"Anishinaabe Mino-Bimaadiziwin in Margaret Atwood's MaddAddam"

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Abstract
This paper argues that reading Margaret Atwood's post-apocalyptic novel, MaddAddam, through the theoretical lens of the Anishinaabe philosophy of Mino-Bimaadiziwin, or "the way of the good life," highlights the complex means by which the novel is entirely composed upon the idea and necessity of interconnectivity, using it as a structuring device, a central thematic, and a means of plot resolution (Rheault 140). Critics have approached the novel (and the trilogy) from a variety of Euro-American philosophies, but with little input from Indigenous philosophies; in contrast, this paper argues that Mino-Bimaadiziwin clarifies MaddAddam's inventive use of discontinuous narrative, time, and multi-voiced discourse, as well as the novel's reliance on inter-species interconnectivity to resolve the plot. Subsequently, MaddAddam offers a sustained critique of, and alternative to, ingrained Euro-American ontologies of rigid binaries, linear time, and human exceptionalism. At the same time, the theoretical framework of Mino-Bimaadiziwin provides a concrete, comprehensive, and underrepresented approach to engage the issue of [...]
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In the cultural movement surrounding Canada’s 150th anniversary (or “Colonialism 150”), scholars and the public alike debate the country’s colonialist past, forms of decolonization and allyship in the present, and the possibility and nature of a post-colonial future. The arguments presented by Simpson (Mohawk), Smith, and their collected authors in Theorizing Native Studies (2009) gain especial significance during this anniversary; the authors argue that a combined theoretical framework of Indigenous and non-Indigenous critical theories could prevent lateral violence between marginalized groups and “intellectual isolationism” in academia in general, while simultaneously promoting “intellectual sovereignty” through “intellectual promiscuity, sympathy, and solidarity” (11). Furthering the message of Theorizing, scholars like Jodi Byrd (Chickasaw Nation of Oklahoma), Vine Deloria Jr. (Oglala Sioux), Lawrence Gross (White Earth Chippewa), Kwes Kwentin (Musqueam), and Zoe Todd (Red River Métis/Otipemisiwak), among others, have also addressed and argued for the value in using Indigenous epistemologies as critical theories in a largely non-Indigenous academic context, or “to start sharing the law with our neighbors” (Kwentin, n.pag).

Following the practice laid out by these scholars, this essay reads Margaret Atwood’s apocalyptic novel, MaddAddam (2013), through the lens of Mino-Bimaadiziwin, the Anishinaabe philosophy and “ontological, ethical, epistemological, and aesthetic directives” of “the way of the good life” (Rheault 104). Mino-Bimaadiziwin’s comprehensive instruction on living in harmony

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1 This essay uses the broader term, Anishinaabe(g), to refer to the collection of Algonquin-speaking tribes who share the beliefs of Mino-Bimaadiziwin. When referring to individuals, their specific tribal identity (e.g. Anishinaabe, Ojibwa, Chippewa, etc.) will be provided. When referring to Indigenous identity in general, the terms “Indigenous” or “Native” will be used interchangeably.
with one’s relations and environment inspires my argument that MaddAddam is entirely composed around the idea and necessity of interconnectivity, using it as a structuring device, a central thematic, and a means of plot resolution. Subsequently, the novel offers a sustained critique of, and alternative to, ingrained Euro-American ontologies of rigid binaries, linear time, and human exceptionalism. This is demonstrated through an analysis of the novel’s use of discontinuous narrative, time, and multi-voiced discourse, read through a short scene which encapsulates the primary importance of interconnectivity to the novel’s structure and story. Overall, the essay has three aims: to provide a narratological analysis of one of Atwood’s most popular novels; in doing so, to offer an alternative theoretical approach to the novel which relies upon Native epistemologies; and thus, to participate in the necessary and valuable work of ontological and academic decolonization by challenging the commonly accepted “wisdom” of who “owns” theory (Simpson 6). Deloria Jr. argues that “[i]f we change the very way that Western people think, the way they collect data, which data they gather, and how they arrange that information, then we are speaking truly of liberation” (qtd. in Simpson 4). In its prioritization of Anishinaabe epistemologies to advance the critique of mainstream Canadian literature, this paper hopes to provide a small step in the efforts to rebalance the relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants in literary criticism.

Scholars of MaddAddam, as a novel and as a part of the larger trilogy (comprised of Oryx and Crake [2003] and The Year of the Flood [2009]), have used a variety of approaches to address the novel’s post-apocalyptic storyworld, fragmented narrative structure, and genetically hybrid characters, including Revelation, Apocalypse, and ecocriticism; Christianity and “Paganism”; Indigeneity and Indigenous myths; victimization and trauma studies; and posthumanism. While many of these critiques address Atwood’s known interest in environmentalism and the dystopic

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2 For Revelation, Apocalypse and ecocriticism, see Northover, whose work traces the shift from Flood’s Christian tradition of ecological domination through to the apocalyptic/revelatory possibilities of the genetically hybrid narrator, who reveals a “more just dispensation” of power between humans and nonhumans (94). Similarly, Bergthaller claims that the Christian sermons provided in Flood reconcile the human followers to live in harmony, as opposed to destructive antagonism, with their environment. Ni also argues that the sermons taught by Atwood’s eco-cult offer a “pagan” form of “radical hope” that allows readers a means to “think otherwise” (Ni 117). While Northover, Bergthaller, and Ni find a need to change an anthropocentric, domineering stance towards the environment to a more interdependent position, none of them address Indigenous philosophies which would provide realistic means to arrive at such a relationship with the world. Some scholars do address Indigeneity specifically, such as Frew, who argues, troublingly, that the Crakers are “post-human indigenes [who] … serve as the noble savages from whom [the protagonist of Oryx and Crake] might continuously attempt to ‘acquir[e] Indian’” (Goldie, qtd. in Frew 212)). That is to say, the Crakers take the position of “the Other,” against which the human survivors define themselves. DiMarco discusses Atwood’s use of the Wendigo as “a cautionary tale that questions the ethics of humans motivated by greed and profit” (140) but DiMarco erases Indigenous perspectives from her analysis of the myth, thereby missing nuance regarding this mythical figure and its links to more-than-human social relations (with adults, children, bears [healing tallow], and dogs), (see Barnouw). For victimization and trauma, see Snyder, who argues that Atwood’s doubled and fragmented temporal structure “emphasizes the futility of attempting to quarantine an individual’s subjective interiority from relations,” including connections of family, nation, and the non-human (473). Interestingly, Snyder’s reading does not take into account the protagonist’s deeply held emotional connections with non-humans and their relation to his trauma and the global catastrophe. For posthumanism, see Mosca, who argues that Crake and Flood present “the end of ‘the human’ as it is traditionally perceived”: that is to say, the end of the human subject as perceived within a strictly Euro-American ontology (48). Despite their disparate approaches, these studies share their assertion regarding the importance of the trilogy’s emphasis on living with more awareness of interdependence, in terms of religion, myths, epistemologies, and ontologies, yet none of them refer to Indigenous philosophies which have asserted these points for centuries and which could offer valuable insight and development of their arguments and analyses of the trilogy.
implications of the planet’s current trajectory, few scholars have approached the trilogy through the lens of Indigenous ways of seeing and being part of an interconnected world.\(^3\) Thus, there exists a significant gap in the literature. However, some readers may question the relevance of Atwood in the conversation of Indigenous studies due to her role in Indigenous erasure or cultural appropriation, as seen in works like *Survival* (1972), *Surfacing* (1972a), and *The Journals of Susannah Moodie* (1970). More recently, Atwood gained notoriety on social media for her part in discussions regarding the claims to Indigenous identity purported by Joseph Boyden and Stephen Galloway. Her support of these claims—which she has no authority to give—is unusual, since she discusses this very problem of “claiming kin,” arguing that “many white Canadians claim, as a matter of pride, some ‘Indian blood,’ perhaps to convince themselves that the land they live in is one they ‘ought’ to be living in” (2004, 45).\(^4\) Atwood admits that there seems little chance that non-Indigenous Canadians will stop making fake claims regarding their desired Indigenous identities. However, one potential “benefit” that she hopes will result from this trend is “if white Canadians would adopt a more traditionally Native attitude towards the natural world, a less exploitative and more respectful attitude, they might be able to reverse the galloping environmental carnage of the late twentieth century and salvage for themselves some of that wilderness they keep saying they identify with and need” (emphasis added; 72).

Atwood’s conclusion is troubling for its reiteration of the “Native-as-Nature” stereotype and its apparent acceptance of Indigenous identity theft. However, her subtler point—regarding the value of bringing Indigenous philosophies into more mainstream Euro-American ways of seeing and being in the world—coincides with the aforementioned projects of Simpson, Byrd, Deloria Jr., and others. It seems, then, that despite Atwood’s troubled/troubling relationship with Indigeneity, reading her novel in terms of Anishinaabe worldviews would have a variety of benefits. For example, the respectful use of *Mino-Bimaadiziwin*, alongside more “conventional” theoretical frameworks, does the important work of decolonizing theory, as it rewrites colonial notions of who produces theory and about whom, as aptly demonstrated in *Theorizing*. Part of this work is the very simple, yet vital matter, of representation and visibility. In a more localized benefit, *Mino-Bimaadiziwin* clarifies Atwood’s vague statement regarding the need to adopt a more “traditionally Native attitude towards the natural world” by referring to actual Indigenous beliefs and worldviews: specifically, those of the Anishinaabeg. *Mino-Bimaadiziwin* therefore offers a unique and underrepresented means through which to engage with Atwood’s most strident environmental text and to expand upon the critical literature.

This alternative approach is possible because *Mino-Bimaadiziwin* is a thorough and concrete manner of seeing and being in an interconnected world. The philosophy is evident from the Anishinaabe Creation Story, in which Gitchi Manitou has a dream vision of all of Creation and decides it must be made. In making the sun, moon, stars, and Earth; the trees, flowers, grasses, and vegetables; the walking, flying, swimming, and crawling beings, Gitchi Manitou gives a piece of

\(^3\) Osborne argues that the protagonist of *Crake* acts like an Aboriginal Australian “medicine man” to the Crakers, as he creates myths and rituals (43). While I agree with much of Osborne’s textual analysis, she does not acknowledge the protagonist’s interconnected state with nonhuman animals and the Crakers, whom Osborne characterizes as “blank slates” (25). This oversight of the nonhumans’ and the Crakers’ active role in reshaping the protagonist’s worldview negates the very interconnectivity that is at the heart of many Indigenous ontologies. By maintaining a top-down approach (a “medicine man” creating the rituals and “giving” them to the “blank slates”), Osborne reiterates a linear, arborescent epistemology rather than a more rhizomic, interconnected episteme-ontology.

\(^4\) Deloria, Jr. also makes a similar point regarding white Americans in *Custer Died for Your Sins* (3-4).
their self into each part of Creation. Creation is, as D’Arcy Rheault (Anishinaabe) describes it, the unity, balance, and harmony of all the parts, set to the cyclical temporal rhythm of generation, growth, death, and regeneration (145). Euro-American ontologies – shaped by Christian ideologies – are formed on oppositional relationships of good and evil, right and wrong, which are easily transformed into dichotomies of nature and culture, human and animal, civilized and savage, set within a teleological time-frame aimed at “progress.” Violence and exploitation – of humans, nonhumans, and the land – have been, and continue to be, the result of such a worldview. In contrast, Lawrence Gross (Chippewa) explains that the Anishinaabe sacred stories push the Anishinaabeg of all ages and stages of life to see themselves within a “peopled universe,” inhabited by Gitchi Manitou and Nokomis, Sky Woman and her Twins, Nanabozho and Muskrat, the Animikiig and Mishipeshu (238). Connecting with the “other-than-human” beings, through fasting visions, dreams, songs, and drumming, allows the Anishinaabeg to learn wisdom, love, respect, courage, honesty, humility, moderation, and truth, and thereby maintain and participate in the harmony and rhythm of Creation (Hallowell 22). A significant portion of knowing one’s place within Creation means that one respects the role and purpose that others have to play, whether they be a child, elder, porcupine, drum, story, or song. Thus, in the Mino-Bimaadiziwin worldview, you become a part of Creation by living in harmony with your relations, which include your immediate and extended family as well as your clan, your totem animal, your personal Manitou, and the nonhuman animals and spirits in the environment around you (including the environment itself). This worldview of relationality clarifies Atwood’s statement about being less exploitative towards the natural world; but it also provides an all-encompassing worldview of interconnectivity through which we can read Atwood’s ecological disaster story.

The three novels of the MaddAddam trilogy tell the past- and present-tense stories of the human survivors of a plague that was purposefully spread to eradicate humankind, in the hopes that the Earth would then have a chance to heal from rampant climate change. The protagonists are affected by psychological, sexual, or emotional traumas from before the plague; subsequently, they try to construct boundaries – such as physical separation, emotional distance, and selfishness – to prevent further trauma. However, the discontinuous narrative structure of each novel demonstrates that this kind of self-isolation is untenable and ultimately harmful – to the individual, society, and the planet. The novels all feature an alternating pattern of two narrators’ perspectives, told from oppositional spaces and time-frames; this pattern is often interrupted by first-person stories. For example, in MaddAddam, Toby, a former member of an eco-Christian cult, tells the present-tense story of the world after the pandemic, while Zeb, her lover, tells the past-tense story of his difficult life before the pandemic. Toby also tells stories of the past to the Crakers, a group of human/animal/plant genetic hybrids. In Crake and Flood, this alternating pattern is eventually disrupted, leading to a reunification of the split narrators in time and space. Yet, the first two novels end inconclusively on the question of how to behave in this new world, leaving open the question of whether the protagonists will continue to follow their isolationist mindset or chose one of relationality and community. In contrast, in MaddAddam, a potent scene of inter-species vulnerability reveals that the community’s isolationist and anthropocentric beliefs are dangerous to their survival. The discontinuous narrative dramatizes this shift in worldview by adding a third voice, rather than unifying the previous two.

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5 Paraphrased from the Creation Stories told by Basil Johnston (Ojibwa) in Ojibway Heritage and Edward Benton Benai (Ojibwa) in The Mishomis Book.
This new narrator, a Craker boy named Blackbeard, reframes the previously binary narrative pattern: from that of Zeb and Toby – past and present, emotionally closed off and anthropocentric – to that of Toby, Zeb, and Blackbeard – a multi-voiced narrative of blended time frames, and representative of a non-anthropocentric community. Mid-way into the novel, Toby receives a vision that requires her to move away from her denial of the past and her avoidance of emotional intimacy. While asking her deceased mentor for advice, she initially receives no linguistic response which prompts Toby to think, “there is no magic, there are no angels. It was all child’s play” (Atwood, 2013, 222). The “it” which Toby thinks is fake refers to the religious teachings of the cult, who believed that the Christian god is omnipresent in the world. However, at the moment when she realizes God is not going to answer, Toby is brought face-to-face with a genetically enhanced pig and her piglets, the same type of pigs who have repeatedly attempted to eat the human survivors. In her vision, Toby sees the sow as “Such enormous power…. She could run them down like a tank. Life, life, life, life, life. Full to bursting, this minute. Second. Millisecond. Millennium. Eon” (223). In this moment of intense physical and spiritual vulnerability, Toby encounters a perception of the world as interconnected and cyclical, a realization that directly contradicts her own linear, Euro-American worldviews of oppositional categories: human and animal, life and death, past and present. Toby’s reference to “power” seems to imply the sow’s strength, which could kill them. But this reference to possible death is juxtaposed by Toby’s uncharacteristic repetition of “life”: the five repetitions highlight the sow’s regenerative power – she is the mother to five piglets – as well as the sow’s choice to grant or take away the lives of the five humans – whom she could “run down like a tank.” The repetition is powerful precisely because it is unclear to whom the repetition refers: the humans and the pigs are equally likely to be the implied objects of the phrase and are thus drawn together as mutual participants in Creation, or “life.”

The connection between the pigs and the humans then expands across time. Whereas Toby previously warned Zeb of delving too much into his past, for fear of reliving the trauma of his childhood, here, she sees “life” – a power shared between the human and the pigs – expanding from this moment of tension to the micro- and macroscopic perspectives of time, from the “millisecond” to the “eon.” This moment of shared “life” becomes a synecdoche, a representative part of the overall balance and rhythm of Creation; as Rheault explains, “each individual (human and nonhuman) is as much a representation and manifestation of the whole of Creation as the whole of Creation is a representation of itself” (111). The description of Toby’s vision is representative of what elder Edward Benton-Benai describes as humility, or “to know yourself as a sacred part of Creation” (64), one of the seven lessons of Mino-Bimaadiziwin. Therefore, it makes sense that Toby only arrives at this simple, yet profound, realization of shared “life” by meeting and returning the pig’s gaze. The vision she receives is far from the vision she sought; yet it nevertheless begins to radically reframe Toby’s understanding of being in the post-pandemic world.

The encounter between Toby and the sow has a significant effect on the narrative structure and the plot, in which the implications of Toby’s awakening to a Mino-Bimaadiziwin-esque worldview of interconnectivity become evident. Following the encounter, Toby initially refuses to tell a story to the Crakers, asking instead for Blackbeard’s help; when the story is eventually recounted in the narrative, it is revealed to be a story Toby tells herself. These changes offer the first two significant disruptions to the narrative pattern and foreshadow Blackbeard’s introduction.
as a new storyteller, which adds a third, and distinctly non-anthropocentric (Blackbeard includes the perspective of nonhuman beings in his stories), voice to the narrative. At the same time that the narrative structure is shifted towards a multi-voiced, non-anthropocentric discourse, the vision also causes several important changes to the plot, foreshadowing the novel’s peaceful resolution via an inter-species community. For example, the vision prompts Toby to stop eating pig meat, a rare source of protein, because, Toby claims, of “what the sow communicated to her […] though she couldn’t put it into words. It was more like a current. A current of water, a current of electricity” (Atwood 2013, 261-62). An Anishinaabe understanding of Creation is one of “unity in movement,” of always being in the process of creation; as Rupert Ross writes about Anishinaabe beliefs, “each person’s primary focus is not on a separate thing but on all the movements and relationships between things” (Rheault 104; Ross 103-4). By describing the pig’s communication through nature-based similes of movement and flow, Toby demonstrates a significant shift in her worldview, moving away from fixed states of being and towards a perspective of Creation as a state of flux: for example, between a pig, a woman, and the movement of elements. Following this scene of recognized interconnectivity, the previously antagonistic pigs offer a truce between the human survivors in order to join forces against two men who have been killing and eating members of the pig and human communities alike. This truce leads to a successful trial and execution and the continued peace and communality between the humans, the pigs, and the Crakers, thereby resolving various conflicts left open in the previous novels. In short, a recognition of vulnerable interconnectivity provides the impetus for a significant shift towards non-human voices in the narration and towards a more egalitarian, and less anthropocentric, community in the storyworld, thereby leading to a successful plot resolution.

There remains one final suggestion regarding the epiphany between Toby and the sow: it occurs immediately after Toby’s recognition that the Christian god she was encouraged to believe in was “child’s play” (Atwood 2013, 223). Atwood has stated that, in Canada, Christianity is an “imported” religion and that “the only sort of good, authentic kind of thing to have is something that comes out of the place where you are, […] the reality of your life” (Gibson 30). In God is Red, Deloria Jr. suggests that “the traditions, beliefs, and customs of the American Indian people are the guidelines for mankind’s future” specifically because they come from revelations stemming from a particular place, as opposed to a re-articulated belief based in history. It seems that, despite the problems which arise from Atwood’s participation in discourses about Indigeneity, she and Deloria are saying similar things. For Indigenous Studies scholars, Atwood’s apocalyptic trilogy is valuable for its representation of ontological revelations stemming from experiences with the “other-than-human beings” with whom we share our environment (itself an “other-than-human being”). For readers of Atwood’s trilogy, Indigenous worldviews and philosophies need to be recentered as a vital and valuable part of mainstream critical theory, for their rich and nuanced understanding of living in an interconnected world and its forms of representation in literature and stories.
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