

## **Eating, Cleaning, and Writing: Female Abjection and Subjectivity in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*\***

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### **Abstract**

This paper attempts to explicate women's emergence from the shade of abjection to the stage of subjectivity, with a focus on the physical and textual boundaries in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*.

The first part of this paper centers on the power dynamics of eating and food, particularly on three issues: anorexia as a protest on behalf of bodily autonomy, eating as a demonstration of power, and sexist stereotypes of women through culinary metaphors. The second part analyzes Iris's and Laura's hygienic habits, aiming to answer the question: why can Iris outgrow her anorexia, but Laura cannot? The third part shifts the focus from women's physical boundary (eating and cleaning) to the textual one (writing), culminating in an exploration of female writing in the novel. Where anorexia and obsessive showers help women characters claim their subjectivity by negatively draw a line between self and other, female writing shapes subjects that do not simply counter the other but negotiate with it. While the first two parts of the essay rely on Julia Kristeva's concept of "abjection" to draw the bodily boundary between self and other, the last part leans on Hélène Cixous's idea(l)s of *écriture féminine* to reimagine, reconstruct, and re(dis)cover the self/other dialectic by "flying" across textual boundaries.

### **Keywords**

Margaret Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*, abjection, subjectivity, physical/textual boundary, anorexia, societal/patriarchal cannibalism, *écriture féminine*

Flesh is heretic.

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My body is a witch.  
I am burning it.  
[.....]  
I am starved and curveless.  
I am skin and bone.  
She [the body] has learned her lesson.  
[.....]  
Caged so  
I will grow  
angular and holy.

—Eavan Boland

I have gone out, a possessed witch,  
haunting the black air, braver at night;  
dreaming evil, I have done my hitch  
over the plain houses, light by light;  
lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.  
A woman like that is not a woman, quite.  
I have been her kind.

—Anne Sexton

Hypocrite women, how seldom we speak  
of our own doubts, while dubiously  
we mother man in his doubt!

—Denise Levertov

I know a little of the principle of design, and I know  
this thing was not arranged on any laws of radiation,  
or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry, or any-  
thing else that I ever heard of.

—Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*, like her previous novels, is fraught with culinary imagery. Although the novel has nested within it stories of three different genres—a memoir by an octogenarian crone, a romance between two clandestine lovers, and a science fiction story about the planet Zycron—nearly all the female characters are pertinent to eating and food. For example, in the memoir, Iris Chase elaborately records her daily diet, her sister Laura is described as a martyr to anorexia, and her sister-in-law Winifred Griffen is depicted as a fastidious and voracious eater; in the professed romance, the unknown woman usually brings food to meet with her secret lover; and in the science fiction story, there are virgins sacrificed to the carnivorous Gods, dead women “slaving for blood” (250), and peach women of the plant Aa’A. As Emma Parker points out, in Atwood’s novels “eating is employed as a metaphor for power and is used as an extremely subtle means of examining the

relationship between women and men” (349). However, Parker fails to clarify Laura’s anorexia. Unlike Marian MacAlpin’s eating problem in Atwood’s first novel *The Edible Woman*, Laura’s has little to do with her awareness of patriarchal consumption in this male-dominated society, though she does suffer from the sexual violence of Iris’s husband, Richard Griffen. Therefore, to depict Laura’s difficulty with food, I suggest that we need to read *The Blind Assassin* in a new light.

In this paper, I will attempt to explicate women’s emergence from the shade of abjection and their entrance onto the stage of subjectivity, with a special focus on physical and textual boundaries. Beginning with the power dynamics of eating and food, I shall center on Laura’s anorexia, Winifred’s “voraciously elegant” (185) consumption,<sup>1</sup> Iris’s omnivorous scavenging in the wake of her non-eating hibernation (222), and the science fiction story’s contrast between the dead women in the eerie mountains of Sakiel-Norn and the peach women of the planet Aa’A, in order to illustrate three issues: anorexia as a protest on behalf of bodily autonomy, eating as a demonstration of power, and the sexist stereotypes of women as presented through culinary metaphors. Interestingly, though Laura’s anorexia is unfavorable to her health, when we set her “disease” in the trajectory of Julia Kristeva’s “abjection” theory it nevertheless declares her bodily autonomy. In other words, by refusing food she draws a line between herself and the environment. However, while Laura acquires her subjectivity by her alienation from food, her inability to eat also exposes her vulnerability to predators in a cannibalistic society. Indeed, for people like Winifred, eating not only denotes a readiness to assimilate or/and be assimilated into this dog-eat-dog society; a consummate consumer even proves his or her competence to thrive *via* what Sharon Rose Wilson terms “societal cannibalism” (“Fairy-Tale Cannibalism” 79).

Therefore, while Laura’s alienation from food attests to her subjectivity vis-à-vis the other, Winifred’s assimilation of/by food vouches for her survivability in this Darwinian society. The former demarcates her bodily boundary by rejecting food; the latter expands her hunting territory by taking it in. While Kristeva’s “abjection” theory and Wilson’s “societal cannibalism” construct women’s subjectivity and survivability

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<sup>1</sup> Although here “voraciously elegant” is used by Atwood to describe Winifred’s dressing style, it also can depict her eating style. A lady of the *nouveau riche*, Winifred has to eat “elegantly” to meet the standards of her class. However, her purposeful consumption of food resembles that of a “voracious” animal. In fact, husbandless and “voraciously elegant” in eating and dressing, Winifred is analogous to a venomous, cannibal “black widow.” No wonder Iris pictures Winifred as killing her husband in order to be with her adulterer chauffeur.

through the quotidian activity of eating, the culinary metaphor generates further meanings if we think it in terms of “patriarchal cannibalism.” By limning the dead women in Sakiel-Norn as greedy to consume men’s essence and the peach women of Aa’A as delicious to men’s carnal appetite, the science fiction story in *The Blind Assassin* actually lampoons the misrepresentation of female images in the real world, belying the polarization of threatening ogresses and titillating toys in men’s sexual fantasy.

Indeed, be they demonized or objectified, these imaginary female figures in effect hold a mirror to the grotesque female images in or of actual reality. In this phallogocentric society, where culinary consumption is an allegory of sexual consummation, these fictional distortions of women thus reflect women’s ideological disfigurements. Beneath these culinary metaphors, the “greedy” women actually serve as a subterfuge for men’s sexual impotence, while the “delicious” women function as a euphemism for men’s sexual conquest. In a nutshell, when eating passes from a tricky *dialectic* between self and other, concerned with subjectivity, to a hunting *game* between prey and predator implying “societal cannibalism,” and then to an ideological *play* between man and woman implying “patriarchal cannibalism,” this “eating” encompasses not only personal/social dimensions but also physical/textual boundaries. *Intrapersonal* and *interpersonal*, factual and fictional, eating in this novel hence becomes an indicator of subjectivity, an expression of survivability, and a metaphor for sexist stereotypes.

If anorexia itself is a positive protest in support of personal subjectivity which is nonetheless negative in the context of societal survivability, I want to place Iris and Laura in contraposition, further comparing their hygienic habits in order to answer this question: why can Iris grow out of her anorexia, while Laura cannot? Intriguingly, Iris becomes obsessed with morning showers after she marries Richard, whereas Laura feels comfortable with the dirty bedpans and vomit when she is an Abigail (volunteer nurse) in the poverty wards (421). Although Kristeva’s concept of “abjection” can explain Laura’s anorexia as an “operation” of her bodily boundary, her wallowing in filth violates this fortification, rendering her susceptible to outer dangers. On the other hand, although anorexia cannot prevent Iris from Richard’s sexual invasion, her daily showers as “dawn rituals” (35) nevertheless provide her with a compensatory boundary “against” him. In this sense, while Laura’s obstinate anorexia contradicts her sloppy hygienic habits vis-à-vis her bodily boundary, Iris’s anorexia is merely a means to claim subjectivity. When she finds out that she can resort to morning showers to restore her “lost” bodily boundary to Richard, she can overcome her destructive

anorexia, claiming her subjectivity in a more moderate way. Moreover, when Iris realizes that she has to be a tough consumer in order to defy societal/patriarchal cannibalism, her anorexia is bound to be cured. Evolving from the level of Laura the prey to that of Winifred the predator, Iris becomes even more adaptive to the cannibalistic society than her sister-in-law inasmuch as she learns to be “voraciously elegant” when in power, and “omnivorous” when at odds. Obsessive cleaning thus allows Iris to reclaim her subjectivity whenever it is transgressed by Richard, and saves her from the eventual suicide of a “hunger strike.”<sup>2</sup>

The settings with which this paper will be concerned are then mostly the kitchen (eating) and the women’s washroom (cleaning). Although these two sites are regarded as “abject spaces” of domesticity, that is, “female spaces,” they are also *exclusively* female domains. With “a room of its own,” to borrow Virginia Woolf’s catchword, female subjectivity can therefore blossom through the manipulations of language. In other words, analyzing the permeability of physical space, domestic space in particular, and textual space, I intend to delineate the matrix formed by female writing, space, and subjectivity in the third part of my paper.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, though men assert that they are the “hosts” of the house, kings of the castle (as well as the world), the fact that women take charge of the kitchen and the women’s bathroom manifests the porousness of this patriarchal topography, disclosing the apertures intrinsic in this system. On the

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<sup>2</sup> In this paper I intend to depathologize anorexia as a physical disease and interpret it as a kind of “hunger strike.” Even though Laura’s anorexia clinically passes for an illness, I read it as a *protest* on behalf of subjectivity, a *petition* for bodily autonomy. However, as an unequivocal division between self and other, a radical anorexia can be suicidal. In this case, I suggest that Iris’s obsession with cleanliness achieves the same effect (subjectivity) without the same result (death).

<sup>3</sup> Concerning female writings in this novel, I hesitate to use the term *écriture féminine*, or “feminine writing,” because there is only a rough correspondence between Cixous’s ideal expectation of this kind of “anti-logos” writing (“Mesusa” 250) and the writing practices of Atwood’s female characters. For instance, where Cixous proposes *écriture féminine* as an authentic use of women’s voice, most writings by Atwood’s female characters in *The Blind Assassin* remain on the underside of patriarchy. Intriguingly, it is not until Iris has Laura’s professed romance published and Atwood has her romance *The Blind Assassin* published that the voices of Adelia, Reenie, Laura, Iris, the women in the bathroom, and even Atwood herself can be heard. Besides, although Cixous claims that *écriture féminine* is a “bisexual” writing style that “inscribes femininity” (“Medusa” 254, 248) rather than a gendered privilege exclusive to women, male characters in Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin* are not given the chance to engage in this kind of writing. In fact, compared to women in this novel, they seldom write. Even though Alex writes science fiction to parody capitalism, a phallogocentric apparatus that erases the “difference” of communism, women in his writing remain oppressed. However, despite these nuances, most female characters in this novel, Iris in particular, do materialize Cixous’s idea(l)s of *écriture féminine*: they write (through) their body, articulate their voices (though mostly in secret), and try to inscribe femininity. I shall elaborate on Cixous’s idea(l)s of *écriture féminine* in the third part of this paper. For a detailed polemic on women’s problems with writing and the bisexual, non-exclusive nature of *écriture féminine*, see Cixous’s “The Laugh of the Medusa”; esp. 246-47 and 253-54.

other hand, even though some people may argue that women's occupation of kitchen and bathroom is in effect a subtle internment rather than a form of ownership because these two places tend to pass for gifts bestowed upon women in comparison with men's vast territory, I will attempt to see women's manipulation of words in these limited spaces as witnesses resistant to the patriarchal oppression. Caged by phallogocentrism, women who see the imbalanced power relationship implicit in the division of physical space hence may use their writing to soar into textual space and to de-/re-/un-territorialize the field of male writing.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, Adelia's eccentric scrapbooks and cookbook, Reenie's inheritance of Adelia's cookbook, Iris's confessional memoir based on Laura's coded notebooks, and the various inscriptions on the walls of the female washroom disrupt or dispute monolithic logocentrism by bringing the filthiest story/space to a celebration of a female community *different* from the patriarchal society. Even though there are discords and conflicts in this imaginary community, these women's isomorphic and "whimsical" inscriptions on the wall/paper bear a striking resemblance to the apparitions on the wall/paper of Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" inasmuch as they elicit an "uncanny" feeling, one that confronts and breaks down the wall of patriarchy.<sup>5</sup> "A return of the repressed," female writings in this novel, particularly those in the name of Laura, thus emerge from behind, from the space to which they used to be

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<sup>4</sup> Here I borrow Cixous's metaphor of flying, with its double meanings of "flight" and "stealing" from the verb *voler* in French. According to Cixous, *écriture féminine* enables women to "go by, fly the coop, take pleasure in jumbling the order of space, in disorienting it, in changing around the furniture, dislocating things and values, breaking them all up, emptying structures, and turning propriety upside down" ("Medusa" 258). By soaring in textual space, women thus play the roles of "birds" and "robbers" ("Medusa" 258); they cross boundaries partitioned off by men, steal them, and redefine them. Ultimately, they even "unterritorialize" them because the concept of "boundary" is disrupted.

<sup>5</sup> While "whimsical" is likely to be associated with something capricious, unreliable, and illogical, I want to cast into relief its subversive potential as one of the features in *écriture féminine*. In Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," when the female narrator/wife/patient is pacified by her physician/husband after making a fuss about the grotesque wallpaper, she says to herself, "[i]t is as airy and comfortable a room as anyone need wish, and, of course, I would not be so silly as to make him uncomfortable just for a *whim*" (1135; emphasis mine). Although here the "whim" refers to the "foolish fancy" and "hysterical tendency" (1139, 1133) with which the narrator is afflicted, the "whimsical" writings she exerts on the wall/paper actually resist the tradition of male writing: while the fragmentary writing on the pages of her journal defies the linear development of male narrative, the revolting patterns on the wallpaper challenge "the principle of design" (1137), a "Name of the Father" in the aesthetic sense. In other words, where phallogocentrism privileges the one and only rule in sexuality, medication, writing and everything else, *écriture féminine*, with its announcement of heterogeneity and complexity, treats "whimsical" writing as a means to implode this kind of male-centered formality. However, even if women must learn to manipulate words, the final goal of this strategy is "not to take possession [of language, snatching it from men,] but rather to dash through and to 'fly'" (Cixous, "Medusa" 258).

confined.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, if “it is his identification with the ‘dead letter’ of the symbolic mandate that bestows authority on [a real father]” (*Looking Awry* 109), as Slavoj Žižek says regarding the dis/embodied power of the Name of the Father, I will claim that Laura’s embodiment through the signature on the women’s washroom wall and as the author of the romance *The Blind Assassin* enable her to transcend death and to further give an “uncanny” aura to the female community. Remarkably, then, women’s subjectivity surfaces at the moment of writing—“I write, therefore I am,” or more surprisingly, “I was written, therefore I am.”<sup>7</sup>

Unlike the subjectivity created by the destructive refusal of food or the less malignant obsession with cleanliness, female writing shapes subjects that not merely draw a line against the other—man, predator, the cannibalistic society—but also

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<sup>6</sup> Here I draw an analogy between the eerie specters in Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” and the graffiti on the women’s washroom in Atwood’s novel. If the “uncanny,” as Freud defines it, is “in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (241), I claim that both the phantoms in Gilman’s story and Laura’s signature in Atwood’s novel evoke a similar “uncanny” effect. Where the phantoms are the incarnations of the narrator’s repressed self, Laura’s signature in the washroom surprisingly survives her physical death.

<sup>7</sup> Although I contend that writing constructs subjectivity, it matters whether the writing is made public or not. Women like Atwood and Cixous have audiences to read their writing; therefore, they are “recognized.” However, there are other women, and a lot of them, writing in secret. Even though they may be as talented as Emily Dickinson, dormant volcanoes are easily mistaken for dead ones if they are not seen to utter.

While authorship is related to the emergence of female subjectivity, the way how a woman is represented in a book is as important. When I say, “I was written, therefore I am,” I mean that women should be written into a text in order to form their subjectivity and transcend their physical death. However, not all women gain their subjectivity when they are “put into a text.” For instance, Bertha Mason is actually “sentenced” to death in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. Demonized as “a madwoman in the attic,” she does not have any chance to speak. It is not until Jean Rhys writes *Wide Sargasso Sea* that she achieves a subjectivity that rises from the ruins of Brontë’s ghostly Thornfield and her misrepresentation of Third World women under the influence of British imperialism.

In liberating language from male restrictions, Atwood also keeps reminding her readers of the potential subversion of domesticity. As the sewing scissors Laura uses to cut her disagreeable passages from the Bible, the household recipes Adelia passes down to Reenie, and the inscriptions on the wall of the women’s washroom all hint at a female community, Atwood’s comparison of Callie Fitzsimmons’s taupe jersey dress to an ice pick also manifests the “silent” but “sharp” attributes of female power (185). As Iris describes it, Callie’s “mole” dress “implied that such things were beneath notice—but rather of something easy to overlook but sharp, like a common kitchen implement—an ice pick, say—just before the murder. As a dress, it was a raised fist, but in a silent crowd” (185). Surprisingly, no sooner does Iris associate Callie’s plain dress to ordinary cooking utensils—“just before the murder”—than the homely ice pick becomes as shocking as a bloody dagger, and the warm mother’s kitchen suddenly turns to an icy slaughterhouse for killers. In this sense, as domesticity assigns women the job of cooking for their family, their skillful utilization of knives and forks can be interpreted not merely as a promise of *bon appetit* but also as training for a professional assassin. Beneath the obedience of gender codes lies the most perverse act of homicide; underneath the devotion to housewifery hides the commitment of butchery.

negotiate with it. Significantly, though Laura's anorexia and Iris's obsessive shower attest to the liaison between bodily boundary and autonomy, the former estranges the self from the other while the latter only restores subjectivity after it is transgressed. Neither way can really help the subjects get over the conflict between self and other. Actually, since there *is* always an irresolvable tension between self and other, opposition can only aggravate or reverse this master-slave confrontation. When Laura and Iris succeed in claiming their subjectivity by means of anorexia or/and morning showers, they still have to live with such "dis-eases" in the wake of the crisis of their bodily autonomy. However, female writing tackles this self/other dialectic in a different way. In addition to opposition, it further initiates a negotiation, working toward a possible coexistence. Indeed, when Iris claims that she and Laura collaborate on the romance *The Blind Assassin*, she not only salvages Laura from the most abject space— death—and brings her into a female community, but also begins a communion with her as the other. Although we do not see the ultimate reconciliation between man and woman in this novel (if there is one), Iris's collaboration with Laura does anticipate a possibility of coexistence between self and other. Moreover, when Iris "sacrifices" herself for her granddaughter Sabrina at the end of the novel, the line between self and other is finally dissolved.<sup>8</sup> Since Iris is always so anxious about her subjectivity, her sacrifice for Sabrina is not an identification that renders the subject void (as Laura tends to feel sorry for the poor) or a suicide enforced by the patriarchal society (as the virgins in the science fiction story are sacrificed to Gods). Instead, it is a negotiation between self and other, a giving in spite of the self/other conflicts.

## I. Consumption and Cannibalism

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<sup>8</sup> Here Iris's "sacrifice" for Sabrina is understood not in terms of "masculine economy," but in terms of "feminine economy." According to Cixous, while the former describes the traditional man who wants to "gain more masculinity: plus-value of virility, authority, power, money, or pleasure, all of which reinforce his phallogocentric narcissism at the same time," the latter is a "gift economy" that involves no profitable return: "she doesn't try to 'recover her expenses.' She is able not to return to herself, never settling down, pouring out, going everywhere to the other" (*Newly Born Woman* 87). When Iris ties up all the papers of her memoir and slides them on top of everything else in the steamer trunk, she does not expect to get "love" or "forgiveness" from her granddaughter; she only hopes that some day Sabrina will come back, unlock the trunk, and listen to her story. As she says, "I leave myself in your hands. [...] By the time you read this last page, that—if anywhere—is the only place I will be" (521). Here Iris, though bestowing a new identity on Sabrina by revealing the secret of her parentage, does not expect to gain anything from her granddaughter (except for a listener). As a giver that does not brood over benefit or interest, Iris finally can negotiate with, or even give herself to, others without fidgeting about the self/other conflicts.



Readers will immediately notice that Laura has a problem with food. In her girlhood, she saves all the “bread men” in her top drawer. Instead of eating them as Iris does, she insists on a mass burial when Reenie threatens to throw them into the garbage can in case of mice (86). During the Depression, she refuses to eat rabbits. Haunted by their resemblance to “skinned babies,” Laura protests: “You’d have to be a cannibal to eat them” (167). She even locks herself up for three days without eating anything because a boy to whom she has served a bowl of soup gets crushed under a train’s wheels (196). Interestingly, while Laura, like “a saint in training” (212), may “fast” for the misery of humankind, she also rejects anything suggestive of cannibalism, inanimate bread included. Unlike ordinary people, who regard eating as a reward for a hard day’s work or as a consolation for haphazard trauma, Laura treats eating as “[a] sort of tedious maintenance routine” (209). Divested of its emotional overtones, eating to Laura is purely physical, biological, and mechanical.

To depict Laura’s dietary problems, Kristeva’s concept of “abjection” and Wilson’s “fairy-tale cannibalism” (“Fairy-Tale Cannibalism” 78) may draw us from a speculation on religious fasting to an investigation of bodily boundaries and the correlation between eating and survivability. As Kristeva says, “[f]ood loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection” (2). When I decline the entry of the food, “I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish *myself*” (3). Kristeva contends that anorexia should be rid of its pathological import, inasmuch as the self emerges at the moment the subject resists the assimilation of food. To proclaim bodily autonomy, “abjection” thus functions as a defense mechanism, drawing a line between self and other. In other words, “[i]t is [...] not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva 4). In a word, Laura’s anorexia, though demarcating the border between self and environment at the cost of satiety, also validates her bodily autonomy in terms of Kristeva’s notion of “abjection.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Besides Kristeva, scholars like James W. Brown and Sau-ling Cynthia Wong also conceive of the mouth as a liminal portal between self and other. As Brown says, “appetite attests to, and even comes to symbolize, the space existing between subject and object, between ‘me’ and the ‘world’” (qtd. in Wong 18). Likewise, Wong notices that “[i]ngestion is the physical act that mediates between self and not-self, native essence and foreign matter, the inside and the outside” (26). As for a thematic reading of eating

However, one question remains: although Laura's anorexia is a declaration of bodily autonomy, it also implies an incongruity between her body and mind. As the body needs nourishment to sustain life but the mind refuses it, Laura has unwittingly become a prey to "societal cannibalism." According to Wilson, Atwood's novels often present readers with twisted "fairy tales involving dismemberment and cannibalism" (*Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics* 82). Although Atwood's main purpose in appropriating these stories is to crack the sugarcoating that pleases people's imagination, belying the fantasy that the prince and princess will live happily ever after, I want to shift the focus from sexual relationships to a societal one. In bedtime stories and nursery rhymes like "Little Red Cap," "The Robber Bridegroom" and "Hansel and Gretel," there are gobbling wolves, ravenous ogres and serpentine witches lurking and waiting to eat children and women alive (Wilson, *Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics* 86-88, 90; "Fairy-Tale Cannibalism" 80-82, 84). Scary as these tales are, their morals have to do with teaching children, girls in particular, not to go out alone, or to use their wits and courage in the face of danger. Nevertheless, the huntsman still righteously cuts open the wolf's stomach to save the little red-cap and her grandmother, the bride recounts her hair-raising dream about the murderous groom's crime, and the cunning Gretel tricks the witch into the boiling cauldron—these brutal images of amputation or cannibalism are actually unsuitable for toddlers. In other words, demanding poetic justice in the extreme, these fairy tales turn foul and indirectly sanction ferocious retribution. Thus, if these stories teach children to wage war for peace, to kill the enemies in order to save themselves from being devoured, Laura's inability to consume the anthropomorphic "bread men" confirms her ineligibility for survival in this cannibalistic society based on "Survival of the Fittest." Unable to kill and unable to eat, Laura puts her own life at peril; she is likely to be devoured before she has the chance to die of hunger herself.

While Laura's anorexia renders her incapable of coping with the treacherous environment, Winifred's "voraciously elegant" eating attests to her competence to thrive in this cannibalistic society. Remarkably, though Winifred "never finish[es] a meal" (233), her ability to consume is unquestionable. At the Avilion dinner party, when she eats the cheese ball, she inserts it into her mouth and pushes her lips outward, "into a sort of funnel" (184). Here the funnel image, while humorously illustrating Winifred's circumspection about the possible oil stain on her lips, caricatures her

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and food in Asian American literature, see Wong 18-76.

ravenous personality as well. If Winifred really cares about her public image, she should firmly restrain herself from consuming the oversize cheese ball. However, she is overcome, in spite of herself, by the desire to eat, and her way of eating turns her into a devouring snake: while she wants to eat “graciously” (184) without a trace on her lip, her swallowing is calculating and purposeful. As Parker speaks of “the female mouth as a locus of potential strength” (358), Winifred’s mouth does epitomize her insatiable desire and her status as a predator. To such a refined consumer at the top of the culinary pyramid, eating is never a matter of stomach capacity but one of table etiquette. The reason Winifred hardly finishes a meal actually has more to do with her ladyship than with her appetite.

In fact, Winifred is so ravenous that even her clothes are tinged with codes of consumption and predation. The first time she shows up at the button factory picnic, she dons “diaphanous orange-tinted muslin like the steam from a watery tomato soup” (175). When she appears at the Avilion dinner party, she is in “a black dress, simply cut but voraciously elegant” (185). Later, when she is at the Arcadian Court, she wears “green alligator shoes” the color of “chlorophyll chewing gum;” a green hat, shaped “like a poisonous cake;” and lipstick, the shade of “dark pinkish orange [like] *shrimp*” (230-31). Metaphorically speaking, the blood-red tomato soup may symbolize Winifred’s sanguine temperament; the alligator and chewing imagery may suggest her rapacious ferocity; the aphrodisiac shrimp may denote her wanton desire; the poison cake may betray her deadly essence lurking beneath the charming appearance. A woman who regards clothes as “skin” and always would like to “wear them to effect” (233), Winifred dresses up not only to protect herself but also to attract, to attack and to devour her prey.<sup>10</sup>

Placing female characters in the food chain of this cannibalistic society, we find that Laura’s anorexia manifests her deficiency in consumption, whereas Winifred’s

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<sup>10</sup> Although Winifred’s clothes denote her rapacious nature, her status as a predator is not so absolute. Comparing her sable dress at the Avilion dinner party with Callie’s taupe jersey, we find an interesting phenomenon: whereas Winifred’s spectacular gown renders her an eye-catcher who draws people’s attention, Callie’s earthy dress allows her to escape people’s notice. Ostensibly, Callie is far less alluring than Winifred because of her plain apparel. However, when we take into consideration the male gaze in this scopophilic society wherein women are objectified into images, while men are bearers of the look (Mulvey 16-19), Winifred’s conspicuous outfit ironically makes her an easy and appetizing target for the devouring eyes of male spectators, whereas Callie’s unsavory “*mole*” dress enables her to avoid such an annoyance. Therefore, in comparison to Callie’s sober attire, Winifred’s loud gown, though proving effective in seducing men, must reduce its wearer from human to food before it ensnares its victims. For an incisive analysis of female images in cinema and a pungent discussion of voyeurism, see Laura Mulvey 14-26.

gorging herself signifies her power of mastery. Iris's eating thus presents us with a tricky case, inasmuch as Iris develops an anorexia similar to Laura's when she marries Richard but later becomes a cannibal, an omnivore, a scavenger even more ravenous than Winifred in her eighties.<sup>11</sup> Significantly, Iris has no difficulty eating in her childhood: she chews the "bread men" to her heart's content, in contrast to Laura's weird benevolence and gladly eats Laura's cake on her own birthday in spite of her mother's recent funeral (86, 142). However, when she knows that she has to be a society bride, marrying Richard for the preservation of her father's button factory, she soon develops a serious case of anorexia. Richard's proposal even makes her feel "as if [her] stomach had vanished" (226). Then, when Richard dies and she becomes an octogenarian hag, Iris surprisingly eats chocolate chip cookies, peanut butter, remnant plums, and everything else—just to stay alive (52, 56, 180). Sometimes she even becomes so gluttonous that she eats or drinks forbidden things, coffee for instance, in spite of the doctor's cautions of heart attack.

To elaborate on Iris's anorexia, we have to decode her dream of hibernation and her fear of wolves. When she recalls her marriage to Richard, Iris has an uncanny nightmare:

The winter was coming, I dreamed, and so I would hibernate. First I would grow fur, then crawl into a cave, then go to sleep. It all seemed normal, as if I'd done it before. Then I remembered, even in the dream, that I'd never been a hairy woman in that way and was now bald as a newt, or at least my legs were; so although they appeared to be attached to my body, these hairy legs couldn't possibly be mine. Also they had no feeling in them. They were the legs of something else, or someone. (222)

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<sup>11</sup> In fact, Iris's anorexia bears more resemblance to Marian's in *The Edible Woman* than to Laura's because her eating problem, like Marian's, is triggered by her coming marriage, articulated by symptoms like stomachache and vomiting, and worked through by her negotiation with patriarchal consumerism. As Jennifer Hobgood observes in her study of Marian's anorexia on the basis of Freud's "decomposition," coupled with Deleuze and Guattari's "deterritorialization," Marian's difficulty with food should be valorized as "her body announc[ing] its refusal to participate in consumerism" instead of simply an alienation of/between body and mind (148, 155). Significantly, when she later comes up with a substitute cake and forces Peter to confess his "devouring" scheme, she has begun her negotiation with consumer capitalism. Although this conversation means Marian's reenlistment in the capitalist system, she does not return without any change: by seeing the cake "as a fetish invested [...] with a sort of magical power of renewal" (160), Marian has uncovered the contradiction in this apparatus. Indeed, to survive the subject should consume without any misgivings. In this case, compared to Laura's abiding fidgeting about food, Iris's convalescence from anorexia bespeaks her adaptability in a cannibalistic society. Concerning Marian's evolution in this consumerist society, see Hobgood.

Iris's dream is reminiscent of her sleep-like blindness in marrying Richard, her refusal to eat during this dreaded relationship, and her loss of bodily boundaries in the face of Richard's abominable sexual invasion. On the very night Richard proposes, Iris even feels she is being buried alive by a stretch of icy snow, her body eaten by wolves: "I would be discovered [...] years later by some intrepid team—fallen in my tracks, one arm outflung as if grasping at straws, my features desiccated, my fingers gnawed by wolves" (228). Given Richard's hypocrisy and his lechery, Iris compares her husband to a wolf: a fierce beast with saber teeth to facilitate his voracious appetite, as a businessman for wealth; a territorial creature with an odorous perfume to demarcate his territory in commercial and sexual relationships; a lewd animal who divides women into "apples and pears, according to the shapes of their bottoms" (318), and commits incest with his sister-in-law. In other words, while Iris's dream of hibernation expresses her inner feeling of repulsion toward Richard, her horror of wolves allegorizes her immolation in this marriage. Asked to put on cream and gloves so as to feel "the texture of uncooked bacon fat" (235), Iris feels like a "trussed" turkey "packed away" for Richard's stomach (238).<sup>12</sup> With the wedding day approaching, she gradually loses her appetite for meat and even salad. In fact, since Iris is so anxious about Richard's imminent invasion, she unconsciously appeals to one of the most dramatic and passive declarations of bodily autonomy—anorexia—to accentuate the border between her and him. As she recalls her former state—"I felt bodiless and flaccid and crepey-skinned, like a deflating balloon" (244)—Iris feels that she was losing her body to Richard. Pressed by his canine teeth, she can hardly make a move; at one bite, she will become paralyzed and fall fast asleep.

Since Iris's anorexia results from her desire yet failure to set up a bodily boundary against Richard, she clearly can regain her eating ability when Richard passes away. Surprisingly, Iris even evolves into a carnivorous scavenger, consuming everything that comes her way. When she as an aged woman wakes up in the morning, Iris at once brushes her teeth and wonders about "what bones I'd been gnawing in my sleep" (35).

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<sup>12</sup> According to J. Brooks Bouson, the depictions of Iris as a "trussed" turkey and as an animal in hibernation construct "the painful objectification of women who consent to femininity in a masculinist system in which women are viewed as objects for male consumption and sexual pleasure" (258). Likewise, Parker claims that Atwood "deconstructs the traditional metaphor of woman as food and explores the effects of symbolic cannibalism as a sanctioned cultural system. [...] The presentation of cannibalism as the governing ethos exposes the disturbing underside of a violent relationship between the sexes that is only thinly disguised as civilization" (363).

Interestingly, she occasionally violates the doctor's instructions and partakes of something forbidden like coffee. Sometimes she even leaves her table manners behind and "scoop[s the peanut butter] directly from the jar with a forefinger" (56), taking delight in her furtive transgression. Or she may munch her chocolate-glazed doughnut on a bench "placed handily right beside the garbage bin" (202), making Epicureanism at top priority and ignoring the awful environment. Above all, she even picks up the plums "the squirrels and raccoons and drunken yellow-jackets ha[ve] left [her]—and [eats] them greedily, the juice of their bruised flesh bloodying [her] chin" (180). (Seeing the mess, Mara, "with her breathless avian laugh, [asks] *Who've you been fighting?*") With the coming of Halloween, Iris further imagines herself, like a witch, devouring the kids that come for candy (202). In contrast then to the morbid anorexia of her earlier wifhood, in her widowhood there are either images of scavenging, cannibalism and gothic consumption or transgressions of table etiquette and sanitation. In her eighties, Iris has grown into a big eater, taking in everything at hand not only to survive but also to gratify her gastronomical flings.<sup>13</sup>

Wong's observations on Asian American food consumption may help to clarify Iris's eating behavior. Reading food thematically in Asian American literature, Wong contends that the immigrants' omnivorousness expresses their power to turn waste to repast: "What unites the immigrants [...] is an ability to eat unpromising substances and to extract substance, even a sort of willed enjoyment, from them; to put it symbolically, it is the ability to cope with the constraints and persecutions Asian Americans have had to endure as immigrants and racial minorities" (25). Although Iris is not considered racially marginalized, the sexual abuse with which she is afflicted puts her in a situation similar to those "aliens from the other shore." To such social minorities, racial and sexual in this context, eating what people regard as unpalatable, unsavory, or in a word inedible means the power not only to revivify residue but also to proclaim the group's autonomy. By devouring the unlikely food, such people implicitly prove that they are more valiant than their dominators and oppressors, and thus more qualified to live in this cannibalistic society. So, when the octogenarian Iris dares to eat berries left by animals or to drink coffee in spite of the doctor's cautions, she is declaring herself a tough consumer. To answer Maya's question, "Who've you been fighting?," apparently

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<sup>13</sup> "Gastronaut," a compound word made of the prefix "gastr-" (stomach) and the Greek noun "naut-" (ship, traveler), describes those who would eat unusual dainties like the Japanese fungus at the risk of their lives. In Iris's case, she is a gastronaut because she would rather put her life in danger than refrain from drinking coffee.

it is the patriarchal “consumerism”—which designates Iris as food, a human sacrifice for men such as her father Norval, her husband Richard, and even her lover Alex—that she is in battle with.

While the female characters in Iris’s memoir illustrate the power configuration of food, bodily autonomy, and societal/patriarchal cannibalism, those in Alex’s science fiction stories represent not only male fantasy but also female stereotypes through culinary metaphors or images. At first glance, the dead virgins in the remote mountains of Sakiel-Norn and the peach women of the planet Aa’A are polarized as images of “*femme fatale*” and “angel in the house.” As Alex depicts them, the dead virgins on the planet Zycron are “beautiful nude dead women with azure hair, curvaceous figures, ruby-red lips and eyes like snake-filled pits” (115). Betrayed in love, they prey upon young men to “suck out their essence, and turn them into obedient zombies, bound to satisfy [their] unnatural cravings on demand” (116). On the other hand, the peach women on Planet Aa’A are virgins with “succulent golden pink” skin and an “undulating” gait (353). Possessing the power to read minds, they are sophisticated in art, literature, philosophy, and theology. Ostensibly, the dead virgins are sinister while the peach women are angelic. However, upon closer scrutiny, these two species of women are both twisted projections of male fantasy. As Bouson comments, both the demonized “wolf women” or the idealized “peach women” invoke classic sexist stereotypes: while the former are gluttonous for men, the latter realize men’s “most outrageous fantasies”—“They [are] completely shameless, or without shame, whichever.”<sup>14</sup> If we simply rejoice at the peach women because they satisfy men’s rape fantasy and worship male “stamina” (251) but chafe at the wolf women because they turn men into senseless zombies, we have distorted a biological fact and made it into an ideological fiction, turning the sexual relationship between male and female into a power relationship between predator and prey. In this sense, when the “imagination” of female characters becomes “a power trip rather than a sexual one” (Atwood, “Pornography” 440), pornography in science fiction is no longer for pure thrills or sheer entertainment. Underneath, misogyny is prowling.

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<sup>14</sup> In analyzing Alex, Bouson indicates that while he want[s] to write fiction to help bring down the corrupt class system, [...] he also invokes classic sexist stereotypes in his depiction of the women characters he refers to as B, which stands, variously, for Beyond Belief, or Bird Brain, or Big Boobs, or Beautiful Blonde; or the Peach Women of the planet Aa’A, whose sole function is to satisfy the sexual fantasies of the earth men marooned on their planet; or the dead women with lithe, curvaceous figures and ruby-red lips who prey on men; or the sacrificial veiled virgins of Zycron who are passively sacrificed by men. (262)

## II. Menstruation and Consummation

When I said that Laura was endowed with bodily autonomy *via* her anorexia, it was only half the story. Taking into account her disregard for personal hygiene, her excessive identification with the wretched vagabonds and invalids, and her loose sense of ownership, we find that Laura actually has problems in managing her bodily boundary. The reason why Iris can “grow out of” her anorexia but Laura cannot is that the former is flexible about her bodily boundary, while the latter either sticks to the boundary or totally forsakes it. In other words, whereas Iris can resort to anorexia and showers to reclaim her bodily autonomy in the face of Richard’s intrusion, yet also enjoy her communion with Alex by *temporarily* erasing the line, Laura does not benefit from her fumbles with this boundary. Lamentably, it either makes her refuse food at the expense of her life or persuades her to sacrifice herself for those in need. As Iris says, “Laura touches people. I do not” (192). The biggest difference between the two sisters is that between flexibility and fixity: while Laura, driven by her “tendency towards absolutism” (288), fails to control her protective boundary, Iris, aware of the lurking dangers, knows when to keep aloof from people and when to get close—*at a distance*.

Laura’s feebleness in manipulating her self-boundary is manifested most clearly in her attitude toward personal hygiene and in her being “skinless” (73). When she drops out of school and joins Winifred’s volunteer organization called The Abigails in the hospital, Laura surprisingly feels at ease with the dirty bedpans, gross vomit, sweat and other forms of filth. Unlike other egoistic Abigails, who are “girls of good family” and thus loathe the smell of the patients, Laura “gravitate[s] to the poverty wards,” even though there are “derelicts, old women with dementia, impecunious veterans down on their luck, noseless men with tertiary syphilis and the like” (421). From this perspective, Laura is so “selfless” that she would tear away her defensive surface just to help those in need. Working in the hospital, she does not even think about the putrid, infectious environment she has put herself in. Compared with the anorexic Laura, this “selfless” Laura is so ready to embrace the crowd that she disarms herself, removing



her protective “skin” with few misgivings.<sup>15</sup>

As her experience of being an Abigail indicates, Laura can be so lax about personal hygiene because she is “skinless.” Curiously, though she may cry for a dead crow, a smashed cat, a dark cloud or maimed veterans, she has “an uncanny resistance to physical pain” herself (85). Besides, while other people manage to conceal their “odd, skewed element” (89), she exposes it, making herself vulnerable to people’s malice. In fact, Laura’s “uncanny resistance to physical pain” does not derive from her superhuman tolerance of affliction but from her void self; her reckless “exposure” of herself should not be attributed to her dauntless self-confidence but to her selfless subjectivity. Thus, as a person without boundaries tends to identify herself with others and becomes unfeeling toward herself, Laura is still susceptible to the dangers out there.<sup>16</sup> Deprived of gloves or other protective devices, she is liable to get hurt whenever there is ill will.

If being skinless/selfless propels her to have no qualms about squalor in the hospital and about her identification with others, Laura’s problems of bodily boundaries can be further expounded in terms of ownership. As Iris grumbles, Laura “[has] only the haziest notions of ownership” (83). Throughout the novel, she either borrows Iris’s fountain pen without asking (42), pushes back her cuticles with Iris’s orange stick without permission (424), or uses Iris’s hairbrush with few misgivings about sanitation (425). She even exchanges Elwood Murray’s hand-tinting materials for Reenie’s jam and steals his photograph taken at the button factory picnic on the sly (194-95). Judging from such mischief, it seems Laura is a willful adolescent. However, while one may be prone to charge her with having a bossy temperament or psycho-

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<sup>15</sup> In Atwood’s novel, she insists on a difference between being “selfless” and being “skinless.” Take Iris’s mother for example. She is “selfless” because she would take care of the maimed soldiers at the expense of her own health. As Iris says in her memoir, “[n]obody is born with that kind of selflessness: it can be acquired only by the most relentless discipline, a crushing-out of natural inclination. [...] As for Laura, she was not selfless, not at all. Instead she was skinless, which is a different thing” (73). Although here being “selfless” describes a nobler deed than being “skinless”—inasmuch as the former talks about the self-sacrifice for the nation, the altruistic devotion to the well-being of others, while the latter is limited to the susceptibility to people’s suffering—I tend to read Laura’s “skinless” disposition as a less serious case of “selflessness.” In other words, Laura’s being “skinless” implies a void subject, a subject who is so inclined to identify herself with others that she is “selfless” to a degree.

<sup>16</sup> When I say that Laura is a person without boundaries, I do not really mean that she has no bodily boundary at all. In fact, while Laura’s anorexia confirms her bodily boundary, her disregard of personal hygiene, her habitual identification with others, and her faint idea of ownership all indicate that her bodily boundary is porous, unguarded, and dysfunctional. In the same vein, when I say that Laura’s self is “void” or her subjectivity is “selfless,” it applies only to her problems of personal hygiene, identification, and ownership, not to her anorexia.

pathic fetishes, I will contend that the idea of ownership is foreign to her. That is, the reason why Laura does not scruple to take or remove other people's objects is not that she is possessive about or covetous of their belongings, but that she is so inclined to identify herself with others that she becomes unaware of the line between herself and others. As we know that Laura's supple identification with others derives from her unguarded bodily boundary, her weak idea of ownership here reflects the same problem.

If Laura neglects ownership, Iris is extremely meticulous about it. Entering Alex's hiding abode, she immediately averts her eyes when she sees "[h]is toothbrush in an enamelled tin cup," not because it is dirty but because it is too "intimate" (110). Moreover, "[s]he never manages to overcome her sense of transgression in [others'] rooms—the feeling that she's violating the private boundaries of whoever ordinarily lives in them. She'd like to go through the closets, the bureau drawers—not to take, only to look; to see how other people live" (253). Even though Iris would like to "unshield" her body while with Alex, she hardly feels at ease infringing upon others' territory or prying into others' lives. Hence, while intimacy in Laura's case implies a volatile subjectivity, it suggests friction, bruises, and injury in Iris's. Aware of the fine line between pleasure and pressure and alert to the dangers lurking behind intimacy, Iris is circumspect about ownership and its connotation of bodily boundaries because she knows clearly that when she devotes herself to others, to men especially, she also exposes herself to the hazards of crashes and burns.

Since Iris is so conscious of the border between self and other, her obsession with showers after her marriage to Richard is understandable. However, before depicting her apprehension regarding cleanliness, we may briefly digress to her first experience of menstruation—an incident that mistakenly portrays the female body as grubby and grotesque—in order to trace her anxiety about sordidness. When Iris has her first period, she thinks that she has "developed a horrible disease, because blood [is] seeping out from between [her] legs" (159). Meanwhile, though Reenie removes its pathological connotation, she refers to the menstrual blood as a "mess," a "curse" that "[is] yet one more peculiar arrangement of God's, devised to make life disagreeable" (159). Thus, for both adolescents and adults, menstrual blood is yoked to such abhorrent things as diseases or disasters instead of to its actual biological significance: fertility. As Kristeva observes, "[m]enstrual blood [...] stands for the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in

the face of sexual difference” (71). When Iris correlates menstrual blood with ailments within or scourges from above, she further internalizes these images of filth or excretion because the blood comes from her own body. Misconstruing menstruation as a feminine malady and her body as the source of contamination, Iris is thus keen on purification.

Iris then becomes obsessed with cleanliness after her marriage to Richard because the latter keeps reminding her of her filthiness, physically and verbally. On the very night of their consummation, Iris initiates her “rite of passage” with blood and bruises. Cleaning herself with a washcloth, she “wonder[s] what should be done with this: the red on it was so visible, as if [she’s] had a nosebleed” (241). Indeed, when blood seeps out from between her legs after intercourse in the same way that menstrual blood does, Iris intuitively believes copulation to be dirty. To become again immaculate, she is thus compelled to wash herself. Then during the honeymoon tour around Europe, after Richard explains to her the utility of the bidets, Iris begins to admire the French for their recognition of bodily anxiety (303). Antagonistic to Richard’s sexual abuse, Iris now is desperate for a “bidet” to help her get rid of Richard’s marks on her body. At the end of the trip, she even learns to relieve her marital “unease,” or perhaps “disease,” by taking frequent baths: “I memorized the cities through their hotels, the hotels through their bathrooms. Dressing, undressing, lying in the water. But enough of these travel notes” (305). However, while Iris has learned to clean herself of her husband’s bodily inscriptions—bruises and smells—by taking showers, Richard does not mitigate his invasion. Instead, he warns her not to leave her hair on the bathroom floor “[l]ike shedding animals” (318). In fact, Iris really resembles a shedding animal in a sense; in the face of Richard’s sexual and verbal violence, she has been excoriated to the extent of becoming “skinless.” (We note that while Laura is “skinless” because she renounces her bodily boundary, Iris becomes “skinless” because Richard keeps “rubbing her the wrong way.”) Indeed, Richard’s assault is so devastating that Iris, even in her eighties, still has to “get the smell of nocturnal darkness off the skin” by taking morning showers before she really feels “restored.” Haunted by the residuum of Richard’s nauseating perfume on her, Iris even suspects that she smells like “a stink of stale flesh and clouded, aging pee” (35). Not surprisingly, from Iris’s wifehood to her widowhood, she has always tried to maintain a line between herself and Richard. Since she cannot resist Richard’s sexual aggressions, she has to express or sublimate her repressed anxieties in the repeated “rituals” of washing, thus recouping her bodily autonomy in a(n) (over)compensative way.

In comparison with Laura's slight regard for her self-boundary, Iris's obsession with cleanliness, though producing symptoms like morning showers, does prevent her from being contaminated by others. In fact, ever since Iris was an adolescent, Miss Violet Goreham's and Mr. Erskine's tutoring have instilled in her such survivalist notions as sanitation and duplicity, which help to build the boundary against others' predatory aggressions. As Iris describes it, despite Miss Violet's "lumpy and inelegant" attitude toward academic education, "she had high standards of delicacy and a long list of things she wanted us [Iris and Laura] to *pretend* to be: flowering trees, butterflies, the gentle breezes. Anything but little girls with dirty knees and their fingers up their noses; about matters of *personal hygiene* she was fastidious" (155; emphasis mine). For Miss Violet education is all about pretense and cleanliness; it is a matter of performance and (en)acting, not one of intelligence or logic. On the other hand, though Mr. Erskine is harsh in his practice of classical education, his "cutting irony [,] nasty temper, and [...] smell like the bottom of a damp laundry hamper" are all intolerable to the Chase sisters (161). What's worse, underneath his pedantic façade, he is a misogynist: he enjoys scolding Iris, abusing Laura, and reading stories "from Virgil's *Aeneid* [...] or from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the parts where unpleasant things were done by gods to various young women" (163). Nevertheless, thanks to Miss Violet's earlier "feminine" education, Iris absorbs from Mr. Erskine something beyond his arrogance and misogyny: "In addition to lying and cheating, I'd learned half-concealed insolence and silent resistance. I'd learned that revenge is a dish best eaten cold. I'd learned not to get caught" (167). In this case, though duplicity is a moral flaw in the light of religious doctrines, it is a saving grace to a woman vulnerable to patriarchal cannibalism.

### III. Writing and Righting

In the previous sections, I have highlighted the differences between Iris and Laura regarding their eating and cleaning habits under the rubric of bodily boundaries. Remarkably, even though they both appeal to anorexia to declare their bodily autonomy, their reasons are quite different: while Laura's refusal of food results from her *fear of consuming* the rabbits and bread men, Iris's dietary problem results from her *fear of being consumed* by Richard. In this sense, since Laura dreads consuming,

rather than being consumed, she can easily identify herself with others, and thus be careless about personal hygiene, ownership, and other codes suggestive of bodily boundaries *unless she is asked to eat others*. On the other hand, since Iris dreads being devoured, she thus becomes constantly aware of the fine line between herself and the environment. She never gets too close to others, people and food included. Even though she later realizes that she can challenge patriarchal cannibalism by becoming a “tough eater,” who, regardless of personal hygiene, eats up everything in order to survive and fulfill her gastronomic flings, her apprehension about her bodily boundary is still seen in her obsession with daily showers.<sup>17</sup>

Based on the foregoing discussion of eating and cleaning, it seems that women have always been assigned the role of victims either in terms of societal cannibalism (Laura) or in terms of patriarchal cannibalism (Iris). Even though occasionally there are female predators like Winifred, they often become the accomplices of patriarchy. However, when we turn from the “trivia” of eating and cleaning to an investigation of female writing(s) in this novel, we find that Adelia’s scrapbooks and cookbook, Reenie’s inheritance of Adelia’s cookbook, Laura’s notebooks, Iris’s memoir, and the hypertextual inscriptions on the wall of a women’s washroom serve to form a female community, where the subjects do not simply negatively define/defend/detach their self against/from the symbolic Other but positively facilitate coexistence with this Other through writing. No longer a tomb-like “trunk” where women are inscribed, stored and locked away, this female community is a womb-like “Avilion” wherein the symbolic order is rectified and dead women come to life.<sup>18</sup> Before I discuss how female

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<sup>17</sup> While some readers may find Iris’s fastidiousness about morning showers inconsistent with her disregard of personal hygiene when she munches on a chocolate doughnut right beside the garbage bin, I will claim that Iris has learned to allow her desire to come into play. Unlike the repressed, youthful Iris, who develops anorexia and becomes obsessed with cleanliness in order to reclaim her bodily autonomy in the face of Richard’s violations, the octogenarian Iris can enjoy eating because she realizes that she has to be a “tough eater” in order to survive in this cannibalistic society. An active consumer, Iris now can eat to her heart’s content. On the other hand, her daily shower is explained as a symptom of Richard’s traumatic invasions of her body, a less radical manifesto of her bodily boundary to replace her dramatic anorexia.

<sup>18</sup> Analyzing the trunk imagery in *The Blind Assassin*, Wilson contends that the trunk, “suggesting the subconscious,” hides Laura’s notebooks, “the doors to the forbidden knowledge of the Bluebeard fairy tale” (“Popular Culture” 271). Although I agree with Wilson on the psychological level of this trunk imagery, I also treat it as a coffin that locks women away in this phallogocentric society. Then, while the trunk keeps women in the dark, the Avilion imagery is much more complicated, inasmuch as it alludes both to the mythic isle where King Arthur is said to die after he receives a mortal wound, and to Adelia’s mansion, which “signifies how hopelessly in exile [Adelia] considered herself to be” (61). However, even though Avilion is depicted as a burial ground in the Arthurian legend, it is also a place for Arthur to revive. As “The Passing of Arthur” implies both death (passing away) and resurrection

writings in this novel shape a female community, how they rectify the symbolic order and resurrect the dead, allow me to briefly touch on Cixous's idea(l) of *écriture féminine* and Gilman's earlier materialization of such *écriture* in "The Yellow Wallpaper" in order to establish a theoretical ground for my reading of these female writings.

In her political manifesto "The Laugh of the Medusa" Cixous, though resisting a theorization of *écriture féminine*, sketches its two senses.<sup>19</sup> First, *écriture féminine* is a way to redeem the female body from phallogocratic ideology insofar as "[b]y writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display" (250). Second, *écriture féminine* is an urge to voice differences, "[a]n act that will [...] be marked by woman's *seizing* the occasion to *speak*, hence her shattering entry into history, which has always been based on *her suppression*" (250). In other words, whereas people traditionally believe that writing is something done exclusively by men, to men, and about men, Cixous proclaims that *écriture féminine* is bisexual. Highlighting the relationship of coexistence between a pregnant woman and her unborn baby, she claims that *écriture féminine* is needed to achieve harmony between self and m/other, achieve a recognition of each other and an acknowledgement of differences (254, 262).

Promising as it sounds, *écriture féminine* yet challenges a way of thinking whose history is as long as that of human languages. In tackling phallogocentrism, Cixous protests that *écriture féminine* will enact "a return of the repressed": "When the 'repressed' of [femininity] returns, it's an explosive, *utterly* destructive, staggering return, with a force never yet unleashed and equal to the most forbidding of suppressions" (256). Indeed, like the monstrous apparitions in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," *écriture féminine* may metamorphose from sheer "optic horror" (1137) into utter psychic disorientation when the overbearing patriarchy fails to contain it. As Gilman's narrator witnesses the "real" specters emerging from behind the screen-like wallpaper, the truth underneath the wall of patriarchy is indeed unbearably dizzy, spooky, harsh to the eye/I:

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(passing on, passing through), Adelia's exile in Avilion can also be seen as a chance to found a "female" utopia. In this sense, Avilion is more like a womb to nourish civilization than a tomb to bury one. For a closer exposition of Laura's notebooks, see Wilson, "Margaret Atwood and Popular Culture," esp. 271-72.

<sup>19</sup> According to Cixous, "[i]t is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded—which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist" (253).

The front pattern *does* move—and no wonder! The woman behind shakes it!

Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one, and she crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes it all over.

Then in the very bright spots she keeps still, and in the very shady spots she just takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard.

And she is all the time trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through that pattern—it strangles so; I think that is why it has so many heads.

They get through, and then the pattern strangles them off and turns them upside down, and makes their eyes white! (1141-42)

What accounts for the uncanny sight/site here? The pattern with a woman of multiple heads, the narrator's ravings, or/and the returned gaze of the phantoms? All of these. The "woman-pattern" with multiple heads takes after Medusa with a legion of animate snakes twitching on her head, thus provoking our sense of the uncanniness regarding the abstract designs on the wallpaper and men's castration anxiety about phallic snakes. The narrator's hallucinations petrify her readers when she expresses her own sense of identification with these barred specters. Claiming that she used to be one of them, she distorts the line between fact and fiction. The vertiginous returned gaze of the apparitions is perhaps a materialization of the Lacanian *objet petit a*, which "stands for what in the perceived positive, empirical object necessarily eludes my gaze and as such serves as the driving force of my desiring it" (Žižek, "I Hear You" 105). That is, the returned gaze, a "surplus" that exceeds the optics of the symbolic order, now exposes us to the scotoma we are not supposed to see, the "real" truth that stings our eye/I. If we read Gilman's wall/paper as a locus for Cixous's *écriture féminine* apropos of the uncanny effect they both arouse, what the narrator sees on the wall and what she writes on the pages of her journal/story can be seen as *écriture féminine*. In this sense, the emergence of the apparitions, like that of *écriture féminine*, designates the inerasable existence of the other, an irreducible residue indicative of the symbolic scotoma. When we are able to recognize the formerly invisible other (Gilman's and her narrator's non-linear writing, the "real" phantoms, *écriture féminine*), we may understand why phallogocentrism cannot wholly contain women, why logocentrism cannot fully

capture women's writing. Powerful as the symbolic snare may be, there are always leftovers that escape the meshes; there are always some female writings, in private or in public, that surpass the ensemble of the symbolic order.

Apparently Iris's grandmother Adelia is an "angel in the house" who obeys the austere Victorian decorum, nourishes her husband with fine art, and takes good care of every trifle in the household. Her domestic compliance with the symbolic order seems beyond question. However, when we ply into her culinary idiosyncrasies—her sly eating in the bedroom, her odd scrapbooks, her quaint cookbook—she actually possesses a witchlike personality underneath her angelic façade. Interestingly, even though Iris never literally meets her grandmother, she believes that Adelia, while avoiding being seen devouring food in public, must have a tray sent up to her room where she eats it with ten fingers (61). Here, in contrast to the civil image of a serene hostess, Adelia is depicted as a grabbing savage in Iris's imagination. In fact, Iris's whimsical romanticization of her grandmother is not groundless because Adelia's bizarre scrapbooks and her incantatory cookbook betray her queer inner self to the readers. On the one hand, the scrapbooks are a contradictory combination of earthly glories and cryptic mysteries. Among her motley clippings, there are "natives practis[ing] witchcraft or hid[ing] their women behind elaborate wooden masks or decorat[ing] the skulls of their ancestors with red paint and cowrie shells" (158), all of which violate the rational, sensible, monotheistic society of Port Ticonderoga. On the other, Adelia's cookbook looks more like an encyclopedia of shamanism than a collection of recipes. Instead of describing "[t]aste and pleasure" (181), it expatiates on the functions of beverages. An *outré* amalgam of science and witchcraft, medication and domesticity, this cookbook even begins with an esoteric epigraph by John Ruskin: "Cookery means the knowledge of Media and of Circe and of Helen and of the Queen of Sheba. [...] It means that you are to be perfectly and always ladies—loaf givers" (181).<sup>20</sup> While readers of this epigraph may stare bewilderingly at the odd connection

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<sup>20</sup> While I focus on the grotesque combinations of Adelia's cookbook, Anne LeCory, in her study of the history of cookbooks, indicates that humanity is "attenuated" in modern cookbooks. As LeCory argues:

When cookery turned from art to "science" of nutrition, exact measurement, home ec [*sic*] principles and second-rate imitators of Fannie Farmer, the broader study of the relation between food and humanity disappeared from view. Efficiency, speed, cost, precooked foods, replaced (for many) loving preparation of food, concern for taste, understanding that a plain, simple menu was appropriate for guests as well as family. (23)

Although LeCory's observation is correct about the scientific side of Adelia's cookbook, this collection of recipes distinguishes itself from other modern cookbooks by its quaint epigraph. That is, while the contents of Adelia's cookbook are rational, scientific, and careless about tastes, its epigraph is romantic,



between those mythological *femmes fatales* and the commonplace chores of cooking, the “loaf-giver” with whom Adelia identifies is actually “possessed of arcane and potentially lethal recipes, and capable of inspiring the most incendiary passions in men” (182-83). Remarkably, this “loaf giver” image is at once reassuring and disturbing—reassuring because one is provided with food by a caring and virtuous “angel in the house,” disturbing because the food, brought by a witch, can be fatal. In this sense Adelia, with her “cat-ate-the-canary smile,” is actually “the Queen of Sheba” (182). A generous lady in appearance, she is a domineering tsarina at heart.

If Adelia’s occult scrapbooks and enigmatic cookbook implicitly denote her incommensurability with the symbolic order, her naming of everything in and out of her mansion Avilion explicitly transgresses a privilege usually exclusive to men.<sup>21</sup> When Adelia becomes a name-giver, taking charge of the decorations like the yacht Water Nixie, the stone sphinxes by the pond, the faun in the conservatory, the white Victorian angels in the family cemetery, and the marble sculpture of Medusa in the library, this mansion recalls Greco-Roman, Arthurian or Christian mythology. Though a powerless society bride in reality, Adelia now becomes a sovereign who commands deities in her imagination. Reading the angels and the Medusa in contraposition, we find that the eyes of the former “are blurred now, softened and porous, as if they have cataracts” (45), whereas from those of the latter still darts “a lovely impervious gaze, the snakes writhing up out of her head like anguished thoughts” (58). If the angel is the social side of Adelia—tender, self-effacing, prone to blindness—the Medusa must be the visceral side of her: cool, petrifying, blazing with power. Remarkably, while her angelic appearance provides Adelia a mask behind which she can masquerade in the symbolic order, the mythic image of Medusa, together with the Queen of Sheba, is her essence as a name-giver and loaf-giver, *a giver that does not lack*, a giver that is so fecund that she would like to distribute her “gracious largesse” (182).<sup>22</sup>

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mythological, and thus contradictory to the contents. Concerning the correlation between literature and cooking, see LeCory.

<sup>21</sup> According to Mary Daly, “women have had the power of *naming* stolen from us. We have not been free to use our own power to name ourselves, the world, or God. The old naming was not the product of dialogue—a fact inadvertently admitted in the Genesis story of Adam’s naming the animals and the woman. Women are now realizing that the universal imposing of names by men has been false because partial” (8). Concerning a discussion of women’s oppression in theology and a critique of logocentrism, see Daly.

<sup>22</sup> Here my interpretation of the “giver” image alludes to Cixous’s concept of giving in “The Laugh of the Medusa.” According to Cixous, “woman couldn’t care less about the fear of decapitation (or castration), adventuring, without the masculine temerity, into anonymity, which she can merge with, without annihilating herself: because she’s a giver” (259). In other words, reversing the Lacanian

Decoding Adelia's cookbook, we know that this woman can be the matriarchal *queen regnant* who designs gastronomic courses to counter the patriarchal discourse. When she passes her cookbook down to her heiress Reenie, the latter even turns the kitchen from a domestic space of host and guest to an ideological "arena" of big eaters and non-eaters. At the Avilion party, as Reenie presents dishes learned from Adelia's cookbook, everyone at the table chews "with such thoughtfulness and vigour [that m]astication [is] the right name for it—not eating" (186). Although, or rather because, Reenie is not a good cook, she "[keeps] tabs on who ha[s] eaten what" (187). Unnoticeable as this act may be, a significant split has taken place at this moment: unlike those conventional housewives, whose greatest wish is to please their guests' palate, Reenie's surveillance of the eaters at the party transforms cooking from a simple art of spicing and tasting to a military arena of spying and testing. When people have to "masticate" in order to swallow Reenie's dishes, they are literally "put to the trial" of consumption. Instead of enjoying the taste of food, they now have to conquer its rough texture before they can actually consume it. Meanwhile, Reenie is doing surveillance, recording, comparing, and calculating her guests' masticatory progress like a sort of tyrannical nurse or prison warden. In this sense, Reenie's unsavory courses thus present a hilarious counter-image to the Griffens' brutal social cannibalism. While Richard and Winifred later devour the button factory of Iris's father, they now have a problem eating Reenie's tough chicken. As Reenie is good at fabrication—she accuses Mr. Erskine of hiding pornography under his bed (165), invents a slur against Richard regarding his family history (175), and makes a story about Alex's orphanage (187)—her appropriation of Adelia's cookbook allows her to create new dishes of her own.

Now that Reenie's surveillance has shifted our attention from the contents of the cookbook to the ingenuity of appropriation, we may leave the kitchen and enter the women's washroom in the doughnut shop, another place exclusive to females. This washroom is a playground where eating, cleaning and writing congregate. Reminiscent of Iris's doughnut-eating by the trash can and her obsession with cleanliness, this place, with its myriad of inscriptions on the wall, is elevated from an abject site for excrement to the headquarters of "female community." However, before elaborating the female writings on the wall, we should take note of the spatial differences between this place and the household kitchen. Since the washroom is a private cubicle within a

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"conceptual orthopedics" (253) which constructs women as lack, Cixous protests that women are not castrated; nor do they have penis envy. They are givers that have, not holes that lack.

public space, it is in a sense an exceptional club, whose membership is limited to “the second sex” taken abstractly, that is, to women unknown to each other. As a place exclusive to one female at a time but open to all at any time, this “room of her own” becomes, like (but differently from) the kitchen, a domestic space for women. Whereas the kitchen is open to a limited number of women, the women’s washroom is open to half of the whole human population of the area. An extension of the kitchen regarding female space, and a “sortie” or “way out of” (Cixous, *Newly Born Woman* 63) the kitchen-as-a-patriarchal-cage, this bathroom serves as a juncture in the network of female communication. Because Port Ticonderoga is a tourist city near the Canada-U.S. border, this washroom may even take on a certain trans-national or “global” dimension.

The difference between the household kitchen and the women’s washroom then is that between private and public space. In addition to spatiality, these two places are distinguished by their receptive modes of communication. While the female gossip in the kitchen may fade away without a trace, the inscriptions on the bathroom wall confer on women a more durable medium of communication: written words. Since in most cases writing outlives voices, and the ideological ambit of these bathroom cubicles is in effect global, the texts and commentaries on the wall are akin to hyper-text(s) on the internet. Intriguingly, as most of the units in this novel’s “Table of Contents” are named after curious odds and ends that suggest specific episodes, the hypertextual connection between the graffiti in the women’s washroom and the themes of this novel likewise depends on the mechanism of association.<sup>23</sup> However, while there are arguments between adherents of societal/patriarchal cannibalism and its

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<sup>23</sup> Readers may easily notice that the plots of *The Blind Assassin* develop in a non-linear manner. As the novel itself is nested with stories in three genres, these fragmentary storylines are further chopped into finer shreds by the intervening newspaper clippings. However, while readers may get lost in Atwood’s labyrinth of words, trapped within the belly of her “baggy monster” when they are forced to ply different roads of storytelling, Atwood provides her readers with a table of contents—not to help them march smoothly along the reading route, but to help them jump abruptly among various reading passages. In other words, the items in the table of contents are more like internet hypertexts that fling their readers into different units of stories than like overpass signs that direct them along a single plot line. Even though these units somehow connect to one another in the long run, most of them may as well be read as individual stories. Thus, while it is the readers’ duty to remap the shuffled patches of stories into a family saga with a chronological order when they read this novel from cover to cover for the first time, Atwood’s table of contents, though of little help to readers on their first reading, leads them directly to the units of stories they want on their later readings. Constructed by the mechanism of association rather than the order of chronology, the table of contents in *The Blind Assassin* thus bears a resemblance to hypertexts, texts that allow their readers to move among related items in a non-sequential way.

cynical critics beneath the surface wordplays, a total deciphering of these female scribblings would take a lengthy textual study. Since my focus here is on eating and writing, I shall have a look merely at the first set of inscriptions, inasmuch as they talk about eating and killing.<sup>24</sup> Before my reading of these inscriptions, we should note that the female writings here, though (im)printed on an abject space, are not as surreptitious as Adelia's or Reenie's writings. Instead, they are inscribed in order to be seen; they have other women as their targeted readers. Hence, be they interdictions, aphorisms, warnings, gospels or tirades, these inscriptions display the *different* ways of female thinking (though most of them are nevertheless invested with concepts of phallogocentrism), and the "conversations" among them thus foretell the possibility of a more totalized or globalized *écriture féminine*, a language of multiplicity and heterogeneity.

The first set of inscriptions is a dialectic or "argument" between eating and killing. Significantly, even though these are female writings—not necessarily *écriture féminine*—most of them still take the form of imperative, a device reminiscent of the Name of the Father, the symbolic order that bombards subjects with taboos and prohibitions. Thus, it is arguable that even though women are allowed to speak now in their small compartment, most of them are so brainwashed by the phallogocentric logic that they "dub" its voice, reinforcing its ideology on other women. However, the last sentence, ventriloquizing in the name of Laura, counters this phallogocentric logic by blaspheming its ultimate monarchs: Gods. Let us read these sentences before I further situate them under the rubric of consumption and cannibalism:

The first sentence is in pencil, in rounded lettering like those on Roman tombs, engraved deeply in the paint: *Don't Eat Anything You Aren't Prepared to Kill.*

Then, in green marker: *Don't Kill Anything You Aren't Prepared to Eat.*

Under that, in ballpoint, *Don't Kill.*

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<sup>24</sup> Even though I plan to center on the first set of female inscriptions, others are also quite meaningful. For example, in the second set, while the inscriptions seem to talk about the functions of mouths in appearance, they actually concern women's right to speech and their autonomy during sexual intercourse. In the third set, the scribblings play on the word "experience" in two senses—theologically and sexually—thus disrupting the sacredness of religion. In the fourth set, these female writings further argue over the existence of Jesus and Heaven, exposing their fictionality as mere constructs. For these inscriptions, see *The Blind Assassin* 202, 419, and 482.

Under that, in purple marker: *Don't Eat*.

And under that, the last word to date, in bold black lettering: *Fuck Vegetarians*—“*All Gods Are Carnivorous*”—*Laura Chase*.

Thus Laura lives on. (84)<sup>25</sup>

The speaker of the last inscription seems to take the first two lines as a defense of vegetarianism; line three and four could be read more broadly in the light of a spiritual path such as Buddhism (or as parodying such paths). However, we also can take the second line as a statement against killing other people and indirectly also against cannibalism. In other words, the first two sentences can then be read: *Don't Eat People You Aren't Prepared to Kill*, and: *Don't Kill People You Aren't Prepared to Eat*. Surprisingly, the first imperative actually endorses homicide when we give it a certain emphasis. The second imperative could be describing a special practice of human husbandry: “Let people live till one has to eat them.” In this sense, even though these two “death sentences” are both cannibalistic on such a reading, where the first one emphasizes the violent (and necessary) act of killing before eating, the second validates a preservation of life, treating killing as the reluctant but ineluctable ending of people’s lives. Then, as we put them into the code(s) of societal/patriarchal cannibalism, the first sentence can be further interpreted as a perverse manner of consumption. Because one kills *before* eating, not *for* eating, what one consumes is actually human life, not human flesh. On the other hand, since the second sentence allows people to live as long as one is hungry, although it sanctions brutal cannibalism it is based on the survival of the killer. In brief, while the first sentence approves cannibalism for the joy of killing itself, the second ratifies it only when it is necessary to one’s own survival.

If the first two sentences create a tension between killing *before* eating and killing *for* eating, the next two sentences break through to another logical “level,” prohibiting women from killing or/and eating anything. In fact, if one does not kill or/and eat, how can one survive? Even though vegetarians claim that they do not live on meat,

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<sup>25</sup> Before a comprehensive analysis of this passage, there is some background knowledge to be understood. First, the signature “Laura Chase” cannot be signed by Laura herself because she has died of a suicidal “car accident” in 1945. Since Iris publishes the romance *The Blind Assassin* in the name of Laura, the signature is likely to be signed by one of Laura’s fans. Besides, when the last inscription quotes “All Gods are Carnivorous,” it alludes to the science fiction story within the romance. Here Gods are described as “carnivorous” not because they really eat people, but because they demand sacrifices of virgins on the altar.

vegetables are also living things. In this sense, the imperative “*Don’t Eat*” can be read as a parody of the seemingly benevolent but actually self-destructive interdiction, “*Don’t Kill*.” Besides, while the prohibition of killing resonates with God’s commandment—“You shall not murder,” the next sentence playfully exposes its absurdity by mimicking its preposterous “double.” In other words, if the command “*Don’t Kill*” is a taboo, a symbolic mandate, a masculine law that gives orders without any explanation, the follow-up command “*Don’t Eat*” is therefore a travesty, a semiotic counterpart, a feminine voice that questions the monolithic and presumptuous Name of the Father. While the feminine voice mocks the preceding masculine mandate, this is not to engender a dualism, but to belie the authority of phallogocentrism. Since to be “different” does not necessarily mean to be “opposite,” the sentence “*Don’t Eat*” is thus exemplary of Cixous’s *écriture féminine*: it counters phallogocentric ideology *via* an ironic imitation and dethrones the symbolic order by an articulation of difference. In the same vein, when the last sentence screeches “*Fuck Vegetarians—‘All Gods Are Carnivorous,’*” it is a long-repressed howl, a shout of overdue rage at the monopoly of what, again, we may take as the male voice of religious prohibitions. Intriguingly, in contrast to the four imperatives above it, the last sentence does not follow any form of phallogocentric logic, nor does it imitate its syntax. By alluding to the contents in the science fiction story of “Laura’s” (actually, it is Iris’s) romance, it is completely a feminine voice. Thus, if this set of inscriptions can be seen as a gamut of female voices ranging from complete adherence to the symbolic order to skeptical resistance to it, the third imperative “*Don’t Kill*” is most likely to be a replica of the symbolic mandate, whereas the last two scribblings more obviously articulate difference(s). As crystallizations of *écriture féminine*, these two sentences, especially the second one, are what Cixous terms the “sexts”: “a privilege of *voice: writing* and *voice* are entwined and interwoven and writing’s continuity/voice’s rhyme take each other’s breath away through interchanging, make the text gasp or form it out of suspenses and silences, make it lose its voice or rend it with cries” (*Newly Born Woman* 69, 92). As the quote “All Gods are Carnivorous” implies a statement against the sacrifice of virgins in some religions, the last inscription actually belies their hypocrisy, exposing their cannibalism under the surface doctrines of “vegetarianism.”

While we have witnessed then the antecedents and germination of *écriture féminine* in the last two female inscriptions, we nevertheless have left out an important feminine icon: Laura. In fact, the real critical power of the last sentence lies in the uncanny appearance of Laura’s signature. I say that it is uncanny in two senses: first, it

is unusual, if not impossible, for a person to inscribe her name on the women's washroom wall after she has been dead for decades. Second, if the signature belongs to someone else, who is she then? Since there is no telling who wrote this blasphemous sentence and signed it in Laura's name, the mysterious inscription is thus at once embodied and disembodied—embodied because someone must have identified herself with Laura, appointing herself Laura's deputy on earth; disembodied because Laura may transcend death, committing a profanity in some spiritual or immaterial form. While the first inference sounds much more plausible than the second, it is the faint possibility of Laura's return from the tomb that possesses the force of the uncanny. Indeed, the return of the dead, like the "return of the repressed," is the uncanniest thing of all since it violates the law of mortality, animating what ought to be lifeless, bringing to light what "ought to have remained secret and hidden" (Freud 226, 225).

Now that we know what gives its charisma to Laura's signature, we must ask: what does Laura bring from the bleak underworld to this abject women's washroom? Before we unearth her influence on this female community, we need to know why Laura won't rest in peace. According to Žižek, if the dead "*were not properly buried*, i.e., [if] something went wrong with their obsequies," they may rise from the graves "as collectors of some unpaid debt"; in other words, "[t]he return of the living dead, then, materializes a certain symbolic debt persisting beyond physical expiration" (*Looking Awry* 23). However, here the "symbolic debt" Laura demands is actually what the symbolic order owes to women. By profaning Gods as "carnivorous," Laura not only reveals God's violation of his own commandment against killing but also debunks the pretence of all religion. Physically decayed but nevertheless spiritually more powerful, Laura now becomes the disembodied "Name of the *Mother*." She rises from the grave; she transcends death because she cannot die. Pointing an accusing finger at the bloodthirsty theological system, Laura has been deified, has become a feminine icon parallel to the "carnivorous Gods." Moreover, when she comes back from the underworld, she brings with her those sacrificial virgins from the science fiction story of the romance *The Blind Assassin* and renders this washroom a courtroom at Judgment Day; on this occasion all the dead will come to life and justice shall prevail. Dramatically, these sacrificial virgins now seem to criticize, to subvert the societal/patriarchal cannibalism to which other women still fall prey. Bearing a certain resemblance to the wallpaper of Gilman's gothic story, this inscription, with Laura's signature as its "password," revives Laura together with the sacrificial virgins.

We may conclude our exploration of female writing(s) with an analysis of Iris's

memoir, which is actually a confessional autobiography that, in Frank Chin's words, "celebrate[s] the process of conversion from an object of contempt to an object of acceptance" (qtd. in Cheung 238). While there are, as Chin says, "oozings of viscous putrescence and luminous radiant guilt" (qtd. in Cheung 238) between the lines, all of Iris's bodily trauma in the face of Richard's sexual violence and her stigma as a mother who deserts her daughter are sublimated and crystallized into her language. Unlike the romance she earlier published in Laura's name, this memoir brings to light all the filthiest stories in Iris's family—her affair with Alex, her daughter's illegitimacy, and her husband's incest with Laura, all of which are too intimate for a self-protective subject to reveal.<sup>26</sup> However, while Iris summons up the courage to expose her marital disloyalty to Richard, she also allows her disgrace to lie in the sun, to fester, to itch, in order to be cured. Disclosing her innermost self to her granddaughter, she also relieves herself of the burden of lies, salvaging truth from heaps of fiction and declaring her subjectivity out of the abyss of abjection.

Furthermore, since Iris refers to Laura as her "collaborator" (513) in writing the romance *The Blind Assassin*, we may read Iris and Laura as mirror images of each other—while the latter encodes her prophecies, the former interprets them. From this perspective, Laura's death in a sense nourishes Iris, bestowing upon her the power to manipulate words, the power to construct truth (not necessarily facts). Invisible as she is, Laura is never absent in Iris's memoir. As Iris says: "What I remembered, and also what I imagined, which is also the truth. I thought of myself as recording. A bodiless hand, scrawling across a wall" (512); she is writing not only with her hand but also with Laura's. Like the doughnut she often mentions, "[Laura]'s the round O, the zero at the bone. A space that defines itself by not being there at all" (409). Paradoxically, this nothingness is where female subjectivity comes from. As Stefan Jonsson claims,

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<sup>26</sup> As Karen F. Stein indicates, Iris, "[i]n attributing [the authorship and the female protagonist of] *The Blind Assassin 2* [the romance between the secret lovers] to Laura, [...] simultaneously hides and reveals her own story. By publishing the [romance] she is able to proclaim [her] affair [with Alex] publicly, while shielding herself from blame" (149). Indeed, while this self-effacing romance, as Stein says, protects Iris from public tirades when she makes people believe that the female secret lover is Laura, rather than herself, I find Iris's self-revealing memoir a better way to deal with her affair with Alex. When she reveals in her memoir that the real identity of the secret woman in the romance is actually herself, Iris finally confesses (at least to the readers of her memoir) her affair with Alex. Significantly, not only does this confession attest to Laura's innocence, it also unmoors Iris's granddaughter Sabrina from the burden of her family history. When Sabrina unlocks the trunk containing Iris's memoir, she will know that her real grandfather is Alex, not Richard. Since Alex is an orphan, Sabrina can thus relieve herself of her scandalous family history and create an identity of her own. Concerning Iris's self-protective tactics in writing the romance, see Stein.



“[s]ubjectivity is [...] a process best understood in terms of *negativity*. It cannot be grasped in pure form except as lack, a lack that generates a need, which, in turn, drives the human agent toward the identifications offered to it by the social milieu, and then away from them” (8-9). While Iris and Laura are constructed as void subjects (“lacks”) at the beginning, they declare their selves through a passive anorexia. Where Laura keeps identifying herself with others, reaching only the halfway mark in the emergence of her subjectivity, Iris is the one who goes through the whole process of metamorphosis, eventually distinguishing herself from the messy crowd. However, to declare one’s subjectivity does not mean to estrange self from other. Since the dialectic between self and other is not always a rivalry or an opposition, there must be the possibility of coexistence. In this case, when Iris proclaims that her writing is a collaboration with Laura, she not only entitles herself to be the mouthpiece of her dead sister but also begins her negotiation with Laura as the other. Through writing, Iris starts to reimagine, reconstruct, and re(dis)cover her relation with the other.

In fact, Iris’s memoir is not just a book of/about herself or a duet of/about her and Laura; it is also a *chorus* of the entire female community. With the inscriptions on the wall of the washroom now put down on paper, this memoir has literarily become a choir, one wherein women articulate their sound and fury in this cannibalistic society, airing their innocent sacrifices on the altar of human history, and above all voicing their differences out of a monolithic phallogocentrism. Not surprisingly, their tones are not as passionate as the universal “I” of Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself”; nor are these female speakers as all-embracing as the male romanticist. Knowing that there are always conflicts between self and other, they do not blindly plunge into a communion with others, food and people included. However, after their subjectivity is gradually secured through anorexia, obsessive showers, and most importantly writing, they start to consider the possibility of coexistence with the other, outgrowing the construct of women as “lack.”

If Iris’s memoir is a chorus that voices women’s difference, it also inscribes femininity into the formerly male-centered symbolic order. As Cixous exclaims at the very beginning of “The Laugh of the Medusa,” when “[w]oman [does] put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement” (243), female subjectivity will emerge through those very abject realms of domesticity, crystallize through women’s own writing. Indeed, the urge to write, as Iris says, is often provoked by a lack of witnesses: “At the very least we want a witness. We can’t stand the idea of our own voices falling silent finally, like a radio running down” (95). If Iris’s writing is

a kind of *écriture féminine*, her voice in the romance *The Blind Assassin* pulls down one of the pillars upholding the symbolic order: Richard the womanizer, the capitalist, the misogynist. However, the goal of *écriture féminine* is not to castrate men, but to coexist with them. Although we do not quite see a real communion of/between man and woman at the end of this novel, Iris's collaboration with Laura and her sacrifice for Sabrina may foretell another sort of self/other dialectic in addition to opposition.

Thus, when we reread the sacrifice theme in *The Blind Assassin*, we find that even though "[t]here is a history of female sacrifice in the Chase family" (Stein 146), Iris is the very first one who would sacrifice herself for another woman (Sabrina) rather than to/for a man (Benjamin, Norval, Richard, and Alex).<sup>27</sup> I am not suggesting that men do not deserve the sacrifice of women or that sacrifice itself is insane. Instead, sacrifice is a noble thing because it achieves the resolution of the self/other opposition. As Cixous's "feminine economy" tells us, Iris's sacrifice for Sabrina involves no profitable return: "she doesn't try to 'recover her expenses.' She is able not to return to herself, never settling down, pouring out, going everywhere to the other" (*Newly Born Woman* 87). On the other hand, Benjamin, Norval, Richard, and Alex do not deserve such a sacrifice because they ask for it in the name of phallogentrism. Under the pretext of marital relationship, familial responsibility or personal heroism, they undo the initial significance of sacrifice, wrenching it into a test of women's allegiance to patriarchy. Thus, as Iris rests herself in her granddaughter's hands, she has gotten over the conflict between self and other. In addition to freeing Sabrina from the fetters of self-identity and allowing her to create a subjectivity of her own, she herself has crossed the threshold between phallogocentrism and *écriture féminine*, rendering herself a "giver" that loves the other in spite of the greatest differences.<sup>28</sup>

Exhilaratingly, the kitchen and the women's bathroom in *The Blind Assassin* are not merely the sordid sites for women's dirty chores but also the sorceress's cauldron where repast, excretion and language brew and blend. While anorexia and obsessive

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<sup>27</sup> In *The Blind Assassin*, nearly all women in Iris's family have to sacrifice to/for men: Adelia marries Benjamin because her father's factory encounters a financial crisis; she marries Benjamin because of money, not because of love. Likewise, Iris marries Richard because Norval's (her father's) button factory is on the verge of bankruptcy. Laura succumbs to Richard because the latter threatens to report Alex to the police for his alleged arson of the button factory. To save Alex, Laura thus yields to Richard's sexual invasions. As Adelia's and Iris's marriages manifest that "the traffic in women" is to treat women as commodities circulated among men, Laura's sacrifice to Richard even unfolds the problem of women's bodily autonomy.

<sup>28</sup> Being a "giver" as described in Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa." Iris does not forego her subjectivity, emptying herself to identify with the other when sacrificing herself for Sabrina. She is rather a substantial subject that gives herself to the other "without annihilating herself."

cleaning express women's anxiety about their subjectivity, they both reinforce the self/other opposition: by refusing food (as the other), I declare the autonomy of myself; by cleaning myself, I regain the bodily boundary invaded by the other. However, to claim subjectivity does not necessarily mean to detach/defense self from/against the other. Instead, the ideal relationship of this self/other dialectic is coexistence *via* writing. While Adelia's cookbook and Reenie's inheritance of it have proved that women can invent "culinary courses" against the patriarchal discourse, the scribblings on the women's washroom wall even foretell the possibility of *écriture féminine*, substituting a language of heterogeneity for the monolithic phallogocentrism. Above all, when Adelia declares herself a "loaf-giver" and "name-giver" and Iris claim herself a collaborator with Laura, a giver of Sabrina's new identity, women are no longer constructed as "holes" in search of subjectivity, but as "wholes" that give in spite of the self/other conflicts.

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### **About the Author**

Chung-hao Ku is pursuing his master's degree in the Department of English, National Taiwan Normal University. His research interests include psychoanalysis and feminism; contemporary American women poets like H.D., Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop and Adrienne Rich; gothic writers like Mary Shelley, Edgar Allan Poe and Margaret Atwood; as well as Asian American literature. His recent articles are "Marine Myths in Elizabeth Bishop's 'The Riverman' and Adrienne Rich's 'Diving of the Wreck'" and "Asian American Woman and Globalization in Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*." He is completing a master's thesis on Atwood. [E-mail: [kuchunghao@yahoo.com.tw](mailto:kuchunghao@yahoo.com.tw)]

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Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* (2000) earned several awards, including the prestigious Man Booker Prize. It is Atwood's tenth novel and quickly became a bestseller, although it received mixed reviews. One possible reason for this is reflected in John Marshall's article in *Seattle's Post-Intelligencer*, which describes *The Blind Assassin* as a novel that raises "demands on readers"; he contends "that serious attention be paid, or else." The reason behind these comments might be due to the complexity of the structure of *The Blind Assassin*, which is built on the narration of Iris Chase Griffie. Margaret Atwood is one of the major contemporary writers who has been writing on a plethora of issues, very often related to women. She occupies a major position in the canon the world as well as the Canadian literature. Her novels explore the subjectivity of the woman in its various aspects and present before her readers multidimensional representations of woman in her various forms "from woman as victim to the woman as monster. Her novels, however, can also be read as sites and strategies of resistance where most often her women characters engage in resisting the dominant discourse in one way or the other." *Writing with the Bodies: Women's Voice in Margaret Atwood's The Blind Assassin*. By Ranjitsing Bhoi. Margaret Atwood *The Blind Assassin*. Imagine the monarch Agha Mohammed Khan, who orders the entire population of the city of Kerman murdered or blinded -no exceptions. His praetorians set energetically to work. They line up the inhabitants, slice off the heads of the adults, gouge out the eyes of the children. Later, processions of blinded children leave the city. Some, wandering around in the countryside, lose their way in the desert and die of thirst. Other groups reach inhabited settlements, singing songs about the extermination of the citizens of Kerman. "ryszard kapuscinski." City Council should take note. *The Blind Assassin*. By Laura Chase. Reingold, Jaynes Moreau, New York, 1947 Prologue: Perennials for the Rock Garden She has a single photograph of him. Margaret Atwood, Booker Prize-winning author of *The Blind Assassin*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Alias Grace*, and *Oryx and Crake*, is a master of speculative fiction. She offers the following seven tips for developing compelling speculative fiction. Learn more about writing speculative fiction in Margaret Atwood's MasterClass. Save. Share. Learn more about creative writing in Margaret Atwood's MasterClass. Sign up here to get James Patterson's tips for writing mystery novels and more sent to your inbox. Acclaim for Margaret Atwood's *THE BLIND ASSASSIN*. Winner of the Booker Prize and the International Association of Crime Writers Dashiell Hammett Award. "A literary high-wire act. . . . [It] is marked by lyrical writing and the intricacy of the narrative. The reader is repeatedly caught by surprise. . . . Almost to the last page, the book retains its sense of mystery."