

**RE-IMAGINING METROPOLIS AND WILDERNESS:  
MARGARET ATWOOD'S *LIFE BEFORE MAN, CAT'S EYE,*  
'DEATH BY LANDSCAPE'**

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**Abstract**

This article explores Margaret Atwood's representations of landscape and gendered identities from a post-colonial/feminist perspective. It examines how, in the three texts discussed, *Life Before Man*, *Cat's Eye* and 'Death By Landscape', the urban and the wilderness are employed as symbolic sites for inscribing Atwood's portrayals of feminine identity, and to problematise the process of defining the self in a post-colonial place. The article concludes that Margaret Atwood uses representations of place in ways which foreground the topics of post-colonialism, female relations, and feminine identities, and promote the possibility of writing 'other' stories by and about women.

There was a moon, and a movement of the trees. In the sky  
there were stars, layers of stars that went down and down ...  
Out on the lake there were two loons, calling to each other  
in their insane, mournful voices. At the time it did not  
sound like grief. It was just background.

( 'Death By Landscape', *Wilderness Tips* 121)

Margaret Atwood's writing presents a creative re-visioning of place as a symbolic site for negotiating shifting constructions of national and gendered identities. The imaginative use of place in her fictions illustrates the process of subverting and deconstructing images of centre, margin, and hierarchical constructions of value and power, which is an important feature of feminist and post-colonial writing.<sup>68</sup> By exploring representations of location and femininity in Atwood's fiction, this study interrogates the relationship between constructions of national and gendered identities and landscape in the specifically post-colonial contexts that she portrays.

In *Life Before Man* and *Cat's Eye*, the two novels discussed here, Atwood works almost exclusively within an urban setting. This allows her to

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<sup>68</sup> This point is made in Brydon and Tiffin 1993, 56-57.

explore the creative possibilities that the multi-faceted image of the city offers for representing a diversity of differences and perspectives. In contrast, in the short story, 'Death By Landscape' from the collection aptly titled *Wilderness Tips*, Atwood links the female protagonist's emotional and symbolic investment in wilderness to a lost realm of female friendship. The narrative depicts the power of landscape in bounding, situating, and defining human identity. 'Death By Landscape' pays particular attention to problems of representation, by foregrounding the complexities and contradictions of femininity and wilderness.<sup>69</sup> In all three texts, both localities, the urban and the wilderness, are employed to inscribe and centre portrayals of feminine identity, and to draw attention to the problems of defining the self in a post-colonial place.

Margaret Atwood situates her stories, and the post-colonial re-imaginings of wilderness and the city that they inscribe, on the margins of the space of empire. Her fictions represent places that are conventionally regarded as peripheral in the hierarchical spatial economy inscribed in dominant cultural modes which, Diana Brydon and Helen Tiffin argue, defines the post-colonial in relation to the empire and its metropolis that constitute the centre.<sup>70</sup> As Alan Lawson and Chris Tiffin remark, commenting on the problems of defining demarcation and power structures in post-colonial contexts:

Empire may have been constituted by sharp difference born of hard specifics, but this does not obviate problems of delineation and demarcation. As Dixon, McNaughton, and Slemon argue, the boundaries of Empire are pervasive at the level of discourse, text, and discipline. These border-lands are the 'region where the control of representation can be contested' (Ashcroft 42). Boundary-drawing around colonial space(s), then, is less an exercise in taxonomy than a politics of representation. Boundary-marking produces effects on races, subjects, narratives, and the academy. Demarcating the perimeters of colonial space also configures and regulates its 'internal' structures of power.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> I am indebted to Coral Ann Howells for her examination of Canadian identity and writing, femininity and the wilderness, in Howells 1987.

<sup>70</sup> Brydon and Tiffin 1993, 56-57.

<sup>71</sup> Lawson and Tiffin, 'Conclusion,' in Tiffin and Lawson, eds., 1994, 234.

By focusing on the diversity of meaning and interpretation involved in the project of representing geographical space and gendered identity in post-colonial Canada, Atwood's writing lends new complexity to fictional depictions of the spheres of city and wilderness. Her preoccupation with the margins and mappings of the metropolis is particularly interesting in this respect. In Atwood's explorations of urban images and spaces, she portrays the city's divisions, their symbolic meanings, and the strata of ethnic identities, social class and historical experience which reflect generations of settlement and migration. The mappings of the city also serve to reflect a postmodern geography of gendered subjectivity. Thus, as we shall see, both the wilderness and the city function, in differing ways, as a symbolic locus and a vehicle for representations of competing and shifting discourses of feminine identity.

### **Theorising Difference: Post-Colonialism and Femininity**

Questions of defining identity and space are central to the work of a number of post-colonial writers and critics. Helen Tiffin comments on the problems of situating post-colonial writing geographically, culturally, and politically, and on the significance of place in post-colonial literary production. She observes, in attempting to define the 'post-colonial' and the textual practices which such writing may employ, that: 'the "post-colonial" has been used to describe writing and reading practices grounded in some form of colonial experience outside Europe, but as a consequence of European expansion into and exploitation of "the other" worlds.'<sup>72</sup> As critics have shown, and as Brydon and Tiffin argue, the project of locating the post-colonial involves a preoccupation with deconstructing the notion of the metropolis as a centre and a discursive dominant.<sup>73</sup> Colin Nicholson comments on the significance of the use of spatial metaphors and place in Canadian post-colonial writing, and, with specific reference to Margaret Atwood's fiction, he argues that: 'giving shape to Canadian cadence would involve a sustained attempt at establishing local alterity in the face of metropolitan determinations of purpose and place.'<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Helen Tiffin, 'Post-colonialism, Post-modernism - Rehabilitation of Post-Colonial History,' *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 23 (1) (1988), 170.

<sup>73</sup> See Brydon and Tiffin 1993, 56-57.

<sup>74</sup> Nicholson, ed., 1994, 5-6.

The critic Linda Hutcheon discusses these topics in a broader context, reflecting on debates in contemporary critique, and the influence of feminism and post-colonialism on postmodernist thought. She suggests that the interest in what she terms the 'ex-centric', and the challenge to privileged positions that it inscribes, is characteristic of both postmodern and post-colonial theories and critical concerns. In her exploration of notions of difference and 'the off-centre', Hutcheon comments on the critical currency of these concepts and observes that:

What we currently call postmodernism has entailed a revaluating of difference in culture: difference in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual preference. The 'ex-centric' or off-centre is valued over the centre. The postmodern distrust of centres and the hierarchies they imply can be seen in many ways: in the recoding of the (denigrated) notion of regionalism into the positive concepts of the local and specific; in the focusing of attention on the periphery rather than the metropolis; and in the general interest in diversity, in the different rather than the same.<sup>75</sup>

Margaret Atwood's portrayals of feminine identity and place reflect a number of these critical preoccupations with defining difference and exploring marginal subject positions. Her writing focuses on a diversity of cultural and gender differences which, as the critic Graham Huggan notes in his article, 'Decolonizing the Map', challenge the idea of a monolithic Canadian national identity, and re-imagines colonial constructs of centre and margin.<sup>76</sup> Her writing resists the ways in which the dominant discourse marginalises the multiple realities of Canadian culture and geography.

However, this sense of resistance is not straightforward or unproblematic. Perhaps there is a certain irony in the fact that Atwood herself now could be said to form a part of the literary establishment - her popularity amongst critics and readers making her appear less a voice from the margin and more a representative of the dominant discourse. It is worth noting here, though, that although Atwood's genre-conscious, playfully postmodernist, and

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<sup>75</sup> Hutcheon 1988, 51-52.

<sup>76</sup> Huggan, 'Decolonizing the Map,' in Adam and Tiffin, eds., 1991, 131-32.

knowing fictions have gained popularity in the literary establishment, with critics and academics, as well as with a broad and international readership, they also continue to challenge and to trouble the mainstream in radical ways. This article argues that certain aspects of her writing resist an assimilation back into the dominant discourse. This resistance is situated on discursive and thematic levels: in Atwood's complex feminism and her portrayal of female relations; in her post-colonial awareness of the importance of locale; and, importantly, in the innovative textual and linguistic strategies she employs.

The representations of landscape and place in the texts discussed here question the construction of empire as the centre for literary and cultural production, a topic which Dorothy Jones explores in her article, 'Decolonising the Romance', on Atwood's *Lady Oracle* and the sexual and post-colonial politics of literary production and place.<sup>77</sup> Atwood's narratives focus on localities that appear to inscribe an element of resistance towards a monolithic 'truth' and identity, by the very marginality and diversity which these localities represent. Diana Brydon and Helen Tiffin comment on this in their study of Atwood's problematisation of the issue of constructing place in a post-colonial context in *Surfacing*; they observe that:

Margaret Atwood has described the colonial mentality of a neo-Europe (a transplanted settler society engaged in making over the new territory in the image of the old), in a way that calls attention to the psychic disturbances such a process involves. She identifies ... a devaluing of the local and a privileging of the metropolitan.<sup>78</sup>

As Elizabeth Ferrier notes, the fact that post-colonial characterisations of the local often take the form of visualising marginal spaces and places as sites of the 'repressed' and as forming the 'unconscious' contributes to rendering place an important locus for inscribing a sense of resistance in post-colonial texts.<sup>79</sup> Ferrier further observes that: 'Logocentric

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<sup>77</sup> Jones, 'Decolonizing the Romance,' in Rutherford, ed., 1992, 390.

<sup>78</sup> Brydon and Tiffin 1993, 56-57.

<sup>79</sup> Ferrier, 'The Return of the Repressed: The "Empire" of the Local and Jessica Anderson's *Tirra Lirra by the River*,' in Whitlock and Tiffin, eds., 1992, 157-168. The quotation is from page 167.

modes of discourse locate identity and presence elsewhere ... the local (colonial) place and experience are associated with difference and absence.<sup>80</sup> Atwood's portrayal of the local and specific in the city and the wilderness, areas which resist monocentric representations, reflects Ferrier's suggestions and is a central aspect of her articulation of stories about post-colonial and feminine difference.

The association of representations of place with feminine identity is significant; for in the fictions explored in this study, Atwood links the problematisation of place with post-colonial identity, femininity, and relationships between women, and with notions of absence and loss. In an interview she specifically links this absence, and the marginalisation of women and feminine difference that it implies, to problems of writing and narration; she observes: 'I sometimes get interested in stories because I notice a sort of blank - why hasn't anyone written about this? Can it be written about? Do I dare to write it?'<sup>81</sup> In an attempt to give voice to this silence, Atwood's fictions explore feminine difference as an excess term that challenges notions and representations of women in popular culture, and use images of place to situate her characters in contexts which afford alternative strategies for thinking about self and gender. By choosing to focus on the topic of female relations, Atwood, as her statement illustrates, positions her fictions outside the dominant discursive constructions of femininity and asks some uncomfortable questions of the literary mainstream and its portrayal of women.

Margaret Atwood's novel *Cat's Eye* and the short story 'Death By Landscape' explore the formative period of girlhood and female friendships as sites of strength and emotional significance for women; a thematic preoccupation that allows her to represent psychological concerns related to the construction and negotiation of feminine identity. In *Cat's Eye* the metaphor of the city, with the possibilities for representing diversity and change that urban structures and environments afford, is used as a vehicle for exploring the female narrator's physical and emotional 'landscape', as the critic Marie-Luise Gaettens observes in a different context.<sup>82</sup> In both

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>81</sup> Earl G. Ingersoll, 'Waltzing Again,' in Ingersoll, ed., 1992, 236.

<sup>82</sup> Marie-Luise Gaettens, 'The Hard Work of Remembering,' in Forman and Sowton, eds., 1989, 78.

narratives, relationships between women are significant in the process of negotiating feminine identity and its contradictions and identifications, a subject which feminist critics, notably Helena Michie and Paulina Palmer, have discussed.<sup>83</sup> Writing on the use of psychoanalytic perspectives by feminist critics, Judith Kegan Gardiner quotes Elizabeth Abel, who also comments on the importance of women's relationships for female subject-formation in contemporary women's writing. Abel argues that 'friendship becomes a vehicle for self-definition for women, clarifying identity through reaction to an other who embodies and reflects an essential part of the self.'<sup>84</sup>

In her portrayals of female relations and friendships, Atwood draws attention to the problems of constructing and representing feminine difference. The discursive and thematic strategies that she employs foreground what Helena Michie defines as a plurality of differences internal to the individual feminine subject as well as differences between women,<sup>85</sup> and illustrate the ways in which relationships between women feature centrally in constructions of feminine identity.<sup>86</sup> These ideas present a challenge to conventional notions of femininity as defined in relation to a masculine norm, as Michie argues.<sup>87</sup> These notions of feminine difference are relevant to the way in which Atwood utilises metaphors of place to inscribe the process of situating and positioning the post-colonial, feminine subject. Re-imagining a marginalised position as a site of resistance from which the feminine subject can speak and imagine alternatives to the dominant discursive economy is a textual strategy, in which tropes of wilderness, city, and landscape form an integral part.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> See Michie 1992, who examines the function of female relations as a space for working out notions of feminine difference. See also Palmer 1989 for a discussion of Atwood's treatment of the theme of female relations, and the significance of this theme in contemporary women's writing in general.

<sup>84</sup> Elizabeth Abel, '(E)Merging Identities: The Dynamics of Female Friendship in Contemporary Fiction by Women,' *Signs* 6 (3) (1981), 416. Cited in Gardiner, 'Mind Mother: Psychoanalysis and Feminism,' in Green and Kahn, eds., 1985, 136.

<sup>85</sup> This is a point made by Michie, in Michie 1992, 4. I am indebted to Michie's insights for my analysis of female relations and the issue of feminine difference in this article.

<sup>86</sup> See Palmer 1989, who treats the theme of female relations in Atwood's writing.

<sup>87</sup> Michie 1992, 4.

<sup>88</sup> See also Tiffin and Lawson, eds., 1994, 'Introduction: The Textuality of Empire,' 10. They

### **Images of the City in *Life Before Man* and *Cat's Eye***

The novels *Cat's Eye* and *Life Before Man* are both primarily set in the city of Toronto, which serves as setting and symbolic landscape for their plots and the drama of locating/re-locating the female self. However, instead of being represented as a privileged cultural centre, the metropolis in these two texts functions as a trope for the provisionality of national and gendered identities, and illustrates the changing nature of place over time. The city plays a significant and intriguing role in both texts; for by exploring images of place and the positioning of female characters within an urban space Atwood examines and depicts the shifting boundaries of place and the concept of the female subject-in-process.<sup>89</sup>

In *Life Before Man* Atwood interrogates hierarchical constructions of margin and centre in her portrayal of the city. As she observes in an interview, the original title of the novel foregrounds this problem. The title originally was, Atwood explains: *Notes on the Mezaaic*. Mezaaic means "middle life". The novel is in the middle of the lives of several people. And they're middle-class. And it's mid-history.<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, the idea of a fixed, ideologically determined hierarchy of value and status, which defines and divides the various groups of the population which inhabit the city, is exposed and parodied in Atwood's humorous account of the notorious Auntie Muriel's discourse:

Auntie Muriel is unambiguous about most things ... First comes God. Then comes Auntie Muriel and the Queen, with Auntie Muriel having a slight edge. Then come about five members of the Timothy Eaton Memorial Church ... After this there is a large gap. Then white, non-Jewish Canadians, Englishmen, and white, non-Jewish Americans,

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note that: 'Whether or not the subaltern can ever speak is obviously a profound and perplexing question ... Post-colonial writers are declaring their spaces, engaging with canonical texts, rewriting not just the tradition but the episteme which underpins it.'

<sup>89</sup> See Palmer 1989, 170, for a lucid exploration of the idea of the female self-in-process in contemporary women's fiction.

<sup>90</sup> Alan Twigg, 'Just Looking at Things That Are There,' in Ingersoll, ed., 122-23.

in that order ... followed by all other human beings on a descending scale, graded according to skin colour and religion.

*(Life Before Man 137)*

The discussion here of *Life Before Man* focuses on an exploration of one of the three main characters, Lesje, and her acute sense of displacement. As the daughter of Lithuanian migrants who have attempted to assimilate into Anglo-Canadian culture and traditions, Lesje is confronted with the need to negotiate the negative aspects of her hybridity: personal problems of alienation and fragmentation. The text foregrounds the impact of this complex heritage on her sense of identity, as a woman and a Canadian, and portrays her experience of cultural and sexual difference, in the striking and suggestive image of Lesje's two warring grandmothers. This image, which reflects the novel's preoccupation with family histories and genealogies, highlights the topic of cultural difference and serves as a frame for the representation of female relations. Lesje is divided by the conflicting cultural and social ideas held by her grandmothers, who both deplore what they seem to perceive as her lack of cultural and national 'purity'. Lesje comments on this; she observes that:

Nationalism of any kind makes her uneasy. In her parents' house it was a forbidden subject ... the grandmothers never met. Both had refused to go to her parents' wedding ... As for her, they'd both loved her, she supposes; and both had mourned over her as if she was in some way dead. It was her damaged gene pool. Impure, impure.

*(Life Before Man 65)*

Lesje's ex-boyfriend William appears to see her family history and cultural background as a threat, albeit indirect, to his middle-class Anglo-Canadian background. In the following passage, Lesje attempts to imagine what he thinks of her, and how he perceives her. She sees him as somehow reducing her to an object that symbolises his own tolerant attitudes, and to a metaphor or trope for cultural and feminine difference, which prevents him from regarding her as a subject. Lesje observes, on registering this sense of distance and inequality in their relationship, that:

William ... finds her impossibly exotic. True, he loves her, in a way.

He bites her on the neck when they make love. Lesje doesn't think he'd let himself go like that with a woman of, as she once caught him putting it, his own kind ... he's proud of her as a trophy and a testimony to his own wide-mindedness. But what would his family in London, Ontario, think?

*(Life Before Man 29)*

Lesje contrasts William's privileged Anglo-Canadian family tree and apparently solid sense of his masculine identity with her own hybridity, mixed background, and sense of fragmentation and dislocation. Her grandmothers escaped a history of war and persecution in Europe, but found themselves excluded from fully participating in the Canadian society that they became part of, and marginalised from Lesje, who describes them as: 'fixed, mounted specimens in her head, cut off from their own wrecked and shadowy backgrounds and pasted here. Anachronisms, the last of their kind' (*Life Before Man* 268). Furthermore, while they were alive, Lesje's grandmothers were living on the outskirts of the metropolis, in the area inhabited by migrants and culturally displaced groups. Situating their stories as females and migrants on the margins of the Canadian metropolis is a strategy for inscribing cultural and feminine differences and urban places that are otherwise unwritten, silenced, forgotten. This representation of the grandmothers' marginalised existence, in symbolic and real terms, and of her own complex bond with and difference from her grandmothers, becomes a key to Lesje's attempt to re-trace and revise her sense of self towards the end of the novel. The mapping of an alternative, multi-cultural, female genealogy seems, for Lesje, to signal a way of dealing with the problems of a fragmented identity.

At the point in the narrative when Lesje acknowledges her own future role as a mother, and sees the consequences of transmitting her own mixed cultural and national heritage, she experiences a sense of longing and loss. Realising this, she mourns the deaths of her grandmothers and the impossibility of returning to a place that she can associate with her family and which would help her in creating a sense of inter-generational continuity, as a woman and a Canadian. However, at the same time Lesje also realises that it is not possible for her to return to an 'origin', and that the values and ideas that she associates with her grandmothers are not permanent and fixed in time, but open to re-interpretation. She describes this sense of instability in identity, and the potential failure of place to provide a continuity of meaning and self:

She doesn't recognise anything; if she wants to find her

grandmothers she'll have to look elsewhere. New people are here now, from other countries. They in turn will make money and shift north. This is not a settled neighbourhood, here for eternity as she thought when she was a child, but a way station, a campground.

(*Life Before Man* 268)

Atwood does not 'romanticise' diversity in identity in an uncritical manner. The representation in *Life Before Man* of identity as a negotiable, changeable concept, and of place as a fluid and problematic notion for providing boundaries for the self, adds complexity to Lesje as a female character. The reality that she inhabits is never singular or straightforward; for she sees herself as a negotiator of multiple differences, an interpreter of contradictory signs:

When she was ten she wanted to go to the Museum ... with both [her grandmothers]. One would hold her right hand, one her left. She didn't expect them to speak to each other ... But there was no rule against walking. The three of them would walk together ... herself in the middle.

(*Life Before Man* 269-70)

On the other hand this vision of plurality, and Lesje's fantasies of an alternative world, also signal 'other' spaces for articulating a sense of self that exceeds the conflicts and divisions of the metropolis and the contemporary society of which she is part. Her vision of herself and the grandmothers, an idea which welcomes a diversity and plurality in feminine identity, as well as acknowledging a need for a specifically female presence, symbolises an outlet for an alienated feminine subjectivity which affords a strategy for re-imagining, in a positive sense, her self which she experiences as: 'an outsider looking in' (*Life Before Man* 93).

In *Cat's Eye* Atwood depicts pockets of wilderness and indeterminacy which serve as a space for inscribing feminine difference and silenced, repressed aspects of the self.<sup>91</sup> The text employs the motifs of urban

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<sup>91</sup> See also Ferrier who discusses similar topics in 'The Return of the Repressed: The "Empire" of the Local and Jessica Anderson's *Tirra Lirra by the River*,' in Whitlock and Tiffin, eds., 1992, 157-68.

space and layers of memory and subjective experience to introduce the themes of quest, and defining self and place. As the narrator, Elaine, notes: 'In my dreams of this city I am always lost' (*Cat's Eye* 14). The critic Marie-Luise Gaettens also comments on the significance of the city as a trope for femininity in women's writing; she suggests that: 'The topography of the city evokes the topography of the female body, with its sexual parts that have to be hidden.'<sup>92</sup>

Elaine Risley, the first-person narrator of *Cat's Eye*, spends her early childhood travelling in the wilderness of northern Canada with her family. This environment, and the sense of mobility and change that it affords, enables her to experience a degree of freedom from societal conventions and the gender roles they inscribe. Looking back in adult life on the landscape of her childhood and the emotions it evokes, of longing and the impossibility of returning to that landscape, Elaine observes:

I peer out through the glass of the train window, which is streaked with rain and dust, and there is the landscape of my early childhood, smudged and scentless and untouchable and moving backwards. At long intervals the train crosses a road, gravel or thin and paved, with a white line down the middle. This looks like emptiness and silence, but to me it is not empty, not silent. Instead it's filled with echoes. *Home*, I think. But it's nowhere I can go back to.

(*Cat's Eye* 376-77)

Hence, when her family moves to Toronto, Elaine experiences the city, its different neighbourhoods, and class and ethnic divisions, as a locus for social constructions of gender, class, and ethnic differences. However, the portrayal in the novel of Elaine's fantasies of the cityscape, and of her emotional and artistic investment in the place where she spent her formative years, invites the reader to consider the complexity and contradictions of both feminine identity and the urban environment. For in this narrative, we follow Elaine upon her return to Toronto where she is confronted with the memories of her friend Cordelia and the city that inscribes their common past. The

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<sup>92</sup> Marie-Luise Gaettens, 'The Hard Work of Remembering,' in Forman and Sowton, eds., 1989, 78.

layers of lived, experienced time that Elaine associates with different aspects of the metropolis' geography frame the novel's representation of the process of female subject-formation.<sup>93</sup> As the critics Frieda Johles Forman and Caoran Sowton observe, writing on the significance of female relations in defining women's sense of self, space, and time:

The dominant myths of Western civilization are those of man marching through time on a mythic journey in search of self, while woman remains outside historical time; they are myths of women's domination and self-alienation. Missing is the tale of the creation of a female self, through and with other women.<sup>94</sup>

The relationship between metaphors of place and femininity is explored on a number of levels in the text. Towards the end of *Cat's Eye* the middle-aged Elaine finds herself re-tracing the routes of her childhood, recollecting how she felt when walking along those streets as a girl and how the city seemed to her then. She compares these memories of the city and of the process of growing up female to the present configurations; and notes:

This is my old route home from school. I used to walk along this sidewalk, behind or in front of the others ... The houses are the same houses, though no longer trimmed in peeling white winter-greayed paint, no longer down-at-heels, postwar. The sandblasters have been here, the skylight people ... I can see through these houses, to what they used to be ... What time do they really belong in, their own or mine? ... Although the girls wear jeans, denoting freedom, they aren't as noisy as they used to be; there are no chants, no catcalls. They trudge along doggedly, it seems to me.

*(Cat's Eye 386)*

She finds that, in adult life, although she attempts to escape from the ways in which the city has shaped and situated her emotional life, creativity,

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<sup>93</sup> See also Gaetens, 'The Hard Work of Remembering,' in Forman and Sowton, eds., 1989, who also explores the notions of urban topography and constructions of femininity.

<sup>94</sup> Forman and Sowton, eds., 1989, x-xi.

and sense of self, she is inevitably drawn to it. In a vision which recalls the psychoanalytic concept of 'the return of the repressed',<sup>95</sup> Elaine imagines the metropolis, and the unresolved part of her emotional life that it represents, in these words:

I sit in front of the fireplace, with his arm around me solid as the back of a chair. I walk along the breakwater in the soothing Vancouver drizzle, the half-tones of the seashore, the stroking of the small waves. In front of me is the Pacific, which sends up sunset after sunset, for nothing; at my back are the improbable mountains, and beyond them distance, burning in thought like Gomorrah. **At which I dare not look.**

(*Cat's Eye* 382, my emphasis)

Similarly, the attempts to represent the wilderness, the landscape of Elaine's earliest childhood, are shown to be problematic, and at best partial and nostalgic. However, portraying these aspects of self and place is also depicted as requiring alternative strategies for representation, and as posing awkward questions which problematise the process and accuracy of representation itself. Elaine comments on this, in her vivid and evocative description of her painting *Picoseconds*:

It is in fact a landscape, done in oils, with the blue water, the purple underpainting, the craggy rocks and windswept raggedy trees and heavy impasto of the twenties and thirties. This landscape takes up much of the painting. In the lower right-hand corner, in much the same out-of-the-way position as the disappearing legs of Icarus in the painting by Bruegel, my parents are making lunch ... They are painted in another style: smooth, finely modulated, realistic as a snapshot. It's as if a different light falls on them, as if they are being seen through a window which has opened in the landscape itself, to show what lies behind or

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<sup>95</sup> Rosemary Jackson discusses this concept in Jackson 1981, 70. She refers to Sigmund Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (1912-13), and notes that: 'a re-surfacing of long familiar anxieties/desires in uncanny incidents constitutes a "return of the repressed".'

within it. Underneath them, like a subterranean platform, holding them up, is a row of iconic-looking symbols ... By their obvious artificiality, they call into question the reality of landscape and figures alike.

(*Cat's Eye* 405-6)

Towards the end of the narrative Elaine considers the possibility, in the light of her own life experience, that notions of time, place, identity, and gender may not be rigid, separate entities. Rather, for her as a woman, constructions of place and identity are seen to be interrelated: 'I walk the room, surrounded by the time I've made; **which is not a place, which is only a blur, the moving edge we live in**; which is fluid, which turns back upon itself, like a wave' (*Cat's Eye* 409, my emphasis).

In *Cat's Eye* the location of the ravine is used to represent feminine difference, and functions as an excess term which challenges human attempts to impose order, rationality, and predictability on their surroundings, by making the wilderness 'safe'. The ravine is associated with the defiant, untamed wildness of cats, the enigmatic projection of an all-pervasive female figure, The Lady of Lost Things, and with the flower Deadly Nightshade. These are powerful, resonant images that undermine both conventional constructions of decorative femininity and pastoral representations of landscape and natural space. The following description highlights this:

The dirt path going down to the wooden footbridge is dry, dusty; the leaves of the trees which hang over it are dull green and worn out from the summer. Along the edge of the path is a thicket of weeds: goldenrod, ragweed, asters, burdocks, deadly nightshade ... The nightshade smells of earth, damp, loamy, pungent, and of cat piss.

(*Cat's Eye* 74-5)

Margaret Atwood uses these tropes to inscribe an element of resistance to patriarchal demands on women to subject to the restrictions imposed on femininity, which Elaine refers to as: 'a little pruning ... a little weeding and straightening up' (*Cat's Eye* 381), and to subvert conventional images of femininity and the pastoral. The critic Bill Ashcroft writes on the symbolic functions of the post-colonial as representing the marginal and notions of excess, a topic which is relevant in this context; he notes that:

In post-colonial discourse the body, place, language, the house of being itself is all `verandahs'. That is, they are a process in which the marginal, the excess, is becoming the actual ... The verandah is that penumbral space in which articulation takes form, where representation is contested, where language is supplemented. The post-colonial lives on the verandah because this is the space where the provisionality of language and the reality of experience can coincide.<sup>96</sup>

Atwood's employment of motifs and symbols which defy any singular interpretation in the economy of the text also serves to highlight the multiplicity of linguistic meaning, a problem which Elaine perceives elsewhere in *Cat's Eye*. Commenting on this, she suggests the existence of: `a submerged landscape of the things that are never said, which lies beneath ordinary speech like hills under water' (*Cat's Eye* 320). The theme of verbal and textual indeterminacy and plurality is most clearly demonstrated in the following passage, which also makes the interesting association of the unconscious with wilderness and subversion which Ferrier examines in a different context:<sup>97</sup> `there's a rustling, the rank undertones of cats and their huntings and furtive scratchings still going on behind the deceptive tidiness. Another, wilder and more tangled landscape rising up, from beneath the surface of this one. We remember through smells, as dogs do' (*Cat's Eye* 417).

The novel employs place, and more specifically the metaphor of the ravine, to inscribe a climactic moment and an encounter between Elaine and Cordelia (the latter, however, in a projected, imagined manifestation) which highlights the contradictions of feminine identity. The encounter, and the choice of its setting, serves to highlight both the role ascribed by the text to location in constructing the self, and the significance of female relations in defining feminine subjectivity. The passage is dense, evocative; and disturbing, as Atwood plays with the reader's expectations and with the notions of absence and presence in narrative. Atwood employs a series of temporal and subjective contrasts and dislocations to imagine the paradoxical

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<sup>96</sup> Ashcroft, `Excess: Post-colonialism and the Verandahs of Meaning,' in Tiffin and Lawson, eds., 1994, 42.

<sup>97</sup> Ferrier discusses similar ideas in `The Return of the Repressed: The "Empire" of the Local and Jessica Anderson's *Tirra Lirra by the River*,' in Whitlock and Tiffin, eds., 1992, 157-68.

presence-in-absence of Cordelia and the problems of representing femininity in language (*Cat's Eye* 417-19). The moment of resolution and forgiveness, as well as Elaine's acknowledgement of the bond between herself and Cordelia, is powerfully framed in an emotionally charged passage towards the end of the novel. Elaine observes that:

The sky moves sideways. I know that if I turn, right now, and look ahead of me along the path, someone will be standing there. At first I think it will be myself ... But then I see that it's Cordelia ... I know she's looking at me, the lopsided mouth smiling a little, the face closed and defiant. There is the same shame, the sick feeling in my body, the same knowledge of my own wrongness, awkwardness, weakness; the same wish to be loved; the same loneliness; the same fear. But these are not my own emotions any more. They are Cordelia's; as they always were ... I reach out my arms to her, bend down, hands open to show I have no weapon. *It's all right*, I say to her. *You can go home now*. The snow in my eyes withdraws like smoke.

(*Cat's Eye* 418-19)

The final pages of *Cat's Eye* present a different view of landscape, with Elaine removed from the realities of Toronto and her memories in the plane. This representation of place is radically different, inviting the reader, finally, to distance herself from the specifics of the localities described in the main body of the text, focusing instead on the portrayal of landscape as a symbolic space, an abstract vision of space and patterns, and on sensuous experience of colour and shape that signify differently:

I'm on the plane, flying or being flown, westwards towards the watery coast, the postcard mountains. Ahead of me, out the window, the sun sinks in a murderous, vulgar, unpaintable and glorious display of red and purple and orange; behind me the ordinary night rolls forward. Down on the ground the prairies unscroll, vast and mundane and plausible as hallucinations.

(*Cat's Eye* 420)

Clearly, Atwood's treatment of the topic of female relations and

feminine difference in *Life Before Man* and *Cat's Eye* differs in a number of respects. This can partly be explained by the different employment of narrative perspective and genre in the two texts, and changing concerns in her developing post-colonial and feminist discourse. However, it is interesting to compare and contrast the two novels' representations of the city and the questions that these lead to, through locating the positioning of the female characters Elaine and Lesje in relation to notions of empire and margin, ethnicity, class, and other groupings. The most significant development to note in this regard is the introduction in *Cat's Eye* of an analysis of national and gendered identity which links multiplicity of place with a plurality of feminine differences, and a portrayal of the centrality of relationships between women in feminine subject-formation. This idea is valuable, for it provides Atwood with a rich textual and thematic basis for inscribing subversive, powerful revisions of femininity and place.

### **Wilderness Outside and In: 'Death By Landscape'**

'Death By Landscape' differs from *Life Before Man* and *Cat's Eye*; for although the narrative present is situated in the city, the story chiefly focuses on the female protagonist, Lois, and her memories of girlhood and the wilderness. Atwood portrays the middle-aged Lois, her lonely life in the narrative present, and her recollections of a close friendship between herself and Lucy, another girl her age. Their friendship ended abruptly and traumatically when Lucy disappeared without a trace during a canoe trip while the two girls were at summer camp in the wilderness. The story of their friendship unfolds as Lois recalls the events of that summer, and reflects on her memories of the summer camp and Lucy, in order to find a possible answer to her friend's disappearance and the gap she left. This loss, and her feelings of bereavement and guilt, remain vivid and painful to Lois. She associates these distressing feelings with the threatening but also fascinating unbounded difference which the wilderness represents, which is captured in the central, striking image of the two loons calling one another, and the haunting quality of their voices: 'Out on the lake there were two loons, calling to each other in their insane, mournful voices. At the time it did not sound like grief. It was just background' ('Death By Landscape', *Wilderness Tips* 121). Atwood demonstrates how the meaning of the sound and image has shifted over time for Lois, as these are now irrevocably imbued with the loss and pain she has experienced, by subtly introducing the notions of background and foreground, and the change in meaning that occurs with an altered perspective.

These narrative strategies serve not only to highlight the use of pictorial and visual representations in the text, and the ways in which these problematise representations of identity and place, but also to suggest that perspectives change according to the subject's position, thus promoting the themes of diversity and difference.

The critic Adam Shoemaker has written on 'Death By Landscape' and the portrayal of space and identity in the narrative. His reading draws attention to the intertextual connections between Atwood's story and the novel *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, written by the Australian author Joan Lindsay, and the implications for representations of wilderness and femininity suggested by the two narratives. Shoemaker's essay also discusses these portrayals in a post-colonial context, and illustrates how the relationship with place and with the land described in the stories by Atwood and Lindsay suggests a sense of post-colonial unease; he observes that:

The strangely discomfoting atmosphere of the story ... is strongly reminiscent of the mystery of Joan Lindsay's Australian novel *Picnic at Hanging Rock* in which school-age girls vanish into another dimension. But there is more in Atwood's story ... What ensues emphasises once again the disjunction between non-native cultures in Canada and the indigenous landscape, a disjointedness reflected by the mindscapes on canvas of the Group of Seven painters ... Atwood emphasizes the sense of not belonging to the land; of underestimating the animistic power of the landscape.<sup>98</sup>

The place that is used to inscribe and situate female relations in 'Death By Landscape', Camp Manitou, also frames the problematisation of wilderness in the text. Camp Manitou is a summer camp in the wilderness of northern Canada for middle-class girls. Interestingly, the camp is portrayed as a female community of sorts, in its relative isolation from conventional patriarchal family structures and what is usually regarded as feminine domestic activity. The camp is run by Cappie, a single woman in her forties. She has, it emerges, been helped through periods of financial hardship by what could be termed a female version of 'the Old Boys' Network', or, perhaps

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<sup>98</sup> Adam Shoemaker, 'Landscapes and Mindscapes: Regionalism and Nationalism in Canadian and Australian Culture,' in Whitlock and Tiffin, eds., 1992, 120-21.

more interestingly, a 'female genealogy' or intergenerational network of women; ideas which the French feminist Luce Irigaray and the critic Elizabeth Grosz, among others, have discussed.<sup>99</sup> Cappie's supporters consist of women who have themselves participated in the camp and are remembered for their efforts to assist the 'sisterhood' through photographs; Lois describes how: 'There must have been enough Old Girls, ones with daughters, to keep the thing in operation ... There were dim photographs of these Old Girls dotted around the dining hall' ('Death By Landscape', *Wilderness Tips* 112).

The friendship between the Canadian Lois and the American Lucy illustrates a degree of merger, but not an obliteration of specificity, in feminine and cultural identities which invites the reader to explore the notion of boundaries, geographical, psychological, and physical. The girls find reassurance in comparing and contrasting their difference, but also in affirming their bond and sense of identification. Lucy appears to be an embodiment of conventionally pretty feminine features, whereas Lois perceives herself as 'a tallish, thinnish, brownish person with freckles' ('Death By Landscape', *Wilderness Tips* 115). Lois portrays Lucy as exciting and excessive, and as a contrast to herself and her own life, which she sees as 'placid and satisfactory' (117). However, the text also suggests that Lucy gains a reassuring sense of stability and permanence from her impression of Lois's predictable and 'safe' home environment, and that Lois, on the other hand, is attracted to the sense of change that Lucy's life in the city signifies. Their friendship is based on a mutual need for a sister and ally. The relationship between the two females is like a mirror which confirms and constructs their identities as females, but also simultaneously reflects a degree of contrast and difference. Their letters, which they write to keep in contact with one another during the winter months, when they are separated by national and geographical distances, inscribe a discourse of sisterly identification and affection; as Lois recalls: 'In their letters they pretended to be sisters, or even twins ... They signed their letters LL, with the L's entwined together ... They were more effusive in their letters than they ever were in person. They bordered their pages with X's and O's' (115).

This discourse, which inscribes a sense of biological and emotional affinity, establishes and maintains a sense of continuity in their relationship that helps them negotiate the changes which occur in them as individuals

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<sup>99</sup> For an account of feminist notions of a female genealogy and its implications, see Elizabeth Grosz's analysis of Luce Irigaray's ideas on this topic, in Grosz 1989, 124.

during their separation: 'when they met again in the summer it was always a shock. They had changed so much, or Lucy had ... At first it would be hard to think up things to say' ('Death By Landscape', *Wilderness Tips* 115-16). However, it is also their sense of affinity with the specific space of the summer camp, which frames the cycle of their encounters; for it is here that they negotiate the shared experience of growing up female, in the relative freedom that the camp in the wilderness provides. Their performance of a ritualistic celebration,<sup>100</sup> when Lucy has her period for the first time while at the camp, further cements their friendship and is subsequently remembered by Lois as significant; she recalls: 'Lois is not sure why they did this, or whose idea it was. But she can remember the feeling of deep satisfaction it gave her as the white fluff singed and the blood sizzled, as if some wordless ritual had been fulfilled' (116). Atwood's portrayal of this event draws attention to the themes of ritual and space, and the ways in which these may be problematised by gendered and post-colonial perspectives.

The year after that summer, the summer when Lucy disappears, the issue of heterosexuality is introduced into the two girls' friendship, by Lucy's announcement that she has a 'boyfriend' and by her reference to sexual experience. This appears, at first, to create a sense of distance and differentiation between the girls: 'She described to Lois what it is like when he kisses her - rubbery at first, but then your knees go limp ... Lois has little to offer in return' ('Death By Landscape', *Wilderness Tips* 117). The 'boyfriend', however, seems a distraction for Lucy more than anything else; for she is confused and distressed by the changes occurring in her life, over which she has little or no control, namely her parents' divorce, her new stepfather whom she dislikes and distrusts, and the private school which she now attends.

Lucy's confession to Lois that she has considered running away from home may provide the reader with a possible explanation as to her subsequent disappearance. Enigmatically, Lucy reveals to her friend that: 'It would be nice not to go back ... to Chicago. I hate it there' ('Death By Landscape', *Wilderness Tips* 121). Lucy's fantasy of escape marks her utopian desire to remain within the wilderness and the female community of the summer camp, and the quality of spiritual and physical freedom which they represent, and to avoid entering the adult world of heterosexual relations, and the contradictions, fragmentation, and unhappy compromises of adult femininity signified by her mother's life and by the city. The wilderness, and the qualities

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<sup>100</sup> See also O'Brien, 'Periods,' in Forman and Sowton, eds., 1989, on this topic.

it represents, appears to provide Lucy with a possible means of resisting fixity in a restrictive feminine role and captivity in a one-dimensional urban existence, the very existence, in fact, which the middle-aged Lois now appears to lead.

The narrative explores Lois's emotional (and financial) investment in and fascination with the Canadian wilderness in her adult life. This has resulted in her acquiring a priceless collection of landscape paintings by the painters belonging to the Group of Seven.<sup>101</sup> The wilderness depicted in the paintings signifies, to her, the complex and contradictory emotions of bereavement, rage, and loss that she feels at Lucy's disappearance. The paintings, however, do not simply signify this; for they are also used, in the economy of the story, to inscribe Lois's ambivalent anxiety over and fascination with the untamed 'otherness' of the natural environment. The paintings also reveal a shifting, multi-faceted portrayal of Lucy herself. Gazing at the paintings in search of signs and traces of her female 'other' and self, Lois reflects on her desire to find Lucy, and observes: 'She looks at the paintings, she looks into them. Every one of them is a picture of Lucy' ('Death By Landscape', *Wilderness Tips* 129). The evoked loss and desire that Lois perceives in the paintings suggest that both wilderness and femininity are excess terms which refuse containment within conventional structures and images. These are terms for difference which challenge and subvert patriarchal constructions of woman as well as romanticised representations of nature, as the following extract suggests:

And these paintings are not landscape paintings. Because there aren't any landscapes up here, not in the old, tidy European sense ... Instead there's a tangle, a receding maze, in which you can become lost ... There are no backgrounds in any of these paintings, no vistas; only a great deal of foreground that goes back and back, endlessly, involving you in its twists and turns of tree and branch and rock ... The trees themselves are hardly trees; they are currents of energy, charged with violent colour.

('Death By Landscape', *Wilderness Tips* 128-29)

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<sup>101</sup> See Shoemaker, 'Landscapes and Mindscapes,' in Whitlock and Tiffin, eds., 1992, who refers to the Group of Seven and the representational strategies that this group of painters employed.

The preoccupation with wilderness also inscribes the text in a Canadian literary tradition which is concerned with revising and re-imagining the pastoral genre and the colonial heritage it inscribes, as the critic Rita Felski notes in her analysis of Atwood's novel *Surfacing*.<sup>102</sup> Margaret Atwood's employment of these motifs of landscape and place, in order to frame interrogations of the meanings of human subjectivity, nature, and national identity, is thus identified with specifically Canadian and post-colonial perspectives, as critics have noted.<sup>103</sup>

The narrative of Lois and Lucy's friendship is erased from and marginalised by the story of the former's adult life as a wife and mother. However, although she remains physically absent from this story, Lucy's symbolic presence and significance in Lois's emotional and spiritual life are inscribed in the paintings themselves. Lois's recognition of this constitutes a climactic moment of the text, as she affirms that: 'it was as if she was always listening for another voice, the voice of a person who should have been there but was not. An echo' ('Death By Landscape', *Wilderness Tips* 128). In this story, Atwood specifically employs representations of place and the trope of the wilderness to frame and situate the stories of her female characters and their subject-formation. In 'Death By Landscape', as well as in *Life Before Man* and *Cat's Eye*, as I have demonstrated here, Atwood uses representations of space as tropes for difference, in ways which foreground the topics of post-colonialism, female relations, feminine difference, and which promote the possibility of writing 'other' stories by and about women.

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<sup>102</sup> Felski 1989, 149. Felski also refers to an article by Sherrill E. Grace, 'Quest for the Peaceable Kingdom: Urban/Rural Codes in Ray, Lawrence and Atwood,' in Susan Merrill Squier, ed., 1984. I am indebted to Felski's perceptive comments on Atwood's representations of wilderness.

<sup>103</sup> See Felski 1989, Howells 1987, Brydon and Tiffin 1993, Whitlock and Tiffin, eds., 1992.

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