

# Making It (In)Visible: The Politics of Absence in Margaret Atwood's *Bodily Harm*

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THE PROTAGONIST OF MARGARET ATWOOD'S 1981 novel *Bodily Harm*, Rennie Wilford, is a Canadian journalist who has come to the (fictional) Caribbean islands of St. Antoine and Ste. Agathe to write a travel piece and take a vacation as she recovers from a partial mastectomy. As Rennie becomes entangled in the islands' violent political struggles, we soon see that this writing assignment will be a shocking return to the earnest focus on uncovering "abuses" (55) that began her career in 1970. Rennie has more recently found herself writing about "lifestyles" (127) for *Visor*, the magazine that has agreed to send her to these remote islands for what ostensibly should be a fluffy tourism piece. It was the managing editor of *Visor* who also, some months ago, assigned Rennie to "do a piece on pornography as an art form," urging her to "Keep it light" (197). At the beginning of Part V of Atwood's novel, Rennie remembers her meeting with Frank, a Toronto artist who makes "sculptures using life-sized mannequins": women's bodies made into tables and chairs, a woman "harnessed to a dogsled, with a muzzle on" entitled *Nationalism is Dangerous*, a man dressed in a business suit with plastic dildoes glued to his head called *Erogenous Zone Clone Bone* (198). Rennie recalls telling Frank that his work "doesn't exactly turn me on"; Frank replies, not at all offended, "It's not supposed to turn you *on*," continuing: "Art is for contemplation. What art does is, it takes what society deals out and makes it visible, right? So you can see it" (198).

In fact, it is actually Atwood's discomfort with art's accurate or objective reflections of reality that drives her literary project in *Bodily Harm*. As Simone Drichel has argued, the novel is concerned with both the impossibility of divorcing representations of the "real" from the socially constructed, and the insufficiency of the documenting gaze to "make society visible"; by exploring these politics of visibility, Atwood

ultimately deconstructs “Sartrean-derived theories that allow the gaze to construct an all-encompassing reality” (33). Drichel suggests that Atwood not only deliberately highlights the limitations and violations of the gaze but also posits an alternative through a different kind of looking, what she calls, drawing upon Emmanuel Levinas, “the ethical regard for the other person” (23). Through its exploration of this kind of regard, expressed through the immediacy of touch, Drichel argues, *Bodily Harm* asks us to both “recognize the limits of representation and acknowledge the (potentially traumatic) real materiality of our existence . . . as the space of ethical resistance” (43).

Drichel’s argument opens up fruitful new ways of thinking about *Bodily Harm*, showing that Atwood’s interrogation of the complicated relationship between sight, experience, language, and representation is what allows her to move past an “objective” uncovering of injustice towards a more nuanced, self-reflexive commentary, one that might lead to substantive action or change. But while Drichel locates this commentary in a Levinasian model of ethical regard that highlights the importance of bodily connection, of a material relationality that enables and produces agency (35), it seems equally important to attend to what isn’t and perhaps can’t be regarded, bodily felt, or materially experienced in Atwood’s novel. Indeed, an essential part of Atwood’s literary and political project in *Bodily Harm* is her deliberate representation of absences: empty spaces, gaps in knowledge or comprehension, textual blankness or silences.

As much as Rennie’s trip forces her — and Atwood’s readers — to carve out a space for ethical resistance in a “real” experience beyond representation, *Bodily Harm* is a text that is also almost obsessively interested in what *can’t* be seen, expressed, or apprehended, what is not there when one tries to look, speak, feel, or understand. From the rope that Rennie finds on her bed before she leaves for St. Antoine — left in an empty apartment by a missing intruder, coiled around nothing — to her partially removed breast, to the gaps in plot and text that proliferate as the novel unfolds, *Bodily Harm*, I argue, uses absences to mark the limits of connection and articulation between individuals, across physical, emotional, and cultural spaces, and through texts. Perhaps paradoxically, moreover, both Rennie and we as readers come to learn that these absences in space, text, and meaning often “speak” or signify the most complex and troubling messages at the heart of the novel,

messages central to Atwood's careful probing of the intersections of questions of gender, race, nation, and postcoloniality. For even as she constructs a moving tale of Rennie's political and emotional awakening, Atwood disallows her readers access to a resolved narrative of empathy and connection. Even as she depicts the importance of looking past the "surface" to see the depth of human experience and oppression, Atwood constantly positions sight and observation as actions that are both profoundly limited in their ability to apprehend reality and always invested with disturbing dynamics of privilege and control — even during moments of bodily connection. And even as she sets up parallels between, for instance, cancer in the body and social illness in the body politic, the violence of pornography and the violence of the state, the silencing of women and of colonial subjects, Atwood uses textual, bodily, and spatial absences to highlight the danger of equating these different kinds of harm. Using the logic of gaps to mark the limits of what can be "made visible" about suffering and injustice, of what is possible to relate (or relate *to*) about both individual struggles and systems of oppression, Atwood calls attention to the politics of representation and reflects upon her own subject position. Moreover, she calls upon her readers — in the specific context of North American feminism and more generally — to think critically about the stakes involved and the gaps that arise in creating totalizing political narratives across disparate spaces, subjectivities, and modes of struggle.

Atwood's novel oscillates between Rennie's time on two Caribbean islands — first St. Antoine, then Ste. Agathe — and her earlier life in Canada, from a sometimes traumatic childhood, to the violence of her sexual relationships, to brief but disturbing interactions with pornographic materials, to the breast cancer and partial mastectomy from which she is recovering. These movements between Rennie's experiences in the Caribbean and Canada speak to the two spaces' complex linkages through histories of slavery and colonization, as well as processes of tourism, migration, and diaspora. The shifts also allow Atwood to map questions of power and control, oppression and subjugation, individual and collective identity onto both corporeal and (trans-)national spaces, weaving together these various thematic strands as part of a matrix of forms of "bodily harm." As Diana Brydon points out, the novel's "title itself embodies the conflation of body politic, female body, and colonized space/tropical island that generates the double narrative of Rennie's can-

cer and Ste. Agathe's revolution" ("Atwood's" 109), and the novel as a whole can be seen as an extended exploration of the analoguousness of the subjugation of bodies, genders, races, and nations that the title implies.<sup>1</sup> I propose, however, that close attention to Atwood's construction of these correspondences reveals key gaps within which we can locate an ultimate critique of easy comparisons between different kinds of suffering and forms of abuse. By assembling correspondences between different kinds of bodily harm while simultaneously highlighting the missing pieces in these constructions, Atwood productively complicates comparative frameworks of violence. In doing so, she critiques the problematic ways in which mainstream North American feminist discourses during what is known as the "second wave" deployed and relied upon these frameworks, showing how they could both flatten out material differences and maintain the centrality of Western female subjectivities.

We learn in one of Rennie's flashbacks that her boyfriend Jake, "a packager" for a living — designing labels and deciding "how things would look and what context they would be placed in" — has also been packaging Rennie herself (95). This includes redecorating Rennie's apartment: "In the livingroom he hung blowups of Cartier-Bresson photographs, three Mexican prostitutes looking out of wooden cubicles, their eyebrows plucked thin and drawn into exaggerated bows, their mouths clown-mouths, an old man sitting in a field of deserted chairs" (96). Then Jake moves onto the "night" spaces:

In the bedroom he hung a Heather Cooper poster, a brown-skinned woman wound up in a piece of material that held her arms to her sides but left her breasts and thighs and buttocks exposed. She had no expression on her face, she was just standing there, if anything a little bored. The picture was called *Enigma*. The other picture in the bedroom was a stylized print of a woman lying on a 1940's puffy sofa, like the one in their own livingroom. She was feet-first, and her head, up at the other end of the sofa, was tiny, featureless, and rounded like a doorknob. In the foreground there was a bull. (96-97)

What is noteworthy about these passages is the entanglement of levels of subjection through the language of sight and visibility. Woven together are Jake's paternalistic relationship to Rennie and his visually "packaging" both her body and her home; his choice of artwork exemplifying the male gaze; the depiction of sex workers literally boxed in and placed

on exaggerated display; the sexualization and objectification of women of colour; the stylization of women's bodies into non-threatening forms that lie down and are tied up, whose unique parts are reduced to domestic images of "bows" and "doorknobs." Here, bodily subjugation, sexual exploitation, racial exoticization, and economic disparity are linked in a common network of unequal, oppressive gazes.

Even more than the images hung in her home, Atwood's narration of Rennie's experience looking at pornography prompts readers to recognize the intersections of power and violence upheld through the act of looking. Immediately after Rennie meets Frank the artist and learns about "making it visible," she views a collection of pornographic "raw material" confiscated by the Metro Police (199). Rennie watches the first few film clips "with detachment"; even the "sex-and-death pieces, women being strangled or bludgeoned or having their nipples cut off by men dressed up as Nazis," seem too unrealistic to be disturbing: "Rennie felt it couldn't possibly be real, it was all done with ketchup" (200). But then:

This is our grand finale, the policeman said. The picture showed a woman's pelvis, just the pelvis and the tops of the thighs. The woman was black. The legs were slightly apart; the usual hair, the usual swollen pinkish purple showed between them; nothing was moving. Then something small and grey and wet appeared, poking out from between the legs. It was the head of a rat. (200)

Rennie cannot "make it out of the room" before vomiting (200-01). Like the description of the images on Rennie's walls, this passage asks us to read the subjugation of women through the lens of race, and, even more graphically and viscerally, calls attention to the gaze as an actual penetration of the body that renders it anonymous, passive, and utterly consumed. That the video features a rat, moreover, is significant: the creature not only renders literal a sense of animal brutality, but also carries associations with mobility, invasion, and disease, therefore subtly evoking histories of slavery and colonization. In these ways, the video allows Atwood to highlight interlocking forms of exploitation, drawing a line from individual bodies to gendered and racial populations to international political struggles; the correlations of misogyny as devouring, racism as devouring, and imperialism as devouring can be apprehended neatly in a single visual representation.<sup>2</sup>

But even as it seems to tempt us with this kind of synecdochic reading — in which one video stands in for and signifies the whole of human exploitation — Atwood’s text also resists such oversimplified formulations by purposefully constructing distinct absences in representation. Importantly, the description of the video is not immediately followed by Rennie’s vomiting on the policeman’s shoes; first, after the shocking statement, “It was the head of a rat,” the paragraph concludes: “Rennie felt that a large gap had appeared in what she’d been used to thinking of as reality. What if this is normal, she thought, and we just haven’t been told yet?” (200). While this moment could represent the “first split” in the grid of surfaces that Rennie has, professionally and personally, come to learn not to look past, as Ildikó de Papp Carrington has argued (46-47),<sup>3</sup> we might also understand it as a deliberate commentary on the insufficiency of setting up facile correspondences between modes of violence and the gaps that arise when we do. From this angle, the “gap” that appears in Rennie’s constructed reality does not reveal something more true or comprehensive about the commonalities of forms of oppression, or expose some more authentic representation of human suffering, but rather opens up onto a space of inarticulation and incomprehension, a space past the limits of sight, understanding, and speech. The gap, then, is not only a marker for what cannot be seen and said about subjective experiences of exploitation, but also an illustration of the profound *incommensurability* of different kinds of exploitation, and the impossibility of fully apprehending those differences, let alone through a single image. Moreover, that this gap prompts Rennie’s internal thought, “What if this is normal . . . and we just haven’t been told yet?,” underscores her profoundly limited understanding of this image’s implications; she cannot help but center it around herself and her own personal and cultural context. Atwood here forces her readers to become aware of both what we cannot know and what we nevertheless assume to, of a tendency as viewers (and readers) to consider disparate experiences only in relation to ourselves, and of what then gets left behind.

Turning back to the images on Rennie’s walls, we can see that they too are marked by absence. Just as the video shows only “a woman’s pelvis, just the pelvis and the tops of the thighs” — which not only enforces the objectification of her body but also disallows its viewers from knowledge of the woman’s individuality, emotional reactions, and agency — the prints leave out as much as they convey. The wooden walls obscure

from view the prostitutes' bodies below their breasts. The chairs are empty. The (non-sexualized) parts of the body of the "brown-skinned woman" are covered by the material that binds her. Her expression is blank; the print's title is *Enigma*. The head of the woman on the couch is featureless. Through the elements of blankness and emptiness in these images, Atwood comments upon what visual and textual representations cannot, or perhaps must not, assume to convey about the complexities of suffering, and the intersection — but not commensurability — of systems of oppression. For it is not that Atwood suggests that, for instance, racism, sexism, and imperialism are not intimately intertwined; rather, Atwood plays with the language and imagery of absence to call attention to the impossibility and the danger of constructing one-to-one correspondences between these enactments of power, of reading sexism *as* racism *as* imperialism. Moreover, by consistently inviting her readers to do exactly that, while also always preventing it through the logic of absence, Atwood self-reflexively interrogates a particular ideological and rhetorical history in North American feminist politics.

Martine Watson Brownley has argued that *Bodily Harm* is "the product of a crucial cultural moment in the history of second-wave North American feminisms, and as such it bears the imprint of that moment" (68), "a transitional novel that queries the optimism of early feminist politics even while reflecting it in other ways" (5). As part of this analysis, Brownley turns to "Atwood's overly sweeping analogies," which, she argues, "function thematically . . . simultaneously reflect[ing] and critiqu[ing] a particular kind of thinking that characterized elements of the early feminist movement and that remains prominent today in certain segments of it, notably among some feminist opponents of pornography" (73). In other words, from the title itself, to the images analyzed above, to the plot that takes Rennie into a postcolonial revolution, Atwood both exemplifies and criticizes what she sees as a Western feminist tendency to conflate or equate a variety of experiences and institutions — pornography, patriarchy, racism, imperialism, neocolonialism, globalization — under the rhetoric of violence or "bodily harm," in the name of gendered solidarity. "One of Atwood's achievements," Brownley writes, "is to convey the emotional power and suggestiveness of this rhetoric while also indicating its limitations" (73), for we see that the act of "[a]nalogizing these disparate forms of violence," while often powerfully affecting readers and conveying the entanglement of

power structures, also “obscures as much as it reveals” (71). Expanding on Brownley’s arguments, I have been suggesting that this obscurity is not only the end result but also actually the method itself. Atwood destabilizes comparisons between different manifestations of “bodily harm,” and expresses her own self-consciousness about her limitations as a (white, female, Canadian, feminist) artist attempting to represent those intertwined manifestations, through focusing on the visual and textual absences that facilitate these analogies between forms of violence and upon which they are predicated. With this in mind, I want to turn now to the rope, a central image and linking metaphor in Atwood’s novel that highlights her exploration of the connections between bodily harms through the logic of absence. It also provides a point of entry into Rennie’s experiences in St. Antoine and Ste. Agathe, where the novel’s feminist and postcolonial critiques ultimately come to fruition even as they become more complicated.

*Bodily Harm* opens with Rennie’s narration of returning home soon after her partial mastectomy to find two policemen sitting at her kitchen table, called by one of her neighbours. “She heard footsteps up here,” the older policemen says, “and she knew it wasn’t you, she saw you go out, and she didn’t hear anyone go up the stairs. He jimmied open your kitchen window” (5). In this bland explanatory statement, the policeman introduces an absent player onto the scene, the “he” who broke into Rennie’s apartment and “went back out through the window” (5). Though this “he” has departed, seeming not to have taken anything from Rennie, the intruder has left traces of his presence, as the other policeman points out: “He made himself a cup of Ovaltine. He was just waiting for you, I guess” (5). When Rennie wonders why, the older policeman answers, “Take a look,” seeming “pleased with himself, in charge. He had a present he’d been saving up” (5). He leads her into her bedroom and points out “a length of rope coiled neatly on the quilt. It wasn’t any special kind of rope, there was nothing lurid about it. It was off-white and medium thick. It could have been a clothesline” (5). The viewing of the rope swiftly changes the power dynamics in the room: no longer sitting at a kitchen table, the policemen are standing with Rennie in her most private space, the older one “smil[ing] down at [her], watching [her] face, almost delighted, like an adult who’s just said *I told you so* to some rash child with a skinned knee” (6). Rennie, they unsubtly begin to imply, might have been asking for it. They ask



about the pictures on the wall — the prostitutes, the bound and door-knob-headed women — and, when Rennie explains, “They belong to a friend of mine,” one replies, “Quite a friend” (6). The questions continue: “You close the curtains when you take a shower?”; “You close the curtains when you get dressed at night?”; “You have men over here a lot? Different men?” (6). Although Rennie answers firmly, “I close the curtains. . . . I don’t have men over. I turn out the lights. I get undressed by myself, in the dark,” the older one is still “smirk[ing]” at her, and so, “suddenly . . . angry,” Rennie “unbutton[s] [her] blouse and pull[s] [her] left arm out of the sleeve and drop[s] the slip strap over [her] shoulder” (7). Showing the policemen her partially removed breast, she tells them, “I want you to believe me,” a plea that ends the scene (7).

In opening *Bodily Harm* with the image of the coiled rope, Atwood constructs an initial metaphor — immediately overdetermined despite, or perhaps because of, its open-endedness and banality — through which to understand and draw correlations between the threat of death and violence in all of its various manifestations. These connections are clear: home invasion and cancer, the absent-yet-present male stranger and the invisible-yet-ubiquitous male gaze, rope and rape.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, left on the bed where Jake played out his domination fantasies, in the room whose walls are hung with images of female subjection, the rope too points readers to a feminist stance “which asserted strong links between pornography as misogynist power fantasy and male violence against women” (Howells 121) — and, more broadly, represents another analogization of different forms of bodily harm. Following this logic, the anonymity of the man who left the rope then allows for him to become a figure for the many men in Rennie’s life,<sup>5</sup> or for all men, or for the larger network of patriarchal social relations that gives rise to individual acts of violation.<sup>6</sup> But these readings are always already undercut by the fact that they are made possible by and ultimately depend upon the logic and language of absence: the rope is coiled around nothing at all, left by an intruder who has already departed, in an empty apartment; soon, it is gone altogether, taken away as “evidence,” though “Every time [Rennie] went into her bedroom she could see it, coiled on the bed, even though it was no longer there” (32). The rope works as a metaphor for all kinds of bodily harm — pornographic, sexual, medical, patriarchal — precisely because there are crucial gaps in space and in meaning; by calling attention to this, Atwood both

comments upon the limits of representation, of “making visible” some essential aspect of social relations, and warns her readers against drawing simplistic correlations between women’s (or people’s) experiences. Moreover, it is only through showing the policemen what is “missing” from her breast, another form of absence as “evidence,” that Rennie is able to mount a defense against their accusations. This suggests at once the impossibility of fully articulating individual suffering, the power of absence as a marker of what cannot be “made visible,” and the problems of understanding disparate kinds of violence as part of a singular framework of oppression.

In its role as a marker for both violence and absence, the rope figures crucially in *Bodily Harm*: the novel actually begins with Rennie narrating, “This” — this initial incident, this coiled rope on her bed — “is how I got here” (3). The “here,” we finally learn at the beginning of Part VI, is a cell in the St. Antoine prison that Rennie is sharing with Lora, a Canadian woman living on Ste. Agathe whom Rennie has met in her explorations of the islands. It is Rennie’s experience with the anonymous intruder and the rope he leaves behind that prompts her, haunted by the sense that she is being “watched” like a “moving target in someone else’s binoculars” (31), to travel to St. Antoine, where she can become a tourist, “invisible” and “safe” (30). Rennie soon learns, however, that she is being watched on the islands as well; on St. Antoine and Ste. Agathe as in Rennie’s Toronto, all are implicated in a complex web of racial, gendered, political, and imperial power dynamics that play out through what Drichel calls “a violent economy of representational gazes” (38). The stakes here, though, are different: unlike Canada, a postcolonial state that now occupies the uneasy role of paternalistic Western benefactor, the islands are gearing up for the first elections “since the British pulled out” (69). As Rennie learns from Paul, an American Vietnam veteran living on Ste. Agathe with ties to an international drug- and gun-running ring, “Yes, there will be trouble” during this political upheaval, although he’s quick to tell Rennie that she won’t get hurt: “You’re a tourist, you’re exempt” (69). But through commencing a relationship with Paul, talking with Dr. Minnow, one of the men hoping to defeat the current prime minister, and spending time with Lora, who is romantically involved with another political contender, Rennie learns that she is not at all exempt. She is ultimately arrested on “suspicion” (251) after a violent political coup that leaves Dr. Minnow dead, and is then locked

in prison with Lora, where she witnesses the brutal beatings of other prisoners, including her cellmate.

As readers, we might understand Rennie's trip as a narrative and thematic "uncoiling" of the rope and an exploration of where it leads,<sup>7</sup> a response, perhaps, to the questions Rennie asks herself early in the novel: "And when you pulled on the rope, which after all reached into the darkness, what would come up? What was at the end, *the end?*" (32). In that passage, Rennie preliminarily answers her own rhetorical questions: "A hand, then an arm, a shoulder, and finally a face. At the end of the rope there was someone. Everyone had a face, there was no such thing as a faceless stranger" (32). Indeed, as Rennie finds that the rope leads straight to other manifestations of bodily harm, this time in the form of neocolonialism, international relations, revolutionary violence, and ultimately Lora's beaten body, it seems that Rennie is finally able to face the realities of oppression, to fill in the gaps that have prevented her comprehension of personal and common suffering. But while Rennie is certainly changed by the end of the novel, it is actually a continuing logic of gaps that leads her, and us as readers, to the climactic prison scenes and the novel's conclusion.

Rennie's trip itself is figured as an absence, one that is very much a privilege: as she prepares to go to the Caribbean, Rennie reflects that she is "lucky that she can manage these sidesteps, these small absences from real life; most people can't" (8). Against Rennie's blithe acknowledgement of the "luck" that gives her the freedom to absent herself from her "real" life, though, Atwood's project in *Bodily Harm* as a whole is, as Brydon points out, instead to remind "us of the human costs, betrayals, and material suffering on which these apparent freedoms are built," thereby "exposing the inevitable investment of contemporary tourist travel in imperialist and capitalist domination" ("Atwood's" 94). And one of Atwood's key techniques for reminding us of these connections between tourism, imperialism, capitalism, and human exploitation is her textual exploration of absence: absence as lack of comprehension, as silence, as empty space. For absence in the world of Atwood's novel signifies not a vacation from serious responsibilities but perhaps the exact opposite: a recognition of at once what is impossible to see, express, or compare about human suffering, what gets lost in feminist and humanitarian efforts to name and address that suffering, and

what, paradoxically, nevertheless must somehow be accounted for as a concerned global citizen.

Absence pervades Rennie's time in St. Antoine and Ste. Agathe. It is there, for instance, in the "thousand tins of ham" that, as Dr. Minnow tells Rennie, Canada donated to St. Antoine after a hurricane, but which never made it to the starving people: "'The refugees never see this ham,' he says, explaining patiently. . . . 'The ham turn up, surprise, at the Independence Day banquet. To celebrate our freedom from Britain. For the leading citizens only. Many of us were very amused, my friend. There was a round of applause for the sweet Canadians'" (20). Absence is there when Paul tells Rennie about what is at stake with the islands' elections, "watching not her but the space in front of them" (69). It permeates Rennie's visit with Dr. Minnow to "Fort Industry," built by the British and housing a tent camp for hurricane refugees (as well as the jail where she will eventually be imprisoned): children surround her and ask her to take their pictures, but "this doesn't seem to satisfy them. Now they want to see the picture" (118). When Rennie tells Dr. Minnow, "This isn't a Polaroid," and says to the children, "It doesn't come out," we learn both that the picture is invisible and inaccessible — available only to Rennie when she develops the film — and that something cannot be communicated in the unequal power dynamics of her tourist interaction with the impoverished children: "It's hard to make them understand" (118). Absence is the gap between when Dr. Minnow shows Rennie "an odd structure, made of boards nailed not too carefully together . . . [with] steps up to a platform, four supports but no walls, a couple of crossbeams" — Rennie initially "thinks it's a child's playhouse which has been left unfinished" — and when she finally "understands what she's being shown. It's a gallows" (123). It is that empty space of imperial violence that Dr. Minnow then tells Rennie, unsmiling, that she must photograph "for your article. . . . For the sweet Canadians" (123). It is Paul's recurring dream about "just a hole in the ground, with the earth that's been dug out. It's quite large, there are trees around it. I'm walking towards it. There's a pile of shoes off to the side"; when Rennie asks, "Then what?," Paul replies, "Then I wake up" (238), leaving readers to wonder whose shoes are piled up, what is in the hole, and why that narrative can never be completed. And it is embodied, perhaps most poignantly, in the deaf and mute old man in St. Antoine whom Rennie encounters periodically throughout the novel, first attempting

to silently shake her hand, then being beaten in the street by a group of policemen, seeing Rennie and moaning in a “stifled reaching out for speech which is worse than plain silence” (138), and finally in the prison, looking at her with “a voice but no words” (279).

This last example, in which Rennie looks out of her cell window onto a courtyard where the old man and other prisoners are being tortured, seems to mark a climactic shift in awareness for Rennie, leading her, perhaps, away from absences and gaps in understanding towards a fuller view of the ubiquity of violence, the relationship between systems of oppression, and, most crucially, her own physical and ethical implication in these dynamics. But within this passage and by the end of the novel as a whole, Atwood ultimately disallows both Rennie or her readers access to a full resolution that makes visible the relationships between the various threads of “bodily harm” that have been woven through the text. Instead, there are always gaps and disconnections. In insisting upon these absences, I do not mean to suggest that we cannot find an important message at the heart of Atwood’s novel. Rather, I locate that message in Atwood’s ultimate refusal to neatly seal off the gaps in visibility, meaning, and connection that she has set up, and argue that these gaps reveal her political and artistic message to be more nuanced and self-reflexive than we might initially think.

With Lora hoisting her up to the window, Rennie peers out into the courtyard and sees “five or six men in uniform” and “another group,” tied together by the arms with rope and being pushed down to their knees (278). “The ones kneeling,” Rennie notices, “have long hair, long black hair standing out from their heads,” and “at first [she] thinks they’re women, then she sees they are naked from the waist up, they have no breasts” (278). The policemen begin sawing the prisoners’ hair off using their bayonets with “chilling . . . tidyness” (278), but the precise ceremony is disrupted when a policeman is “not careful enough” and slices one of the prisoner’s heads with his bayonet. As the man begins to “howl,” the policemen turn on him with buckets of water, kicks, and cattle prods, and Rennie finally recognizes him when he looks back at her, blood pouring down his face: “the deaf and dumb man . . . he can see her, she’s been exposed, it’s panic, he wants her to do something” (279). Asking Lora to let her down from the window, Rennie “leans against the wall” and thinks:

It's indecent, it's not done with ketchup, nothing is inconceivable here, no rats in the vagina but only because they haven't thought of it yet, they're still amateurs. She's afraid of men and it's simple, it's rational, she's afraid of men because men are frightening. She's seen the man with the rope, now she knows what he looks like. She has been turned inside out, there's no longer a *here* and a *there*. Rennie understands for the first time that this is not necessarily a place she will get out of, ever. She is not exempt. Nobody is exempt from anything. (279-80)

Here, Atwood explicitly connects the pornographic abuse Rennie saw in Toronto with the state abuse she witnesses against political prisoners, the man with the rope in her apartment to the men with ropes in the prison, the subjection of women under patriarchy to the subjection of colonized peoples under military and imperial law, the "here" of St. Antoine with the "there" of Canada. Rennie, this passage suggests, has come to understand something crucial about the relational nature of various manifestations of violence and, more importantly, has recognized that she is not, has never been, merely an innocent observer. In realizing that she "is not exempt," that she too has been "seen" and "exposed," Rennie sees not only that she is in very real danger — that she won't necessarily be saved — but also that her position as a white, privileged Western tourist implicates her in what is happening, that she too is an active participant in the playing out of gendered, racial, and imperial oppressions.

By acknowledging this, Atwood seems to suggest, Rennie is finally forced to come to terms with her own responsibility to others, to really see and be seen by other people — not gazing, not watching or staring, not passively witnessing, but seeing — and to ethically respond to them. Indeed, when in the next scene Lora is brutally beaten by two guards, Rennie cannot help but see and, moreover, she reluctantly recognizes that she must take ownership of that seeing: "She doesn't want to see, she has to see, why isn't someone covering her eyes?" (282). When the guards have left, Rennie takes hold of Lora's hand and "sits with her, pulling Lora's head and shoulders onto her lap" (287). At first "Rennie wants to throw up, it's no one she recognizes, she has no connection with this, there's nothing she can do, it's the face of a stranger, someone without a name"; but as she already knows, of course, "it's the face of Lora after all, there's no such thing as a faceless stranger, every face is someone's, it has a name" (288). And so Rennie holds Lora's hand, not

moving yet somehow “pulling . . . as hard as she can,” for “there’s an invisible hole in the air, Lora is on the other side of it and she has to pull her through”:

She holds the hand, perfectly still, with all her strength. Surely, if she can only try hard enough, something will move and live again, something will get born.

“Lora,” she says. The name descends and enters the body, there’s something, a movement; isn’t there?

“Oh God,” says Lora.

Or was that real? She’s afraid to put her head down, to the heart, she’s afraid she will not be able to hear. (288)

In these moments of seeing and corporeally connecting with an insistently present “someone” whose individual “face” is a feature at once totally unique and universally shared — for “every face is someone’s” — we might read Atwood’s concluding message as an illustration of a way past the logic of absence towards a more substantive picture of the inextricable relationships between different manifestations of violence. Rennie, as Amelia Defalco suggests, seems now to be “inadvertently” awakened to “the consequences of relationality and responsibility” to other people’s bodies and freedoms (241).<sup>8</sup> This ethical responsibility, moreover, includes an obligation not only to care for others, but also to tell their stories and convey their struggles, as Lora implores Rennie at one point during their time in prison: “Tell someone I’m here. . . . Tell someone what happened” (272). And indeed, on the plane trip back that is the novel’s final scene, Rennie decides to be “a subversive. She was not one once but now she is. A reporter. She will pick her time; then she will report” (290). The act of reporting — of *representing* people and their experiences through narrative, in all of the various meanings of the word — is crucial because it has the power to illuminate the shared dynamics and mutual implications of various structures of oppression, various forms of “bodily harm.” Indeed, this could actually be what makes Atwood’s novelistic telling of Rennie’s story meaningful: Rennie’s narrative is that of “all women, all victims and oppressors, all human beings, all. A here and a there, a past which is separate from a present or a future, no longer exists. The cell of malignancy is, finally, both in and of her and us” (Wilson).<sup>9</sup>

But to accomplish this kind of affirmative reading, in which Atwood’s representation of a particular set of characters in particular

situations becomes a universally applicable story of the “malignancy” of bodily harm and its resolution through ethical action, we must necessarily gloss over aspects of the conclusion that prove much more ambiguous. Indeed, Rennie’s climactic experiences and the lessons she draws from them are fraught with uncertainty and misapprehension, continuously highlighting the profound disconnections between understanding, sight, and representation that remain as the novel closes. For instance, Rennie’s stunning revelation that “She’s afraid of men,” that “She’s seen the man with the rope, now she knows what he looks like,” while not lacking in rhetorical and emotional power, somewhat misses the point: as Brownley notes, “men can indeed be frightening. But not all men have access to power, and not all men misuse it. Rennie’s moment of recognition, after all, occurs as she sees *male* prisoners being tortured” (77) — male prisoners, moreover, that she has initially mistaken for female, further undercutting the reliability of her perceptions. Rennie’s bodily connection with Lora is likewise forged through a set of moments characterized by doubt and limited perception: trying to pull Lora through “an invisible hole in the air,” Rennie thinks she sees bodily movement but wonders, “isn’t there?”; she thinks she hears the sound of Lora’s voice but worries, “Or was that real?” We, as readers, will never know: the last scene with Lora ends with Rennie’s fear of listening for a heartbeat, her fear that “she will not be able to hear.” And Rennie’s conviction in her ultimate duty to report is undercut by the fact that, “For the first time in her life, she cannot think of a title” (290), cannot find adequate language for representing the strands of power and struggle she has seen and experienced.

Finally, even as we learn that Rennie is at last “paying attention” and that she is, again, “not exempt,” the novel closes with the lines, “she is lucky, suddenly, finally, she’s overflowing with luck, it’s this luck holding her up” (291). This passage returns Rennie’s character back to the naïve sentiment of luck that began her trip and therefore seems to erase the lessons she has learned about different modes of power and responsibility. And so it becomes clear that contrary to Rennie’s revelation that “there’s no longer a *here* and a *there*,” that spaces and times collapse through the universality of experiences, there is still a gap between “here” and “there,” between disparate struggles and different kinds of oppression. This gap is finally and permanently revealed through the spatial imagery of Rennie rising up above the islands to return home: in



the ever-widening empty space created as the plane departs, returning Rennie to her home in Canada, we cannot help but sense the incommensurability of the many kinds of harm Atwood has illuminated. Moreover, that it is Rennie, like Atwood, who will “report” on these dynamics — because she, like Atwood, is a white woman from North America — reminds us again that acts of artistic and political representation are not only always partial and subjective, but also fraught with questions of power and privilege.

It is in the ambiguities opened up through these absences and obscurities — ambiguities sustained through the final pages of *Bodily Harm* — that Atwood locates her feminist, postcolonial, and literary critiques. With them, she conveys the limits of feminist narratives of collectivity, the exploitation of the white tourist gaze, and the hidden hierarchies and suppressions built into Western discourses, political movements, and artistic representations. Atwood’s intentional construction and insistent illumination of gaps undergirds her careful questioning of easy comparisons of different struggles, of visibility as a political aim, of the limitations of language and representation, of the delicate and entangled relationship between literature, politics, and the production of identity. In this endeavour, Atwood raises similar concerns, though in a very different context, to those voiced in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” delivered as a talk in 1983, just two years after the publication of *Bodily Harm*. In that piece, which proved so groundbreaking for both feminist and postcolonial politics, Spivak asks what it means to attempt to uncover the disparate experiences of silenced populations; to recognize the complex matrices of race, class, and imperialism in terms of specifically gendered power dynamics; and, perhaps most of all, to be what she herself is: a writer and scholar seeking to address systems of power and oppression. Like Spivak’s critique, Atwood’s novel is both highly self-aware and keenly attentive to absences in texts, representations, and histories. Because of this, it too opens up new ways of thinking about a feminist politics that questions and decenters dominant discourses, that attends to the limits of commensurability, that recognizes its reliance on a set of ever-evolving yet always incomplete epistemologies that, like an ethnography, “inherently imperfect,” will always “produc[e] gaps as it fills them” (Clifford 8).

To close, I turn, somewhat paradoxically, to the passage that opens Atwood’s novel, from John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing*. As an epigraph it

appears as “A man’s presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you or for you. By contrast, a woman’s presence . . . defines what can and cannot be done to her” (original ellipses). But Atwood has, unsurprisingly, left us with crucial gaps in her (re)presentation of this quotation; there are those pesky ellipses, of course, and as it turns out, two sentences have also been ignored without any indication at all. Berger’s full passage actually reads:

A man’s presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you or for you. His presence may be fabricated, in the sense that he pretends to be capable of what he is not. But the pretence is always toward a power which he exercises on others. By contrast, a woman’s presence expresses her own attitude to herself, and defines what can and cannot be done to her. (46-47)

Atwood’s quotation of Berger simplifies his nuanced observations by omitting the possibility of a man’s presence that is “fabricated” and based on “pretending,” and of a woman’s presence expressing something “to herself” and not only in relation to men. The quotation is therefore deliberately incomplete, with absences in text and in meaning. But perhaps this is exactly the point. Perhaps, in beginning her novel with a quotation that so seemingly simplistically lays out the unequal power dynamics of men and women, and then fundamentally complicating the idea that it is possible or even fruitful to talk about all “men” and “women” at all, Atwood in her epigraph is providing an initial set of directives to her readers: look for what isn’t said, what isn’t seen, what isn’t there at all. Pay attention to obscurities. Beware of simple understandings of privilege and exploitation. Question straightforward representations of the complexities of identity and experience; think critically about who gets to represent whom, how, and for what purpose; consider acts of representation in terms of the overlapping and yet distinct power dynamics of gender, race, and imperialism. Investigate the relationship between art and “real life,” between discourse and materiality, and consider that these distinctions might be blurry at best. And perhaps most of all, acknowledge your own implication in these tensions. In all of Atwood’s writing, we as readers continue to be reminded of the ellipses — in text, in sight, in representation, in comprehension — that mark our reliance on what seem to be easy answers, the limitations of attending only to “presences,” and most of all, our readerly and political responsibility to attend to what is left out.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Brydon, "Atwood's"; Goodwin; Kirtz; Melley; Patton; and Somacarrera.
- <sup>2</sup> See Patton 168.
- <sup>3</sup> See also Drichel 33.
- <sup>4</sup> See Howells; Lucking; and Rubenstein.
- <sup>5</sup> That one of the draft titles for *Bodily Harm* was *Rope Quartet* — a quartet that might include Jake, Daniel, Paul, and the intruder — has been noted in this context (Howells 115).
- <sup>6</sup> See Bouson 114; Brydon, "Caribbean" 185; Epstein 88; and Melley 71.
- <sup>7</sup> See Lucking par. 21 and Navarro 265.
- <sup>8</sup> See also, for instance, Drichel 36, 38; Carrington; Wilson par. 16, 17, 18.
- <sup>9</sup> See also Epstein 85 and Hansen 10.

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