

Margaret Atwood Society



2020 MLA Conference Panel 1

Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*: Responses to *The Handmaid's Tale* Sequel

Response 1: My roundtable discussion of Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* will consider the novel through the critical lens of food and consumption. Throughout Atwood's speculative fiction, food plays a significant role by communicating characters' material circumstances, social hierarchies, and dreams of a better future. In Atwood's dystopian worlds, therefore, meals are rarely satisfying – signalling the limitations imposed on marginalized members of the imagined societies and the immense difficulties these individuals face in becoming agents of societal change. Indeed, Atwood's dystopian meals are in keeping with her definition of power politics as “who is entitled to do what to whom with impunity; who profits by it; and who therefore eats what” (“Amnesty” 19). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Gilead's absolute power manifests itself in Offred's solitary, institutional-like regimen. Her breakfasts consist of two eggs (one contained underneath the egg cup upon which the other egg rests), symbolizing the theocracy's exploitation of the handmaids' viable ova and bodies through enslaved surrogacy (120). Just as the handmaids' diets are controlled, then, the handmaids themselves are a commodity, a “national resource” to be branded, traded, and consumed (75). My contribution to the roundtable discussion will consider how the power politics of food and consumption, as previously established within *The Handmaid's Tale*, extend and/or alter within *The Testaments*. Because the sequel's title suggests a focus on confessional narratives, I will be especially interested in examining how Atwood potentially empowers women through their own food voices and through literal and figurative acts of consumption.

Works Cited

- Atwood, Margaret. “Amnesty International: An Address (1981).” *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose, 1960-1982*, House of Anansi Press, 1995.
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Bio-Statement:

Shelley Boyd is a Canadian literature specialist at Kwantlen Polytechnic University in Vancouver, Canada. She is the author of *Garden Plots: Canadian Women Writers and Their Literary Gardens* (MQUP, 2013) and co-editor of the forthcoming collection *Canadian Culinary Imaginations* (MQUP, expected in fall 2019). Shelley has published on Atwood's “Utopian Breakfasts” in the journal *Utopian Studies* (2015) and on Atwood's gardening technologies and the politics of dirt in the edited collection *The Good Gardener? Nature, Humanity and the Garden* (Artifice Books on Architecture, 2015).

Response 2: I'm a poet whose books of domesticity/sexuality/girlhood/feminism/motherhood are shot through with everyday trauma along with heavy currents of dystopian systems, parallel universes, and other speculative worlds. My current book, *The Octopus Museum* (Knopf 2019) imagines human civilization taken over by cephalopods; the reproductive capacities/rights of women are yet again probed and investigated to a state of precarity and erasure. In one poem an "early crone" is placed with a family in order to keep household rations stable; in another the Octopodal Overlords embark on a research project titled, "Are Women People?" My work pitches the most outrageous and hellish scenarios that are nevertheless, like Atwood's vision, somehow utterly possible, if not downright historic (as hers are.) For we don't need to get speculative to find horror: a disabled family member means closed borders for countless families; we burn precious resources for fuel, we allow racism and misogyny to poison one generation after another. But when the speculative narrative route is chosen, how does it function as an act of imaginative protest? How can we—and how does Atwood?—use fantastical dystopias to identify how to prevent arriving at one in real life? How can feminist perspectives evolve to survive such dire possibilities if we can't prevent them? How can we become fluent in intersectional feminism so that, if the world doesn't end, we can begin to reimagine, rebuild and protect a concept of personhood that is supple and versatile enough to include everyone?

Keywords: poetry, ecopoetics, personhood, octopus, dystopia, disability activism, reproductive freedom, intersectional feminism.

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Brenda Shaughnessy is the author of five poetry collections, most recently *The Octopus Museum* (Knopf 2019). 2012's *Our Andromeda* was a *New York Times*' 100 Notable Book, a finalist for the Griffin International Prize and the Kingsley Tufts Prize. She's the recipient of a 2018 Literature Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and a 2013 Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship. Her poems have appeared in *Best American Poetry*, *The Nation*, *The New Yorker*, *Paris Review*, *Poetry Magazine*, *The Yale Review*, and elsewhere. She is currently writing an opera libretto for the composer Paola Prestini, commissioned by The Atlanta Opera for production in the 2020 season. She is Associate Professor of English and Creative Writing at Rutgers University-Newark and lives in Verona, New Jersey.

Response 3: Testamentary Capacity and Acts of Witnessing

Margaret Atwood has given readers awaiting release of *The Testaments*, the sequel to her iconic novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, the following message: "Dear Readers: Everything you've ever asked me about Gilead and its inner workings is the inspiration for this book. Well, almost everything! The other inspiration is the world we've been living in." The focus of this response to the novel will rest on the "other inspiration" Atwood mentions. Specifically, I'd like to discuss the way testaments have shaped our current geopolitical landscape. On one hand, I'd like to discuss how political figures have used the interpretation and issuing of testaments—particularly religious texts—with increasing effectiveness to control the public. On the other hand, I want to focus on the role of the artist, the author, in creating a new type of testament. Atwood explains in "Notes Toward a Poem that Can Never Be Written" that this creation is "Partly it's an art / The

facts of this world seen clearly” and “It is also a truth. / Witness is what you must bear” (*Selected Poems II* 41-42; 56-57). In this response, I plan to put the three narratives of *The Testament* in the context of the writer’s witnessing discussed in Atwood’s poetry.

Lauren Rule Maxwell is an Associate Professor of English at The Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina, and author of *Romantic Revisions in Novels from the Americas*, published in the Purdue University Press Comparative Cultural Studies Series. Dr. Maxwell teaches American and contemporary literature as well as advanced composition, professional writing, and business communications. She also serves as director of the Lowcountry Writing Project, a local site of the National Writing Project that fosters writing among teachers in the Charleston area and helps them use writing more effectively in their classrooms.

Response 4: Maternity Traumas: A Discussion of Atwood’s *The Testaments*

As part of a larger project, my dissertation, where I discuss the traumas of motherhood in contemporary American and Canadian literature, I use Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) as a starting point for late 20th and early 21st century maternity narratives, which seem to be hybrids of the domestic and revenge novel genres. Increasingly, the depiction of motherhood in such novels explores the traumas of maternity, often understanding these traumas as side effects of late-stage capitalism. In this roundtable, I will discuss the ways in which Atwood, through *The Testaments*, continues to answer a societal need for feminist revolution and rebellion, particularly through the functions of motherhood. I will frame *The Testaments* as foundational text in a larger, growing canon of contemporary literature that situates the violence and trauma linked with maternity as a base for anti-capitalist, intersectional, feminist critique—extending the work of *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

I propose to discuss *The Testaments* in terms of how it serves to further the narrativization of North American maternity, its traumas, and its problematic institutionalization. I plan to address questions such as: If *The Handmaid’s Tale* is seen as a starting point for critical narrative exploration of near-future understandings of motherhood, how does *The Testaments* further and/or change contemporary maternity narratives? How does *The Testaments* handle concerns of state and capital controlled/regulated maternity in comparison to ostensibly similar novels like Louise Erdrich’s *Future Home of the Living God* (2017), Leni Zumas’ *Red Clocks* (2018), or Christina Dalcher’s *Vox* (2018)?

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Response 5: The Handmaid’s Sequel: Exploring the Feminist Politics of *The Testaments*

While *The Handmaid’s Tale* has been much admired and discussed in both academic and non-scholarly settings since its initial publication in 1985, it gained a new lease of life following the

release of the recent *Hulu* adaptation, which garnered major media attention and revived interest in the original novel. Much of the publicity surrounding the adaptation focused on the fact that it was released soon after Donald Trump won and assumed the US presidency, and many felt that parts of Gilead's seemingly outlandish political landscape could soon become reality; in recent years, protesters have even used handmaid costumes while protesting issues including sexual harassment and reproductive rights. On top of this, Atwood herself has pointed to "Gilead-like" aspects of the current US administration, including recent attacks on freedom of the press and attempts to curtail female reproductive rights. Given that Atwood's decision to write a sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale* seems to have been influenced not only by the success of and subsequent reaction to the adaptation, but also to the similarities between the world of the novel and the current political landscape, in my paper I hope to explore how Atwood engages with contemporary feminist politics in *The Testaments*. I will be interested to see which aspects of the Gileadean regime she chooses to focus on, and how the novel will reflect contemporary feminist concerns such as intersectionality and activism.

Laura Birkin is a PhD student in English at Temple University in Philadelphia. She is currently studying for her preliminary examinations in the fields of Feminist Studies and Speculative Fiction, with a view to writing her dissertation on contemporary feminist dystopian fiction. She teaches in Temple University's first year writing program as well as working as a writing tutor at Harrisburg Area Community College.

Response 6: Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is no stranger to adaptation. Aside from the recent Hulu series, the text has inhabited movie, radio, stage play, and operatic form. Before *The Testaments* arrives, *The Handmaid's Tale* will be adapted as a graphic novel (forthcoming March 2019), further stretching the novel's palimpsestic web of interpretations through a visual amalgamation of Atwood's novel and the television series. Early-release images of Moira adopt her racial identity as established by Hulu's casting of Samira Wiley rather than adhering to the novel's conspicuous lack of race markers (thus commenting on race). Addressing contemporary fears of resurgent fascism, Renée Nault's adaptation depicts Aunt Lydia in a tan skullcap, wire-rimmed spectacles, and government-issued uniform visually reminiscent of Nazis and the horrors of authoritarian control. These visual renderings intersect poignantly with recent non-textual cultural adaptations of Atwood's characters into "real world" contexts such as the global trend of women protesting gender and sexual inequity dressed in the handmaid's red habit. As elements of Atwood's writing continuously travel across creative media, responding to and engaging real world issues and contexts via the process of adaptation, I propose we discuss *The Testaments*, written amidst such creative/cultural crossover, as what Linda Hutcheon and Gérard Genette call a textual "palimpsest," a document whose meaning is created by reading the "old" simultaneously with the "new." In doing so, we will gain an understanding of Atwood's latest novel as well as of the manifold aesthetic, political, and cultural meanings it generates in conversation with its predecessors.

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Response 7: While little specific details are known about Atwood's upcoming sequel, one of her hallmarks in writing is having her female characters give voice to establishing their own narrative and history. Since Offred followed this in *The Handmaid's Tale*, we can assume with some confidence that the three narrators of *The Testaments* will do so as well. One of the patterns that Atwood has followed in her narratives is using postmodern techniques such as the influence of intertexts and challenging normalized discourses to converse with readers about the construction of female identity. In my graduate thesis, I looked at how her female protagonists in *The Robber Bride*, *Alias Grace*, and *The Blind Assassin* each progressively had more agency in establishing their history and identity. My hypothesis for *The Testaments* is that the three Gilead narrators will do more to take ownership of and direct how the history of the females of Gilead will be told. As Offred's story was found at the end to be interpreted and valued through Professor Pieixoto (a male), I would like to compare and contrast the historiography of Offred's testimony versus those that will be found in *The Testaments* as well as analyze how specific postmodern techniques in the upcoming novel will lend itself to the larger conversation Atwood has been having through her writing about female identity in general.

Biography

Marguerite Raymond started at Bishop Lynch High School in 2011 in the English Department. A graduate from the University of Texas at Austin with a B.S. in Public Relations, she decided after five years of corporate life that she needed a new path and followed her calling to teach, receiving her Texas teaching certification from the University of Texas at Dallas in 2010. She currently teaches World Literature with her English II Honors students and British Literature/ENGL 1301 & 1302 with her English IV ADV students, dual enrolled in partnership with Eastfield College.

Recently, she received her M.A. in English from the University of Texas at Tyler. Her focus was on postmodern literature and feminist criticism, and she combined these passions in her thesis, *Postmodern Puzzles: Creating Versions of the Truth and Identity in Margaret Atwood's The Robber Bride, Alias Grace, and The Blind Assassin*.

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