

2016

# Beyond Borders: Nature, Revelation, and Identity in Atwood's *Surfacing*

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## Recommended Citation

Denommé, Emily, "Beyond Borders: Nature, Revelation, and Identity in Atwood's *Surfacing*" (2016). *2016 Undergraduate Awards*. 15.  
[https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/ungradawards\\_2016/15](https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/ungradawards_2016/15)

### **Beyond Borders: Nature, Revelation, and Identity in Atwood's *Surfacing***

Abstract: Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* studies the effects of the delineation of identity at a time in Canadian history where the question of Canadian national identity was evolving, becoming a marker that was more clearly defined and more consciously sought out by Canadian artists and citizens. Atwood's novel can be considered in light of these historical developments, but *Surfacing's* interest in the establishment of borders of exclusion and inclusion is not an affirmation of the positive effects such identifiers can bring. Instead of the perhaps typical celebration of the collective identity that such group identifiers as nationality can bring, this novel reveals that the borders such distinctions establish are ultimately damaging. As a Canadian and a woman in particular, the narrator's social groupings demand her victimhood, a concept that this paper explores in relation to Atwood's major work of Canadian literary criticism, *Survival*. The narrator's initial state of near-total psychological constriction is indicative of the dangers of social borders, and it is only in escaping the identifiers that define her – in terms of national, gender, and epistemological constructs – that she comes to a kind of wholeness. This escape takes the form of a turn towards the natural world as a truly borderless space where it is possible to heal a fragmented self. In light of the emphasis placed on the question of borders, this paper will consider the theories of Walter D. Mignolo and Julia Kristeva as a means to explore how identity is constructed around borders, both psychological and national, and how such constructions can be subverted.

The process of forming a mature identity within society's bounds is a question of borders: it is a matter of choosing what to define ourselves as and against. Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* charts the re-construction of identity undertaken by a narrator who must come to terms with the metaphorical borders in her life. Her journey to selfhood is used to explore the inadequacies of social groupings of national and gender constructs, as well as the failure of normative subjectivity, as embodied in reason, language, and individuality, to provide meaningful definitions of identity. Instead, it is through the acceptance of foreignness – as outlined by Walter Mignolo and Julia Kristeva – that the narrator discovers a more satisfying construction of identity in the face of social demands, a selfhood that is structured around a fusion with nature and a recognition of the power of revelation.

The journey of Atwood's narrator highlights the problematic groupings that her society demands in terms of nationality and gender. Under these categories, the narrator is doubly victimized as a Canadian and as a woman. This image of Canada as victim is at the centre of Atwood's work of Canadian literary criticism, *Survival*. According to Atwood, the major theme of Canadian literature is that of survival, an idea which places Canadians in the role of victim (*Survival*, 35). There are, according to Atwood, four stages of victimhood present in Canadian literature, but the second stage is especially pertinent to the narrator's mentality during the first part of the novel: the stage where victimhood is acknowledged, but is seen as an inevitable part of forces beyond one's control (37). Atwood also links the idea of survival for English-speaking Canadians to the threat of American "conquest" (32). In *Surfacing*, this idea of Canada as an inevitable victim to American commercial interest obsesses all of the Canadian characters. David, for example, frequently calls Americans some variation of "'fascist pig Yanks'" (Atwood,

*Surfacing* 36), doing so as casually “as though he’s commenting on the weather” (5), as if American conquest were simply a force of nature. The narrator also participates in this fatalistic mentality; though she seems to care about the environment around her childhood home, she feels that there is nothing she can do about the destruction of the Canadian wilderness: “The lake didn’t matter to them [the company], only the system . . . I would be able to do nothing, I didn’t live here” (117-118). This social “border”, or idea of fated victimhood, is also part of the narrator’s position as a woman.

Women are also made victims by patriarchy. The victimization of women is exemplified in Anna, whose obsession with make-up reveals the inauthenticity of her society’s vision of womanhood, what the narrator later describes as “an imitation of a woman who is also an imitation, the original nowhere” (Atwood, *Surfacing* 175). Before the trip, the narrator had never seen Anna without her make-up on, and she comments that “shorned of the pink cheeks and heightened eyes her face is curiously battered, a worn doll’s, her artificial face is the natural one” (42). Anna’s later fear of being without make-up in front of David reveals the extent of her position as his victim: “‘It’s not just that, it’s something for him to use. He watches me all the time, he waits for excuses. Then either he won’t screw at all or he slams it in so hard it hurts’” (126-127). She is unwilling or unable, however, as she tells the narrator, to leave him (127). David himself is an exemplar of an especially misogynistic sentiment, and he frequently objectifies both Anna and the narrator, culminating in his abusive demand that Anna strip to become one of his Random Samples (140-141). The narrator, though capable of understanding the humiliation this causes Anna, does not intervene because “after a while I no longer fought back because I never won. The only defense was flight, invisibility” (140). The narrator has given

up on any active resistance of her and other women's victimization. For most of the novel, the narrator struggles with the position that her gender places her in within a misogynistic society.

Worse than these positions of victimization is the state of self-deception and apathy that is their natural outcome. Trapped variously in Atwood's position one and two of victimhood, the narrator has become incapable of feeling emotion. This is especially apparent in her relationship with Joe, where it would seem most natural that she feel emotions. The narrator recalls, for example, that Joe admired "the way I took off my clothes and put them on again later very smoothly as if I were feeling no emotion. But I really wasn't" (Atwood, *Surfacing* 25). She also later attempts to decide whether she loves Joe (which "shouldn't matter" [40]) by dividing him into pros and cons (40). She is in fact so divided from any emotional inner life that she no longer even has dreams (41), as Rao recognizes (63). As Rao further points out, this division is a type of border; like a schizophrenic, the narrator "creates a barrier between the inner self and the self for others in order to protect what is felt to be the real self" (57). This desire for rationality in her life has essentially divided her from her innermost self, the self that is aware of the truth of her abortion. This barrier is described by the narrator: "At some point my neck must have closed over, pond freezing or a wound, shutting me into my head" (Atwood, *Surfacing* 109), the head being, here and elsewhere throughout the novel, symbolic of reason and logic. Later in the novel, the narrator also describes logic as "a wall, I built it, on the other side is terror" (185). The narrator's fake memories are this wall of logic, a phenomenon which she herself describes in imagining a bottle around her dead fetus: "The bottle had been logical, pure logic. . .secreted by my head, enclosure, something to keep the death away from me" (148). Ironically, she uses the very logic

that was part of her undoing to form this narrative. Her former lover is intimately linked with logic: entirely emotionally detached from the abortion that he has just forced his lover – who is clearly traumatized – to go through, he is described as “the voice of reason” (90). It is reason, therefore, that has failed the narrator and confined her to a life of emotional stagnancy.

All of the social “borders” available for the narrator to live within have failed her, placing her within the role of a victim so detached from her true self that she is unable to feel anything at all. In order to re-take her self-definition and to become a complete human being, the narrator must come to realize that these social “borders” can be broken. This is achieved through challenging the binaries that sustain the idea of Canada and women as fated victims. The border between American and Canadian is eventually rendered nebulous when the narrator comes to associate “American-ness” not with a nation, but rather with a mentality of destruction and artificiality. Creatures like the heron, for example, only have value to Americans if they can conquer it through violence: “Food, slave or corpse, limited choices. . . It must have been the Americans” (121). As Brooks writes, this is incredibly common in the Canadian experience: unlike Americans, Canadians tend to base their national self-definition around the existence of the other country (25). According to Brooks, Canadian perceptions of Americans usually reinforce Canadian moral superiority (31), a fact that can be clearly perceived in the narrator’s envisioning of Americans. The narrator’s revulsion towards Americans can be further explored through Kristeva’s psychoanalysis. Kristeva writes that “[t]he cult of origins is a hate reaction. . . devotees of origins anxiously seek shelter among their own, hoping to suppress the conflicts they have with them by projecting them on others – the strangers” (2-4). The

narrator's reaction of hatred, then, is an example of an artificial exterior border that serves to strengthen her inner, self-created one.

This binary is irretrievably blurred, as Rao points out, when Canadians are labelled as "American" (8). Most damningly, the "Americans" who have killed the birds are actually Canadian (Atwood, *Surfacing* 133), but this mingling takes place with all of the Canadian characters. When David, for example, demands that Anna be part of his Random Samples, the narrator comments that he has "used up" everything else, and when he does manage to force Anna to take off her bikini, the narrator sees her as "cut in half" (141), like another animal that has been conquered through violence and death. Soon after, when David demands sex of the narrator, she sees him as American: "Second-hand American was spreading over him in patches, like mange or lichen. He was infested, garbled, and I couldn't help him: it would take such time to heal, unearth him, scrape down to where he was true" (158). Later, all of the Canadian characters besides the narrator are judged as "American now" (179). Ultimately, the narrator even acknowledges herself as a killer after she remembers her abortion (148). As Rao writes, this blending of Canadian and American reveals the "pointlessness of splitting the world into discriminatory categories and oppositions" (8). By placing "American-ness" beyond nationality, the narrator effectively makes the American invasion of Canada something that has been allowed by Canadians and therefore far from inevitable.

The male/abuser female/victim binary is also challenged in the novel and finally rejected by the narrator. Anna herself, though clearly a victim of sexist ideology, willingly chooses to back her abuser when she must choose where to position herself. This follows Atwood's logic of the first victim position of denied victimhood, where the victim is "afraid to recognize they are

victims for fear of losing the privileges that they possess” and often direct their anger “against one’s fellow-victims, particularly those who try to talk about their victimization (Atwood, *Survival* 36). Trapped in her own anger, Anna chooses to side with David after the narrator reveals that, unlike Anna, she did not cheat with the other person’s partner, thus making her look like the better, purer woman (Atwood, *Surfacing* 159-160). Later, Anna also sides with the men when the narrator dumps the Random Samples tape in the lake, despite the fact that this directly benefits her, as she fears being seen as an “accomplice” (176). The position of woman as victim is also rejected by the narrator at the end of the novel, when she refuses to limit herself to her physical appearance, like Anna does with her “natural” made-up face: “I must stop being in the mirror . . . Not to see myself but to see. I reverse the mirror so it’s towards the wall, it no longer traps me, Anna’s soul closed in the gold compact, that and not the camera is what I should have broken” (186-187). This is the narrator’s first step in challenging and ultimately rejecting the position of victimhood that she first understood as an obligation.

As a victim, through both nationality and gender, the narrator has reached an identity based on falsehood and rationality. Above all, it is the failure of rationality that she must contend with. This discovery is paralleled with her father’s, who during the narrator’s childhood saw the absence of logic as the ultimate crime: “To him, that’s what Hitler exemplified: not the triumph of evil but the failure of reason” (Atwood, *Surfacing* 57). Her father also does not believe in revelation; to him, “Jesus was a historical figure and God was a superstition, and a superstition was a thing that didn’t exist” (107). Both of these beliefs, passed on to his daughter in the form of her emotional stuntedness, must be discarded for the narrator to regain a sense of identity. Like her father, the narrator must come to recognize the “failure of logic” (151). This

binary of head (reason) and body (emotion) the narrator must also overcome; at the start of the second part of the novel, for example, the narrator states that the problem is “the neck, which creates the illusion that they are separate” (77). As Rao writes, this separation of mind and body is a one that has great influence in the Western tradition; importantly, in Western rationality, “[t]he mind, severed from the body, is given the task of controlling it (124). This is a direct reflection of the initial attitudes of the narrator and her father, and is part of the privileging that Walter Mignolo wishes to do away with.

Stressing the importance of gnosis, or “knowledge conceived from the exterior borders of the modern/colonial world system,” Mignolo writes that “we need to open up the space epistemology took over from gnoseology, and aim it not at God but at the uncertainties of the borders” (11-12). Gnoseology here aligns with the narrator’s attempts to move beyond reason as a method of structuring her life and identity. As a regulator of personal borders, reason has not done much for the narrator: a victim as a Canadian and as a woman and divided from her inner life, the narrator must find a different way to think about the “borders” in her life. As Mignolo further states, “our goals are not salvation but decolonization” (12). The same could be said, in a metaphorical sense, for the narrator, who must be “decolonized” of her infatuation with reason, and the positions into which she has been placed by her gender and nationality. To begin this process, the narrator must recognize her inner un-reason.

In order to abandon reason, the narrator must accept what Kristeva would describe as her inner foreignness, a conception intimately linked with nature in the novel. Specifically, this concept of foreignness is linked to the idea of surfacing. Diving into the lake near her home marks the end of the first section of the novel and the beginning of the narrator’s strangeness:

it is in the beginning of the second part of the novel that the narrator's distrust of language and paranoia commences (Atwood, *Surfacing* 77). Rao links this idea of diving to the unconscious (42), of reaching, as Kristeva would say, our innate strangeness and foreignness. It is in diving, of course, or metaphorically reaching into her subconscious, that the narrator recalls the truth of her traumatic abortion, and her healing process becomes possible. As Kristeva writes, we must "recognize ourselves as strange in order to better appreciate the foreignness outside of us instead of striving to bend them to the norms of our own repression" (29). Though Kristeva is speaking about other human beings, the concept is pertinent to the narrator's case, and the "foreignness" outside of her can be read as nature, to which she has become as estranged and wary of as she is to her own inner life. The narrator, therefore, must first recognize herself as strange in order to begin her rejections of the social norms that divide her and appreciate the foreign power of nature. This dive into nature initiates a long series of rejections of reason in favour of what is essentially an anti-logic: the repudiation of language and individuality. To reach a state of revelation within nature, the narrator must go beyond these borders.

The major step that the narrator must take in her rejection of logic and fusion with nature is to abandon the greatest signifier of logic: language itself. As Rao writes, language is the embodiment of a thought system dominated by logic (124). After her initial dive into the lake, the narrator begins to question the value of language. As she says at the beginning of the second part of the novel, "I was seeing poorly, translating badly, a dialect problem, I should have used my own" (Atwood, *Surfacing* 77). The narrator finds unsuitable the language of her social world; when Joe asks her if she loves him, for example, the narrator cannot answer because human language is inadequate: "It was the language again, I couldn't use it because it

wasn't mine. . .it was an imprecise word; the Eskimos had fifty-two names for snow because it was important to them, there ought to be as many for love" (110). As Onley writes, the division into categories and binaries is inherent in language, and there are examples throughout the book of "the exploitive use of language to impose psychological power structures" (80-81): these are the binaries that the narrator will transcend in rejecting language. Language acts as a border arbitrarily set by the dictates of reason and logic, a border that she must move beyond.

In abandoning language, the narrator abandons normative concepts of individuality and the rationality that informs it. As Rao writes, "it is language that provides the possibility of subjectivity because it enables the speaker to posit himself or herself as 'I'. . .Consciousness of the self is achieved only through contrast and differentiation between 'I' and 'not-I'" (62). The narrator is essentially returning to a pre-verbal type of "language", what Rao, using Kristeva's theories, would call Semiotic language as opposed to the Symbolic language that is adopted when entering the social world (61). The narrator's attempts to reach a pre-verbal state, then, is a desire to move beyond the "imposition of the Symbolic and the 'self'" (Rao 61), a Symbolic order that has left the narrator fragmented. The narrator desires an expansion of language beyond its regular confines; as she later states, "[l]anguage divides us into fragments, I wanted to be whole" (Atwood, *Surfacing* 152). This desire to be "whole" is linked with the narrator's desire to abandon individuality in favour of fusion with the totalized force that is nature. In this, she challenges normative ideas of individuality as defining subjectivity.

To re-take her subjectivity, the narrator will merge with nature. However, the narrator is at first estranged from its power. As Campbell writes, "the strangeness of the terrain she moves through" is symbolic of her overall alienation (172). This is part of the Canadian experience. As

Atwood indicates in *Survival*, and Rao acknowledges in her book, nature for Canadians is highly dangerous (Atwood, *Survival* 49; Rao 7). There are innumerable instances of the threat posed by nature in *Surfacing* as well. The area around the narrator's home is described as a "tangled maze" and the lake as "tricky", both of which make it "easy to lose the way" (Atwood, *Surfacing* 28-29). The narrator also describes how easy it is to die here: "it's not unusual for a man to disappear in the bush, it happens dozens of times each year. All it takes is a small mistake" (44). However, although the narrator at the start of the novel has forgotten some important survival skills, she gradually improves until she and the wilderness become one.

This process takes the form of re-learning the "language" of nature, rather than that of rationalistic humanity. Eventually, for example, the names of various plants begin "reappearing" in her vocabulary (Atwood, *Surfacing* 46). More pointedly, near the start of the novel, she wakes up to birdsong that she no longer understands: "I used to know the species; I listen, my ears are rusty, there's nothing but a jumble of sounds. They sing for the same reason trucks honk, to proclaim their territories: a rudimentary language." (39). The analogy between trucks honking and birds singing further highlights the narrator's alienation from nature at this point, but this passage also underlines the fact that she will have to learn the "language" of nature, rather than that of reason, in order to re-construct her divided identity. After going mad, the narrator finally comes to recognize new "languages" in nature, such as the language in which "there are no nouns, only verbs held for a long moment" (193). The water of the lake is also described as "multilingual" (190). The language of the novel itself begins to break down, and the possibility in nature for the end of language altogether is mentioned: "The animals

have no need for speech, why talk when you are a word" (193). Finally beyond the borders of normative identity, the narrator learns to recognize nature's insights.

This refamiliarizing with nature is essential to the narrator's self-construction; as she loses the conventional locus of meaning, reason, by exceeding the borders conceived around identity, the narrator discovers a new type of meaning: that of revelation. As du Plessix Gray writes, nature in the novel is a new type of nunnery, a new "refuge from patriarchal order" and place of "religious vision" (134). Atwood herself describes such an experience within *Survival*, that of the "stranger": unwilling to see any kind of meaning that does not "arrive in his own terms", the stranger to the Canadian wilderness leaves without being able to "recognize" the revelation that nature has given him (54). This idea is paralleled in Kristeva's thought about the importance of otherness: the example of Ruth the Moabite exposes, for Kristeva, the fact that "divine revelation requires a disparity, the welcoming of a radical otherness, the acknowledging of a foreignness that one would at first tend to consider the most degraded" (24). The narrator will later claim that she has re-discovered the truth about herself because of the Indians' knowledge of places of salvation; this and her acceptance of new "gods" reveals her interest in a new divine force of otherness (Atwood, *Surfacing* 150). This is also an example of Mignolo's idea of border thinking, or thinking from subaltern perspectives (7). Finally, the narrator moves beyond her own perspective and becomes nature itself: "I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place" (193). In this fusion and acceptance of the vision nature can offer her, the narrator manages at last to heal herself.

As the narrator moves beyond logic and language in her fusion with nature, her emotions return to her through a series of revelations. Her initial revelation in nature occurs

with the return of her memories of her child, and after she has sex with Joe and believes she has become pregnant again, she reaches a kind of peace with what she has done: "I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me. . .the two halves clasp, interlocking like fingers, it buds, it sends out fronds" (171). This is the rejoining of her divided self and the return of her emotions, as well as the beginning of her madness and deepest capacity for revelation. The narrator's emotional connection with her parents returns as well, and she "finally" cries for them (182). This is fully experienced as mystic revelations in the appearance of her parents' ghosts (194, 198). As Campbell writes, in the narrator's visions, her mother and father also return to nature: the mother becomes a bird, a more natural "death" than her real in one a hospital bed, and her father also becomes a kind of animal (176). It is in abandoning social language and rationality and having faith in other forms of knowledge that the narrator comes to term with their legacy: "They were here thought, I trust that. I saw them and they spoke to me, in the other language" (200). The necessity to move beyond socially constructed borders to reach this state of self-connection is acknowledged by the narrator herself. In describing the rules that guide her new behaviour, the narrator realizes that "[t]hey can't be anywhere that's marked out, enclosed. . .they are against borders. To talk with them I must approach the condition they themselves have entered" (192). To access revelation and make a meaningful connection with what she has lost, the narrator must leave behind social borders.

While the novel ends with the narrator's renewed sanity and potential return to civilization, this does not mean that she leaves behind the new-found wisdom that she has gained from her fusion with nature. Instead, her experience has left her with a new self-awareness of how she can construct her own identity within a society that would render her

powerless: “This above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that I can do nothing. I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless” (203). This is a retaking of subjectivity from a society whose rules of nationality, femininity, and logic have left her divided and emotionally dead. Though Atwood offers no practical solutions for how the narrator might live in society with her rediscovered subjectivity, the narrator’s new-found knowledge leaves her optimistic and determined about her future: “The word games, the winning and losing games are finished; at the moment there are no others but they will have to be invented, withdrawing is no longer possible and the alternative is death” (203). The narrator is at last secure in her own self-definition and prepared to face the social world.

The narrator’s journey to self-reconstruction in *Surfacing* is a lesson in the destructive power of the borders that we place in our lives. Originally a victim as a Canadian and as a woman, the narrator is entirely cut off from her inner self. It is only in “decolonizing” herself, as Mignolo might say, and discovering new forms of knowledge in nature that the narrator can live with the truth of herself: an orphan with a dead child who is also a victim of national and patriarchal power structures. Despite these seemingly permanent and insurmountable hardships, the narrator heals herself when in a state of communion with nature, free from logic and language and towards the power of divine revelation. In *Surfacing*, wholeness is found beyond borders.

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