

“You are one of us”: Communities of Marginality, Vulnerability, and Secrecy in Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace*

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IT IS REVEALING that Margaret Atwood should have chosen for her 1996 novel the title of *Alias Grace*, which points to two central and interrelated aspects of this literary work. On the one hand, it indicates that the fictional world it denotes revolves around one individual, namely, the historical figure of Grace Marks, an Irish immigrant in Canada sentenced to life imprisonment after being convicted in 1843 for her involvement in the murder of her household employer, Thomas Kinnear, and of his housekeeper and lover, Nancy Montgomery. On the other hand, the introduction into the title of the term “alias” suggests that in their search for the truth about Grace Marks, both readers and characters may be frustrated by their continuously encountering duplicity and falsity. This process takes place because Grace resists being comprehended by the knowledge and discourse of what I would like to call communities of power, namely, the scientific, religious, and legal communities and by the Foucauldian disciplinary system created by them. She belongs, on the contrary, to the marginal communities of immigrants, servants, and mad people, who share strong bonds of solidarity based upon vulnerability and secrecy and who challenge the rigidity of social categories, together with official middle- and upper-class constructions of national identity.

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In her essay “In Search of *Alias Grace*,” Atwood asserts, in relation to Canadian history and historical writing, that “it’s the very things that *aren’t* mentioned that inspire the most curiosity in us. *Why* aren’t they mentioned? The lure of the Canadian past, for the writers of my generation, has been partly the lure of the unmentionable—the mysterious, the buried, the forgotten, the discarded, the taboo” (218). In her novel, Atwood is precisely concerned with a mysterious story, Grace Marks’s, an individual who escapes all attempts to enclose and apprehend her. The textual excerpts and fragments that we find at the beginning of each chapter, coming from newspapers, letters, poems, and other textual sources, denote a collective eagerness to translate her story into meaningful and articulate terms, although the fragmentary and incoherent result points to the impossibility of doing so. In this sense, the scrapbook owned by the penitentiary governor’s wife, a collection of newspaper cuttings on famous crimes and criminals, can be seen as a microcosm of the novel as a whole. Grace herself has looked at it many times, finding both “lies” and “true things” and what constitutes the “chief concern” of “the gentlemen and the ladies both”: not whether or not she killed anyone, but whether or not she was “really a paramour” (30). The scrapbook underlines, then, where Grace stands in relation to social class divisions: as a marginal figure on which the upper- and middle-class desire for sensationalism and feminine stereotypes comes to be projected.

The scrapbook also presents Grace as spectacle, an object everyone can look at and examine. This condition is one of which she is aware, as we see her reflecting upon the hanging of James McDermott—the fellow servant who supposedly committed the murders and with whom Grace is complicit—in front of the jail in Toronto: “It was raining, and a huge crowd standing in the mud, some of them come from miles away. If my own death had not been commuted at the last minute, they would have watched me hang with the same greedy pleasure” (32). Not only were executions public spectacles, but so too were penitentiaries and asylums. It is in this way that the nineteenth-century settler Susanna Moodie approached Grace Marks, to whom she refers in *Life in the Clearings* (1853), the text in which Atwood first encountered Grace’s story, as she explains in the “Author’s Afterword.” Pointing to Moodie’s descriptions, in *Life in the Clearings*, of the provincial penitentiary in Kingston and the lunatic asylum in Toronto, Atwood explains that “such public institutions were visited like zoos, and, at both, Moodie asked to see the star attraction, Grace Marks” (538). Grace, as a low-class woman, becomes the object of knowledge of a middle-to-upper-class woman, Susanna Moodie.

Thus, *Alias Grace* depicts the kind of punishment that, according to Foucault, prevailed in Western societies until the eighteenth century: punishment as spectacle, so that “the main character was the people, whose real and immediate presence was required for the performance” (*Discipline* 57). But the world of *Alias Grace* also incorporates aspects of the “disciplinary society” (“Truth” 57) that Foucault saw as emerging in the nineteenth century and in which there was an “inversion of spectacle into surveillance” (72). In this new system, the body “is caught up in a system of constraints and privations, obligations and prohibitions” and “as a result of this new restraint, a whole army of technicians took over from the executioner, the immediate anatomist of pain: warders, doctors, chaplains, psychiatrists, psychologists, educationalists” (*Discipline* 11), precisely the kind of army that surrounds Grace Marks. In this society of panopticism, a kind of power based upon supervision and examination gave rise “to what we call the ‘human sciences’—psychiatry, psychology, sociology” (“Truth” 59), whose main representative in Atwood’s novel is Dr Simon Jordan, a young psychiatrist who arrives from the United States to examine Grace and help her to remember the events surrounding the crime.

In her first interview with Simon, who conveys his desire to get to know her true story, Grace tells him: “You should ask the lawyers and the judges, and the newspaper men, they seem to know my story better than I do myself” (46). The interrelation between power and knowledge, in a Foucauldian sense, is made clear here. Practices of power, as carried out in penal institutions, and by the legal and scientific communities, intend to turn Grace, who finds herself in a position of marginality, and hence, of lack of power, into a knowable individual to be supervised and controlled. Early in the novel we read about the disciplinary methods employed in the Toronto lunatic asylum, such as cold baths and strait-waistcoats: “The matrons at the Asylum were all fat and strong ... Sometimes they would provoke us, especially right before the visitors were to come. They wanted to show how dangerous we were, but also how well they could control us, as it made them appear more valuable and skilled” (35). The novel creates a strong sense of social division, in this case, between the sane and the insane, suggesting that the inclusion in this second group depends on low social origins, together with the disadvantage of being a woman: “One of them was in there to get away from her husband, who beat her black and blue, he was the mad one but nobody would lock him up” (34).

Simon himself comes to realize to what extent madness is an arbitrary construction, as he reflects upon his often being assaulted by irrational and hence uncontrollable “manifestations of the imagination”: “He is both

sane and normal, and he has developed the rational faculties of his mind to a high degree; and yet he cannot always control such pictures. The difference between a civilized man and a barbarous fiend—a madman, say—lies, perhaps, merely in a thin veneer of willed self-restraint” (163). As Cuder has argued, Simon “hides behind the smoke screen of scientific discourse, pretending to be in control of his life and his body when he is in fact troubled by volcanic passions” (4). But, however much of a problem and violent these passions may be, “the power politics within society ... will not permit respectable people like him to be regarded as abnormal and institutionalized for their mental condition. Instead, as a member of the medical profession, it is he who has the power to institutionalize others” (Vevaina 93).

Self-restraint is indispensable for Simon in order to carry out his scientific activity, which entails a manipulation of the body from a position of power in order to heal it and gain knowledge: “To heal humanity one must know it, and one cannot know it from a distance; one must rub elbows with it, so to speak” (86). The irony of this passage lies in the fact that Simon’s view actually constitutes an inner justification for his sexual intercourse with European prostitutes and is confirmed in the final reference to his having “taken, of course, all proper precautions against disease” (86). His intimate knowledge of humanity is no more than mere sexual exploitation, as he maintains all the privileges of his position and with women from the lower classes as his object of desire. Similarly, he presents his interest in Grace as “purely scientific” (46), but it is actually driven by a strong sexual attraction toward her. As Hall puts it, “his hungers and erotic speculations interweave the literal and symbolic penetration of women’s minds and bodies” so that “carnal knowledge and scientific knowledge are inextricable” (29). If, as critics have argued, *Alias Grace* can be seen as a parody or postmodernist version of the traditional detective story,¹ Peter Brooks’s contention that “the invention of the detective story in the nineteenth century testifies to the concern to detect, track down, and identify those occult bodies that have purposely sought to avoid social scrutiny” is particularly apt in the context of this novel. Borrowing Brooks’s words, Simon Jordan can certainly be seen as a “professional decipherer of the hidden identity,” “driven by the anxiety and fascination of the hidden, masked, unidentified individual” (26).

1 Staelis analyzes the way in which Atwood “both affirms and undermines” the realistic conventions of the detective story and the historical novel, “such as narrative linearity, the representation of a reality beyond the bounds of textuality, a belief in a fact-based truth, and the assumption that a fictional character is a knowable entity” (428).

As he is driven by the desire to decipher her enigma, Simon's relation with Grace very much resembles that of the magistrate of J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) with the barbarian girl tortured by officials of the Empire to which he belongs. Both Simon and the magistrate experience their respective female companions as a surface whose depth cannot be penetrated or as a closed container whose content cannot be reached. Grace is "a very hard nut to crack" (61), her mind "a locked box, to which [Simon] must find the right key" (153). Simon's object, hence, is "to probe down below the threshold of her consciousness, and to discover the memories that must perforce lie buried there" (153). However, he has "never known any woman to be so thoroughly self-contained," so that he is "trying in vain to open her up like an oyster" (153). If his dilemma is "whether Grace will at last crack open, revealing her hoarded treasures, or whether she will instead take fright and hide, and shut herself up like a clam" (357), she certainly shuts herself up.

The magistrate of Coetzee's novel employs very similar imagery in order to convey the barbarian girl's resistance to his interrogations as he takes her into his apartment and tries to discover the truth about what happened in the torture chamber.² He feels that "with this woman it is as if there is no interior, only a surface across which I hunt back and forth seeking entry" (46). Her body is so "closed, ponderous" (45) that he is unable to carry out the sexual act with her,³ finding, instead, refuge in another woman, whom he can easily penetrate: "to desire her has meant to enfold her and enter her, to pierce her surface" (46).⁴ Similarly, Simon projects his frustrated sexual desires into his landlady, Rachel Humphrey, who "at least is something he can grapple with, take hold of. She will not slip through his fingers" (473). Borrowing Maurice Blanchot's words in his analysis of Marguerite Duras's *The Malady of Death*, Grace, like the barbarian girl, "escapes what would turn her into a graspable whole, a sum that would integrate the infinite and thus reduce it to an integratable finite" (39). Grace's "way of life" is one that "prevents one from knowing anything

2 There is an essential difference between Grace and the barbarian girl: whereas the former provides a story, the latter remains silent. Grace's narrative and the barbarian girl's silence, however, lead to the same opacity as regards the revelation of truth.

3 The barbarian girl and the magistrate end up having sex, but this only happens when they leave the territory of Empire and enter the barbarian lands, which highlights to what extent their personal relationship is conditioned by historical and political power relations.

4 See May for an insightful analysis of the question of the body in *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

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about her, except for her presence-absence ... this young woman is forever separate because of the suspect closeness with which she offers herself” (Blanchot 38). Hence, as a woman of the “worse” classes, she radically challenges the special kind of knowledge that Simon, as a doctor, has access to and that has always attracted “women of the better classes” (93–94):

Knowledge with a lurid glare to it; knowledge gained through a descent into the pit. He has been where they could never go, seen what they could never see; he has opened up women’s bodies, and peered inside. In his hand, which has just raised their own hands towards his lips, he may once have held a beating female heart. (94)

Simon’s knowledge of the body is allied with what Foucault has called “epistemological power, that is, a power to extract a knowledge from individuals and to extract a knowledge *about* those individuals” (“Truth” 83), which is precisely the kind of knowledge that Grace does not provide to him. The passage quoted above also highlights that, as Hall has put it, “perhaps nowhere throughout history is the female body more material and more mastered than in the traditional (male) doctor-(female) patient relationship” (35). Following Elizabeth Grosz’s arguments in *Volatile Bodies*, Hall has argued that “Dr Jordan’s language dramatizes the violent social inscription of the female body, rendering the body as text to be read and to be understood as a site of meaning-making” (31), just as Brooks relates the dynamics of the detective story to the tendency, in Western patriarchal culture, to associate the drive to know with the uncovering of the female body.

The male agent, therefore, is the one that often carries out the violent manipulation of the female body, and critics have accordingly offered feminist readings of Atwood’s novel.⁵ I do not want to negate the important role that gender plays in the power relations depicted in the novel. However, *Alias Grace* suggests that divisions in terms of social class reinforce and may even be stronger than those of gender. Thus, the matrons’ brutal way of dealing with the inmates’ bodies makes them obviously complicit with the Foucauldian disciplinary regime depicted in the novel. Furthermore, if as Howells has pointed out, “this is a woman’s narrative, and it eludes

5 Focusing on “Atwood’s trickery and pawns in her narrative games” (157), Rigney describes Grace’s storytelling as “a practice akin to witchcraft, which women have traditionally practiced with greater success than men” (162). According to Hall, “Atwood offers a critique of the ongoing sexist perspectives that construct social attitudes towards women’s bodies and minds” (35).

the attempts of male authority figures—from the church, and the legal and professional professions—to get the truth of what happened” (*Margaret* 141), it is not only male figures that attempt in vain to extract Grace’s true story. As we have seen, that is also the aim of middle-to-upper class women such as the governor’s wife and Susanna Moodie, who, despite not being a character in the novel, is somehow included in its fictional world, as several passages from *Life in the Clearings* precede different chapters of Atwood’s novel.

The figure of Susanna Moodie is also relevant for another reason. Both Grace and Moodie are immigrants to Canada, although with two important differences: Moodie was English and belonged to what Atwood has called “the genteel middle-to-upper middle class” (“Introduction” 74),⁶ whereas Grace was Irish and working class. These dimensions obviously contribute to Grace’s being, as put by Howells, “one of society’s others, marginalized by her criminality, her sex, and her class” (*Contemporary* 30). It is interesting to remember Moodie’s antipathy toward the Irish, as revealed in chapter 1 of *Roughing It in the Bush*, where she describes them as “vicious, uneducated barbarians” (8) and “filthy beings ... with contaminating sights and sounds” (9). Atwood challenges Moodie’s writing of early Canadian national history by giving protagonism and dignity to a character belonging to an immigrant group to which Moodie denied both things and which suffered from an especially liminal and marginal status in national terms, of which Grace herself is aware: “I did indeed come from the North of Ireland; though I thought it very unjust when they wrote down that both of the accused were from Ireland by their own admission. That made it sound like a crime, and I don’t know that being from Ireland is a crime; although I have often seen it treated as such” (118). Furthermore, Grace’s Irish background complicates the public and political perception of her case, since as Reverend Verringer tells Simon, “the Tories appear to have confused Grace with the Irish Question, although she is a Protestant; and to consider the murder of a single Tory gentleman—however worthy the gentleman, and however regrettable the murder—to be the same thing as the insurrection of an entire race” (91).

This passage suggests a national scene of political rivalries and social conflicts, and in this sense, an essential historical fact to bear in mind is that Grace’s conviction took place just six years after the 1837 Rebellion, led by William Lyon Mackenzie, and which “was against the gentry, who

6 See Atwood’s “Introduction to *Roughing It in the Bush*” for an account of her different encounters with and reactions to Moodie’s texts and for an analysis of Moodie’s immigrant experience.

ran everything, and kept all the money and land for themselves” (171). The references to the Rebellion and Mackenzie are scattered throughout the novel (238, 264, 291, 432), underlining the point made by Atwood in “In Search of *Alias Grace*”: the treatment that Grace Marks received by the Canadian press was very much dependent on the newspaper’s stance toward the Rebellion and Mackenzie. Thus, “the Tory newspapers that vilified him also vilified Grace ... but the Reform newspapers that praised Mackenzie were also inclined to clemency towards Grace” (226–27). In the “Author’s Afterword,” Atwood also emphasizes Grace’s association with the rebellious lower classes, as she states that what journalists found so attractive about her story was its “combination of sex, violence, and the deplorable insubordination of the lower classes” (537).

Methodist Reverend Verringer’s words, quoted above, also point to religious differences—the novel is pervaded by references to different religious movements, such as Spiritualism, which had become “the craze of the middle classes, the women especially” (95)—and to Grace’s liminal position in this respect as well, since in spite of being Irish, she is, at least nominally, a Protestant.⁷ In fact, Reverend Verringer’s role, as religious figure and as part of the circle working for Grace’s freedom, also needs to be taken into account. However well intentioned he may be in his attempt to free Grace, Verringer embodies an official religious discourse that is, like the scientific and the legal discourses, unable to find her truth. Verringer is present in what probably constitutes the climactic moment of the novel, when Dr Jerome DuPont—who is none other than Grace’s old friend, Jeremiah the peddler—hypnotises Grace in front of a private audience. DuPont challenges Simon’s scientific procedures, telling him to forget “Mesmerism, and other such fraudulent procedures” and to believe in the Braidian system, “a fully scientific procedure,” “completely logical and sound,” which “has been proven by European experts beyond a shadow of a doubt” (460). He, then, induces Grace into what he calls “a neuro-hypnotic sleep” (461), during which Grace delivers a speech with a voice that is not

⁷ The prevailing prejudices against Catholics in Canada are made evident when a housekeeper asks whether Grace is a Catholic, “as those from Ireland generally were; and if so she would have nothing to do with me, as the Catholics were superstitious and rebellious Papists who were ruining the country” (148). The brief view we are given of Grace’s family’s previous life in Northern Ireland is also revealing, since social rivalries and nationalist contentions, based upon religious differences, are again highlighted. Hence, her father, “being an Englishman, ... was none too welcome even among the Protestants, as they were not fond of outsiders” (121), and it is suggested that he gets involved in violent acts carried out by the Orange Order (124).

her own but apparently that of her dear dead friend and fellow servant, Mary Whitney, whose ghost has supposedly taken possession of Grace's body. The implication is that it was Mary who committed the crime, and not Grace, and hence that "Grace" is an alias concealing her true identity.

Religious discourse, represented by Verringer's interpretation of the episode as an instance of demonic possession, and scientific discourse, embodied by Simon and his hypothesis that it may be a case of split personality, are defeated by Grace's apparently hypnotic speech, in which truth and falsehood are inextricable from each other. Such evidence is naturally inappropriate for the scientific report that Simon has to write: those who are going to read it are "hard-headed, practical men, who require solid evidence.... he would become an instant laughing-stock, especially among the established members of the medical profession" (473). This episode is, therefore, the definitive blow to Simon, who soon afterwards leaves town, abandoning Grace's case. His involvement in Grace's case has seriously shattered the foundations of his rationalist and scientific world: "He has gone to the threshold of the unconscious, and has looked across; or rather he has looked down. He could have fallen. He could have fallen in. He would have drowned" (479).

In both *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Alias Grace*, then, the encounter with a woman who is forever unknown destroys the male agent's previous identity. In Coetzee's novel, the magistrate, after returning the girl to her people in the barbarian lands, falls into disgrace in the eyes of Empire, so that he himself is imprisoned and tortured. In Simon's case, he goes back to the United States, where he joins the Union army to fight in the American Civil War. In order to deal with the anxiety produced by his frustrated search for knowledge, Simon thinks of the beneficial effects of a patriotic act:

In the event of an outbreak of hostilities, my duty to my country will be clear. As Tennyson says in his overly botanical fashion, it is time to pluck "the blood-red blossom of war." Given my present tumultuous and morbid mental state, it will be a relief to have a duty of some kind set before me, no matter how deplorable the occasion for it. (491)

Through his involvement in Grace's case, Simon has experienced what Blanchot has called, following George Bataille, "the principle of incompleteness," the fact that "there exists a principle of insufficiency at the root of each being" (5). Whereas Blanchot, together with Jean-Luc Nancy, advocates a kind of community in which "this lack on principle does not

go hand in hand with a necessity for completion" (5), Simon cannot endure experiencing himself as finitude, "as an existence shattered through and through, composing itself only as it decomposes itself constantly, violently and in silence" (6). He needs, on the contrary, to counter his feeling of incompleteness and insufficiency with a communal intimacy that "operate[s] the transfiguration of its dead into some substance or subject—be these homeland, native soil or blood, nation, a delivered or fulfilled humanity, absolute phalanstery, family, or mystical body" (Nancy *Inoperative* 15), the kind of communal consolation offered by patriotic acts.

Simon's fighting for his homeland, however, does not have the hoped for results. As we learn, through a letter by Simon's mother, that he suffers amnesia due to a wound in his head and that he calls his fiancée Grace, we feel certain that he will never get out of the state of delusion and perturbation into which he has fallen. The frustration of Simon's expectations in his final patriotic commitment, which interestingly enough takes place on American and not Canadian soil, underlines to what extent this novel is concerned with disrupting official accounts of national histories, mainly made from a middle-upper-class perspective. On the contrary, *Alias Grace* tells a version of Canadian history in which the protagonists, borrowing Atwood's words in "In Search of *Alias Grace*" again, are "mysterious," "forgotten," and "discarded" (218) characters, such as criminals, servants, and peddlers.

While the hypnotism scene condemns Simon—as member of the upper classes and of the communities of power—to defeat, it establishes a relationship of lower class solidarity between Grace, Mary (even if only in spirit), and Jeremiah, with the latter emerging victorious from it. This is a character who, in spite of playing an essential role in the novel, has not received enough critical attention. I would like to argue, however, that he needs to be seen as one of the central protagonists of *Alias Grace* and as Simon Jordan's antagonist. Howells has remarked that it is interesting that "the two most significant men in Grace's narrative," namely, Simon and Jeremiah, are both Americans and Atwood's inventions (*Contemporary* 39), and she considers the legal and illegal border crossings between the two countries that characters in the novel regularly make "a reminder of the fact that Canada has never been isolated from the United States and that continual border traffic has been a feature in the history of these two nations" (40). While this is certainly the case, it is important to note that Simon's and Jeremiah's identities are in fact completely opposite. Whereas Simon lives by social conventions, scientific certainties, and patriotic motivations, Jeremiah is a mobile and metamorphic character that subverts the

conventionality and rigidity of social, national, and religious categories, none of which can exclusively contain him, as he has a different identity and profession each time he appears in the novel. Jeremiah, alias Dr Jerome Dupont, is “a Yankee” but “with an Italian father,” so that “he spoke good English, yet with something foreign in his voice” (177), hence disrupting homogeneous and essentialist constructions of national identity.

When Mary Whitney dies, Grace is puzzled by Jeremiah’s assertion that he will pray for her: “What sort of prayer I could not imagine, as he was a heathenish sort of man, with all his tricks and fortune-telling. But surely the form of a prayer does not matter, and the only distinction God makes is between good will and ill; or so I have come to believe” (228–29). Grace, like Jeremiah, does not truly endorse any particular religious faith but simply advocates the universal distinction between good and ill will. This passage resembles others in the novel, which appeal to a fundamental dimension or principle going beyond social, political, national, or, as in this case, religious distinctions. And it is especially poor people who can subvert and escape those distinctions, as Jeremiah suggests to Grace when he visits her while she is living at Mr Kinnear’s, explaining what the United States is like:

In many ways it is the same as here, he said. There are rogues and scoundrels everywhere, but they use a different sort of language to excuse themselves; and there they pay a great lip service to democracy, just as here they rant on about the right order of society, and loyalty to the Queen; though the poor man is poor on every shore. But when you cross over the border, it is like passing through air, you wouldn’t know you’d done it; as the trees on both sides of it are the same. (308–09)

In this passage, Jeremiah inverts the opposition between higher and lower classes, as the “rogues and scoundrels” are those defending “the right order of society” and not the other way round. He also undermines national differences, given that the poor are poor on every shore. If we consider these thoughts together with the attention paid by the novel to the Mackenzie Revolution, what emerges is a strong sense of solidarity among those belonging to the lower classes or margins of society, a sense of community that we see, even more powerfully, on the ship transporting migrants from Ireland to Canada:

There was one good effect of all the suffering. The passengers were Catholic and Protestant mixed, with some English and

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Scots come over from Liverpool thrown into the bargain; and if in a state of health, they would have squabbled and fought, as there is no love lost. But there is nothing like a strong bout of seasickness to remove the desire for a scrap; and those who would cheerfully have cut each other's throats on land, were often to be seen holding each other's heads over the scuppers, like the tenderest of mothers; and I have sometimes noted the same thing in prison, as necessity does make strange bedfellows. A sea voyage and a prison may be God's remainder to us that we are all flesh, and that all flesh is grass, and all flesh is weak. (135)

The community we glimpse here is a community of the body and, as Judith Butler has put it, a community of vulnerability. According to Butler, the "primary tie" that we share with others is the body, since "we are, as bodies, outside ourselves and for one another" (27). Hence, there is "a common human vulnerability" (31) that, as Grace points out, is especially experienced on a sea voyage or in prison, where national, religious, and social differences dissolve and there is only the common necessity of survival. Atwood suggests, borrowing Butler's words, "another way of imagining community," a community in which beings are "physically dependent on one another, physically vulnerable to one another" (*Precarious* 27), with the necessary abolition of power relations and social differences.

The possibility of a community of equality and corporeality becomes especially important from an ethical point of view when seen in opposition to the disciplinary and violent use of the body. Butler has argued that "the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well" (26). As we have already seen in *Alias Grace's* Simon, doctors are presented as agents of this violent touch of the body, which is why Grace both fears and resists them. Thus, she cannot bear to think of how James McDermott's body was dissected: "It was done by the doctors. They cut him in pieces like a pig to be salted down, he might as well have been bacon as far as they were concerned. His body that I listened to breathing, and the heart beating, the knife slicing through it" (31). According to Butler, and as we have seen in the description of the community of the ship or the prison, the community of vulnerability challenges "the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control.... We're undone by each other" (23). In the medical practice described in *Alias Grace*, however, the opposite process takes place:

The most fearsome of his instructors at Guy's Hospital in London, the celebrated Dr Bransby Cooper, used to say that for a good surgeon, as for a good sculptor, the ability to detach oneself from the business at hand was a prerequisite.... a surgeon was a sculptor of flesh; he should be able to slice into a human body as deliberately and delicately as if carving a cameo. A cold hand and a steady eye were what was required. Those who felt too deeply for the patient's suffering were the ones in whose fingers the knife slipped. The afflicted did not need your compassion, but your skill. (216–17)

The “I” of the surgeon is never “called into question by its relation to the Other” (Butler 23). There is no undoing, no grief, no “we,” but a reification of the “I” as agent of power and of the other as object of knowledge. Grace refers to a doctor who “is measuring the heads of all the criminals in the Penitentiary, to see if he can tell from the bumps on their skulls what sort of criminals they are, whether they are pickpockets or swindlers or embezzlers or criminal lunatics or murderers” (31). Passages such as this one illustrate what Foucault has called “the power and knowledge relations that invest human bodies and subjugate them by turning them into objects of knowledge” (*Discipline* 28). But the challenge that the case of Grace Marks poses is that she can never be turned into an object of knowledge, since neither characters nor readers can get to know whether she is guilty, whether she suffers from amnesia, whether she is hypnotized, and, if she is, whether she is truly possessed by the spirit of Mary Whitney.

Niederhoffs “takes the hypnosis scene at face value” (76), arguing that “the novel is about the effects that knowing or not knowing the truth has on people's lives” (77) and that Grace's survival depends on her ignorance of the fact that Mary Whitney has taken possession of her body. On the contrary, I agree with Rogerson's contention “that we just do not know whether [Grace] knows it, whether she once knew it and has now forgotten it, or whether it has always been blocked from her memory—and that this is as it should be, at least in Atwood's terms” (“Should” 86). Grace's knowledge, in other words, remains a secret, a secret that, as Howells has put it, Jeremiah helps her to keep: “whatever may have happened, Jeremiah has saved Grace by allowing her to keep her secret about the murders; he has also defeated Simon, who cannot write a medical report based on such unscientific evidence” (*Margaret* 150).

That the relationship between Grace and Jeremiah is based upon secrecy had already been suggested in the novel when they first meet, and “he said the strangest thing of all to me. He said, You are one of us....

I decided he meant that I too was homeless, and a wanderer, like the peddlers and those who worked at fairs; for I couldn't imagine what else he might have in mind" (179). This is an enigmatic moment whose full meaning remains unrevealed both to Grace and to us. One thing, however, is certain: Grace is included in some kind of community. Another meaning is highly probable: her belonging to this secret community is related to her marginal status in society. The last time we hear about Jeremiah is through a letter that Grace sends to him from Kingston Penitentiary telling him about the events after the hypnotism session. Toward the end of the letter, Grace tells him that a few months earlier she had received a "bone button," which she thinks that "perhaps" may have been a "message" from him, "as a button is a thing for keeping things closed up, or else for opening them; and you may have been telling me to keep silent, about certain things we both know of" (496).⁸

This passage is very similar to one we encounter in another novel by Coetzee, *Foe* (1986), in which secrecy is also an important dimension of the narrative. The female protagonist, Susan, is trying to turn her island adventure into a story but is thwarted by the muteness of the black slave Friday, whose story she defines as "properly not a story but a puzzle or hole in the narrative (I picture it as a buttonhole, carefully cross-stitched around, but empty, waiting for the button)" (121). Friday has a secret story that he shares with nobody and that neither Susan nor the reader will ever know. In *Alias Grace*, on the other hand, Grace and Jeremiah share a secret—a buttonhole—that they never tell to other characters or to the reader.⁹

Critics have seen Friday's muteness as an instrument of power and authority.¹⁰ Similarly, in *Alias Grace*, knowing and keeping secrets

8 There are more moments in the novel in which Grace shares secrets with other characters, as when she tells Simon that "it was at this time, Sir, that McDermott said he had a secret, and I promised not to tell; and you know, Sir, that once having promised such a thing, I was bound by it" (359). Earlier in the novel, during an argument between Grace's parents about her father's political activity, her father commands his mother to "keep it a secret" and her mother, in turn, commands the same to Grace: "and after that I was always very careful about keeping the secrets of others, no matter what they might be" (125).

9 See chapter 6 in Miller's *Others* for an analysis of the dimension of secrecy in Conrad's "The Secret Sharer." Miller's contentions that literature "seems to have something essentially to do with the sharing of secrets" (139) and that Conrad's story "depends on the assumption that some secrets can be shared without ceasing to be secret" (138) are particularly relevant for Coetzee's and Atwood's novels.

10 One of the most acute analyses of the question of power in *Foe* and of Friday as a nonspeaking agent of power has been made by MacLeod.

becomes servants' instrument of power against their masters and mistresses, as Mary Whitney—who “had very democratic ideas” (183) and who claimed that “one person was as good as the next” (182)—tells Grace: “In the end, she said, we had the better of them, because we washed their dirty linen and therefore we knew a good deal about them; but they did not wash ours, and knew nothing about us at all. There were few secrets they could keep from the servants” (183).¹¹ In the relationship between the lower and higher classes, it is actually the former that hold knowledge and hence a superior position of power. Grace comes to realize this truth as she reflects on how in polite gatherings of society, ladies have to see “through veils, and window curtains, and over the top of fans,” whereas “those of us who do not have to be bothered with all the veils and fans manage to see a good deal more” (268).

In the first part of this essay, I have presented Grace—together with criminals and insane people—as a spectacle, as an object publicly exposed and examined. However, as the passages quoted above suggest, an inversion of terms takes place in the novel, so that it is Grace, servants, and the lower classes in general that become the subjects of knowledge. Thus, if Simon is initially presented as the agent of knowledge, his incapacity to know Grace finally condemns him to “brain-sick ramblings”: “*Not to know*—to snatch at hints and portents, at intimations, at tantalizing whispers—it is as bad as being haunted” (490). Simon expected “to shed light on a puzzling obscurity” (89), but, ironically, he ends up “wander[ing] in darkness” (490),¹² with Jeremiah as the new agent of knowledge—and hence, of power—although knowledge of a different kind: “he was a great man for divining what was meant, even when not spoken out loud” (308). Grace occupies a position of power by being until the end “Alias Grace,” by remaining forever unknown, by never showing her true identity to us. Similarly, Jeremiah’s power is allied to his capacity to assume a fake identity. His ability to imitate gentlemen—“he did an imitation of a gentleman,

In the relationship between the lower and higher classes, it is actually the former that hold knowledge and hence a superior position of power.

11 Rimstead provides an acute description of female domestics in *Alias Grace* as intruders into the bourgeois spaces of home and nation. My analysis, however, does not agree with her contention that Atwood’s novel, with its portrayal of a postmodern fluid subject, does not really oppose class politics and boundaries.

12 This imagery of light and darkness establishes further parallels between Simon and the magistrate of *Waiting for the Barbarians*. The lantern with which the magistrate examines the prisoners’ granary stands for his search for truth. He falls, however, from light into darkness when, following his close association with the barbarians, he is imprisoned and tortured by Empire. In Coetzee’s novel, furthermore, barbarians, like criminals and the insane in *Alias Grace*, are submitted to public exposition and to Foucauldian spectacular punishment.

with the voice and manners and all” (179)—allows him to successfully assume the alias identity of Dr Jerome DuPont, through which he mocks and defeats the scientific and religious establishment, never allowing the rest—except Grace—to know who he truly is.

The secrets of Grace and Jeremiah undermine Simon’s scientific discourse, in which secrecy cannot have a place. Legal discourse cannot tell Grace’s “truth” either.¹³ Grace recalls how her lawyer, Mr MacKenzie, would become annoyed with her way of telling her story, accusing her of “wandering.” He then told her “not to tell the story as I truly remembered it, which nobody could be expected to make any sense of; but to tell a story that would hang together, and that had some chance of being believed.” She is ordered to construct her story “in what he called a coherent way” and “according to plausibility” (415). The result is that Grace’s voice at the trial is not her voice but an alias voice and that the story she tells is not her story: “for there are always those that will supply you with speeches of their own, and put them right into your mouth for you too ... And that’s what it was like at the trial ... my true voice could not get out” (342). The imposition on Grace of a discourse of coherence and plausibility has meant a distortion of her “truth”: “they were the wrong words, because whatever I said would be twisted around, even if it was the plain truth in the first place” (79).

Since Grace’s “truth” does not emerge in scientific, religious, or legal discourse, critics have paid attention to her constant activity of quilting as a possible source of meaning, together with the fact that each of the fifteen sections of the novel are named after a quilt pattern. Pointing to quilting as a traditionally female social activity, through which subordinated women could express themselves and exchange experiences, Wilson argues that “quilting is an appropriate vehicle for retelling a nineteenth-century woman’s story” (125). It is certainly highly revealing that the novel should finish with Grace engaged in quilting, making for the first time a quilt for herself, “The Tree of Paradise,” in which there will be a triangle cut from Mary Whitney’s petticoat, another from Grace’s prison nightdress, and a third one from Nancy Montgomery’s dress: “I will embroider around each one of them with red feather-stitching, to blend them in as a part of the pattern. And so we will all be together” (534).

Howells describes “Grace’s quilts with their pattern of light and dark colors as a metaphor for the cultural and racial mixture of Canada’s popu-

13 See Blanc for an analysis of *Alias Grace* as “a *trial* novel that questions the construction of a teleological courtroom narrative” (101).

lation" (*Contemporary* 39).¹⁴ That the novel should finish with a quilt pattern that projects an image of community certainly suggests a conception of Canadian national identity as a mosaic of different ethnic identities.¹⁵ It is important to underline, however, that the final quilt made by Grace especially suggests an engagement with Canadian national identity from the perspective of the marginalized. Thus, the two particular people who Grace includes in this final community, Mary and Nancy, are two lower class women. Grace's quilt implies a rewriting of official national discourse that includes the stories of those standing at the bottom of the social ladder. The fact that Grace is sewing this quilt after having married a middle-class landowner, thus rising on the social ladder, underlines her mobile condition, like Jeremiah's, and the possibility of subverting and undermining social origins and class categories.

But we cannot be sure about the definite meaning of Grace's quilt, precisely because quilts do not have fixed or final meanings, since "you can see them two different ways, by looking at the dark pieces, or else the light." Thus, in her description of the quilt called Attic Windows, Grace explains that "if you looked at it one way it was closed boxes, and when you looked at it another way the boxes were open" (187). Michael has argued that quilts and the model of patchwork threaten the linear, teleological, and patrilineal logic of Western scientific knowledge and historical discourse. My point is that quilts also undermine the positivism of scientific, legal, and historical discourse because of the kind of meaning they generate and the kind of interpretation they demand: an interpretation that does not intend to reduce their ambiguous and equivocal meanings to certitude and objectivity. Mackenzie seems to guess that this lack of certainty is the way in which Grace's discourse should be approached, as he reacts in the following way to Simon's suspicion that Grace has been lying to him: "Did Scheherazade lie? Not in her own eyes; indeed, the stories she told ought never to be subjected to the harsh categories of Truth and Falsehood. They belong in another realm altogether" (438). Official and public discourses, which operate according to the categories of truth and falsehood and which are complicit with the communities of power, will never be able

14 This vision of Canada as a multicultural country had been highlighted when Grace had seen the city of Toronto for the first time: "The people appeared to be very mixed as to the kinds of them, with many Scots and some Irish, and of course the English, and many Americans, and a few French; and Red Indians, although they had no feathers; and some Germans; with skins of all hues" (143).

15 See chapter 7 of Day's *Multiculturalism and the History of Canadian Diversity* for an account of "the rise of the mosaic metaphor."

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quilts.

to tell Grace Marks's "truth." Her truth can only be conveyed through a different kind of language, a language of suggestion and indirection, a language of secrecy and double meanings, which is the language of quilts and the language of literature itself.

According to Rogerson, "The Tree of Paradise quilt ... has meanings that are not fully knowable and the bits and pieces of the history of its maker are not fully recoverable" ("Reading" 21). This impossibility of fully getting to know the meaning of Grace's quilt is related to the impossibility of fully getting to know the truth of Grace's relationship with Mary and Nancy. In relation to the former, we are told that she gets possession of Grace's body twice, immediately after dying and in the hypnotism session, although we cannot ascertain the truth of either. Furthermore, Grace signs her confession as "*Grace Marks, Alias Mary Whitney*" (117), so that we cannot know to what extent she may be using the figure of Mary to exculpate herself or even if they may be the same person. As regards Nancy, we are told that Grace expects to find in her such a good friend as she did in Mary, although things turn out to be different, with Nancy fearing her as a rival. However, Grace welcomes her in the community projected by her quilt: she includes a piece of cloth "cut from the dress of Nancy's that she had on the first day [she] was at Mr Kinnear's" (534), when she thought they "would be like sisters or at least good friends" (260). As in the case of the relationship between Grace and Jeremiah, there are secrets lying behind the relationship between these women to which readers do not have access. Hence, the suitability of the secretive language of quilts.

Nonetheless, what Mary, Nancy, and Grace have definitely shared is their condition as servants, together with suffering due to their female corporeal vulnerability, in the case of the first two, a sexual one: Mary is seduced by her young master and dies from a botched abortion, and Nancy, after surviving an abortion, gets pregnant again and has to look for the protection of her well-off lover. It is meaningful that the final quilt/community projected by Grace should be made of oppressed women's pieces of clothing since the novel pays strong attention to clothes as symbols of class differences—"People dressed in a certain kind of clothing are never wrong" (36)—and of the oppression and violence exerted on the body: "Why does civilized man see fit to torture his body by cramming it into the strait-jacket of gentlemanly dress? Perhaps it is a mortification of the flesh, like a hair shirt.... At least he isn't a woman, and thus not obliged to wear corsets, and to deform himself with tight lacing" (83). However, a different use of clothing, this time as an image of a democratic community in which differences are abolished, had already been anticipated by Grace,

as we find her reflecting on the nightdress she used to wear in prison: “I should not say it was mine, because we own nothing here and share all in common, like the early Christians, and the nightdress you wear one week, next to your skin while you sleep, may two weeks previous have been lying close to the heart of your worst enemy, and washed and mended by others who do not wish you well” (275). As she stitches the pieces of cloth of her two friends together with a piece from her prison nightdress, Grace looks forward to a community of common human vulnerability in which the exposure of bodies does not entail violence and oppression but solidarity and equality, with the subsequent dissolution of power relations and of social, national, and religious differences.

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