

“Toast is me. I am toast.”: The Mnemotechnics of Consumption and Technohybrid Identity in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* (2003) is set in a world devoured by the unending nature of humanity’s materialistic appetites, made evident through the visceral, predatorial images of consumption saturating the novel. The narrative is one colossal banquet table, filled with images of consumption that hark back to a monstrous past seemingly left behind, and builds a future tremulously upon its haunting memories. Food, medicine, and even language, all actively deconstructed and reconstructed by technology, act as mnemotechnical devices through their absorption into the body and the body politic in the novel, challenging the borders of psychic purity and emphasizing the hybridity of identities. This article examines the fluctuating locus of the human and the non-human in *Oryx and Crake* through the various instances of transgressive consumption and the (re)emergence of repressed narratives from the individual and collective consciousness. We employ the metaphor of the Classical Greek *pharmakon* (both *poison* and *cure*) as a conceptual tool to explore consumption as a haunting biopolitical process lived in relation to social meanings and practices invested in our posthuman existence.

Keywords: consumption, pharmakon, mnemotechnics, technohybrid identity, body

I sit at the little table, eating creamed corn with a fork. I have a fork and a spoon, but never a knife. When there's meat, they cut it up for me ahead of time, as if I'm lacking manual skills or teeth. I have both, however. That's why I'm not allowed a knife.¹

Introduction

Margaret Atwood’s fictional *oeuvre* ranges across various genres and themes, constantly returning to two fundamental maladies of human existence. The first is rather ironically summed up by Atwood in a children’s tale “We live in a tree, way UP in a tree,”² referring to the comforting sense of superiority possessed by an individual or a people. The second is a practice born from the first, with Atwood stating “When we think of the past, it’s the beautiful things we pick out,” caused by the fact that “We lived, as usual, by ignoring,” which sends us hurtling toward the disastrous result of our desires.³ Exploring the psyche of her human characters, Atwood evaluates how the human ego and denial/neglect drive the practices of civilization that produce self-consuming cultures of exploitation. Atwood’s novels embody this “double vision”, which reveals the “dark psychological impulses” beneath the sensational immediacy of

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¹ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (New York: Anchor, 1998), p. 228.

² Margaret Atwood, *Up in the Tree* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1978).

³ Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, pp. 41, 56.

“contemporary socio-political and ethical issues.”⁴ Atwood’s favoured way of achieving this for the maximum effect, especially in her speculative fiction, is through an abundance of metaphors of consumption.⁵ In these novels, Atwood talks of a variety of possible societies resulting from morally grotesque systems, where corporate materialism, fuelled by human hubris and ignoring, has reached the terminal velocity of consumption.

The structures of consumption are incorporated into the memory networks of the body and the systems it is a part of, according to recent epigenetic experiments.⁶ Eating is the primaeval foundation of relationships in the living nature around us; in fact, the building blocks of life as we know it today came into existence because a cell ingested another cell. As such, the earliest basis of identity is also derived from this relationship: the predator and the prey, the monster and the food, the consumer and the (natural) product. To incorporate a substance is to incorporate its properties, and the consumed incorporates the consumer into relevant systems of consumption. Humans can select what they can consume, so they have the autonomy and the power to determine hierarchy and control alienness in the kingdom of the living. On the other hand, it also results in “the omnivore’s paradox”: such power becomes a dependence as the appetite controls the body via the memory of consumption.⁷ This article aims to show that the various modes of consumption in Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* (2003) act as mnemotechnical devices through their imbibement into the body and society, challenging the notion of purity of identities and emphasising hybridity. It examines the fluctuating locus of the human and the non-human in Atwood’s novel through instances of transgressive consumption and the (re)emergence of repressed narratives from the individual and collective consciousness. The ancient Greek metaphor of the *pharmakon* is used as a conceptual tool in this study, to explore consumption as a haunting biopolitical process lived in relation to social meanings and practices invested in our posthuman existence.

“You are what you eat”: Consumption and Memory in Atwood’s industrial Zombieland

Maggie Kilgour finds eating, reading and sex, the three life impulses meant to stave off human mortality, analogous to her definition of incorporation as an action that “enforces an absolute division between inside and outside; but ... dissolving the structure it appears to produce.”⁸ Kathryn Rose modifies Kilgour’s interpretation: instead of a collapse of ontological boundaries, the consumed inscribes a parasitic niche for the infinite play of meanings, inviting various kinds of reading and interpretation. Rose combines this interpretation of the process of incorporation with representations of various modes of consumption, which “highlights a non-normative act of eating and its resonance within a self-conscious narrative.”⁹ C. Parker Krieg elaborates on building identities through consumption by adding a focus on memory and imagination. To Krieg,

⁴ Coral Ann Howells, “Atwood’s Reinventions: So Many Atwoods,” *Elope*, vol. 17, no. 1 (2020), p. 21.

⁵ Katarina Labudova, *Food in Margaret Atwood’s Speculative Fiction* (New York: Springer, 2022), pp. 2-3.

⁶ See Pete Hughes, “‘We are what we eat’: Oxford scientists discover previously unknown link between diet and DNA,” *Oxford Mail*, 15 November (2016). At: https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/news_bites/14905674.eat-oxford-scientists-discover-previously-unknown-link-diet-dna/. See also “Genetic Memory of Starvation May Curtail Lifespan of Men,” 6 December (2016). At: <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-12-genetic-memory-starvation-curtail-lifespan.html>.

⁷ Claude Fischler, “Food, Self and Identity,” *Anthropology of Food*, vol. 27, no. 2 (1988), pp. 277-278.

⁸ Maggie Kilgour, *From Communion to Cannibalism: An Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 16.

⁹ Kathryn Rose, *Digesting Modernism: Representations of Food and Incorporation in Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century French Fiction* (PhD thesis, Harvard University, 2013), p. 17.

the “selective recall and recombination” of the environmental experience of the self occurs through the external memory support of food, which is “a material and discursive site for the making and remaking of environmental memory through taste and imagination.”¹⁰ Both Rose and Krieg use the etymological signification of the *pharmakon* (simultaneously “poison” and “cure”) theorised by Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler to read consumption as a process of writing and rewriting cultural norms and identity. Both Derrida and Stiegler use the duality of this “necessary evil” to decipher the politics of mnemotechnics that forms the basis of psychopower, a major determinant of human behaviour in our technological age.

To Atwood, the nature of consumption hints at the fictional genre: “delicious and wholesome food, lovely natural surroundings, friendly animal life, beautiful people who are also kind, jolly and risk-averse sex” in utopias as opposed to “starvation, gruesome food... horrible and usually coerced sex...[and] the destruction of nature” in dystopias.¹¹ *Oryx and Crake*, the first in the MaddAddam saga and a speculative narrative about a consumerist apocalypse from an out-of-control industrial “food” chain, forms one of her visions regarding this “zero hour” of consumption.¹² It is built on the premise of real-world technoscientific developments and events of eco-precarity, such as a radicalised bioengineering industry marketing death, a clear hierarchical structure of society where the rich are fortified with their technogenic marvels and the poor form their testing grounds as well the surplus market, and a hypersensationalist media industry that promotes cannibalism, pornography, and public executions as entertainment.¹³ Against this bleak background, the events of the novel are narrated by Snowman, whose pre-apocalyptic life as Jimmy offers the crumbs leading to the global pandemic apocalypse that ends human civilisation. Jimmy becomes a helpless observer as the ethical hollowness of society eats away at the human relationships around him, starting with his mother, then the rest of his family, his romantic affairs, and last of all, his relationship with his Crake, best friend, and Oryx, the woman he loved. Jimmy remains unaware of the impending doom until the last moment, being fed lies by Crake, who had made it his life’s mission to put an end to the human race by concealing a supervirus inside a prophylactic pill marketed by the former. As doomsday hits, Jimmy is left to pick up the pieces of a world rapidly collapsing onto itself, leading the Crakers, a new group of humanoids bioengineered by Crake, to a new dawn of the earth’s ecological hierarchy. The novel depicts a monstrous past seemingly left behind and a future built on haunting, evoking images of consumption that hark back to the oldest memory of Nature, *to eat and be eaten*.

The novel initially seems to be a Platonic critique of the (over)dependence humans have built upon their evolutionary partner, *tekhnē*, or the techniques of civilization constituted of, for and by human memory. According to Derrida, Plato considered these techniques an external threat to psychic purity, *poisoning* living memory by substituting with its inferior.¹⁴ But *Oryx and Crake* juxtaposes the techniques of consumption with those of memory in the same way Derrida and Stiegler situate the technological framework as a necessary, *curative* part of our bio-

¹⁰ C. Parker Krieg, “The Pharmacological Table: Environmental Memory in New Nordic Cuisine,” in *Food in Memory and Imagination: Space, Place and Taste*, eds B. M. Forrest and G. de St. Maurice (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), p. 282.

¹¹ Margaret Atwood, *Burning Questions: Essays and Occasional Pieces 2004-2011* (London: Doubleday, 2022), p. 209.

¹² Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake: A Novel* (London: Doubleday, 2003), p. 3.

¹³ Sarah Appleton, “Corp(Se)ocracy: Marketing Death in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*,” *LATCH: A Journal for the Study of the Literary Artifact in Theory, Culture, or History*, vol. 4 (2011), pp. 64-67.

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Athlone, 1981), pp. 108-109.

anthropological identities.¹⁵ The novel starts with Jimmy/Snowman eating a mango and simultaneously involved in acts of remembering, using the act of consuming to fill in “blank spaces in his stub of a brain, where memory used to be.”¹⁶ Such memory aids give the characters access to a lost past, which aids in psychic and collective individuation by the mutual programming and reprogramming of *who* they are and *what* they remember.¹⁷ In *Oryx and Crake*, the flux of binaries such as the self and the other, the human and the nonhuman, the natural and the technogenic occur in such political spaces created by the consumed entities. Such shifts in identities are represented as the *chimera* by Donna Haraway and Derrida, a hybrid creature from Greek mythology which navigates semantic instability, fluidity of identity, and the potential for emancipatory and ethical transformations by using *tekhnē*. Donna Haraway’s cyborg, a potent fusion of animal and machine, appears where the boundaries between the human and animal blurs.¹⁸ However, Derrida emphasizes the shifting linguistic aspects residing in the concept of the *animal*, which makes it chimerical, multifaceted, and plural.¹⁹ Combining these two theories, we find technohybrid identities emerging from our interactions with both biotechnologies and communication technologies (primarily, recorded language). Yet, Atwood’s fictional world does not use the techniques of consumption as instruments of self-care only, but one that leads to the proliferation of a hyperconsumerist culture, which Stiegler delineates as “the systematic industrialization of the entirety of retentional devices, [which] is an obstacle to the very individuation process of which consciousness consists.”²⁰ A metaphorical zombieland results, where humans have lost individual identity and subjecthood to become a collective force of nature, wreaking havoc on the world without recognising the consequences of their appetites.

“Real” Meat, “Real” Mother: Deceptive Realities of Food and Identities

The gastronomic discourse in the novel is a kind of necromantic fancy; it is reminiscent of the utopic past and anticipates further destruction. The novel’s setting is a world on the brink of ecological collapse, with the scarcity of “real” food and a constant, aching hunger for natural, earth-grown food like “grapefruit orchards” and “hamburger chains, always real beef ... hot-dog stands” gnawing at the subconscious, which translates to a longing for a better past “before New York was New New York,” when “you could fly anywhere in the world, without fear” and “voting mattered.”²¹ People depend on laboratory-grown food, which intensifies the “feelings of loss or the desire of domination” and turns the experience of consumption into a constant haunting. For instance, the absence of “real” meat results in the consumption of unnaturally long-lasting, farmed meat such as ChickieNob drumsticks, Sveltana No-Meat Cocktail Sausages, SoyOBoy sardines and CrustaeSoy shrimps, leading to dissatisfaction over their “bland tofu-like

¹⁵ See Derrida, *Dissemination*, pp. 112, 152; see also Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time*, Vol. 1, trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 192-194.

¹⁶ Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, pp. 4-5.

¹⁷ Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time*, Vol. 2, trans. Stephen Barker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 186.

¹⁸ Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late 20th Century,” in *The International Handbook of Virtual Learning Environments*, eds. Joel Weiss, Jason Nolan, Jeremy Hunsinger, and Peter Trifonas (Dordrecht: Springer 2006), pp. 120-121.

¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 28, no. 2 (2002), p. 392.

²⁰ Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time*, Vol. 3, trans. Stephen Barker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), p. 4.

²¹ Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 63.

consistency and inoffensive flavour.”²² Simultaneously, media technology intensifies these feelings by holding contests of eating live animals and birds “with prizes of hard-to-come-by foods” such as “a couple of lamb chops or a chunk of genuine brie.”²³ Thus, technology creates a phantasmagorical experience, continuously flipping the coins of the real and the artificial, the tangible and the abstract through the vicissitudes of memory.

Eating “real” meat is a method of reconnecting as well as subjugating nature, tying it with the idea of hierarchical identities:²⁴ “real” meat eaters having the most superior of human identities (the *Homo faber* like Crake), the pseudo-food eaters like Jimmy devolving into subpar “apelike man or manlike ape” with “its backward-pointing footprints,”²⁵ and finally the clover-eating Crakers, who are likened to obedient pets or naive children at best. Atwood problematises the consumption of industrially produced food in a manner similar to Gothic narratives: the consumption of “undead” food, the symbol of “excessive and transgressive appetite,” causes the consumer to be helplessly insatiable as well.²⁶ Such an appetite leads to the dehumanisation and deindividuation of the eater, as Jimmy compares his own identity time and again in comparison to Crake: “He was feeling more and more like a troglodyte. Living in a cave, fighting off the body parasites, gnawing the odd bone.”²⁷ Jimmy becomes the last zombie standing in the aftermath of an apocalypse caused by a kingdom of zombies, finally torn apart by their uncontrolled hunger.

This Platonic theme of deception and the irreplaceability of *logos* with the inferior, prosthetic support of memory also pervades Jimmy’s agonised wandering through the tropisms of his past. The significant scenes from Jimmy’s childhood play out in various dining rooms, *artifice*-ial settings (signifying both fakeness and deception) meant for the nonviolent consumption of food distanced from the violent modes of its sourcing or preparation.²⁸ The dining table becomes the stage for Jimmy’s childhood relationships with his nanny, his parents and his stepmother, Ramona. Jimmy’s nanny, Dolores, remembered as smiles, laughter, eggs “cooked ... just the way he liked it” and birthday cakes “with icing and candles ... giving off their sweet, comforting scent of vanilla, like Dolores herself,” is perhaps the only unadulterated memory carried over to his life as Snowman.²⁹ The deceptively utopic quality of this memory is juxtaposed with the other dining memories in Jimmy’s life, situating his dining experience with others firmly in abandonment and betrayal. Snowman remembers awkward meals, a show of mother-son love, with his emotionally absent mother: “Once in a while there would be a real lunch waiting for him, a lunch that was so arranged and extravagant it frightened him, for what was the occasion?”³⁰ Jimmy’s doubt regarding the genuineness of his mother’s actions is proven when she runs away from the Compound life, leaving him alone with another equally unbothered parent.

Similar experiences occur with his father and Ramona when they talk about Jimmy’s mother in front of him during lunchtimes at OrganInc, making it obvious that they are a couple behind his mother’s back. To a young Jimmy, Ramona becomes the epitome of evil who has

²² Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 292.

²³ Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 85.

²⁴ Jovian Parry, “*Oryx and Crake* and the New Nostalgia for Meat,” *Society and Animals*, vol. 17 (2009), p. 248.

²⁵ Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 8.

²⁶ Elizabeth Andrews, *Devouring the Gothic: Food and the Gothic Body* (PhD thesis, University of Stirling, 2008), p. ii.

²⁷ Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 201.

²⁸ Margaret Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner: The Origins, Evolution, Eccentricities, and Meaning of Table Manners* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991), pp. 1-17.

²⁹ Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, pp. 30, 50.

³⁰ Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 31.

sucked away the stability of his family, evident in the way he describes her eating, “as if she could liquefy those hard, crisp foods and suck them into herself, like an alien mosquito creature on DVD.”³¹ It is also at the dining table Jimmy first learns of the cellular level consumption by disease-causing microbes, presaging how humans would fall prey to their own deeds through the betrayal of his friend, Crake.³² Dining experiences become agonising for Jimmy, connected with maternal betrayal and other instances of duplicity in his life; notably, the initiation of Crake’s betrayal by recruiting an unaware Jimmy in his plans starts at an extravagant dining table loaded with “real oysters” and “real Japanese beef, rare as diamonds.”³³ These instances perpetuate Jimmy/Snowman’s anger and hurt throughout the novel and situate his “ontologically unstable state” as a lifelong child, never reaching a “fully humanized adulthood” like Oryx or Crake.³⁴ His naïve adherence to the moral philosophy of an older world starkly juxtaposes this less-fully-human psyche with the unsentimental nature of his companions as he is repeatedly told to “grow up.”³⁵ Therefore, food and its memory act as the shapeshifting *pharmakon* in the novel, simultaneously acting as the source of reassurance as well as of despair.

“Fasting, Feasting”: Eating Bodies and Building Selves

Bodies are the chief source of capital in Atwood’s novel, and this is portrayed with clarity via medicine and sex. If food becomes the marker of the difference between the real and the artificial, life and death, human-nonhuman/subhuman in *Oryx and Crake*, the incorporation of futuristic medical technology that complicates such ontological boundaries at the unitary level of the body. Asha Persson declares medicine as the *pharmakon* in relation to bodies, as “products of human culture, but also producers of it, affecting people’s sense of being and social lives as intimately as food, money and other charged ‘things’;” that is, more than the poison/remedy binary, it is a “means of producing something.”³⁶ In hypercorporealised societies, biotechnology and nanotechnology used as “transformational technologies” in medicine helps rewrite genetic information, procreative processes and intergenerational genealogy.³⁷ In *Oryx and Crake*, both disease and technomedicine rearrange and redesign the building blocks of life. Therefore, the body becomes an infinitely conformable, renewable and durable object, challenging the frontiers of sickness and health, life and death, the grotesque and the ethereal, the possible and the impossible. The novel portrays the infinite dismantling and malleability of bioforms for the benefit of medical consumerism, where the entire living world comprises, raw ingredients thrown into infinite combinations to cook up new dishes benefiting the cyclical industrial machinery of the laboratory and the market. This process defines the hierarchical identities of the novel’s preapocalyptic world: the bioengineers being the *pharmakeus* subject (healer-sorcerer figures in ancient Greece) with their ability to create and manipulate living systems and the rest of the living world as the *pharmakos* object (patient-scapegoat-victim figure in Greek) with their mere acts as manipulated consumers or puppets-in-flesh. Interestingly, like the technological *pharmakon*, the

³¹ Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 25.

³² Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, pp. 19-20.

³³ Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 289.

³⁴ Zoe Jacques, *Children’s Literature and the Posthuman* (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 9.

³⁵ Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, pp. 120, 191.

³⁶ Asha Persson, “Incorporating *Pharmakon*: HIV, Medicine and Body Shape Change,” *Body & Society*, vol. 10, no. 4 (2004), p. 46.

³⁷ Bernard Stiegler, *What Makes Life Worth Living: On Pharmacology*, trans. Daniel Ross (London: Polity, 2013), pp. 127-129.

pharmakeus and the *pharmakos* in *Oryx and Crake* keep shifting natures, as substantiated below.

The biotech corporate giants of this fictional world, such as OrganInc Farms, HelthWyzer and RejoovenEsence, use “the armatures of a newly intensive medical-industrial complex” to give shape to the “biomedical imaginary” of society.³⁸ The ability to rewrite cellular memory is the scientific equivalent of omnipotence, making genetic engineers “feel like God.”³⁹ The *pigoon* is one such venture, meant to help humans achieve longevity by transplanting human-tissue organs harvested from a transgenic pig host. Organ transplanting modifies the self, which while “enabling a ‘self’ to endure”, urges the recipient to “forge a new narrative of a self.”⁴⁰ The human subject is altered by its fusion with the nonhuman (animal and technology), and once the pigoon hosts the human brain, a kind of chimerical existence results. This medical consumption is complicated by rumours of pigoon meat being used in OrganInc food, making Jimmy uncomfortable with implications of cannibalism: “He didn’t want to eat a pigoon, because he thought of the pigoons as creatures much like himself.”⁴¹ Cannibalism is examined in the novel when Snowman, the last trace of humanity in the world, is compared to a mythical humanoid creature that mountain tribes are supposed to have killed, cooked and feasted upon.⁴² Human identities are precarious despite the desperation to preserve them, and this is evident in the new hierarchies of the food chain when Snowman, the human, is hunted by human-brained pigoons.⁴³

Crake’s “Paradice” program is the crowning achievement of the novel’s biotech marvels, which is made of the Project and the Pill, referring to Crakers and the BlyssPluss Pill, jointly meant to counter the problem of overpopulation and human weaknesses such as diseases and violent emotions: “The Pill would put a stop to haphazard reproduction, the Project would replace it with a superior method.”⁴⁴ In a society characterised by a slaughterhouse economy, rationalist technologies such as the Crakers and the BlyssPluss pill provide a fantasy of control over life and death, a cure for the ailing world. But the duplicitousness of *tekhnē* is once more seen when the BlyssPluss Pill, transforms from a pleasure pill to an agent of mass destruction through the concealed supervirus JUVE. This plan of saving the world involves a post-apocalyptic humanless world repopulated by the Crakers, the race of supposedly perfect posthumans. However, the Crakers are “a shell which has been filled to the brim with something that looks like ourselves but is irremediably other.”⁴⁵ They are “neither lopsided nor sad . . . like animated statues,” with major behavioural changes such as the erasure of “the thumbprints of human imperfection”: sickness, pain, carnivorous tendencies, sadness, romantic love, hierarchies, memories of human civilisation and the fear of oblivion.⁴⁶ To Jimmy, the last human, they are merely unreal children.

In *Oryx and Crake*, erotic impulses are rampantly used to counter thanatotic forces. Atwood repeatedly implies Kilgour’s viewpoint that sexual intercourse is analogous to eating, for it “makes two bodies one, though in a union that is fortunately less absolute and permanent.”⁴⁷

³⁸ Robert Luckherst, “Biomedical Horror: The New Death and the New Undead,” in *Technologies of the Gothic in Literature and Culture: Technogothics*, ed. Justin D. Edwards (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 90.

³⁹ Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 51.

⁴⁰ Sara Wasson, “Recalcitrant Tissue: Cadaveric Organ Transplant and the Struggle for Narrative Control,” in *Technologies of the Gothic*, ed. Justin D. Edwards (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 99.

⁴¹ Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 24.

⁴² Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 8.

⁴³ Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, pp. 265-268.

⁴⁴ Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 304.

⁴⁵ David Punter, *Gothic Pathologies: The Text, the Body and the Law* (London: Macmillan, 1998), p. 16.

⁴⁶ Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 100.

⁴⁷ Kilgour, *From Communion to Cannibalism*, p. 7.

At her most elegant, Atwood declares, “But the body had its own cultural forms. It had its own art. Executions were its tragedies, pornography was its romance,” and at her crudest, “the less we eat, the more we fuck.”⁴⁸ Crake’s BlyssPluss pill is advertised to be a one-stop solution based on this philosophy, the human desire for longevity through procreative impulses, promising “an unlimited supply of libido and sexual prowess,” with the added benefits of protection against STDs, prolonged youth, and birth control.⁴⁹ It is a brilliant marketing move in this decadent society, dealing in a variety of pornographic sites such as Tart of the Day and HottTotts, which advertise orgies and unique sex entertainments. On one hand, there is this excess of sexual consumption in the background of the narrative; on the other, there are scenes of abject penury from lack of food, leading to human trafficking, especially for the sex trade. Starved bodies are necessary; delicate female bodies such as Oryx’s are desirable for visual feeding. Thinness and finicky eating go hand-in-hand for Gothic heroines,⁵⁰ and Oryx is a picky eater; she finds rich or junk foods distasteful. Gastronomic starvation is not the only starvation that the sex-trafficking victims face; they are also starved of voice, agency and control over their identities, as evident in the way the victims obey everything their male “owners” had them do.⁵¹ Oryx’s double starvation is a product of the dual precarity of her postcolonial female identity, which tantamount to nothing but a puppet made of flesh, even to the two men who supposedly care for her: Jimmy, who wants to put wrathful words against the world in her mouth, and Crake, who slices her throat in the end, a final act of choking her voice altogether. Ironically, she remains in Jimmy’s psyche primarily as auditory hallucinations, her voice haunting him at every turn in his life after death.

“From Nowhere, a Word Appears”: The Edible Word

Language itself becomes a consumable entity through Jimmy’s obsession with its materiality. Like the banality of DNA recombination prevalent in the novel’s technomedicalised industrial society, language is “spliced” and combined in various arrangements to suit the needs of the consumerist culture, creating possibilities before they take corporeal forms, for instance, “new”+“skins” = “NooSkins.”⁵² Language, therefore, becomes the vehicle of the material reality of this fictional world, the absence of which causes Jimmy to feel disoriented: “He can see the word, he can hear the word, but he can’t reach the word. He can’t attach anything to it. This is happening too much lately, this dissolution of meaning, the entries on his cherished wordlists drifting off into space.”⁵³ Jimmy’s life, both before and after the apocalypse, is full of foraging for words and their material significance, representing the dying strain of “word people” in a world that values “numbers people” only. His school lunchtimes in HelthWyzer Public School are spent in the library watching old movies; he likes watching reality shows that introduced to literary giants like Shakespeare; he turns into a veritable logophile in his days at Martha Graham:

He compiled lists of old words too – words of a precision and suggestiveness that no longer had a meaningful application in today’s world . . . He memorized these hoary

⁴⁸ Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, pp. 85, 120.

⁴⁹ Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 294.

⁵⁰ Andrews, *Devouring the Gothic*, p. 39.

⁵¹ Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 139.

⁵² Grayson Cooke, “Technics and the Human at Zero-Hour: Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*,” *Studies in Canadian Literature*, vol. 31, no. 2 (2006), p. 118.

⁵³ Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 39.

locutions, tossed them left-handed into conversation: *wheelwright*, *lodestone*, *saturnine*, *adamant*. He'd developed a strangely tender feeling towards such words, as if they were children abandoned in the woods and it was his duty to rescue them.⁵⁴

The extent of loss is felt in Jimmy's agonised forgetting of words: “Hang on to the words,” he tells himself. ... When they're gone out of his head, these words, they'll be gone, everywhere, forever. As if they had never been.”⁵⁵ It is language, the most primeval of *tekhnē*, that establishes the human identity in him.

The consumption of language in *Oryx and Crake* has a Promethean significance. The decadence of art proves this, which includes “vulterizing,” a process in which words formed with dead animals are torn apart by vultures.⁵⁶ Jimmy remains the last repository of *tekhnē*, the body made to be the Word, which is turned into sustenance, as in the Holy Communion, by his own resigned declaration of his unwanted identity as “the Apostle and High Priest” to the Crakers: “Toast is me. I am toast.”⁵⁷ He becomes the reluctant *pharmakos* like Prometheus, chained or crucified to the existence of the Crakers. This is evident in how he invents a Genesis story of his own, mixing random images of fashioning flesh from food and eating up words with biblical images of Adam's bones and the egg from Christ's Resurrection. The fish-eating ritual with the Crakers is also layered with rhetorical and mnemonic significance. For instance, the biblical scene of plentitude is reversed, for one fish per week is a kind of accidental anorexia Snowman subjects himself to. The fish being a phallic symbol, it also signifies Jimmy's sexual starvation in the absence of Oryx, who is a fish-eater herself, and therefore, an instance of mourning through food by transforming “a desiring character to a character who *writes* of desire.”⁵⁸ Additionally, the act of eating being bartered with the act of storytelling links language to consumption on a communal level. This is important, for Snowman's stories start to inculcate a sense of community and culture in the Crakers, the slow process of being human-like at the end of the novel with rudimentary art and praying.⁵⁹ It upends Crake's singlehanded agenda to save the world via changing the ways of nature, for what is nature's is bound to go back to the ways of nature. This understanding shifts Jimmy's identity from the *pharmakos* to the *pharmakeus* at the end, the potential healer of the remains of his world, the “expert on potential accidents: scalding liquids, sickening fumes, poison dust. Pain of odd kinds.”⁶⁰ Jimmy, the last human, deeply realises the inexorable ways of human-nature relationship and the pathography of an ailing world left for posterity.

Conclusion

“You are what you eat,” Atwood states in *The Canlit Foodbook*, concluding that the phrase “means one thing to a nutritionist, another to a novelist” as metaphors of eating found in a fictional piece are used to “reveal character, slimy as well as delectable.”⁶¹ In *Oryx and Crake* industry has normalised trends of consumerism, with consumption becoming the method of making sense of the world, partly due to what they ingest affects their relationship with the surrounding

⁵⁴ Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 195.

⁵⁵ Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 68

⁵⁶ Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 244.

⁵⁷ Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 98.

⁵⁸ Rose, *Digesting Modernism*, p. 129, emphasis mine.

⁵⁹ Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, pp. 360-361.

⁶⁰ Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 7.

⁶¹ Margaret Atwood, *The Canlit Foodbook: From Pen to Palate* (Toronto: Totem Books, 1987).

environment. Atwood's novel challenges the structural notions of identity when read through existing postmodern theories of consumption driven by the technoscientific momentum of life and the politics of spirit within global capitalist regimes. *Oryx and Crake* calls for a holistic understanding of the infinite points between the binaries of living-dead, human-nonhuman, natural-technogenic, real-artificial, and self-other. Consumption becomes a method of achieving this, via what Abou Farman calls "the implosion, the negation, of what has been known as civilization, and a pluralism of techno-ecologies, with different grammars connecting past-present-future temporalities and animate-deanimate-reanimate continuums."⁶² The incorporation of food, medicine, sexual desire and language forces the reader of the novel to reconsider the hierarchy of identities amidst a growing awareness of the ecological position humans hold. Like the novel's madhouse concoctions of recipes, panacea, bodily units and rhetorical impulses, the characters are an admixture of identities, hybrids—ants having relevance to not just one anthill, for all the anthills have surely fallen apart. Throughout her novel, Atwood keeps shifting allegiances, ultimately allowing nature, red in tooth and claw,⁶³ to preserve the only relations that matter within a chaotic ecosystem—the consumer and the consumed.

⁶² Abou Farman, *On Not Dying: Secular Immortality in the Age of Technoscience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), p. 273.

⁶³ See Alfred Tennyson, "Canto 56," *In Memoriam A.H.H.* At: <https://allpoetry.com/In-Memoriam-A.-H.-H.-:56>.