

## Recognition, or the Depressive Pleasure of Reading Surfacing

Misao Dean

Volume 44, numéro 2, 2019

Resurfacing: Women Writing in 1970s Canada

Refaire surface : écrivaines canadiennes des années 1970

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1070953ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1070953ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

University of New Brunswick, Dept. of English

ISSN

0380-6995 (imprimé)

1718-7850 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Dean, M. (2019). Recognition, or the Depressive Pleasure of Reading Surfacing. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 44(2), 16–31.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1070953ar>

# Recognition, or the Depressive Pleasure of Reading *Surfacing*

MISAO DEAN

IN *USES OF LITERATURE*, RITA FELSKI ASKS, “What does it mean to recognize oneself in a book?” Felski suggests that recognition is not only an important element of the pleasure that “ordinary readers” seek in popular novels, but further that “reading cannot help but involve moments of recognition” (38), because literature has come to assume “a crucial role in exploring what it means to be a person” (25). The contemporary conception of “selfhood as an unfolding and open-ended project” (25), Felski argues, has led to a practice of reading that couples “reading with self-scrutiny” (26) in a way that requires the interrogation of the “catch-all concept of identification” (34). For Felski, that familiar moment when a reader feels “addressed, summoned, called to account by a text” (23), when she cannot help seeing traces of herself in the text she is reading (23), requires a more nuanced approach that acknowledges “the divergent mental processes that come into play” (34) in the process of recognition.

Literary theory has yet to produce a consensus on what it might look like to take the moment of reader recognition seriously. The forms of reader-response theory associated with Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish provide tools for identifying the reader constructed by the text, an implied or ideal reader that is as much a fiction as the text itself; alternatively, sociology and book history offer methodologies for book historians and cultural theorists to survey the responses of actual readers, responses that may represent intimate personal connections to a text, or mere performances of the cultural capital of reading in the public sphere.<sup>1</sup> Yet the pleasure of reading for recognition is often considered particularly naïve and foolish in the English literature classroom, the starting place for a critical reading, but never its end. On the one hand, recognition is described as necessarily a projection of the self onto the textual other in a gesture of erasure: “it is a sign of narcissistic self-duplication, a scandalous solipsism, an imperious expansion of a subjectivity that seeks to appropriate otherness by turning everything into

a version of itself" (Felski 27). Alternatively, recognition is portrayed as the result of hostile manipulation by Althusserian interpellation, "the quintessential means by which. . . individuals are folded into the state apparatus and rendered acquiescent to the status quo" (27). In both versions recognition is invariably a form of misrecognition to be resisted by the critical reader, a misrecognition that works against the otherness of the text, and against a potentially disruptive resistance to the social order. However, I want to rescue recognition from these criticisms in the name of reader pleasure, because I think that the play of "comprehension, insight, and self-understanding" (29) involved in identifying with a fictional character is not captured by either of these extremes.

Anecdotally at least, reader recognition was an important part of the popular appeal of Margaret Atwood's 1972 novel, *Surfacing*. The nameless narrator, who along with three friends has undertaken a trip to her childhood home in northern Quebec to investigate her father's disappearance, seemed instantly familiar to many reviewers, who judged her to be a representation of a contemporary everywoman, and drew comparisons to the protagonist of Plath's *The Bell Jar*.<sup>2</sup> And reviewers were not the only readers who found recognition among the key pleasures of the book, to judge by the comments posted on the popular website for booklovers, *Goodreads*. "I found myself completely absorbed by this novel. The manner of Atwood's prose baits you into reading the whole novel in a small series of large chunks and whilst I did find the narrative to be languorous at times I could not seem to escape the narrator's mindset," writes "Barry Pierce"; another reviewer writes "Atwood quickly immerses you and holds you down in the story" ("Jennifer aka EM"). While some readers recount finding the style initially alienating, they found their persistence rewarded by understanding: "At first the writing style bothered me with the constant commas and seemingly unending sentences, but as I got into the novel, this style seemed to facilitate the reader's comprehension of the narrator's stream of consciousness" ("Shelby"). Readers who wrote positive reviews, whether professional book reviewers or amateur book lovers, invariably cite identification, or recognition, as one of the pleasures of the novel.

I'm with them. Recognition is one of the key pleasures I anticipate when I read, or reread, *Surfacing*. The novel's technique of first-person narration creates a formal alignment between the reader and the narrator which fosters reader identification, even as the narrator herself

proves cranky, confusing, and unreliable. And further, I would argue that for many middle-class white women in my age group, the narrator offers opportunities for experiential allegiance as well. As Atwood argues in her essay, “An End to Audience?”: “When you read a book, it matters how old you are when you read it and whether you are male or female, or from Canada or India” (343), because readers invariably bring to books the experiences, prejudices, and expectations shaped by their cultural background, and by their personal positioning within it. Because of my age, my gender, and my background, I recognize the struggles of the narrator to steer an overloaded recreational canoe, to bait a fish-hook with a worm or a frog, to resist the traditional roles of wife and mother; I also recognize the physical settings, the idioms of conversations, and the rhythms of speech that characterize the book. I think that I am Margaret Atwood’s target audience, and feel myself part of the “intimate public” (Berlant viii) Atwood creates with her first-person narration.

As Felski notes, critiques of recognition tend to conflate formal alignment with experiential allegiance, and assume that readers formally aligned with a fictional persona cannot help but swallow the ideologies represented by that persona whole. “In reality,” she goes on, “the relations between such structural alignments and our intellectual or affective response are far from predictable” (Felski 34), and the “catch-all concept of identification is of little help in distinguishing between the divergent mental processes that come into play” (34). While readers may experience a “surge of affinity” for a character (34) that lifts them into a condition of “rapturous self-forgetting,” they may also experience an intersubjective encounter that “refracts a revised or altered understanding of a reader’s sense of who she is” (35). For this reason Felski rejects the term “identification” as vague and simplistic, suggesting instead the term “recognition” as one that encompasses two kinds of engagement with fictional characters: the experience of self-recognition, and the intersubjective encounter with otherness implied by the use of Charles Taylor’s term.<sup>3</sup> Even within these two categories she identifies a range of responses, from the “intense affiliation” readers reported feeling for Emma Bovary (34), to the critical self-awareness that prompted Elizabeth Robins, the nineteenth-century British actress, to claim that Hedda Gabler was “all of us” (qtd. in Felski 34).

In the case of *Surfacing*, the pleasure of recognition is also emotion-

ally ambivalent and politically fraught. Because, and I want to emphasize this point, *Surfacing* is not a contemporary book, but a historical one. As Atwood jokes in *The Burgess Shale*, “[she] come[s] to you from a planet far, far away, and in a distant galaxy, namely, the past” (4). *Surfacing* was published forty-seven years ago, and for many of us, as well as our students, it demands to be read historically. By this I mean that Atwood’s writing — especially her early writing — cannot be understood without what Deirdre Lynch calls the “labor and service” (72) of attempting to recover the historical circumstances in which it was written. This approach to reading, according to Lynch, was first advocated in the eighteenth century by Thomas Warton, who recommended the preservation and reading of obscure ballads and rare “black letter” books as a context for understanding Shakespeare. Warton suggested that we should “endeavor ‘to place ourselves in the writer’s situation and circumstances’” (Lynch 72), and this endeavour demands to be undertaken in humility, and in openness to the difference the text represents.

This form of reading requires acceptance of the fact that the context of Atwood’s early work was very different from the context of “CanLit,” or of feminism, today. As Nick Mount puts it in *Arrival*, “that Canada, or those people” were different from us (2). As the reception of *Arrival* has demonstrated, that difference can spark defensiveness, shame, hostility, and disgust in contemporary academic readers.<sup>4</sup> *Surfacing* (and the whole “CanLit” period of the 1970s) can here stand in for the canon of pre-contemporary English-Canadian writing, whose relentless whiteness, middle-class-ness, and realism can seem like an overwhelming endorsement of the status quo. Why should we read it? Why should we teach it? Does finding pleasure in reading *Surfacing* mean we embrace its exclusions, its politics, and its canonicity? I don’t think so, and this is why I emphasize *Surfacing*’s status as a historical book. Historical scholars, through an act of “labor and service,” extend themselves toward the otherness of the past; they attempt to open to the difference the text represents. Historical scholarship is thus always a performance of doubleness: the doubleness of the attempt to enter the subjectivity of the text’s original reader, and at the same time to inhabit the contemporary space of literary analysis. For me, in the case of *Surfacing*, this doubleness of historical reading is also an act of nostalgia and remembering that brings the pleasure of recognition: the person who read *Surfacing* for

the first time in 1975 at the age of nineteen is different from the person who writes this essay, but not so different as to be beyond the reach of memory. I want to treat that early me with gentleness and sympathy, but also to recognize her privilege, her blindness, and her intellectual limits.

Moreover I want to be careful in calling *Surfacing* historical, because I don't want to fall into the trap of reinforcing a limiting model of what the novel is, as well as what it represents. *Surfacing* is most often taught within the narrow confines of Mount's "CanLit," a period he defines as extending from the late 60s through the 70s, in which post-war affluence met the optimism of the Centennial celebration, resulting in a vast expansion of both the audience for, and the business of, literary publishing in Canada. Scholars who read *Surfacing* in the context of "CanLit" so defined usually evoke Atwood's own guide to Canadian literature, *Survival*, in order to place the novel in the context of this period's cultural nationalism and the thematics of survival and victimization, with a few obligatory mentions of Bhabha's "nation as narration" thrown in. The narrator's declaration, "This above all, to refuse to be a victim" (191), is then presented as the suggested resolution to the narrator's sense of fear, grief, and emotional betrayal, with various degrees of conviction. Read this way, *Surfacing* works, like most of Atwood's novels, as though it were a Chinese puzzle box, one whose intricate pattern of intrinsic symbols becomes obvious once the critic reveals the key that makes it spring open. Contextualizing the novel this way seems to "cover" the CanLit period in Canadian writing admirably for an undergraduate audience.

I would suggest that this approach to *Surfacing* is itself outdated, not only because the problems of Atwood's 1972 vision of Canadianness have become so obvious, but also because it plays into the hermeneutics of suspicion, and exerts a totalizing authority over the text in the service of its dismissal, as too white, too middle-class, too nationalist, and too self-consciously political to be aesthetically accomplished. Such dismissals, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues, "may have made it less rather than more possible to unpack the local, contingent relations between any given piece of knowledge and its narrative/epistemological entailments for the seeker, knower, or teller" (124). Under the current neoliberal order "no one need be delusional to find evidence of systemic oppression" (125) in every text we read; the question is not whether such texts are complicit in maintaining oppression, but whether, given that

all literary texts are complicit, we can find anything useful, anything beautiful, anything illuminating, anything recognizable, in texts whose politics we find outdated, dubious, or even abhorrent. Sedgwick refers to this process of reading as “reparative,” and associates it with the “depressive position” in Melanie Klein’s psychology. My attempt to rehabilitate the idea of recognition as a strategy for reading *Surfacing* emerges from depression, and asserts that depression may be the only position that the ethical reader can take up in the Anthropocene.

The idea of reading from depression perhaps sounds odd (or maybe not so odd, for anyone who has spent time on Twitter lately). The depressive position, as Sedgwick (via Klein) describes it, succeeds the paranoid position and replaces the latter’s energy of accusation, of outrage, of fear, and of enemies, with the passivity of what addicts call “rock bottom.” The depressive position is the place where the patient recognizes that flailing and fighting against an identified evil is achieving nothing but self-harm, and chooses instead to nurture the self in a partial re-engagement with a world that is always/already designated as hostile. As Ellis Hanson puts it, “Faced with the depressing realization that people are fragile and the world hostile, a reparative reading focuses not on the exposure of political outrages that we already know about but rather on the process of reconstructing a sustainable life in their wake” (105). Sedgwick advocated this reading practice late in her life, after she had been diagnosed with terminal cancer, and when she had turned to Buddhism as a way, as Hugh MacLennan put it so memorably, to “live” her death.<sup>5</sup> The term *reparative* should not be misunderstood as implying the evasion or dismissal of the politics of literature: instead, it is a way to name how one reads when one’s diagnosis is terminal, or when, as Hanson has described, communities of affiliation understand themselves to have no future. So perhaps it is an appropriate tool to engage with a culture that is inimical to human survival, a display of what my colleague Nicole Shukin has called “the art of dying,” a term she uses to describe an extraordinary and conscious engagement with the everyday in anticipation of the death that toxic capitalism has doomed us to. Reading for recognition can be part of this process, because it rejects the strictures of “strong theory” and allows readers to embrace the fragmentariness of their affective response, drawing attention to moments of pleasure and attachment as well as moments of critical self-awareness and revulsion.

Investigating the idea of literary recognition in *Surfacing* is difficult, because as academic critics we have very little data about the feelings of actual readers, beyond the reported experiences of critics and reviewers, among whom we count ourselves. One way is to focus on reading as a process of what Atwood calls “evocation” in her 1980 essay, “An End to Audience?” In this essay she makes the well-known assertions that serious literature is “the guardian of the moral and ethical sense of the community” (346) and that the author has a responsibility to bear witness to the world around her. But the effect of the writing on the reader is achieved, according to her, not by expression of personal experience but by its evocation in the reader: “of course all writing is based on personal experience, but personal experience is experience — wherever it comes from — that you identify with, *imagine*, if you like, so that it becomes personal to you” (342). She suggests that “what writing does for the reader” is evocation, or “calling up” both the world and language through the reading process, a process that “makes experience personal for others” (348). For Atwood, the reading process is transformational, the process of taking on the experiences of others in a gesture of openness and willingness to learn, even though the form of the resulting transformation is unpredictable: “The writer may be writing *for* other people in the sense of assuming a common language and a human brain at the other end of his activity, but not *for* in the sense of trying to ingratiate, flatter, harangue or manipulate” (345). Atwood’s description of the reading process as “making experience personal” seemingly relies upon the idea of recognition as central to the function of her fiction.

As literary scholars we have limited ways of discussing the experience of readers. There are ideal or implied readers, readers constructed by or anticipated by the text, and as Marta Dvorak notes, Atwood highlights the construction of such a reader in later works like *The Handmaid’s Tale*. But *Surfacing* does not construct an explicit subject position for the implied reader, and offers no metafictional rationale for the narrative. This seems to leave actual readers free to form affective attachments and affiliations at will, though in practice I think this process is limited by the reader’s willingness to accept three main characteristics of the text: the narrator’s syntactic and logical leaps; the idioms and ideological tropes of the time; and the analysis of gender roles that the narrator provides. The “voice,” the logic of the narration and its idioms, are what I find historical and specific: the cultural codes of human relationships



are what compel recognition for their historicity, their “otherness,” but also for the way that they evoke the present, and compel the sort of recognition that is also self-scrutiny.

“[I]nconsistency, incoherence, fragmentation, randomness, non-linearity, unpredictability, variety” (158) are the adjectives that Philip Kokotailo applies to the narration in *Surfacing*, characteristics that he suggests signal the novel’s relationship with the postmodernist critique of language. I might argue that this quality in the language, rather than being alienating, might actually engage a certain kind of reader; the intensity of concentration required creates the momentary loss of self-awareness that signals recognition. Joseph Boone writes of the “delirious process of surrender into otherness” (20) that good fiction inspires in him, aided by the concentration and attentiveness that literary language requires. The foregrounding of “the narrator’s phenomenological participation in the course of events” (Kokotailo 158), and its initial emphasis on present-tense verbs, also gives the narrative an urgency that is absorbing, like “writing to the moment” in eighteenth-century fiction.<sup>6</sup>

But while for Kokotailo, “the narrator’s own syntax reinforces [a] sense of fragmentation and randomness” (160), for me, the logic of the narrative seems, well, logical. Not only the syntax, but the cultural codes that govern the narrative seem familiar as hell: Anna’s white bell bottoms signifying her (inappropriate) concern for appearance on what is essentially a camping trip, the narrator’s fringed shoulder bag expressing her hippie practicality, the clinking sound of the bottles of beer in the duffle bags as they are swung aboard the motorboat foretelling an Ontario cottage vacation. The characters’ casual contempt for college communication courses, and those who take them, was a common element in the complacent upper-middle-class Toronto culture I grew up in. Even their ironic jokes and judgments — that a highway by-pass around a small city indicates “success” for the (presumably) contemptible sods who live there, for example — are easily deciphered. These codes prompt an experience that Felski calls “*self-intensification*. . . . typically triggered by a skillful rendition of the densely packed minutiae of daily life” (39). I have no doubt this is because I am an educated white woman of a certain age, who grew up in Ontario, and this subject position becomes something to be noted, and historicized. The ritual of smoking a cigarette on the dock; the smell of a summer cottage that’s been closed up for weeks; the gendered walk to the outhouse in

the dark; “recognizing aspects of ourselves in the description of others, seeing our perceptions and behaviors echoed in a work of fiction, we become aware of our accumulated experiences as distinctive yet far from unique” (39).

The rhythm of the internal narration, with its choppy sentence fragments and comma splices, is also familiar. When I first read the novel, it seemed to represent a person who spoke like me: too fast, too intense, too negative, and much too much for my family circle. If “[s]uch choppy rhythms correspond with and thereby emphasize the discontinuous and non-linear way in which the narrator tells her story” (160), as Kokotailo says, the insight that I recognized myself in the narrator’s internal voice prompts me to reflect that *Surfacing* is not a Canadian novel, but a central Canadian one, recognizable to a specific audience, me and people like me, who find the narrator’s speech natural (if emotionally intense). The narrator draws attention to the idioms of the time and place, remarking that they seem almost cliché: “I do . . . I do give a shit about you,” sounds “like a skipping rhyme” to her (87), while David’s repeated wisecracks about the “fascist pig Yanks” are so normalized as to become “virtue signalling.”<sup>7</sup> The narrator comments that for all their rhetoric of opposition, she and her friends are “the new bourgeoisie, this might as well be a Rec Room” (39). Who says “rec room” anymore? It’s family room, or entertainment room, or home theatre. These ways of speaking are what date the novel, but they are also a source of a group identity that, even when the novel was published, was circumscribed and somewhat illusory.

While *Surfacing* offers a variety of these sorts of opportunities for affective attachment and aesthetic absorption, other experiences of reader recognition may prompt critical self-scrutiny, or even alienation. The narrator’s shame at her inability to speak French, and even her inability to read the social cues in her interactions with her family’s neighbours, recalls the complex politics of Québec in the ’70s. In the aftermath of the October Crisis and the rise of the Parti Québécois, that particular kind of shame, the shame of complicity in the exclusion of the Québécois from Canadian prosperity, was felt as a personal failing as well as a social one, and for many, that failing was indicated by the inability to become fluent in Canada’s other official language. This source of shame, terrifically present for the readers of the 1970s, is almost nonexistent in the present moment, signalling the doubleness

of this historical perception. But the narrator's belated recognition of her participation in the colonial practices that deprived the local First Nation of income is a more recognizable source of shame for contemporary readers, and taints her pleasant memories of picking blueberries with her mother with a moment of critical self-awareness that operates to implicate both the narrator and, potentially, an invested and sympathetic reader.

The narrator's encounter with David in the bush in which he tries to pressure her into having sex prompts another potentially disturbing moment of recognition that is both absorbing and alienating. The narrator has returned to the cabin, overwhelmed by her recovered memories, and retreats down a private path alone to think. But David follows her, asserting that her attempt to find a private space to ponder was in fact an invitation to sex — "You wanted me to follow you" (151), he declares. Her inarticulate refusal of his demands prompts him to insult her, calling her a "tight-ass bitch" and "a little third-rate cold tail" (152), and to taunt her with the infidelity of her partner, Joe. This representation of the discourse of sexual encounter between straight people collapses the doubleness of historical scholarship, recalling the intensity of the current "#MeToo" movement. However, the almost laughably outmoded language of the encounter (such as "Come on now, don't give me hassle" and "You're a groovy chick, you know the score" [151]) seals it in the amber of the past, and prompts a doubled awareness that reminds readers that white feminist writers of the '70s, for all their faults and omissions, also engaged with issues of consent and harassment, even if the language was different. (And that's depressing.)

The narrator's encounter with David is only one example of the way heterosexual relationships are represented in the novel as negotiations of power rather than expressions of desire. David's cruel manipulation of his wife (and her covert retaliation), the narrator's confused remembrance of her relationship with her married art school instructor, her hurried visit to an illegal abortion clinic, and the resulting feelings of shame and self-loathing, are all related through patterns of imagery to war, death, colonialism, and vivisection. The narrator's eventual recognition of her complicity in this system recalls the "consciousness-raising" motive of many feminist works in this period, which strove to bring women readers to full consciousness of their complicity in their own subjection. The mechanism whereby the narrator recognizes herself in

her recovered memories provides a model for a parallel experience of reading: the overwhelming affective moment of critical self-recognition, the reader's recognition of her own alienation from her own body and her own feelings, her complicity in the system of gender relations that subjects her. But while for second-wave feminists, this recognition was supposed to be a precursor to action, for the narrator, this self-recognition leads not to action or even expressive speech, but to silence.

In an era in which feminism is frequently described as a consumer choice and a justification for career ambition, it's difficult to remember a form of feminism that consisted mainly of these kinds of passivities, refusals, and shameful silences. The narrator's refusal to participate in the various interpersonal scripts that she perceives are laid out for her, her determination to "surface" the feelings and experiences she has buried, and the moment of self-recognition that signals her "coming to consciousness" in the mode of second-wave feminism, all of this movement is internal: despite her ironic internal monologue, the narrator actually speaks very little, answering questions with monosyllables, and echoing the words of others. Her silence is even more noticeable because the narrative overflows with all the thoughts, experiences, and feelings she doesn't articulate. She didn't tell her parents what happened to her in the city, not even the sanitized version she has almost convinced herself to believe; she hasn't told Joe either, and doesn't until part way through the novel. She doesn't tell anyone about her suspicions about her father, or her distrust of her own memory. Her eventual rejection of language altogether seems almost reasonable, despite its characterization in the critical literature as mental illness; the narrator's breakdown, in which she rejects abstract thought and verbal communication, recalls the 1970s' characterization of hysteria as a "pre-political manifestation of feminism" (Mitchell, qtd. in Devereux 21) that communicated through the body a kind of resistance that could not be verbalized (Devereux 21).

Indeed, re-reading *Surfacing* in the light of Sara Ahmed's influential essay, "Happy Objects," illuminates the way the narrator's feminism is represented. Like most of Atwood's heroines, the narrator doesn't trust women, and is not interested in the sort of collective action that supposedly characterized "second-wave feminism." The narrator simply knows that everything feels wrong; she knows there are supposed to be specific feelings to accompany the present events and the past memories of her life, and she knows she doesn't feel them; in some cases, she feels

intensely emotions that she knows are inappropriate. She is Ahmed's "affect alien," a person who rejects the gendered script for her life and consequently cannot muster the appropriate feelings for the public celebrations and private rituals of community belonging. Her memories of her wedding (later revealed to be false) are accompanied by feelings of abandonment; her first encounter with her lover is passionless; she is alienated from the people she calls her friends, and angry when Joe proposes marriage. She knows what she is supposed to feel, and sometimes tries to fake it; but she doesn't feel it.

The narrator's reported inability to feel, and her sense of numbness at the beginning of the book, reinforces the idea of refusal as resistance (though this too is a kind of privilege, made possible by her middle-class status). Her hysterical break is characterized by her belief that everyone and everything human is inimical to her survival, a kind of global paranoia that makes her completely unable to act in human terms: eventually she comes to think of herself as a tree, and then a place, unable to move or think. Read through Sedgwick's framework, the narrator's eventual emergence from hysteria signals her shift from paranoia into the depressive position, and the novel ends as she expresses her willingness to remake whatever nurturing and simple bonds with the human world are possible, however partial. Read this way, the narrator's experience with language, and with the world, is recognizable as comparable to that of the reparative reader, who similarly has given up on the ability of "strong theory" to devise global explanations for her situation, and merely wants to live, as ethically as possible, under the circumstances.

*Surfacing* thus seems to be structured by various experiences of recognition: for the reader, moments of experiential allegiance and formal alignment, aesthetic absorption and critical self-knowledge; for the narrator, the eventual recognition of her own self-deception as well as her distorted memories. All of these experiences contribute to the climactic moment when the narrator comes to recognize her own complicity in the systems of power that subject her, primarily colonialism and sexism, but more generally the Manichean allegory of winners and losers, victors and victims. If, as Atwood argues in "An End to Audience?," reading evokes experience "that you identify with, *imagine*, if you like, so that it becomes personal to you" (342), then these fleeting moments of immersion, recognition, and critique may prompt readers to also understand themselves to be complicit in systems of gender and colonial oppression,

and like the narrator, wordless in the recognition of their own anger, sadness, and sense of betrayal. It may be that embracing the fragmentary experience of recognition, and consciously engaging with the experiential, pleasurable affects of reading, we can re-enter “the local, contingent relations” (Sedgwick 124) of the novel in a way that the “CanLit” script, with its victim positions and paranoias, closes down.

So why read *Surfacing* at all? Indeed why teach Atwood, and the rest of the canon of 1970s novels that seem to reinforce the whiteness and middle-class-ness of the hegemony that subjects us? And more importantly, why contribute to the incomes of their authors by assigning these books as course readings? A disciplinary “Canadianist” may feel a certain responsibility to “cover the field,” though I think Paul Martin’s research in *Sanctioned Ignorance* demonstrates pretty clearly that few still hold to this idea.<sup>8</sup> Especially when, as literature professors, we are well aware of the effects such novels have on Indigenous students and students of colour, trans or queer students in the absence of texts that are more recognizable. I am not sure there is a definitive answer to this question, an answer that I would be prepared to defend, in the sense of a principle or moral vision that guides me when I choose what to assign my classes. Such principles would fall into the realm of “strong theory,” I think, and would require the kind of energetic defense that closes down avenues of interpretation and recognition. I think I can learn, and teach, things about literature by reading this book, not the least of which is a form of critique that reveals the centering of white middle-class experience in Atwood’s work, and her evocation of issues of colonialism and sexualized violence. Someone else would choose a different book. But because of the way it evokes in me experiences of recognition and self-awareness, I would choose this one.

As the specific historical circumstances that allowed readers to recognize themselves in Atwood’s books retreat into the past, I would suggest that recognition might still provide an explanation for the way *Surfacing* operated to produce pleasure in readers, and a map for how it might become accessible to a new generation of readers. *Surfacing* is not important to me for its cultural nationalism, its thematic emphases, or its use of the “victim positions,” but for the way that its language, its conversational idioms, the rhythms of speech, and the cultural codes of the novel provide the pleasures of absorption and recognition. *Surfacing* also reminds me of what has not changed — in the representation of the

narrator's encounter with David, in its depiction of silence and refusal as feminist strategies, and in its evocation of the shame of complicity that prompts self-scrutiny. These aspects of the novel still resonate, even if the language and material circumstances are unfamiliar to contemporary readers. *Surfacing* can still be a book to like, even to love, if read from a position of depression, in the full knowledge that its politics may not be something we can wholly endorse, and with the willingness to make experience personal that Atwood describes. This is one way to nurture ourselves as readers and scholars, by moving past the hermeneutics of suspicion, and with the "scholars' self-abnegating identification with the poets whom they study" recommended by Thomas Warton (qtd. in Lynch 72), approaching the novel as an opportunity for reflection, recognition, and pleasure.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The extensive literature on the reader in fiction can only be suggested here; see, for example, Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader* (1974); Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin* (1967); Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance* (1991) and *A Feeling for Books* (1997); and Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo, *Reading Beyond the Book* (2013).

<sup>2</sup> William French (in *The Globe and Mail*) describes the heroine as representing "a certain type of contemporary woman — cool, uninvolved, unemotional" (30). Diane Johnson in *The Washington Post* called her a "bruised, sophisticated, 'modern' young woman with most of the usual chips on her shoulder" (B8). Tana Hoban notes in *The New York Times*: "Reviewing this novel on its publication in hard covers last year, Paul Delaney pointed out that in some respects it resembles Sylvia Plath's 'The Bell Jar'" (315).

<sup>3</sup> Felski discusses Taylor's idea of recognition and how it compares to literary recognition in *Uses of Literature*, pp. 25ff.

<sup>4</sup> *Arrival* sparked criticism and debate for its focus on white and central Canadian writers, and for its penchant for evaluation. See, for example, Rak, Metcalf, and Sutherland.

<sup>5</sup> This is a reference to MacLennan's novel *The Watch that Ends the Night* (1958); see pp. 362, 367, 373, and elsewhere.

<sup>6</sup> This term refers to the technique used by Samuel Richardson to suggest that the characters experience the events as they write. See Curran.

<sup>7</sup> "Virtue Signalling" is a contemporary expression that means, according to the *Urban Dictionary* website, "To take a conspicuous but essentially useless action ostensibly to support a good cause but actually to show off how much more moral you are than everybody else" (Verboy).

<sup>8</sup> Martin provides evidence gleaned from syllabi and from interviews with university teachers of Canadian Literature to demonstrate that most favour contemporary over historical texts.

## WORKS CITED

- Ahmed, Sara. "Happy Objects." *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, Duke UP, 2010, pp. 29-51.
- Atwood, Margaret. "An End to Audience?" *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose*, Anansi, 1982, pp. 334-57.
- . *The Burgess Shale: The Canadian Writing Landscape of the 1960s*. U of Alberta P, 2017.
- . *Surfacing*. McClelland and Stewart, 1972.
- . *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. Anansi, 1972.
- Berlant, Lauren. *The Female Complaint*. Duke UP, 2008.
- Boone, Joseph. *Libidinal Currents: Sexuality and the Shaping of Modernism*. U of Chicago P, 1998.
- Curran, Louise. "Letters, letter writing and epistolary novels." *Discovering Literature: Restoration & 18th Century*, 21 June 2018, The British Library, <https://www.bl.uk/restoration-18th-century-literature/articles/letters-letter-writing-and-epistolary-novels>.
- Devereux, Cecily. "Hysteria, Feminism, and Gender Revisited: The Case of the Second Wave." *English Studies in Canada*, vol. 40, no. 1, Mar. 2014, pp. 19-45.
- Dvorak, Marta. "'What's in a Name?': Readers as both Pawns and Partners, or Margaret Atwood's Strategy of Control." *Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale/Le Conte de la servante: The Power Game*, edited by Jacques Leclair and Jean-Michel Lacroix, Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 1998, pp. 79-99.
- Felski, Rita. *Uses of Literature*. John Wiley and Sons, 2011.
- Fish, Stanley. *Surprised by Sin*. Palgrave Macmillan, 1967.
- French, William. "Exhilarating: An All-Purpose Novel." Review of *Surfacing*, *The Globe and Mail*, 16 Sept. 1972, p. 30.
- Fuller, Danielle, and DeNel Rehberg Sedo. *Reading Beyond the Book*. Routledge, 2013.
- Hoban, Tana. Review of *Surfacing*. *The New York Times*, 11 Aug. 1974, p. 312.
- Hanson, Ellis. "The Future's Eve: Reparative Reading after Sedgwick." *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 110, no. 1, Winter 2011, pp. 101-19.
- Iser, Wolfgang. *The Implied Reader*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1974.
- Jennifer, aka EM. Review of *Surfacing*. *Goodreads*, 31 Dec. 2008, [www.goodreads.com](http://www.goodreads.com).
- Johnson, Diane. "Cultural Innocence in Canada." Review of *Surfacing*, *The Washington Post*, 19 Mar. 1973, p. B8.
- Kokotailo, Philip. "Form in Atwood's *Surfacing*: Toward a Synthesis of Critical Opinion." *Studies in Canadian Literature*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1983, pp. 155-65.
- Lynch, Deirdre. *Loving Literature: A Cultural History*. U of Chicago P, 2015.
- MacLennan, Hugh. *The Watch that Ends the Night*. MacMillan, 1958.
- Martin, Paul. *Sanctioned Ignorance: The Politics of Knowledge Production and the Teaching of the Literatures of Canada*. U of Alberta P, 2013.
- Metcalfe, John. "Origin of Species." *Canadian Notes and Queries*, Jan. 2018, [www.note-sandqueries.ca](http://www.note-sandqueries.ca).
- Mount, Nick. *Arrival: The Story of CanLit*. Anansi, 2017.
- Radway Janice. *Reading the Romance*. U of North Carolina P, 1991.
- . *A Feeling for Books*. U of North Carolina P, 1997.
- Rak, Julie. "Another Dumpster Fire: An Opinionated Review of *Arrival: The Story of CanLit* by Nick Mount." *Hook and Eye*, 16 Nov. 2017, [www.hookandeye.ca](http://www.hookandeye.ca).
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or You're so Paranoid You Probably Think this Essay is About You." *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Duke UP, 2003, pp. 123-51.
- Shelby. Review of *Surfacing*. *Goodreads*, 21 Feb. 2018, [www.goodreads.com](http://www.goodreads.com).



- Shukin Nicole. "The Biocapital of Living — and the Art of Dying — After Fukushima." *Postmodern Culture*, vol. 26, no. 2, Jan. 2016. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/pmc.2016.0009.
- Sutherland, Fraser. "A Fit of CanLit." *Canadian Notes and Queries*, Jan. 2018, [www.note-sandqueries.ca](http://www.note-sandqueries.ca).
- Verboy. "Virtue Signalling," *Urban Dictionary*, 18 Mar. 2016, [www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Virtue%20Signalling](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Virtue%20Signalling).