

**“I’m a refugee from the past”: The Function of Nostalgia in Margaret
Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale***

Asami Nakamura

Introduction

Notably, Margaret Atwood prefers to call her future-oriented novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), “speculative fiction” rather than “science fiction.” This genre statement originates from her sense of necessity to distinguish them in terms of the probability of the world presented in a story. Atwood explains this by using examples as follows:

What I mean by “science fiction” is those books that descend from HG Wells’s *The War of the Worlds*, which treats of an invasion by tentacled Martians shot to Earth in metal canisters—things that could not possibly happen—whereas, for me, “speculative fiction” means plots that descend from Jules Verne’s books about submarines and balloon travel and such—things that really could happen but just hadn’t completely happened when the authors wrote the books (*In Other Worlds* 6)

The probability of a prediction is, however, dependent on perspectives of the author and readers. In other words, the question regarding whether a fiction belongs to the realm of the possible or the impossible remains open-ended. Yet Atwood’s point seems to be that a world narrated in speculative fiction has to be mostly consisted of elements which have already (partly) come into existence in the past, thus assuming a form of prediction or cautionary tale more explicitly than science fiction in general. Speculative fiction and science fiction are in this sense placed on the spectrum between the possible and the impossible; the boundary between the two ultimately remains obscure. Atwood elaborates on this aspect:

For me, the science fiction label belongs on books with things in them that we can’t yet do, such as going through a wormhole in space to another universe; and speculative fiction means a work that employs the means already to hand, such as DNA identification and credit cards, and that takes place on Planet Earth. But the terms are fluid. (“Aliens Have Taken the Place of Angels” n. pag.)

Speculative fiction demands its content of reasoning to be something “already to hand”; a cautionary tale such as *The Handmaid’s Tale* thus provides the acute sense of urgency in avoiding an oppressive future.

Such nature of speculative fiction indeed foregrounds the relationship between prediction and history. Although he does not differentiate speculative fiction and science fiction, the following claim by Adam Roberts is pertinent here:

SF does not project us into the future; it relates to us stories about our present, and more importantly about the past that has led to this present. Counter-intuitively, SF is a *historiographic* mode, a means of symbolically writing about history” (Roberts 35)

Roberts indicates that prediction in science fiction is deeply connected with history or nostalgia, in the sense that a prediction is done through extrapolation from things and events in the past. Atwood focuses on past things and events in creating her future world, in order to make her prediction more plausible. It should be noted here that the future is something embedded in the past, and Atwood’s task is to (re-)discover it, not to create it.

In dystopian fiction, as will be discussed later, such nostalgic tendency can be detected on the level of form as well as on the level of content; the past serves as a place for hope. Although Atwood admits her indebtedness to other major dystopian novels such as Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We* (1921) and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1931), I would like to draw a parallel between Atwood and Orwell in particular because of the similarity in their treatment of the theme of nostalgia, which culminates in their dystopian fiction. In an essay on Orwell, Atwood refers to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) as “a direct model” of her dystopian novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which was published in 1985 (*In Other Worlds* 145). Meanwhile, for both authors, exploration of the theme of nostalgia precedes that of dystopia. Ten years before the publication of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell wrote a novel about nostalgia titled *Coming Up for Air* (1939), whereas Atwood dealt with the same theme in a novel, *Surfacing* (1972), which was published thirteen years before *The Handmaid’s Tale*.¹ Both are first-person narratives about the experience of coming home, and the similarity of the titles is somewhat striking. In both novels, the narrators struggle to find a consolation for the current situation, which is lacking something indispensable to their life. The longing for home is presented as a strategy for reconfirming identity and thus empowering the self,

although its consequence is shadowed by the impossibility inherent in such longing, that is, the unattainability of the past. In dystopias by Orwell and Atwood, the past is presented as a place for hope which has the potential to offer the protagonist a counter-authoritative position, although Atwood takes this motif more critically than Orwell. While referring to Orwell's novels at some points, this article is primarily based on Atwood's work, and by assessing the thematic continuation between *Surfacing* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, it will investigate the relationship between nostalgia and dystopia.

The Concept of Nostalgia

The word "nostalgia"—a combination of the Greek *nostos* (returning home) and *algia* (pain) — literally means a deeply felt yearning for one's own home. When the term was coined by a Swiss physician Johannes Hofer in 1688, it was used to denote medical symptoms from which Swiss soldiers were suffering during their deployment in France. Although nostalgia in this sense seemingly means homesickness, the concept now carries multiple valences, rendering it a complex locus of signification. Throughout history, the meaning of "home" in the definition of nostalgia has been expanded from a mere location to a more temporal dimension; it is not only a place, but can also be the past or, for example, one's childhood. Nostalgia can be a way temporarily to escape from the turmoil of the present life, which can be a consolation by reconfirming one's origin, or a way "to revivify [one's] connection to one's childhood" (Hemmings 4). This is more so when the aspect of "home" is emphasised, or when nostalgia is regarded as that which provides "a sense of comfort and familiarity," an ephemeral, dream-like experience of repossessing the past (Malpas 163).

This home-oriented nostalgia ranges from wallowing in the memory of trivial things to more actively engaging in selective memory, which tends to limit itself to "a single plot," or "the restoration of origins" (Boym 43). Nationalism is an example for this, in that nationalist, or "the Golden Age" arguments present themselves as an authentic account of the targeted period, hiding its nature as a mere projection from the present and ignoring the discontents (in terms of race, sexuality, class, the environment etc.) which existed at that time. Svetlana Boym categorises nostalgia into two "tendencies," namely, "restorative nostalgia" and "reflective nostalgia" (Boym 41). The following passage summarises the difference: "While restorative nostalgia returns and rebuilds one homeland with paranoic determination, reflective nostalgia fears returning with the same passion" (Boym 354). The

latter instead engages with “[choosing] the narratives of the past and remake them” (Boym 354). Here, “Restorative nostalgia” is presented as “a social disease” and “reflective nostalgia” “a creative emotion” (354). Jeff Malpas, however, disagrees with Boym’s categorisation, claiming that what Boym calls “restorative nostalgia” is by definition not nostalgia, but should be called “*mythophilia*—a longing not for what is remembered, but for what is known only through retelling, through story and myth” [emphasis in original] (Malpas 169). Malpas’s contention seems to be that a yearning for an imaginary home should strictly be differentiated from that of nostalgia, which is directed for one’s home lived in the past. With regard to this point, Malpas himself admits that “memory and imagination stand in such a close relation to one another” (179), and in this sense it seems to be that the object of nostalgia can still be (partly) imaginary. Yet what makes *mythophilia* distinct from nostalgia is that the object of longing in this case is a certain idea of what home *should be*, rather than home itself which is based on one’s lived experience; the issue is that *mythophilia* often disguises itself as nostalgia by positing something ideal as “lost.” Although *mythophilia* is, strictly speaking, not a sub-category of nostalgia, it is thus inevitable that such form of longing has to be discussed in the analysis of nostalgia.

Some types of nostalgia and *mythophilia* which can be seen in Atwood’s novels will later be presented as working models for exploring various aspects of nostalgia. The nature of nostalgia itself, however, has to be elaborated here to some extent in order to clarify this article’s take on the concept. The first question is: does nostalgia occur on the level of consciousness or the unconscious? The act of recollecting belongs to the former. Yet at the same time, nostalgia is something which conjures up one’s memories, catching the subject by surprise. In other words, we cannot choose to be nostalgic. In this meaning nostalgia is the working of the unconscious. Nostalgia is therefore characterised by this bimodality, an interplay of feeling and action. In addition to this, the fundamental nature of nostalgia can further be explored when it is observed from Heidegger’s theorisation of boredom in his 1929-30 lecture (this is collected in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*). The following quote is helpful for examining the nature of nostalgia:

The thing can ultimately be boring only because the attunement already plays around it. It does not cause the boredom, yet nor does it receive it merely as something attributed by the subject. In short: boredom—and thus ultimately every attunement—is a hybrid, partly objective, partly subjective (88)

At first, it seems that nostalgia is remote from boredom; the former denotes desire and the latter the inability of it. What both concepts have in common, however, is their nature as “a hybrid” of the objective and the subjective. Nostalgia and boredom are not an inherent attribute of a certain object, yet at the same time, they are not entirely a product of the subjective. The analysis of nostalgia therefore cannot be a mere psychoanalytic reading of the text. In order to capture this double nature of nostalgia, this article will aim to elaborate on the function of the notion in the novels by looking at how dystopian fiction reveals it in its manifold representations.

Surfacing

Although Atwood’s *Surfacing* is often regarded as a manifestation of Canadian nationalism,² the narrator’s sense of nostalgia is far from consoling or comforting. The narrator travels from America to Canada in order to search for her missing father, or “her missing memories, which will prove the key to her past and to her true self” (Tolan 41). Yet it gradually turns out to be “an attempt to escape into isolation and innocence”, especially from the trauma of being forced to have an abortion in America (Tolan 41). It should be noted here that it is actually the sense of nostalgia itself which is longed for from the beginning of the novel. “Now I’m in the village, walking through it, waiting for the nostalgia to hit [...] but nothing happens” (*Surfacing* 14). What the narrator seems to yearn for is the home that can offer her the sense of origin and comfort, which would heal her trauma. Yet something seems inhibiting her from wallowing in nostalgia. For instance, when she realized that the old road to the village is now closed, she panics about this change, insisting that her father “shouldn’t have allowed them to do it” (*Surfacing* 8). She cannot accept the change, but at the same time, she desperately tries to suppress her own negative feeling: “if it hurts invent a different pain. I’m all right” (8). Likewise, for the narrator, returning home *should not* be easy; she is in some way haunted by the idea of suffering: “I can’t really get here unless I’ve suffered” (11). In this way, *Surfacing* depicts the very inability of nostalgia and one’s longing for nostalgia itself. Meanwhile, the narrator remarks as follows when the village comes into full view from the lake, which complicates the problem even more: “The feeling I expected before but failed to have comes now, homesickness, for a place where I never lived, I’m far away” (*Surfacing* 26). The narrator’s family in fact used to live in a place secluded from the village, across the lake. Her homesickness is here displaced to the village, highlighting the uncertainty of home. Does this mean there is something traumatic about her actual home, or

is it more related to her traumatic abortion later in her life? Here, it seems necessary to focus on the concept of trauma, which may provide the key to this problem.

The term *trauma* is a Greek word meaning wound.³ Cathy Caruth defines it as “the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena” (Caruth 91). For the narrator in *Surfacing*, the memory of abortion is still vivid enough to the extent that she feels it is happening here and now.⁴ Meanwhile, the concept of nostalgia also signifies one’s *present* longing for the past. In this sense, it could be said that both trauma and nostalgia are characterized by the presentness of the past. In *Surfacing*, the narrator tries to believe that returning home would provide her with the sense of security and helps rearranging her shattered identity, only to realise that she is locked in the eternal present of repetition compulsion. The traumatic experience casts a shadow over the narrator’s past as a whole, making her unable to idealise her childhood. She is emotionally numb, displaced, now belonging in somewhere beyond feelings and longings, even pain.

The Handmaid’s Tale

While focusing on the relationship between trauma and nostalgia in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, I shall examine representations of nostalgia detected in the novel by employing the following types: forbidden nostalgia, mythophilia and inhibited nostalgia. Forbidden nostalgia indicates how a dystopian regime attempts to prohibit an individual’s feeling of nostalgia, which is considered as a potential threat to authority. As discussed above, the second, mythophilia, is technically not nostalgia, but strongly related to (and misunderstood as) it. Symptoms of mythophilia range from discourses such as “return to nature” and “Golden Age,” and they usually invent some essential value as something has been lost and must be regained. The third, inhibited nostalgia, is an ambivalent state of being where one’s yearning for the past is blocked by trauma or (compulsively) critical attitudes against the past, which can be seen in the above discussion of *Surfacing*. This typifying of nostalgia, or analysis of discourses regarding the notion, is utilised to articulate varying aspects of nostalgia found in *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

Prefiguring the importance of the theme of nostalgia, *The Handmaid’s Tale* in fact starts with the narrator’s reflection of life in the past: “We slept in what had once been the gymnasium” (HT 3). Two components of this opening line, the activity (sleep) and the tense

(the past perfect), produce defamiliarising effects, which become more vivid through the narrator's reflection of what a gymnasium used to be in the past; it used to be a place for activities such as sports and dance parties, and have the potential to be a hiding place for adolescent sexual relationships (*HT* 3). Under the state of emergency, however, these characteristics of a gymnasium disappear; it seems that the place is now used as a temporary accommodation, and the narrator and other women are in fact coerced to sleep while female officers are patrolling with cattle prods. The place now serves more as a prison, and the sense of stasis and the lack of freedom and privacy make a vivid contrast with various kinds of activities and the sense of intimacy which the same place was characterised with. In regards to this change narrated in the first chapter, Qiuyi Tan points out the narrator's "reference to the end of all the colours, smells, textures, and sounds of the rich physical life," rendering the place a space of control and stasis (102). As is gradually revealed in the later part of the novel, the gymnasium now operates as part of the Rachel and Leah Centre (also called "Red Centre") under the regime called Gilead, where women are imprisoned and trained to be "Handmaids." There is already a sense of resignation in the following sentence: "We yearned for the future. How did we learn it, that talent for insatiability?" (*HT* 4). Its nostalgic undertone is also highlighted by the narrator's self-questioning regarding the longing for the future which people took for granted but are no longer allowed to have. The object of nostalgia here is not particular things, but rather the sense of the future, or the past future, "something that was always about to happen and was never the same" as she had imagined it to be (*HT* 3). It should be noted that a certain degree of ambivalence can be observed here about this desire for the future that she currently longs for; it is imbued with her sober realisation that expectation is always meant to be betrayed, if not ruined.

The narrative is set around the beginning of the twenty-first century, soon after a military group called "Sons of Jacob" took over the government of the United States through *coup d'état* and declared the establishment of The Republic of Gilead. The narrator is one of the Handmaids, those who have been enslaved to serve as a surrogate mother on behalf of the sterile Wives of the Commanders. Her name is Offred, a pseudonym used to indicate that she is currently appointed to, or serves as a possession of the Commander Fred. The background of the foundation of Gilead is marked by the fall in pregnancy rate, which had apparently been caused by environmental contamination through nuclear, chemical and biological substances, and sexually transmitted diseases such as syphilis and AIDS. The founders of Gilead also contend that the expansion of women's rights and the promotion of contraception

and abortion significantly contributed to the decline of (Caucasian) birth-rates (*HT* 304, 112). As for the political form, Gilead is a theocracy exploiting the Bible as the basis for a fertility cult. Although sufficient food and hygienic shelter are provided to the Handmaids, they are only for the sake of keeping their bodies fit for reproduction; they are perceived by society as “two-legged wombs” (*HT* 156), with their subjectivity stripped away. The Handmaids are forced to wear a red dress/uniform, which is also called “habit” (*HT* 24); this symbolises their strictly regulated daily habits and duty to participate in ceremonies/ activities, the most important of which is the ceremony of insemination.

As is summarised in a slogan in Oceania in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*—“Who controls the past [...] controls the future: who controls the present controls the past” (Orwell 37), the time before dystopia must be repressed so that the current regime can present itself as absolute. With this regard, Theo Finigan aptly indicates that both *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* are “centrally concerned with dominating their subjects through the control of their experience of time, memory, and history” (435). People are denied accessing past information and knowledge, and are also forbidden to express personal memory (cf. the Handmaids are forbidden to read or write). For instance, one day in the kitchen, Offred smells freshly baked bread, and to her it is “a nostalgic smell,” reminding her of her mother’s kitchen and her own before Gilead (*HT* 47). Yet she immediately comes to herself, realising that “This is a treacherous smell, and [she] know[s] [she] must shut it out” (*HT* 47). Sensations like smell often conjure up memories in an unexpected manner, yet Offred self-censures such nostalgia for her survival. Nostalgia here is regarded as subversive, in that it is a threat to Gilead due to its potential to abrogate the absolute status of the current regime.

Such subversive aspect of nostalgia in dystopian society, however, is often employed rather simplistically as a tool for resistance against authority. Chris Ferns indicates that “the past, in its turn, becomes the main source of the values in comparison with which dystopian society is judged and found wanting,” even to the degree that “[u]ltimately, the subversiveness of an interest in the past lies not in the implications of any specific piece of information, but rather in the fact that there was a past at all” (119). For example, Winston in Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* believes that collecting antique objects itself constitutes a resistance, and his obsession with the past is so profound that he starts inventing the idea of “ancestral memory”; an antique-filled room upstairs of Mr Charrington’s junk-shop “awaken[s] in [Winston] a sort of nostalgia, a sort of ancestral memory” (Orwell 100, also see 63). Winston cannot help but use the word “ancestral”, because he does not remember the life

before Oceania. Here, the past is the object of fantasy as an antithesis to the current dismal social conditions, and Winston's mode of yearning should rather be called mythophilia than nostalgia (examples for this kind can also be seen in Zamyatin's *We* and Huxley's *Brave New World*⁵). This seems reasonable if we posit that dystopian fiction is about the inability of imagining a better future. This is the point where the concept of nostalgia firmly ties in with dystopian fiction, a genre which depicts how the future itself is stifled from imagination and the past appears to be the only place which could allow one to obtain a coherent sense of individuality.

In contrast to this, Offred's nostalgia is marked by its sober realisation of the impossibility of regaining the past. Recollecting her militant feminist mother, Offred laments in despair: "I want her back. I want everything back, the way it was. But there is no point to it, this wanting" (*HT* 122). For Offred, the past functions more as a critical measure to assess current situations than the object of longing. In other words, throughout the novel, Offred's attitude is self-critical and dialogic rather than a mere monologic reproach; meticulous comparison between the past and the present is crucial to Offred's method of reflection. For example, when on the sidewalk with her walking partner Ofglen, Offred begins to remember how "women were not protected" *before* Gilead (*HT* 24). Cautions against jogging on the sidewalks, opening a door to a stranger, helping a "troubled" motorist, going to a laundromat alone are "rules that were never spelled out but that every woman knew" (24). Offred then juxtaposes how "safe" it is to walk outside under the current regime: "no man shouts obscenities at us, speaks to us, touches us. No one whistles" (24). The sentence which follows this represents the ironic aspect of one of the principles of Gilead: "there is more than one kind of freedom [...] In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from" (24). These related discourses are super-imposed; by neutralizing the past and the present, the text questions what freedom truly means to women.

We can also trace the intertextual dimension of this multi-faceted critique between *Surfacing* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, in terms of the theme of abortion. In *Surfacing*, the narrator detests her married lover and the doctors, claiming that she was forced to have an abortion and her baby "was taken away from [her], exported, deported" by them (*Surfacing* 45, also see 79, 144). Since then, the narrator has been feeling that "a section of [her] *own life*, [...], [her] *own flesh* [was] cancelled" [emphasis mine] (45). Yet she also reflects that she could have rejected it, and not having done so makes her "one of them [...] a killer" (146). In contrast, abortion is strictly illegal in Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale*: doctors and scientists

who have been involved in abortion are now sentenced to death, for they are deemed “war criminals” (*HT* 33). Although Women “are supposed to feel [...] hatred and scorn” towards those abortionists, Offred is reluctant to do so and even indifferent to the atrocity, for she believes that they lived in the past, in a different context (33). Although Offred’s feelings are revolving around “blankness,” what she rather cares about is her husband Luke, worrying that one of the hanged bodies could be him (33). Both novels appear to correspond with each other as a problem and an answer especially in terms of abortion. However, they reject such linear argument, which makes their social critique more multi-dimensional.

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, what makes this self-critique possible is that the memory of the pre-Gilead America and its transition to the current regime is still quite vivid to Offred. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, in contrast, Winston only possesses vague, fragmentary memories of his past, and he chooses to invent and idealise it as a tool of criticism. Likewise, whereas *Nineteen Eighty-Four* emphasises the discontinuity of the past and the present, *The Handmaid’s Tale* rather traces the continuity, contemplating over what exactly the narrator has “lost” in the dystopia. For instance, what Offred has lost in Gilead seems obvious: the right to have a family and job, spend money, move to anywhere, speak and read, and the right not to be sexually enslaved. Yet at the same time, Offred is always in doubt about whether those rights had been actually accommodating her freedom in the pre-Gilead America.

On the other hand, nostalgia found in the Commander’s remarks is reactionary in a quite straightforward way, reinventing the concept of “Nature” as something that had been lost in America and is necessary to be brought back: “All we’ve done is return things to Nature’s norm” (*HT* 220). According to him, commercialised sex or sexual freedom should be banned, since it is the cause of men’s “[i]nability to feel”; The Commander laments that “men were turning off on sex, even” (210). Gilead is then a device which provides men with “ability to feel” once again, and Offred later realizes that such device is made of (so to speak) a rule and its exception, that is, the puritan Handmaid system and a “secret” brothel called Jezebel’s. In Jezebel’s, there are women dressed in all kinds of clothes and wearing heavy make-up, which are habits strictly forbidden for the Handmaids (*HT* 235). The Commander enjoys the gap between the monotone, uniform-clad Handmaids and those diverse sex workers: “Nature demands variety, for men. It stands to reason, it’s part of the procreational strategy. It’s Nature’s plan” (*HT* 237). The Commander describes the experience in Jezebel’s as if he is “walking into the past,” wallowing in the sense of nostalgia for a “forbidden” pleasure (235). The Commander’s reasoning presented here is an example of mythophilia

disguised as nostalgia, an ideology created by inventing the loss of “Nature’s plan.” In fact, it should be added here that the Republic of Gilead itself is the product of such mythophilia. As is mentioned in the Historical Notes, Gilead deliberately chose “surrogate mothers” over “artificial insemination” and “fertility clinics” as a strategy to tackle the issue of infertility (HT 305). Instead of investing in scientific technologies, the regime employed the Old Testament in order to restore the seemingly lost virtue of femininity, blaming women’s literacy, contraception, and sexual freedom.

By contrast, Offred’s nostalgia can be called “critical nostalgia.”⁶ Raffaella Baccolini argues as follows:

Memory and imagination mix in Atwood’s novel as well, this time not in order to idealise the past, but to critique and destabilize it. Her character’s memory is not nostalgic but revisionist: if Atwood’s protagonist shows nostalgia for the past, it is not for the past as it was, but for the past as she would create it (“Journey” 354)

Offred indeed realises that she is a revisionist, yet in her following remark—“We were revisionists; what we revised was ourselves”—it should be noted that she rather seems to lament the lack of initiative in improving a certain situation, which results in changing the self (HT 227).

Meanwhile, Offred is the only one who could escape from Gilead, while others such as Offred’s feminist mother, her lesbian friend Moira, or Ofglen the rebel, couldn’t. Yet her survival is far from triumphant, and it is problematic on a political level. The characters I’ve just mentioned are all presented as a person who is certain about who they are and what they should do. Compared with them, Offred’s passivity and indecisiveness are somewhat troubling. Allan Weiss dismisses such an attitude as follows: “Offred is guilty of complacency, complicity and selfish concern for her own private needs and desires,” adding that “she prefers freedom from pain and acceptance of comfortable paternalistic domination over dangerous political commitment” (138). In addition, Offred is in fact prioritising her standpoint of extreme scepticism. It appears that Offred refuses to take a particular political side, but as she remarks somewhat decisively that “Context is *all*,” her relativism is presented as absolute [emphasis mine] (HT 144).⁷

Although it might be true that Offred’s survival is after all contingent and politically inept, Offred’s perspective of the world demands a close examination in order to explore the

possibility of nostalgia in her narrative. The feelings of uncertainty which dominate it on the level of its content and form are represented in the following examples. First, “Don’t let the bastards grind you down” is a mantra which Offred keeps holding on to ever since she discovered it, encouraging her to engage in active resistance against authority. Yet it is in fact a message from another Handmaid who used to be kept and eventually committed suicide in Offred’s room. Offred found this message in the cupboard in her room but at first did not know its meaning, since it is written in the language she did not know (*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*) (HT 52). It is ironical that it was the Commander who taught her the meaning, revealing that it is merely an old joke among schoolboys. After realising that Offglen killed herself and having discovered her (forced) affair with the Commander by his wife, Offred becomes devastated by these incidents, and the above dictum now begins to have an opposite connotation, rather turning into an invitation to end her life. At this point, she laments that “There’s no one you can protect, your life has value to no one. *I want it finished*” [emphasis mine] (HT 293). This anecdote tellingly suggests the phenomenological nature of the signified; the meaning is constantly affected by each situation where the subject engages with the words. Offred is acutely aware of this malleability of the signified, and this anxiety over the meaning of the words is extended to her whole narrative. Furthermore, Offred declares that her narrative is a reconstruction: in Chapter 23, she claims that she “reconstructed” a seemingly benign encounter with the Commander in his study (HT 134). This implies further that her reflection of the past in general is also inevitably a reconstruction. Here, one’s past event is ultimately something imaginary, which remains to be inauthentic. It is also revealed in the Historical Notes—an appendix attached to the story—that Offred’s narrative is in fact a reconstruction made by future historians. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the authentic past is impossible, and nostalgia is presented in this context as an affect which should always be kept under control through critical examination.

The prevalence of the sense of resignation which keeps haunting Offred’s past, present and future, however, seem in turn to suggest her acute longing for nostalgia itself. With regard to this, the distinction between loss and absence in Dominick LaCapra’s theorisation would be helpful in elaborate on this point. Absence is more abstract than loss, or “transhistorical” in that it is “not an event and does not imply tenses (past, present, or future)” (49). The following quote seems particularly important to delve into Offred’s attitude towards the world:

When absence is converted into loss, one increases the likelihood of misplaced

nostalgia or utopian politics in quest of a new totality or fully unified community. When loss is converted into (or encrypted in an indiscriminately generalised rhetoric of) absence, one faces the impasse of endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and interminable aporia in which any process of working through the past and its historical losses is foreclosed or prematurely aborted. (46)⁸

If we follow this formula, it could be said that Offred converts losses to absence, which leads her to “the impasse of melancholy.” Again, it should be noted here that this makes a vivid contrast to Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where Winston converts absence into loss, which is epitomised by the image of “the Golden Country”; it is a fictional place which is recurrent in Winston’s dream, where common sense symbolised by “two plus two make four” and sexual pleasure are promised. Meanwhile, not only is Offred unable to long for her past, what is traumatic to her is that she cannot be “properly” nostalgic for her past, even if she still has a clear memory of it. This is partly exemplified by the facts that her husband is missing and she believes that her daughter would not remember her even if she is alive (see HT 228). These objects of mourning have not yet been completely lost, which prevents Offred from pursuing the act of mourning and come to terms with reality. Scepticism over whether women used to enjoy their rights or not likewise keeps shadowing her nostalgia, since the subject cannot be nostalgic for something has not been possessed in any ways. Offred can evade reactionary politics and examine the past and the present in their continuity in light of “critical nostalgia.” Yet at the same time, the sense of trauma and uncertainty dominates her sensibility, confining herself to perpetual melancholia. In this sense, Offred’s nostalgia is inhibited as the protagonist in *Surfacing*, which cannot entirely seem to be attributed to the fact that nostalgia is forbidden in dystopia.

Conclusion

Classic dystopias such as *We*, *Brave New World*, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* start their narrative *in medias res*, so that the discontinuity of the world in the past and the dystopia in the present is highlighted. Although *The Handmaid’s Tale* applies the same method of narrative, it rather shows continuity of the past and the present through Offred’s act of remembering. Offred’s nostalgia is constantly aborted by her trauma and melancholic scepticism in the sense that her losses are now “transhistorical,” and her contemplation over

the past is rather repetition compulsion than a longing. Nostalgia is the main mode of narrative in *The Handmaid's Tale*, yet it evades the binary interpretation of nostalgia as reactionary or critical (militant), presenting homesickness as a chronic condition. While speculative fiction provides a possible future extrapolated from the past, Atwood's narrative of her dystopia does not easily allow readers to envisage a positive sense of the future.⁹ It seems, however, that we can still find some hopeful, or utopian dimension in Offred's attempt at nostalgia. Svetlana Boym suggestively notes as follows: "Nostalgia itself has a utopian dimension, only it is no longer directed toward the future. Sometimes nostalgia is not directed toward the past either, but rather sideways. *The nostalgic feels stifled within the conventional confines of time and space*" [emphasis mine] (XIV). In this sense, the ambiguity in Offred's nostalgia can be regarded as an attempt to reconfigure the conception of time and space, through questioning the function of memory, home, and longing. Yet at the same time, Offred is always/already a refugee; although she refuses the conventional or one-dimensional conception of time and space, at the same time, she remains as "a blank [...] between parentheses. Between other people," haunted by the inability to find her home (HT 228).

Notes:

¹ In "The Times of Their Lives: George Orwell's *Coming Up for Air*", Joseph Browne refers to this parallel (156), although he does not develop his argument. This is the only essay that I have found so far regarding this similarity in both authors in terms of the transition from nostalgia fiction to dystopian fiction.

² See particularly "Negotiating the Nation: The Reproduction and Reconstruction of the National Imaginary in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*", where Kiley Kapuscinski argues that *Surfacing* is not a nationalist tract, but rather a critique of it, exploring "the complexity and culpability that lies beneath the surface of gender conventions and national narratives" (109).

³ Or "any injury where the skin is broken as a consequence of external violence, and the effects of such an injury upon the organism as a whole" (*The Language of Psychoanalysis* 465). It is interesting to note that, in German, *traum* means "dream."

⁴ Also see the following Freud's theorisation regarding repetition compulsion: "the patient does not *remember* anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but *acts* it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he *repeats* it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it" [emphasis in original] (150 "Remembering, Repeating and Working Through"), "The patient cannot remember the whole of what is repressed in him, and what he cannot remember may be precisely the essential part of it. Thus he acquires no sense of conviction of the correctness of the construction that has been communicated to him. He is obliged to *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, *remembering* it as something belonging to the past" [emphasis in original] (18 *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*).

⁵ In *We*, "the Ancient House" (Zamyatin 24) (whose influence on Orwell's "Mr Charrington's junk-shop" can clearly be recognised) is provided in the narrative to foster a rebellious mind-set in the protagonist D-501 by a female rebel I-330. Meanwhile, John the savage in Huxley's *Brave New World* clings to the value system of the past which is signified by Shakespeare's works.

⁶ Baccolini uses the term “critical nostalgia” in another essay, “Finding Utopia in Dystopia: Feminism, Memory, Nostalgia, and Hope”, page 185.

⁷ Offred also declares that “Freedom, like everything else, is relative” (HT 231). Meanwhile, I touched on this point in my essay, “Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* as a Multidimensional Critique of Rebellion”, where I argue that the novel is a critique of rebellion and interpretation, while contextualising the novel with other dystopian novels in details.

⁸ “[M]isplaced nostalgia” should be called mythophilia for the reason discussed above in this article.

⁹ Atwood contends that Historical Notes indicates a place of hope in the sense that it testifies the demise of her dystopia, Gilead (*In Other Worlds* 91). Such hope seems feeble, however, since there remains a huge temporal gap between the end of Offred’s narrative and the time when Historical Notes was written; *The Handmaid’s Tale* does not describe how a dystopia went into decline and ultimately ceased to exist.

Abbreviation

HT: *The Handmaid’s Tale*

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Asami Nakamura
University of Liverpool
Asami.Nakamura@liverpool.ac.uk

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