"Bright Side": Margaret Atwood's Post-Apocalyptic Post-Anthropocentrism

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Abstract

Barbara Hill Rigney has described the project of Margaret Atwood's fiction as "a moral issue. …it is the responsibility of the writer/artist not only to describe her world, but also to criticise it, to bear witness to its failures, and, finally, to prescribe corrective measures - perhaps even to redeem" (1). The moral responsibility of the author is evident in Atwood's speculative fiction trilogy, in which the author's known concern for the environment and wildlife conservation provides the impetus to the trilogy's biological catastrophe. Though Atwood describes herself as a "pessimistic pantheist," nevertheless, her post-apocalyptic story-world is not without hope (Atwood, para. 3). Indeed, Atwood describes her speculative America - initially overwhelmed with environmental crises, mass extinctions, rampant poverty and greed, social anarchy, and political corruption before a human-designed global pandemic wipes out most of the human species - as an "ustopia" (utopia and dystopia, together). The utopian hope is embodied within the genetically modified Crakers, human-animal-plant hybrids who live in harmony with their [...]

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The conference call-for-paper asks “what hope can the future hold” and what can American studies teach us about futurity and uncertainty? Naturally, I turned to Margaret Atwood, who is neither American nor particularly hopeful, if we’ve read any of her dystopian texts. Hope seems a secondary thought in the story-world of her *MaddAddam* trilogy, which features rampant species extinction, widespread climate change, and exploited environments that can no longer support their human or nonhuman populations, leading to famine, refuge migrations, armed conflicts, and social fragmentation between those who have and keep, and those who desperately want. Atwood’s creative response to this oddly familiar global disaster is to kill off most of the human population through a bioengineered virus hidden inside a sex-enhancing pill. Crake, the creator of the pill, is also the creator of the beautiful, peaceful, vegan, human-animal-plant hybrid Crakers, who are designed to be perfectly adapted to live as a part of their post-apocalyptic, human-free environment. The Crakers and the virus are, Crake says, “two stages of a single plan,” intended to give the planet and other nonhuman life a chance to heal and thus survive, without humans to push the planet past the brink of disaster (*OC* 358). It is precisely this duality of life and death, destruction and regeneration, that leads me to propose that the trilogy, and, in particular, the final novel, offers hope and lessons to be learned for our ecologically and socially uncertain future. This hope becomes clear when we read the novels in light of Atwood’s own “third thing” theory as well as the “companion species” theory of American philosopher, Donna Haraway, and the epistemology of *Mino-Bimaadiziwin*, of the Native American and First Nations tribe, the Anishinaabe, on whose ancestral lands we are currently located. Specifically, I will argue today that the Crakers are dramatizations of a complex worldview of interconnected, intersubjective, and more-than-human relations, accomplished in both the form and the narrative voice and style of Blackbeard, the post-apocalyptic Craker narrator. The Crakers thereby become the “bright side” of Atwood’s utopian apocalypse: they are the speculative and didactic dual-edged sword of hope and warning to the other characters and Atwood’s readers, revealing that our potential salvation from a destruction our own making – borne from Western conventions of essentialism, individualism, and separation from the natural world – lies in acknowledging and respecting our inherently interdependent nature with the beings and the world around and inside us.

To begin, I’ll provide a brief explanation of the theoretical terms, as they relate to my project, before continuing to a more detailed discussion of *MaddAddam*. Sherrill Grace argues that Atwood’s fictional corpus can be read in terms of the tension and destructive arising from oppositional polarity; but, she says, freedom from this violence “comes from accepting the duality … which we share with all living things” (Grace 3). Atwood explains this accepted duality, by saying “you can define yourself as innocent and get killed, or you can define yourself as a killer and kill others. I think there has to be a third thing again; the ideal would be somebody
who would neither be a killer or a victim, who would achieve some kind of harmony with the
world, which is a productive or creative harmony, rather than a destructive relationship” (Gibson
27). Grace also explains that for Atwood, the “greatest crime … is the rejection of
responsibility,” as it leads to the false sense of innocence (ibid). But, taking action can also lead
to destructive consequences. Ultimately, then, “the third thing” that Atwood is looking for is a
recognition of one’s moral responsibility to be an active member of the world around you, but
with a recognition that this world is larger than yourself and that you “share it with all living
things.” These beliefs give Atwood’s writing a characteristic style and thematic. For example,
Grace discusses how sections one and three of the poem “The Circle Game” describe two adults
fighting inside a home, while sections two and four describe children playing games outside. It’s
only in sections five, six, and seven that this alternating pattern ends by converging the binaries
of adult/child and inside/outside through figurative language and symbolism, thus revealing that
the children are representations mirroring the games being played by the adults (Grace 22).
Therefore, structural convergence of polar opposites leads to a critical uncovering of an
uncomfortable truth. As in “The Circle Game,” Atwood uses repetition and convergence in
MaddAddam, and the result is a similar revelation and critique in one step.

Atwood and Haraway come together with their interest in interconnected worlds and
worldviews. Haraway deconstructs essentializing and dichotomous terms such as “human,”
“animal,” “self,” “other,” “nature” and “culture” to find that they are “instances of misplaced
concreteness,” resulting in an illogical and unscientific adherence to human exceptionalism, the
belief that humanity stands outside the “spatial and temporal web of interspecies
dependencies” (WSM 11). In contrast, Haraway’s “companion species theory” is a biological
conceptualization of a self constituted by its relatings with others. As she says, “companion
species” signifies that “[t]here are no pre-constituted subjects and objects, and no single sources,
unitary actors, or final ends” (CSM 6, 7). From cells, viruses, and intestinal bacteria to humans,
dogs, landscapes, and technologies – life is, she says, a “knot in motion” (emphasis added; CSM
6). Haraway maintains that once we are aware of our interconnected world and its asymmetrical
power relations over life and death, our respectful responses cannot be pre-determined by
anthropocentric assumptions of rights and privileges (WSM 42). As such, in her philosophies and
across a variety of disciplines, Haraway investigates the practical ways to promote the
“flourishing” of individuals, species, and communities as a connected and complex whole,
though the answers are often disruptive to Euro-American modes of thinking and being in the
world.

Mino-Bimaadiziwin, the guiding moral principle and epistemology of the Anishinaabe, is
one way in which Atwood and Haraway’s joint interest in working outside an essentialist and
anthropocentric worldview may be realized, for Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike. Anishinaabe
scholar D’Arcy Rheault describes Mino-Bimaadiziwin as “the Way of the Good Life,” or a “life well-lived” by maintaining good relations with all of life (Rheault, 104, 30). Lawrence Gross (Minnesota Ojibway) explains that the Anishinaabe have a familial relationship
with the world and other living beings – including, but not limited to, human and nonhuman
members; the plants, trees, landscape features, and planetary bodies; as well as healing songs,
and sacred stories; as he writes, the Anishinaabeg live in a “peopled universe.” For non-Anishinaabeg people, raised within a worldview of clearly delineated boundaries between nature and culture, subjects and objects, or humans and nonhumans, this all-encompassing understanding of the world, and one’s moral obligations to it, may be difficult to conceptualize. The teachings become clearer with an understanding of the Anishinaabe language, which does not separate nature and culture, but reads them as different forms of life. Thus, Scott Lyons (Leech Lake Ojibwe) explains that the term for a human dance may contain prefixes and suffixes which also relate to flowing water and birds in flight. The comparison is more than a metaphor; it’s a recognition of continuity and the flourishing of different forms of life (X-Marks 85). For these reasons, translations from Anishinaabemowin to English often disrupt subtle meanings of connectivity and simultaneously challenge figurative comparisons, gendered pronouns, and the nature of anthropomorphization.

Interconnectivity is also reaffirmed through the tribe’s sacred stories. Anishinaabe elder, Edward Benton-Banai wrote The Mishomis Book as a means to teach and maintain Anishinaabe values and understandings of the world through retelling the tribe’s Creation Story cycle. From just the first story, several important ways of understanding the world as an Anishinaabe become clear:

- 1. Everything was made by the Creator for a specific, interrelated purpose. As such, there can be no dichotomously and polarized beings, because everything plays a role in the life processes of something else. Figures may oppose each other, as with the Thunderbirds and the Water Lion, but theirs is a complementary duality, as the Anishinaabe understand by watching rain of a thunderstorm pummel a lake, thereby refilling the water reserves, only to be reabsorbed back the clouds. Polarities, such as good and evil, are inconceivable because they run counter to how the living world works.

- 2. The form of Anishinaabe stories, often based on creation, destruction, and regeneration, mirrors the rhythms of the world. Lived experience and the stories tell us that regeneration is inherent within destruction.

- 3. The events of the stories, such as Muskrat saving the world after it was destroyed by humanity’s greed, stress that more-than-human interdependence and kinship are mandatory for survival, as are the respect and humility necessary to maintain these good relations.

- 4. Finally, storytelling is not one-sided; the storyteller is constantly in the process of telling the story, considering its reception as an audience-member, and returning back to telling the story. As Gross explains, the storier is always in the middle. Subsequently, the storier is as affected by the act of telling as the audience is in listening.

Overall, the stories told by Anishinaabe elders like Benton-Banai, Basil Johnston, and Victor Barnouw are forms of pedagogy, entertainment, community-building, and healing. Anishinaabe scholars Jill Doerfler, Nigaan Sinclair, and Heidi Stark highlight the connection between stories, resiliency, and Mino-Bimaadiziwin, saying “Anishinaabe stories resist narratives of domination and subjugation […] by providing an alternative way of understanding the world and relationships with Creation (Centering 235). It is for precisely this “alternative way of understanding the world” that Anishinaabe worldviews have much to offer to non-Indigenous
scholars, like Atwood and Haraway, who all attempt to visualize and be responsible agents within a worldview of complementary duality, interconnectivity, intersubjectivity, and more-than-human communality.

I turn now to how the theories are dramatized by Atwood’s use of repetition and distorted narrative form in the trilogy, which can be described as follows:

1. A self-destructive oscillation between constructed binaries – specifically, between pre- and post-apocalyptic discourses (past versus present-tense) and two fragmented or separated narrators (Jimmy/Snowman in Crake; Toby/Ren in Flood).

2. The alternations are regularly interrupted by interfering voices of former friends, lovers, or books (in Crake) or by the sermons told by an eco-Christian preacher, Adam One (in Flood) which guide the narrative towards particular events and attempt to push the characters towards more interconnected and communal ways of seeing the world.

3. The separated narratives gradually come together until a moment of crisis, leading to a breakdown of the alternating pattern and the breakdown of the character’s sense of being a bounded subject, separate from their surroundings and other beings.

4. The united narrative that emerges from this breakdown distorts the character’s previous worldview, as the character arrives at a latent acceptance of their inherent duality, interconnectivity with the landscape and beings around them, and an increased sense of communality.

Crake and Flood conclude with the protagonists struggling to know how to act responsibly in the world now that they have been reawakened to their relationship within it. And both end ambiguously at a decisive moment where the protagonists must decide whether to shoot other human survivors.

MaddAddam continues from the moment of indecision that ends the previous novels and expands upon the post-apocalyptic world, where a group of surviving humans eke out a life living with the Crakers, and trying to protect themselves from bands of escaped prisoners and feral, transgenic pigoons – pigs with human brain tissue. The structure of MaddAddam repeats Atwood’s previous patterns: the alternating past-present narrative perspective is repeated with Toby’s present-tense descriptions of the post-apocalyptic world while her lover, Zeb, fills in details from his past-life. Likewise, the trope of the interfering, guiding voices is also repeated: Toby adopts Snowman’s role as storyteller to the Crakers, telling them stories of Zeb and Crake’s past and a mythologized version of their origins.

However, Atwood introduces two important distortions to this repetition of previous narrative and stylistic tendencies and from these distortions emerge revelations and critique. In the first distortion, Toby’s stories are continuously interrupted by the Crakers’ questions which, through their apparent simplicity, estrange anthropocentric behaviors. For example, Toby is forced to explain how and why humans can kill nonhumans, but she cannot revert to explanations of human exceptional privileges for she has no material evidence of such exceptionality. The Crakers’ questions depict the “instances of misplaced concreteness,” per Haraway, that undergird epistemologies of anthropocentric. Highlighting the “always in the
middle relationship” of a good Anishinaabe storyteller, in telling stories to the Crakers about the world, Toby gradually alters her way of characterizing others (in particular, the Pigoons), and ultimately adopts a worldview that is more cognizant and respectful of her relations with the nonhuman beings around her. In this way, the Crakers indirectly reform Toby into a closer image of themselves and their peaceful worldview by reshaping Toby into the storyteller that they want her to be; as she herself realizes: “They prompt, they interrupt, they fill in the parts she’s missed. … they’re doing what they can to polish her up” (45).

In the second distortion of the novel are two distinct moments of narrative breakdown, as opposed to just the one instance in the previous novels. The first relates to Toby’s spiritual encounter with a pigoon and Blackbeard, which fundamentally alters how she sees these creatures and undermines her belief in the polarity of life and death and in the fixed nature of bodily boundaries. The second narrative breakdown takes the place of the previous instances of narrative convergence, after which the separated narrators of the earlier novels converge and offer an altered perspective to their previously self-centered worldviews. It is in this scene of narrative reunification that we see Atwood’s “third thing” theory come into effect, as well as her dual-edged sword of destruction and revelation, hope and critique. Toby and Zeb’s alternating narrations converge at the crisis of the plot, during which the humans and the pigoons battle the escaped prisoners together, in order to protect their shared community. However, before the Battle can take place, Blackbeard accidentally discovers the desiccated bones of Oryx and Crake, god-like figures to the Crakers due to Snowman’s earlier stories. Toby’s describes Blackbeard’s reaction as “the sudden fall, the crash, the damage. […] He begins to cry as if his heart will break. […] What to say? How to comfort him? In the face of this *terminal sorrow*?” (MaddAddam 356). “Terminal” is both tragic and evocative, as it implies an “irreversible, irreparable, […] disastrous” conclusion, “located at or forming the end of something” (OED 1C, 4a). However, immediately following this scene of spiritual apocalypse, Blackbeard permanently replaces Toby as the embedded storyteller. Illustrating the dual nature of apocalypse, Blackbeard’s spiritual destruction and discovery signals an opening for hope. Hope lies in Blackbeard’s new role as the narrator of stories; these stories illustrate how the Crakers’ non-anthropocentric and interrelated worldviews stem from their lived experience of responding, with profound respect and empathy, to the “peopled” world around them. In other words, Blackbeard’s hope-filled post-apocalyptic stories are dramatizations of a companion species world, driven by a *bimaadiziwin*-esque interest in maintaining good relations with one’s more-than-human family.

In the stories immediately following Blackbeard’s spiritual apocalypse,¹ Blackbeard reveals the origins of the Crakers’ highly empathic worldview, beginning first with his report of the multi-sensorial way that he experienced the Battle. That is, Blackbeard’s first-person narrative explains that he, as a Craker, can hear and feel the pain of the battle participants and he can see and smell their intention to do harm (362, 359). After the battle, when the prisoners

¹ “Spiritual apocalypse” = both a horrible act of spiritual devastation and a terrible unveiling of what had been kept secret from him.
are recaptured, Blackbeard acknowledges feeling their pain and anger, though he knows not to untie them for they will commit even worse acts of violence. Following from Blackbeard’s story, the Crakers’ worldview becomes clearer: they are peaceful towards the world because they can sense the pain of others in their own bodies. This ability understandably blurs Blackbeard’s sense of his own bodily boundaries, and thereby challenges the binary of self and other, for what does it mean to be a unified “self” if your feelings and sensations are partially the result of those around?

In the process of telling his stories, Blackbeard’s use of language, in particular, reiterates his relational and non-speciesist worldview. In referring to himself in his diary entries, Blackbeard often uses both the first-and the third-person pronouns, as seen in his journal entry for a feast day:

“And I (Blackberd) said, ‘But you love each other anyway.’ … Blackbeard (I am Blackbard Blackbeard) does not see why. Soon Blackbeard will be ready for his first mating. When the next woman turns blue, he will turn very blue also, and gather flowers; and maybe he will be chosen. He (I, Blackbeard) asked Toby if the green branches were like that … So now I understand better” (379).

Blackbeard’s difficulty in assigning himself one pronoun repeats and distorts the previous protagonists’ moments of crises, when they inadvertently see and refer to themselves from the outside. For Snowman and Toby, this was during moments of danger to the self; yet, for Blackbeard, his “self-otherization” denotes a lack of significance to the subjective experience in Euro-American cultures. Indeed, the pronouns raise the question of whether a “purely” subjective experience is even thinkable when his body, his experience of the world, and the worldview it forms are so profoundly shaped by the experiences and sensations of others. Though grammatically incorrect from an English perspective, Blackbeard’s language uncovers and reaffirms an epistemology and ontology that understands the individual as inherently comprised of others, part of a complex, inter-special “web of life” (McNally, qtd. in Gross 212).

While these previous stories and journal entries by Blackbeard are interspersed with journal entries from Toby, her voice is slowly phased out and the novel ends with Blackbeard’s two stories, “Book” and “The Story of Toby.” These stories echo the same narrative and thematic technique of convergence and revelation as used in “The Circle Game.” In doing so, they allow us to see, in closing, how the hybrid, post-apocalyptic narrator provides a dual image of hope and critique. In particular, the “Story of Toby” repeats Atwood’s penchant for ambiguous endings. However, Blackbeard’s inconclusive ending is more of an “exploration of [post-apocalyptic] imaginative possibilities,” to borrow from Richard Northover. When Toby discovered that she has a “wasting illness,” she says her goodbyes before walking towards the woods, alone, and with a bag of toxic mushrooms. Blackbeard reports not one ending, but four, each offering different ways in which Toby may have died:

“Where she went I cannot write in this Book, because I do not know. Some say that she died by herself, and was eaten by vultures. The Pig Ones say that. Others say she was taken away by Oryx, and is now flying in the forest, at
night, in the form of an Owl. Others said that she went to join Pilar, and that her Spirit is in the elderberry bush.

Yet others say that she went to find Zeb, and that he is in the form of a Bear, and that she too is in the form of a Bear, and is with him today. That is the best answer, because it is the happiest; and I have written it down. I have written down the other answers too. But I made them in smaller writing” (390).

Blackbeard’s advocation of the experiential knowledge of the community, rather than his own singular belief signals an emphasis on a communal, intersubjective epistemology. Moreover, in this story, Blackbeard does not prioritize certain knowledge based on its special origins: while the Pigoons offer a likely answer, the preceding events and the knowledge of the interconnected nature of the planet does not disqualify the more “spiritual” nature of the other endings. If Toby’s body is eaten by owls, bears, and finally decomposes into a bush, as has been the case with other characters in the novel, then all the endings are equally possible. However, it is significant to note that the one ending Blackbeard highlights is “the happiest”; Blackbeard places his narrative emphasis on the continued flourishing, care, and respect for all of beings, even when that being is no longer physically alive.

In converging the polarized narrative binaries into such a hybrid narrator, Atwood distorts the prejudices levelled against these characters, in terms of their simplicity and their maligned, “primitive” forms of communication and culture. At the same time, Atwood depicts how many of the beliefs of the other characters have been dismantled, such as the sustainability of anthropocentrism and of essentialist categories like life and death, dreams and reality, and self and other, human and animal. That is, as Blackbeard would say, “a thing of hope,” and, for Atwood, a critique. Namely, through the theories that I’ve investigated today, we already have the means to think in ways outside the persistent and destructive Euro-American epistemologies of anthropocentrism and separation from the world. But do we have the humility and the respect necessary to act? Vine Deloria, Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux) argues that “The future of mankind lies waiting for those who will come to understand their lives and take up their responsibilities to all living things” (God is Red 300-1). Maintaining better relations with our interconnected world is our responsibility and our hope; otherwise, Atwood suggests, it may be a world without us.

Thank you!


