and race, Grace’s question of whether the girls published “under their own names” is significant. Not only were the few women who entered authorship at this time white and somewhat financially independent, but they frequently used male pseudonyms or aliases in order to get published.\(^5\)

Sexist sentiments concerning white women’s writing, particularly in Victorian times, revolve around notions of women’s writing as “sentimental,” and, as Grace says, “made-up.” Thus, Grace’s notion that writing, marriage and motherhood were not congruent is not unique.

In keeping with a feminist dialogics, however, it is significant that Jordan’s father owned a textile mill in the U.S. Implicit in Jordan’s statement that the mill was prosperous at a time when “the cheap cloth from India came in” (68) is the reality that the subjugation of women crosses continents. In both the British colonies of India and across the Atlantic in the States, women were and are responsible for the domestic—and industrial, if financially beneficial—production, export or sewing of textiles.

One of the “cover stories” revealed in *Alias Grace*, then, is that of the male hegemonic and indeed cross-cultural elision of women’s oppression. and, within Western culture at least, the elision that hegemonic institutions such as motherhood and marriage are dependent on the subservience of white women from particular classes, and thus on the marginalization of all Others. Prior to emigrating to Canada and married or not, Grace’s mother, with the help of her daughters, depends on sewing to keep the family alive (109). Indeed, Grace’s education in sewing is as
elementary as learning the alphabet. Recalling her first sampler, she recalls stitching "A is for Apple. B is for Bee . . ." (40).

The family's emigration to Canada does not alter their circumstances in any way. Not only does Grace's mother die on the passage over, but Grace ends up as a servant-girl, whose status would never, in all probability, provide her an opportunity for marriage, motherhood and/or financial stability. Grace's predicament in the class structure, a structure dependent on racism, is emblematic through the ironies and contradictions that Mrs. Jordan unwittingly reveals in her letters to her son. Mrs. Jordan, the American widow of Simon Jordan's father, owner of a textile mill, pesters her son to marry and to get out of the Lunatic Asylum business. She does so, however, by trying to persuade him to invest in the latest business venture that is being talked about in her circles:

There is talk of a new Sewing Machine for use in the home, which would do exceedingly well if it might be cheaply produced; for every woman would wish to own such an item, which would save many hours of monotonous toil and unceasing drudgery, and would also be of great assistance to the poor seamstresses. Could you not invest . . . in some such admirable but dependable venture? I am certain that a Sewing Machine would relieve as much human suffering as a hundred Lunatic Asylums, and possibly a good deal more. (51)

While Mrs. Jordan reveals that she too must toil and spin because of her sex, and while she reveals that sewing was (and is) for many women a form of slavery, she is unable to make the connection between women's oppression and issues of class and race. Implicit in her statement that the new Sewing Machine would do very well if "cheaply produced" is not only the irony that no matter what
the cost, only a certain class has purchasing power, but that women all along have been “cheaply producing” goods to be sold and bought.

In her persistence in terms of trying to persuade her son to marry comfortably, she further elides issues of class and race. She and her son, although American, are not excluded from the white group of British elite in charge of Grace’s fate, and which gathers to discuss issues such as the Abolitionist Question. Since Simon Jordan’s wealth and education are also dependent on class and race structures, not to mention gender, it is a further irony that when he is asked where he stands on the Abolitionist question he “finds it tiresome to be constantly accused, in his individual person, of all the sins of his country” (84). Criticizing “these Britishers” for their rather suspect newly developed consciences, however, he leaves his own position of privilege unexamined: “On what was there present wealth founded, but on the slave trade; and where would their great mill towns be without Southern cotton?” (84).

Grace Marks’s position as a white woman of the lower class thus complicates both her view of hegemonic culture as well as how her culture views her. For instance, she is obviously not of the same class as the girls who work and write at the textile mill in the U.S. If anything, she is surprised that women in such positions exist, and, if she had the chance to do the same thing, “would never be so brazen” (68). She also knows that an opportunity for marriage and children are not likely for her, even though she ironically plays the role of mother or care-giver to her widowed father and several siblings after her mother’s death. As she states of
the girls Jordan speaks of: "at least after they got married, they would be too busy to make up any more stories, because of all the children" (68).

Yet Grace is not only formed by white masculinist and elitist norms, but also informed by them. These norms, as we have seen, rely on the traditional binary thought that defines (white) women. In which category a woman is placed, however, is further dependent on her class position. Amid the chaos after the murders, Grace says:

I think of all the things that have been said about me--that I am an inhuman female demon, that I am an innocent victim of a blackguard forced against my will and in danger of my own life, that I was too ignorant to know how to act and that to hang me would be judicial murder . . . that I am a good girl with a pliable nature and no harm is told of me, that I am cunning and devious, that I am soft in the head and little better than an idiot. And I wonder, how can I be all of these things at once. (23)

What Grace does not (yet) know is that "all of these things" fall into one of the two categories that have traditionally defined (white) women: good or bad. Indeed, the ways in which her person and persona are constructed by the binary oppositions of a white phallocratic system are illustrated in each of the dialogues (textual or literal) between Grace and the men with whom she comes into contact or who have taken an interest in her. The words of the stablehands, the men who harass Grace on her supervised walks from the Penitentiary to the Governor's house, first serve to demonstrate how the inherent and internalized misogyny of this binary thinking begins with the exaltation or denouncement of the mother. When one comments that "women should be born without mouths on them, [for] the only thing of use in them is below the waist," Grace reminds him that his mother was
also a woman. While he then refers to his mother as “the whoring old bitch,” the stablehand with him says that his mother “was an angel to be sure . . . and I don’t know which is the worse” (240).

Like the public, the men who are either on her side or pushing for a conviction define her in similar terms. Jamie Walsh, the man who turns against her at the trial and who will turn around and marry her “felt betrayed in love, because she had gone off with McDermott; and from being an angel in his eyes, and fit to be idolized and worshipped, [Grace] was transformed to a demon” (360). While Reverend Verringer petitions to free her, there is also a suggestion that he desires an abject wife, as a grateful Grace might be, and indeed ends up marrying the rather one-dimensional and conventional Lydia, the governor’s daughter. While Dr. Bannerling insists that Grace is a “fraud,” an “imposture,” an “accomplished actress” and “a most practised liar” (71), Simon Jordan, who cautions himself against absolutism, cannot resist the desire to define his enigmatic subject of study: “What he wants is certainty, one way or the other” (322).

The “alias” of the novel’s title, the portrait of Elizabeth Siddal on the dust cover, the inclusion of the engraved portrait of Grace and McDermott which appears on the abridged version of the trial, and the novel’s subtexts all work together to illustrate further the “cover story” or construction of Grace’s person and persona. While the name “Grace” carries with it traditional connotations of the divine and angelic woman, the “alias” evokes cunning and deviance, suggesting that Grace is an impostor and uses her feminine ‘graces’ to get away with murder. However, underneath this story is not only the story of a woman whose version is
not heard and/or believed, thus revealing how culture renders her the stranger, alien or Other, but the story of the imaginary girlfriend who is a stranger or alien to the dominant culture.

Grace uses the name of her best friend, Mary Whitney, as her alias when she is on the run after the murders. As we shall see, aside from Grace claiming that Mary said she was "a native-born Canadian" whose grandmother had been a Red Indian," (150), and aside from the story Grace tells about Mary's untimely death because of a botched abortion, Mary's background is, just as her life was and as Grace's life has been, "buried," and thus remains a mystery. Ironically, however, when she reveals part of Mary's story to Jordan, he wonders, as it were, if Mary is a figment of Grace's imagination. In an attempt to find proof, he locates her gravestone at the site Grace claims she was buried. What he finds is the name "Mary" and "nothing more," thus observing that Mary Whitney (and thus Grace as alias Mary Whitney) could be any woman: "She could be an old woman, a wife, a small infant, anyone at all" (387-88).

The portrayal on the dust cover of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's portrait of his wife Elizabeth Siddal is also ironically telling. For Rossetti, a Pre-Raphaelite painter/poet, Siddal was an "ideal woman." According to him and his circle of artist friends within the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, the "ideal [white] woman," referred to as "stunners" by the men, possessed beauty in both body and soul.  Typical of Rossetti's paintings and poetry, then, and evident in the portrait of Siddal, the "ideal woman" exudes both angelic purity and erotic sexuality: that is, her eyes remain vacant, her expression placid, and her long flowing hair, half-closed eyes and full
lips evoke traditional notions of ideal (white) femininity and heterosexuality. What goes further (un)noticed here, however, is the fact that, like Grace Marks, we know very little about Elizabeth Siddal. In commentaries on Rossetti and his work, all we know about her is that Rossetti buried with her and later excavated from her grave a number of his poems.

As Simon Jordan describes it, the portrait of Grace, which appears on the abridged version of the trial, is not much different from the Victorian and/or Pre-Raphaelite depiction of (white) women. Here Grace is depicted as a “heroine of a sentimental novel” with “the vapid pensiveness of a Magdalene with the large eyes that gaze at nothing” (60). Always a double-edge to her (constructed) persona and person, however, when he meets Grace for the first time in her prison cell, “there was a different woman--straighter, taller, more self-possessed. Her eyes . . . were frankly assessing him” (59-60).

As for the novel’s subtexts, that of Bellini’s Sonnambula, the story of Amina—“a crude anagram of anima”—recalls the story of the young girl who is first denounced as whore than restored to saint after the men in power decide she is not guilty of sleeping with the Count (321). We might thus recall here that Jamie Walsh changes his mind about Grace’s involvement with McDermott (and not about the murders) when he has the opportunity to marry her. Grace is not only restored to saint but Walsh begs her forgiveness “often . . . at night” when he “begins to unbutton [her] nightgown” (457). Yet Grace has little choice but to take this opportunity of marriage if she wants to survive. Ironically, moreover, upon being pardoned from prison, it is the Warden’s daughter who escorts Grace to the “home
provided” for her (446). Rather than questioning Walsh’s past treatment of Grace, this woman escorts Grace to Walsh but does not tell her of the plans made: “Janet said that there was a surprise awaiting me, and as it was a secret she could not tell me what it was; but it was a good surprise, or so she hoped it would be” (449).

Finally, the story of Susannah, the woman of the *Apocrypha* or alternate Bible in which God’s word is written down by men and not God himself, is about the accusation that she “sinned” with a young man, an accusation of which that is made “by some old men, because she wouldn’t commit the same sin with them” (223). As Grace ironically comments to Jordan, then, “Just because a thing has been written down, Sir, does not mean it is God’s truth” (257).

Whether Grace is demon or angel, guilty or innocent, or possibly all of the above on a number of complex levels is not clear. Indeed, it is impossible to tell since Grace’s subjectivity is not only “buried” in a story but is *the* buried story. What is clear is that on the level of community, the level at which, according to Bakhtin, the novel and its many voices participate, Grace’s voice is the only one not explicitly heard, and thus, if listening, the loudest. Significantly, while the alternate Bible or Word in the *Apocrypha* is told from a male point of view, the novel is told for the most part from Grace’s point of view. Although she does not share most of her thoughts with any of the characters, the reader is privy to her private utterances. Of the trial in which the public attempts to reach the Truth, then, Grace is believable when she tells Jordan that she was “there in the box” and “might as well have been made of cloth, and stuffed,” that she was “shut up inside that doll of [her]self, and [her] true voice could not get out” (295). As she states further, “it’s
all been decided”: “the lawyers and judges, and the newspaper men, they seem to know my story better than I do myself” (41).

But of course they do not. Beneath the cover story, below the novel’s subtexts, Grace and each of the other female characters of the novel, consciously or not, attempt to construct an alternate plot or story and/or alternate identities and relationships out of the materials available. The Governor’s wife “cuts . . . crimes out of newspapers and pastes them” in the scrapbook that has been sent to her by her eldest daughter who lives in India (26). And as Grace reveals, she saves everything on the Kinnear-Montgomery murders. While on one level this suggests that she merely participates in the sensationalism of the case, the idea of cutting or tearing here, and the pasting of the fragmented pieces into a scrapbook sent by her eldest daughter from a foreign country suggests otherwise. Apart from her husband and his position, the “Governor’s wife” remains nameless with no real identity of any kind. Ironically, however, this nameless woman collects for herself and for Grace fragments of women’s identities from stories of “crimes” that purport to know the (w)hole “Truth.” As Grace states, “She showed the scrapbook to me herself, I suppose she wanted to see what I would do” (26). Juxtaposed with her scrapbook, moreover, is the Keepsake Albums kept by her two daughters. Each holds “little scraps of cloth from their dresses, little snippets of ribbon, pictures cut from magazines . . . and promises of alliance” from their girlfriends (25-26).

Not unlike the quilt, the scrapbook and Keepsake Albums are part of the picture of fragmented and (e)merging women’s identities and alliances. Grace, however, does not have (subversive) “fancies” about quilts until, as she says, “after
"I was already in prison" (61). In other words, her time in a concrete prison cell serves as the impetus for her realization that she has long been a prisoner because of her sex. In turning to a more in-depth analysis of Grace’s nascent awareness that women’s oppression or imprisonment affects women’s alliances, I necessarily provide her longest utterance about the quilt. As she relates to Simon Jordan, when she and her friend Mary Whitney “hung a half-dozen [quilts] on the line, all in a row, [she] thought they looked like flags, hung out by an army as it goes to war”:

And since that time I have thought, why is it that women have chosen to sew such flags, and then to lay them on the tops of beds? For they make the bed the most noticeable thing in a room. And then I have thought, it’s for a warning. Because you may think a bed is a peaceful thing . . . and to you it may mean rest and comfort and a good night’s sleep. But it isn’t so for everyone: and there are many dangerous things that take place in a bed. It is where we are born, and that is our first peril in life; and it is where women give birth, which is often their last. And it is where the act takes place between men and women . . . some call it love, others despair, or else merely an indignity which they must suffer through. And finally beds are what we sleep in, and where we dream, and often where we die. But I did not have these fancies about the quilts until after I was already in prison. (161)

Like the quilt, this passage symbolizes the ways in which gender, class and race biases intersect with the suppression of women’s subjectivities, sexualities and alliances. Although Grace does not self-consciously articulate the effects of race and class biases on all women, her flag and war metaphors reveal first that the white patriarchal and bourgeois cover story of the quilt ensures that “common usage has restricted the term to bed-covering” (Hall 13). In other words, and as I have shown, women’s sewing and/or the quilt serves as a patriarchal tool which conceals the fact that women’s work has been traditionally tied up to male sexuality
and to a (white) bourgeois male economy. As Grace ironically states, then, knowing her own limited options in terms of marriage and motherhood, the metaphorical flag-covered bed in which women have been traditionally required to show their allegiance is where "women give birth, which is often their last." That is, along with their allegiance to men comes enforced motherhood or the denied option to be a mother, options of which that have traditionally and effectively hindered or continue to hinder women's desire to give birth to themselves.

While Grace does not have (subversive) fancies about quilts until after she is (already) in prison, she will nonetheless use the new stories she has "imagined" in prison, and from the materials made available to her, will construct her own quilt. Indeed, a quilt which, literally and metaphorically speaking, pieces together her fragmented relationships with other women, and because not explicitly heard and thus the loudest, the cultural whitewashing of women's alliances in nineteenth-century Toronto society and how this suppression affects women's relationships in and out of bo(u)nds and across borders.

Drawing on Bakhtin, the language or multi-languagedness that reaches us from the text(ile) exceeds the laws of the symbolic and thus reveals the subversive or imaginary significance of both the novel Alias Grace and the quilt its protagonist constructs once she is out of prison. Rather than thinking of the text or quilt as a kind of isolated container or as dissociated from the level of community and the world, women's texts or quilts represent women's multiplicity and/or multiple female bodies. Indeed, depending on what materials a woman might have access to (depending on her social positioning in terms of class and race), and to borrow a
phrase from Elaine Hedges, the pen or "the skein is her very skin" ("Needle" 350). The concept of l'écriture feminine, or "the inscription of the female body and female difference in language and text" (Showalter 335) speaks directly to women's self-fashioning of the text(ile). As Helene Cixous writes, "Women's imaginary is inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing: their stream of phantasms is incredible" (246), each act of which marks her "seizing the occasion to speak, hence her shattering entry into history, which has always been based on her suppression" (250).

The fact that the conflicts between women in the novel are between white women and play out only on the levels of gender and class serves as an ironic highlighting of the cultural erasure or suppression of all Others. By mirroring the culture and mindset of nineteenth century Toronto, the novel makes present the absence of racial and ethnic Others, of lesbians and gays, and the elderly. In linking this consideration to considerations of women's text(ile)s, however, it is nonetheless important to keep in mind that while the text(ile) is the unique and personal expression of the individual woman artist, and while that expression becomes a piece of the larger picture of women's solidarity, that expression (like Elaine's paintings in Cat's Eye) will also be contingent on the structures or norms of the sociopolitical system of which she is or is not a part, and thus contingent on her internalization and perpetuation of hegemonic forms, as well as her resistance to these forms. Optimistically, however, it is useful to think of the contradictions and dialogues that (e)merge because of this as dynamic spaces-between in which to imagine new forms of politicization and women's solidarity.
In Grace's limited and confined world in and out of the penitentiary, her imaginary preservation of her connection with Mary Whitney and her later attempt to form and/or to strengthen the bond between herself and Nancy Montgomery (which neither thought they had) is essential to the plot and aesthetic/political schema of the text(ile). Upon being granted a pardon, Grace uses the quilt as an imaginary means to step out of bounds. Prior to creating her own quilt, and prior to the murders, Grace is not involved with other women who use sewing or quilting as a means to gather. Although Elaine Hedges writes that “[t]he quilt involved both individual and collective artistry,” and that while it was the usual case that “an individual woman designed and executed the top layer . . . [t]he work of quilting together the three layers . . . was a large collective effort” (“Women” 15), as prisoner and/or servant, Grace is not part of this “collective effort.” Although it is her responsibility to do the “fine work” of sewing the individual quilt blocks, she is not permitted to participate in the piecing of the patches or fragments:

they don’t use me for quilting, only for the blocks because it is such fine work, and the Governor’s wife said I was thrown away on the plain sewing such as they do at the Penitentiary, the postbags and uniforms and so forth; but in any case the quilting is in the evening, and it’s a party, and I’m not invited to parties. (98)

Ironically, the only parties to which Grace is invited are those organized by Nancy Montgomery in the absence of Kinnear, Nancy’s lover and both women’s employer. While this would suggest a bond within class boundaries and between two women of the same race, the political structures that form and inform their positions create from the start conflict between them. As Grace puts it, “I thought
we would be like sisters or at least good friends"; Nancy, however, "was very changeable, two-faced you might call her. . . . A friend one day and the next quite turned against me" (260).

Grace’s assumption concerning Nancy’s jealousy is not inaccurate. As Grace says, “I came to notice that she was always affability itself when Mr. Kinnear was not present, but jumpy as a cat when he was, and when I was in the same room” (229). Yet, while Nancy oscillates between kindness and cruelty towards Grace, Grace also criticizes and censures her. The women’s inability to communicate to one another the reasons for their ambivalence is tied up to the reality of white women from poor backgrounds. As noted above, Grace’s role as ‘servant’ in her dysfunctional family unit mirrors the role she plays in a dysfunctional community. Indeed, young (white) girls who emigrated to Canada moved from one poverty-stricken situation to another, or from one form of slavery to another.

Upon their arrival in Canada, with no opportunity for wealth or marriage to an employed husband, sex with their employer often kept female servants employed. While this does not appear to be the case for Grace in the Kinnear household, she leaves her job at the Haraghy household when Mr. Haraghy continues to sexually harass her (199-200). At the Kinnear household, moreover, Kinnear continuously (or only) flirts with Grace, much to Nancy’s angst, which suggests that she is safe since he already has a mistress. For Nancy, moreover, holding on to Kinnear is essential for her survival. Grace suspects that Nancy is pregnant. Having already lost one child, conceived with a man who abandoned her
when he had second thoughts about marrying her (255). Nancy senses that Kinnear is her last chance.

Grace is nonetheless unsympathetic to Nancy's predicament, and no doubt because she is absorbed in her own. Indeed, upon suspecting that Nancy is pregnant with Kinnear's child, she does not make a connection between Nancy's predicament and with what ended up being the fate of Mary Whitney, her best friend. Mary Whitney dies after she receives a botched abortion from the male doctor "that the whores went to" on the infamous Lombard Street (175). Ironically, however, Mary is impregnated by her employer's son, a college student home on leave who only feels "obliged" to give her five dollars for the abortion (174).

Profoundly affected by Mary's death, Grace does not hope that Nancy will change the constructed story line for women in their positions. Indeed, she tends to censure rather than reward Nancy, and thus participates in hegemonic norms that ensure the absence of women's alliances: "I wished Nancy no harm, and did not want her cast out"; yet,

it would not be fair and just that she should end up a respectable married lady with a ring on her finger, and rich into the bargain. It would not be right at all. Mary Whitney had done the same as her, and had gone to her death. Why should the one be rewarded and the other punished . . .? (276)

Grace's question or questioning at the end of this statement indicates nonetheless an engagement on her part with the contradictions that have shaped her life and the past lives of Nancy and Mary. As does her construction of her "Tree of Paradise" quilt. Of Nancy and Mary, she says "I will embroider around
each one of them . . . to blend them in as part of the pattern. And so we will all be together” (460). Judy Elsely’s description of the quilter’s process of healing is fitting here. As she explains, the quilter

begins work on her patchwork quilt by cutting or ripping the fabric apart. Indeed, a patchwork quilt cannot come into existence without that tearing. This deconstructive act is, paradoxically, also one of the quilter’s most creative acts—an act of courage, necessity, and faith. Tearing seems a singularly appropriate place for a woman to begin, whether with a quilt or with finding a way to autonomy, because being torn is so familiar an experience for women. (4)

This process is crucial for Grace Marks if she is to construct an alternate story out of her life. Significantly, it is at the end of her story when Grace reveals that she is approaching her forty-sixth birthday and that she is in the process of constructing her quilt. Indeed, the imaginary suggestion that Grace is in the process of giving birth to her self is reinforced by her comment that she is either pregnant or experiencing “the change of life” (459).

Nonetheless, Grace’s intention for the quilt raises a number of ironies and contradictions. Prior to stating her intention to embroider around the stories of herself, Nancy and Mary, she reveals that she “had a rage in [her] heart for many years, against Mary Whitney, and especially against Nancy Montgomery; against the two of them both, for letting themselves be done to death in the way they did, and for leaving me behind with the full weight of it. For a long time I could not find it in my heart to pardon them” (457-58). Not unlike her own predicament, neither Mary nor Nancy had any control over the ways in which they were “done to death.” Moreover, her use of the word “pardon” here ironically situates her in the same
position of those who have the power to decide whether she herself should be
graded a pardon from her original conviction.

Her intention to “blend” Nancy and Mary “in as part of the pattern. And so
we will all be together” (460) is also striking. Subsequent to the murders at the
Kinnear place, Grace will, as it were, step into Nancy’s shoes or skin. Indeed, she
steps into Nancy’s clothes before she attempts to flee the country, and, ironically,
also ends up with a husband and financial security. At the same time, Grace has
little choice but to follow the plot line that has been constructed for her life in or out
of prison and indeed refers to her husband as she would an employer—Mr. Walsh.
Not unlike the man who felt “obliged” to give Mary five dollars for an abortion,
moreover, Walsh professes his love and obligation to Grace—“To think of the
sufferings I have caused you” (456)—at night, when he is eager for “a few more
stories of torment and misery” after which, as Grace says, “he clasps me in his arms
... and begins to unbutton my nightgown” (457).

This is not to suggest that Grace’s quilt does not provide any imaginary
significance. To the contrary, her “Tree of Paradise” texts—like Offred’s taped
recordings in The Handmaid’s Tale, Elaine’s paintings in Cat’s Eye, and the
multiple stories the female characters tell in The Robber Bride—participates in a
feminist dialogic paradigm that serves to expose for imaginative re-vision the force
relations that make the suppression of women’s subjectivities and alliances
possible, and, more complexly, how these force relations impose various levels of
women’s oppression and/or women’s complicity therein. By situating the story of
Grace Marks in the specific time and milieu in which she lived, then, and in
considering her prison term and the few materials available to her throughout her life, her quilt is not only a testament to her own suffering and to that of the other female characters, but also to the complexities of women's enforced estrangement from one another across time and across borders.

In keeping with the idea of the text(ile) as part of a feminist dialogics, Grace's description of her quilt is similar to Bakhtin's use of the novel as a metaphor for life. Of the Tree of Paradise motif, she says:

> whoever named that pattern said better than she knew, as the bible does not say Trees. It says there were two different trees, the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge; but I believe there was only the one, and that the Fruit of Life and the Fruit of Good and Evil were the same. And if you ate of it you would die, but if you didn't eat of it you would die also; although if you did eat of it, you would be less bone-ignorant by the time you got around to your death. Such an arrangement would appear to be more the way life is. I am telling this to no one but you, as I am aware it is not the approved reading. (459)

Capturing the multi-layeredness of her own mindset and by extension the cultural mindset of her time—formed and informed by the biblical dogma of the patriarchy—Grace's appropriation of the "Tree of Paradise" motif speaks to Bakhtin's "imagining" of the text as revealing the ways in which "the dominant discourse" is "aging, dying, [and] ripe for change and renewal" (139). Although Bakhtin did not address women's oppression and the hegemonic lines that intersect with women's oppression, it is significant here that Grace gets the idea for her quilt from an unknown woman or stranger who "said better than she knew." In other words, for women, it is the uncovering of the buried stories of women and women's relationships that make "the dominant discourse . . . ripe for change and renewal."
As Rozsika Parker notes in *The Subversive Stitch*, “The Tree of Life” motif does not belong to the hegemonic order, but is traced back to “the sacred trees of goddess-worshipping murals in Crete and Egypt, and referred to in the Old Testament as asherah or asherim that stood alongside the altar at shrines of the Goddess” (51).

The story of Grace Marks is thus one of many quilt blocks that simultaneously stresses and creates out of silence and mutism a space that acknowledges women's identities and communities. Thought of as one chapter of the multiple and fragmented story of women and women’s relationships, the novel makes audible women’s voices of oppression and subversion over time and across borders. Indeed, *Alias Grace* as text(ile) offers more than aesthetic value in its intricacy, beauty and depth, for it exposes the heteroglossia of women’s voices and art (domestic and otherwise) by pulling back the “cover story” of monolithic and prejudicial centers of power and creates a site in which to imagine the (e)merging of women in and out of hegemonic bo(u)nds.
1 Judy Elsley uses the term “text(ile)” in her recent study, *Quilts and Textiles: The Semiotics of Quilting*.

2 A number of critics argue that Bakhtin’s theory provides us with a useful tool for analysing and exposing hegemonic forms as well as a springboard for theorizing a feminist dialogics. For extensions of Bakhtin’s work that address difference and/or notions of the Other, see Maroussia Hajdukowsk-Amhed, “Bakhtin and Feminism: Two Solitudes”; Wayne Booth, “Freedom of Interpretation: Bakhtin and the Challenge of Feminist Criticism”; Dale Bauer, “Gender in Bakhtin’s Carnival”; Mae Wendolyn Henderson, “Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics and the Black Woman Writer’s Literary Tradition”; Susan Rudy, “*What There Is Teasing Beyond the Edges*”: Claire Harris’s Liminal Autobiography”; Iris Zavala, “Bakhtin and Otherness: Social Heterogeneity.”

3 As a number of critics cited above note, Bakhtin did take into account issues of class, social status, religion and so forth.

4 Although I discuss throughout this paper the dangers of eliding the fact that sewing or quilting for many women worldwide continues to be a form of oppression or slavery for women, it is of equal importance that many women used and use this practice as a means to subvert the status quo. The growing recognition of women’s textiles as an art form supports this. For discussions of quilts as art, see Elaine Hedges. “The Needle or the Pen” and “Quilts and Women’s Culture”; Rozsíka Parker. *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*; Miriam Schapiro and Faith Wilding, “Cunts/Quilts/Consciousness”; Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*.

5 Hedges and Wendt note that the Bronte sisters published under the male pseudonyms Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell (95). Other examples would include George Sand and George Eliot, to name only two more women who did the same.

6 This suggestion is made by Simon Jordan and thus serves to illustrate male projection of the abject anima figure on both the public and personal level.

7 For a commentary on Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, see Abram 1487-1490.

8 For a good example of Rossetti’s sexist portrayal of women in his poetry, see “*The Blessed Damozel*.” The title alone is indicative of the poem’s message: a woman is imbued with saintly attributes and, at the same time, is sensually pleasing to the male (gaze).
CONCLUSION

I conclude with some comments on why I chose to undertake this study and where this project has taken me. Unable to articulate precisely where I had hoped to take my questions concerning the problematics of women’s relationships, and yet never questioning my decision to work on Atwood’s fiction, I had a vague notion that I wished to look at issues of feminisms, at what constitutes or gets constituted as “feminine” in our culture, and finally what it means (at least to me) to be female and a feminist. The ways in which I order my chapters is thus significant to me, and I suggest that Atwood’s recent novels encourage the kind of project I have undertaken here. The way in which I lay out my argument complements the course I see Atwood’s recent novels taking, and, in more specific terms of exploring women’s relationships, exposes the suppression and some of the complexities of women’s friendships, alliances and solidarity.

The scope of this study is not wide enough to include an analysis of Atwood’s novels prior to The Handmaid’s Tale, which was published in 1985. Nonetheless, and ironically, The Handmaid’s Tale continues to strike me as an appropriate place to start. Prior to beginning this study, and after re-reading all of Atwood’s novels in sequence, I was struck once again by how incredibly struck I was over a decade ago by The Handmaid’s Tale. While I knew on some unarticulated level that I was a “feminist”—and would have readily identified myself as such if I had known what I know now—when the word “feminist” or “feminism” was heard at all, it was always in terms of malcontent women or groups of
malcontent women. *The Handmaid's Tale* did not tell me differently. What it did tell me, however, was that something was terribly wrong with what I now see as the politically motivated “cover story” of our culture, and that what I on some level “knew” was incongruous with what I had learned and with what I was supposed to be learning.

Yet my reaction to *The Handmaid's Tale* was and is not unique. For myself as a white woman of the middle class, indoctrinated into male heterosexist and Catholic codes of behavior, and as several of my white women friends have revealed to me, *The Handmaid's Tale* served as an impetus for developing some kind of feminist consciousness. Yet, I do not specify the white racial and class identity of myself and the women friends I am thinking of to suggest that this novel might be a vehicle of (imaginary) consciousness-raising for all women, nor to suggest that it might serve as such *only* for white women of a certain class and/or certain conditioning. Rather, there is something to be said about the fact that my friends and I got our hands on the novel at all.

The reasons for which women like myself—white, middle class and (presumably) heterosexual—were introduced to very few works by African-American women writers, and by no means to lesbian writers of any color or, for instance, First Nation female writers, are now obvious. Significantly, however, despite Atwood’s mainstream popularity, and even in the event that I was enrolled in university literature courses, I was not introduced to much of her work either. A few of her poems only. In other words, whether it was Margaret Atwood or Alice
Walker on the bestseller list, or designated as the token required reading in a university course, their work for the most part was reviewed in the media and taught and/or tokenized in the classroom by white male professors. As a student, and in the event that a white or black woman’s text was on the syllabus, I was also required to stick to traditional and formal readings. While *The Handmaid's Tale* was never one of these texts, and while Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon* do stand out for me, the social hegemonies that Morrison writes against were never discussed in lectures—although the issue of “American racism” was always the superficial focus. Not surprisingly, when it came time for term papers, the hegemonic practices that Morrison interrogates in her work were reinscribed in my own term papers.

Nonetheless, outside of the classroom it was *The Handmaid’s Tale* that was the most circulated and most talked about novel in the group of white women of which I was a part. On one level this speaks of my position of privilege and resulting solipsism (enforced and willed): why weren’t Morrison’s novels, for instance, being circulated in the same way? And when they were read in university courses, why was I (or am I) not struck by what she has to say? I think these questions are important, and I have tried to provide some answers for them throughout this project. But I would also argue, and only speaking for myself again, even when I was reading work by white women, I was not doing so with any kind of feminist consciousness. Thus, I think it is significant that I was so struck by a novel that depicts a worst-case scenario for all women.
For all of these reasons, *The Handmaid’s Tale* has served as one of the impetuses for this study. By *imagining* living in a system like Gilead, it soon became clear(er) that I already imaginatively “knew” that Atwood’s world of Gilead was not so far-fetched. I have thus approached a reading of the novel that speaks to my (white) frustration in trying to unpack feminist questions concerning women’s relationships and thus the dangers in not doing so, as well as to the optimism in uncovering that which goes without saying in our culture. Read as what Barbara Ehrenreich calls an “intra-feminist polemic,” the novel’s depiction of a worst-case scenario for all women is a useful vehicle for uncovering how established power structures work to undermine the goals second-wave feminists hope(d) to realize, and thus the dangerous futuristic possibility of a system like Gilead in which there would be little chance (if any) for politically effective female solidarity.² In providing an ironic overview of the *oversights* of second wave feminism, then, and the cultural backlash that continues to ensure that this is the case, Atwood provides an imaginary map that offers a way to track and, at least for some of us, to realize the necessity for solidarity between and among women within and across hegemonic lines. At the same time, however, *The Handmaid’s Tale* also paves the way for Atwood’s subsequent works, in which she undertakes some of the specific difficulties involved in trying to chart and realize this imaginary course.

*Cat’s Eye* did not strike me in the same way as *The Handmaid’s Tale* did. Which is not to say that I did not and do not find the novel to be very disturbing. As I have argued, read as a questioning of what constitutes the “feminine” in North
American culture, and how social hegemonies are played out between and among privileged white women, *Cat's Eye* does not provide an optimistic ending. As I have also argued, however, the pessimism of this novel is fitting. While Atwood imaginatively constructs a somewhat optimistic ending for her depiction of a worst-case scenario for women in *The Handmaid's Tale*—the narrator escapes Gilead; at least her story in “on record”—it would be rather suspect if the same were to be true for the narrator of *Cat's Eye*.

Read in light of her white socialization process or initiation into white femininity, which is grounded in hegemonies based on a theory of Sameness, as well as in light of the traumas of her childhood which continue to haunt her in adulthood, it would be highly unlikely if, on the plane back to Vancouver at the end of her narrative, she were simply and finally liberated from her complex conditioning that formed and thus to some extent must inform her sense of self and her relationships with others. As I have argued further, however, the novel does not leave the reader, at least this reader, without hope. First, Elaine does take a step towards alliances with women. Despite a socialization process that systematically attempts to ensure that she does not take this step, particularly because she and women like her are crucial for the perpetuation of the status quo, Elaine at least attempts to try to come to terms with her mother and Cordelia. More optimistically, however, an analysis of the difficulties and, finally, the limitations of this step the narrator takes also creates a space that does not privilege the voice of the narrator. Rather, the novel’s ironic demonstration of the cultural reasons for which voices
like the narrator's do get privileged serves to expose again hegemonic biases and underscores the acknowledgment of Other(s') realities and the realities of Other(s') oppression.

The step Elaine takes is the first of many taken by the protagonists of The Robber Bride. Significantly, my attempt to use this novel as a vehicle by which to enter the controversial territory of what constitutes the (female) Other proved to be the most difficult. At least for my analysis of The Handmaid's Tale, I was allowed some (academic) distance from my topic by grounding my argument in terms of an overview or in terms of uncovering oversights. For my analysis of Cat's Eye, I have my own conditioning or initiation into white femininity—not unlike the narrator's—on which to draw. Yet my analysis of The Robber Bride posits an individuation process which, although a constant goal on my part and an important one, I think, for all women and for the potential of female solidarity, is not only difficult to undertake but far from realized.

Still, I maintain that a feminist re-vision and subsequent undertaking of the Jungian individuation process is useful if not crucial for an individual and, by extension, collective feminist consciousness—and thus, on the level of culture, a collective humanist consciousness. It demands that the individual on the way to individuation—individuation being understood as an understanding and integration of the self with one's community and world at large—begins to engage with her (or his) own and other(s') realities. As I have argued in the context of the novel, the three main characters of The Robber Bride, although resistant to the pain involved
in embarking on a process of individuation, are also ready if not desperate for this process to begin. And it is the multiplicity of the Other Woman that allows them to begin this process.

_The Robber Bride_ thus demonstrates that, to know (what Irigaray calls) the female Other that resides within in each of our psyches, and/or to imagine what we might say and do if we allow the female Other (in ourselves and by extension in all women) to speak and act, the possibilities for alliances between and among women are endless. While it might be argued that the individuation process undertaken (and unconsciously for the most part) by the three main protagonists of _The Robber Bride_ is not fully realized, it is nonetheless this very process (and not the resulting end of this process), that allows them to make a connection with other women. Indeed, this is the first time in Atwood's novels that, despite and because of sameness _and_ difference, alliances between and among women are palpably present.

In keeping with the modes of irony and satire that characterize all of Atwood's works, it is finally fitting that what I now think of as “feminist” is realized most fully in her latest novel, _Alias Grace_. Here, and to work backwards, this very recent novel of Atwood's, while it lends itself to an explication of contemporary or postmodern issues surrounding hegemonic and feminist notions of the female Other, it does not provide an overview of second wave feminism(s). Rather, _Alias Grace_ requires us, as feminist thinkers attempting to learn from the past so that we might collectively move forward, to backtrack, as it were. It reminds
us that women's alliances have always been suppressed and complicated by structures of power, and that, at least over the last century and certainly across continents, women have always been complicit in and/or attempted to subvert the status quo. In general historical terms of women's involvement in politics—as is the case for Grace Marks, whether one was passively complicit or actively subversive is complicated by one's race and class position and materials available—Atwood's revisit to the nineteenth century reminds us that the problems and paradoxes that emerged in and out of widespread women's movements that sprang up around the middle of the eighteenth century and which ended soon after the first World War, as well as those that (have) emerged from second-wave feminism, are not dissimilar.  

Woven throughout *Alias Grace* are not only the many (hegemonic) cover stories that were constructed around Grace Marks because of her alleged involvement in the Kinnear-Montgomery murders, but also the reasons that made and make possible these kinds of hegemonic narratives. Making it impossible to make a definitive claim concerning Grace's involvement in the murders, let alone her guilt or innocence, Atwood explores the intersection between the age-old problems of (hetero)sexism, classism and racism with the age-old practice on the part of those in power of claiming definitive "Truths." By extension, then, Atwood exposes that underlying all hegemonic cover stories is an age-old gynephobia. 

By way of the textile motif, Atwood imaginatively expose or pulls back these hegemonic cover stories. I read both Atwood's and her narrator's imaginative
construction of a text(ile) as acts that simultaneously explore cross-cultural female oppression, privilege and rebellion. Backtracking further, we might recall here that the conclusion of Grace’s story and thus of Atwood’s novel involves Grace’s re-creation and re-creation of the biblical “Tree of Paradise” motif. Significantly, this points again to women’s shared sexist oppression, at least in Western culture. All women in this context, despite class, racial or any other difference, have been and are targets of biblical ideology. In Western culture, Biblical dogma has not only been a patriarchal tool in suppressing a collective rebellion on the part of women, but, as Foucault shows, is one whose diversity serves to perpetuate various hegemonic forms.

My analysis of Atwood’s latest novel in terms of the age-old problematics of and continued optimism for women’s solidarity thus brings me back to The Handmaid’s Tale, to where I started with Atwood’s depiction of a worst-case scenario for all women. Yet, I do not wish to end with the suggestion that I have come full circle with my argument, or with my ideas and concerns about women’s relationships. To do so would only serve to enclose myself and this study into a hegemonic paradigm that attempts to contain our capacity to imagine. Rather, I am more interested in getting to “know” and/or to understand better imaginary girlfriends and where I and we can imaginatively go from here.
I am speaking only from my position as a middle-class white woman, mostly in the context of my experience with a group of white women friends in Ontario in the mid-1980's. Sometimes we were university students, and sometimes we were working to pay the rent. Sometimes we were doing both. Aside from the few token and tokenized texts by African-American women and men read for a course, however, we were not introduced to any writers taking on "difference" of any kind.

The recent Promise Keepers Movement, based on the suppression of women through biblical dogma, reminds us that if the stage for a very real Gileadean-regime is not already set, it is well under construction. While the group's ideology "bars" all women, it embraces men of color for the "brotherhood," and yet is not tolerant of men who are gay.

See the collection of historical essays in Miriam Schneir, ed., Feminism: The Essential Historical Writings.


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