Nation, Genre, and the Poetics of Pax Americana: Atwood's Ustopian Fictions

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Abstract:

   As part of a project that compares unified world systems with the cultural development of nation-states through the taxonomy of pax periods, this paper focuses on Margaret Atwood's speculative dystopian Maddaddam trilogy (2003-2013). These novels are widely read and studied because they offer a credible global barometer of the (post)national response to the destruction wrought by Pax Americana's global liberal order. While Pax Americana is never mentioned in the novels, their setting in a dystopian near-future discloses the retreat of the national order in the face of biotechnologically engineered genocide facilitated, even encouraged, by global capitalism. In other words, the trilogy imagines the inevitable outcome of Pax Americana: a world system that brings about the destruction of first, social orders; second, the natural world; and finally, genocide. However, it is a peaceful world: while there are hints of a recent military conflict arising from global pandemic and environmental destruction generated by out-of-control pollution and global warming, peace has broken out. Focusing on *Oryx and Crake* (2003), the first novel in the trilogy, this paper argues that even in peace tensions and values that defined the modernity that took shape in Pax Americana persist. One of those tensions concerns the very nature of peace in Pax Americana: is the peace that has broken out merely the absence of armed conflict, or are there other reasons? Ghosting Atwood's dystopian future is a plea for a moral vigilance that ironically signals the potential of a cultural ethics that registers both a Pax Americana aversion to war and argues for a Pax Americana consolidation of a historically 'new' nation-state centered liberal capitalism. Pax Americana, the novel seems to say, creates both the conditions for its destruction and the interplay of novelistic, cultural, and political discourses for a new world system.

   Keywords: Peace, New Humanism, Dystopia, World Systems

This paper is part of a project that seeks to compare past attempts to produce unified world systems with the current nation-state order through the taxonomy of pax periods – periods of peace emerging from prolonged armed conflict, such as Pax Romana, Pax Britannica, and Pax Americana.[1] Not only do the pax periods allow a protracted mapping of human history, they can be analyzed temporally and spatially, with historical events tied to socio-cultural change and development on sliding scales of geographical, political, and intellectual import. As definable historico-spatial units, they also can be compared using relatively stable coordinates, including, for instance, the relation between social change and developments in narrative style, or between trends in migration and changes in religious aesthetics. Pax periods are also periods of influence: hegemonies that operate and effect change both within the geographically delimited pax area, in its influence on immediate neighbors, and as historically significant instigators of cultural, political, social, and economic change.

The project's other reason for concentrating on pax periods is that they allow comparisons of characterizations of peace and the development of national cultures. More specifically, the significance and cultural resonance of a pax period both depends on and shapes how peace is defined or manifested in the national imaginary. The session's title, "Peace, Global Blues and National Songs", tasks presenters to map onto a pax period contemporary tensions produced by spatio-temporal hegemonies, and to relate how the cultural productions of a national people – either self-fashioned in the historical moment, or retroactively imagined – respond to the pax hegemony. In other words, peace refers to the pax period, global blues to the hegemonic spread of a pax power, and national songs are the ways in which a people articulate their relationship to the pax period. The focus on peace forces us to think again about the meanings of peace: Is peace simply the absence of armed conflict? Is it the ideal of a cultural area that emerges in a pax period's religion or social order? Is it defined by social and political stability within the pax region, which in turn requires military control of surrounding areas that may disrupt that peace? Is peace really attainable, or does it flicker as an anomalous respite, or bulk as an aspiration in the hearts of those struggling to recover from the wars that shape their realities? Nor-

mally, the humanities focuses on conflict, instability, difference, and, well, war. Focusing on peace presents us with an unfamiliar perspective from which to discuss how a culture shapes its imaginary and responds to those of other times and places.

Given the scope of this project, each intervention must necessarily narrow its focus. This paper discusses Margaret Atwood's science or speculative dystopian fictions – *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), the Maddaddam trilogy (2003-2013),[1] and *The Testaments* (2019) – because they are 1) internationally popular, widely read and studied texts, and 2) because their topical focus is, in my view, partially if not largely responsible for their popularity, thus they offer a credible global barometer of the paper's claims. I will address the matter of popularity later. Prior to that, I will discuss Atwood's science or speculative dystopian fictions as her 'global blues', written/sung as her (post)national response to the destruction wrought by a globalized Pax Americana. While Pax Americana is never mentioned in the novels, their setting in a near-future of postnational upheaval laments the retreat of the national order in the face of biotechnologically engineered genocide facilitated, even encouraged, by global capitalism. In other words, the trilogy imagines the inevitable outcome of Pax Americana: a world system that brings about the destruction of first, social orders; second, the natural world; and finally, genocide.

But it is a peaceful world – or rather, peace has broken out because a recent catastrophic military conflict, arising from global pandemic and environmental destruction generated by out-of-control pollution and global warming, has exhausted any purpose or capacity for war. What persists, however, are tensions and values that defined the modernity that took shape in Pax Americana. One of those tensions concerns the very nature of peace in Pax Americana: is the peace that has broken out merely the absence of armed conflict, or are there other reasons? As for the former, political scientist John Mueller maintains that the long, international peace that lasted from 1945 to 1984 marks not the decline of warlike behavior thanks to "a US-led 'world order'" or Pax Americana (Mueller, 2020); rather, it is due to "the rise of an aversion to international war" (Mueller, 2020) birthed in Europe in the

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[1] The trilogy consists of *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009), and *Maddaddam* (2013).

aftermath of World War I, and strengthened after World War II. Thus, rather than the US-led development of institutions and economic structures *causing* international peace, these were established as a *consequence* of aversion to large-scale war. To be sure, these institutions no longer exist in the trilogy, yet the values that uphold them seem to.

A different take is offered by another political scientist, Mark T. Berger. He argues that Pax Americana persists because it is wholly unlike Pax Romana, the pax period to which it is often – mistakenly, in Berger's view – compared. According to Berger, "The rise and power of the United States, especially after 1945, can only be understood when it is firmly linked to the universalization and ongoing efforts to consolidate the nation-state system against the backdrop of the victory of 'genuinely existing' liberal capitalism" (Berger, 2009). This largely economistic world order looks likely to persist, argues Berger, as there are no serious systemic challenges to US-style liberal capitalism. Assuming a relationship between liberal capitalism, social order, and cultural production, this paper will argue that ghosting Atwood's dystopian future is a plea for a moral vigilance that ironically signals the potential of a cultural ethics that both registers a Pax Americana aversion to war and argues for a Pax Americana consolidation of a historically 'new' nation-state centered liberal capitalism. Diana Brydon (2006) sets the paper's parameters by observing that in *Oryx and Crake*, "Crake [one of the protagonists; it is he who has engineered genocide through pharmacologically delivered genetic destruction]... has destroyed one world and set another in motion". The dystopian future seems destined, yet the novel concludes with hint of hope: "the world is in need of a global ethic, one that can align discourses of human rights with those of responsibilities, and human endeavours in the sciences with those in the arts" (Brydon, 2006). In short, Pax Americana creates both the conditions for its destruction and the interplay of novelistic, cultural, and political discourses for a new world system. Thus it is that Atwood calls these works 'ustopias', a word she coined in order to capture that utopia and dystopia "each contains a latent version of the other" (Atwood, 2011). Atwood's ustopias present an ironic 'end of history': the neoliberal order is both agent of its own destruction, and its rebirth.

For the remainder of my paper, I'll concentrate on *Oryx and Crake*, the first of the Maddaddam trilogy. *Oryx and Crake* tells the story of Crake's bioengineered destruction through the eyes of Jimmy, also known as

Snowman, in a series of flashbacks which allows comparison of the years preceding the near wipeout of humanity and Snowman's resulting struggle to survive the aftermath. His flashbacks tell the story of how Crake, a young, brilliant though emotionally scarred science wunderkind, initiates global genocide through a pill called BlyssPluss, which promises health, happiness and sexual fulfillment while also causing sterilization and spreading a pandemic-inducing virus. It is a dark joke that of course everyone would want such a pill, thus unwittingly guaranteeing their demise.

It should be clear that I'm using Pax Americana as a rough synonym for a US-centered globalized neoliberal, postindustrial order in which other nation states are branch plant economies, providers of cheap labor, and suppliers of raw materials. The world before genocide is controlled by multinational corporations, walled communities, and genetically engineered hybrid creatures. Culture has been superseded by technology, represented in the novel by the luxuriously appointed Watson-Crick Institute, an updated version of MIT where Crake is educated to think of art as pointless because it "serves no biological purpose" and a delusion because it is nothing more than an elaborate mating dance (Atwood, 2003). Jimmy, on the other hand, is enrolled at the crumbling and underfunded Martha Graham Academy, a vision of what happens to the humanities in a STEM-centric world, where less capable students are taught to channel any artistic or creative energies into utilitarian courses on web design, advertising, and propaganda for the bio-industry. In its reflection of our contemporary world, this split between science/technology/power and language/art/subservience figures throughout the Maddaddam trilogy.

All of the Pax Americana identifications having empirical, scientific, historical or geographic referents is important for Atwood's speculative ustopias for, as she claims, science fiction is about "things that could not possibly happen", while speculative fiction is about "things that really could happen but just hadn't completely happened when the authors wrote the books" (Atwood, 2011). The trilogy's ethical credibility rests on the recognizable pre – and post-apocalypse American settings (although as the trilogy progresses, geographies do become less identifiable). We more acutely feel and understand that that the terrain is that of Pax Americana's self-immolation, and that the loss is the Promethean result of the overreach of that nation's biotechnical industry, its culture of seductive marketing creating patterns of passive consumption, its necessary exacerbations of inequality

and colonization of political and gendered bodies, and, crucially, the online consolidation and spread of the technologies, language, and values.

But there is more to the significance of the real in the trilogy because of what it suggests about the place of literature in the Pax Americana cultural imaginary, in particular how it is crisscrossed by literary fame, literary authority, and genre in mobilizations of and resistance to brave new worlds of digital connectivity, climate crises, bio-technological overreach, and posthuman social orders.

Looking at the literary side of the relationship, Atwood claims that science fiction emerges as a kind of alternative or replacement mythos to religious or theologically based mythologies. In his discussion of T. S. Eliot's 1923 review in *The Dial* of Joyce's *Ulysses*, Peter Nicholls (1995) highlights Eliot's preoccupations with how the novel's mythical parallels invoke "an *external* principle of order" outside of history. Eliot also sees the use of myth as part of a "search for 'authenticity' in the modernist aesthetic" (Coates, 2010) arising from anxiety over an anarchic modernity "lacking in any sense of direction" (Nicholls, 1995). Atwood professes something similar, writing in *In Other Words: SF and the Human Imagination* that "Heaven and Hell... have gone to Planet X... They've gone there because they're acceptable to us there, whereas they wouldn't be here. On Planet X they can take part in a plausible story – plausible, that is, within its own otherworldly parameters" (2011). Atwood thus advances science or speculative fiction as a narrative space for a new genesis myth arising from Pax Americana's anarchic post– or late modernity. Moreover, it has a weight of authority that outstrips previous literary invocations of external order. Atwood, it seems, has taken note of Eric Rabkin's claim that science fiction is "quite naturally the most influential cultural system in a time like ours, in which dominant technological change constantly provokes hope, fear, guilt, and glory" (2004). Rabkin has done some data-crunching that shows the kinds of stories most substantially reprinted are satire and dystopia, thus "It seems as if . . . if one hopes to make a lasting contribution, one is best advised to write a dystopian satire" (2004).

But again, ustopia foregrounds the ideas that inside every utopia lurks a dystopia and vice versa. Pax Americana, similarly, contains both. It has spread digital connectivity, climate crises, bio-technological overreach, and posthuman social (dis)orders. But it also engenders the cultural system within which Atwood can speculate about a new kind of posthuman authen-

ticity based on an ethics of nature. Yet, it can also be seen as a kind of neo-pastoralism comprised of 'older' humanistic notions of subjectivity and spirituality; and like traditional or Romantic pastoralism, it registers the threat posed by humanity.

We can see this most clearly with the Crakers, the humanoid species bio-engineered by Crake to replace humans, live sustainably with nature and peacefully with each other. Conflict is a concept they cannot understand, and like bio-Buddhists they feel no desire, particularly sexual desire, thus eliminating, in Crake's words, "'needless despair... caused by a series of biological mismatches,'" therefore "'no more sexual torment'" so "'You'd never want someone you couldn't have'" (Atwood, 2003). But desire creeps in through their exposure to the language of a remaining human, Jimmy, aka Snowman. The Crakers gradually get hooked on Snowman's story-telling, and happily supply him with fish and other foodstuffs in acts evocative of worship. Snowman, by exploiting their naivety, is humanizing the Crakers, opening the door to doubt (over sex, property, pride, etc.).

But if the story-telling scenes suggest the inevitability of conflict, they also suggest the ambivalent role of language. As the novels progress, the Crakers' doubts and anxious questioning increase. The stories, though they are perfunctorily told to the Crakers by each of the trilogy's human protagonists (Snowman, then Toby and the Craker Blackbeard in the later volumes) in an attempt to calm anxieties and deflect questions, inadvertently become a forbidden fruit. Equally true, however, is that the Crakers come to rely on these stories to supply them with an identarian narrative, underscoring Atwood's belief in literature as a primary discourse of knowledge and aesthetic experience. With the power these stories have over the Crakers, Atwood signals that she's too much of a liberal humanist to abandon the idea that novels can have social impact, or that literature can both represent and inspire agency and action, and that 'literariness' indexes seriousness. That the story-tellers often resort to manipulative, self-serving versions of history suggests Atwood's awareness that literary works "have effectively lost their category distinction" as aesthetic artefacts in a corporate world where entertainment, information and celebrity have been blurred together (Liu, 2004). As Liu believes, "Literature as traditionally understood no longer survives as an autonomous force," thus the literary searches "for a new idiom and role" (2004). These stories inhabit a new idiom and role: aesthetics become a secondary concern as the stories are meant to teach the Crakers about life and

nature, but also to clarify for the human story-tellers what their new role will be in the post-apocalyptic world. Thus these stories also recall those roles and idioms stories have always served, myth in particular, thus reaffirming the power of the literary while also altering its range of force. Stories serve an elemental purpose in human development, while also initiating and perpetuating a circle of doubts and questions that call for more stories. Though they are contained in a novel, these stories argue that literature in any form can no longer be a 'national' aesthetic product or an object of scholarly study. Their scope is eschatological, addressing the possibility of the erasure of the historical present and future in a singularity – i.e. the destruction of the planet, and thus the human race, by the human race.

In that sense Atwood writes a kind of speculative ethnography of the future, one in which the remaining humans struggle to construct some sort of post-apocalyptic, post-modern humanism that combines pastoralist communalism, barter, cooperative living, animistic religion, non-romantic 'open' relationships, queerness, etc. Despite their efforts, however, the humans carry too much baggage from the past (essentially the opposite of the above list, particularly in the matter of romantic-sexual attraction). Their eventual failure reactivates the binary separation of nature and culture characteristic of Pax Americana's normalization of a Cartesian humanism expressing its mastery through capitalistic resource exploitation. Thus, peace for humans is out of the question: conflicts over territorial and resource control still require violent resolution (which we see at the end of the trilogy), and there is never any peace of mind.

To conclude, I want to situate the moves Atwood makes with this trilogy, specifically how Atwood the literary novelist, known for her realist/naturalist representations of Canada's landscape and sociality, becomes an internationally popular science/speculative fiction writer – moves that negotiate the tensions between literariness and popularity in the cultural landscape of Pax Americana. Given her status as a literary author, becoming a popular 'genre' writer requires Atwood to traverse the cultural politics of genre distinction and nationalism without surrendering any authority. How effectively Atwood straddles the border between literary and genre or popular fiction can be seen in a recent *Guardian* article. Atwood, the article claims, is "arguably the most famous living literary novelist in the world and unarguably one of the most prolific," adding that "Atwood's writing is –

unfailingly – a pleasure to read. She is one of the all-time great storytellers, a truth sometimes obscured by her highbrow reputation... When it comes to making you want to know what happens next, Atwood is up there with Stephen King and JK Rowling" (Freeman, 2022). Atwood knows well that "there is still often a certain stuffiness attached to perceptions of the more popular and easily marketable end of literary production" (Gupta, 2009), an atmosphere lingering from the presumption that literary and artistic work should in principle be indifferent to commercialization. This is echoed in the way academic work traditionally justified itself "as developing knowledge for social benefit and in terms of the integrity of its internal rationale" (Gupta, 2009). Literary fiction looks down on 'low culture' and 'popular culture' as lacking sufficient seriousness or quality. Atwood takes dead aim at this status anxiety, particularly its roots in the waning of literature in the cultural and commercial spheres. But she doesn't simply ridicule this anxiety: she shares it – she is, after all, a literary author and public intellectual of sorts. She instead fashions a new role for the literary author, straddling 'highbrow' literariness and pop-culture aesthetics. Thus it is that the aforementioned *Guardian* article is accompanied by an Atwood fashion shoot complete with designers' names and shops where you can buy these items so that you too can dress like a famous author.

There is of course more to say about the ethics of genre and Atwood's representations of science, materiality, and gender. As Coral Ann Howells (2006) argues, in echo of Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Atwood seeks to disrupt and invert the border between masculinist discourses of science and reason and feminist discourses of art, emotion and imagination as a challenge to the literary canon's overwhelmingly male authorship. Overall, however, though there remains an underlying grimness, Atwood's dystopian fictions express the moral compass of Pax Americana's liberal order. The power of her speculative fictions is that they not only capture Pax Americana's potential for genocide and salvation, they also leave no doubt of the psychic costs of the former and the humanism required to achieve the latter.