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The Right (not) to Read *The Handmaid's Tale* in School:
Tensions with/in Conversations about Risky Texts

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**The Right (not) to Read *The Handmaid's Tale* in School:
Tensions with/in conversations about risky texts**

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Arts in Education

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Prologue: The imperative to respond	3
CHAPTER ONE	
The Right (Not) To Read: An Introduction	5
In General: A Glance at Book Censorship	6
In Particular: The Right (Not) To Read The Handmaid's Tale in School	9
(Mis)Shaping My Response	10
The Chapters	12
CHAPTER TWO	
Methodologies and Theoretical Frameworks	15
Quilting	16
Theoretical Backing	17
Cultural Studies	18
Reading and Weaving: An Intertextual Analysis	19
Context/Content: Internet/Intertext	21
Critical Discourse Analysis	22
<i>Editorial Blogs</i>	22
<i>Virtual 'Participants'</i>	23
Moving forward, into the void	24
CHAPTER THREE	
Literature Review	25
The Reader... in Theory	27
<i>Formalism and New Criticism</i>	28
<i>Reader-Response Theory</i>	29
Gut Responses: Limitations of Reader-response Theory	32
Misreading	36
Risky Readings	37

Guilty Readings	40
Context	42
<i>Public and private readings</i>	42
<i>Online Communities</i>	43
<i>In School</i>	45
Ethics of Reading	47

CHAPTER FOUR

Conversations **50**

PART I **53**

Censorship: Slippery Slopes and (Over)Protective Parents	53
<i>The Slippery (Political) Slope: Reading Republics</i>	53
<i>The Slippery Slope: The Disappearing Reading List</i>	57
<i>(Not) For Children</i>	59

PART II **62**

What is it to read?	62
<i>Lessons in Literature</i>	63
“You missed the point”: Necessary Misreadings	63
The ‘Point’ of Reading	65
<i>The Ethics of Reading</i>	67
<i>Risky Readings</i>	69

PART III **73**

Context Is All	73
<i>What (not) to read in school</i>	74
<i>(Dis)Connecting: Online Conversations</i>	76
<i>Breaking down the Blogs: Critical Discourse Analysis or,</i>	78
<i>Who Says What Where</i>	78

CHAPTER FIVE

Final Thoughts: (Un)masking My Readerly Innocence **81**

<i>Reading Writers and Writing Readers</i>	84
<i>Quilting, Bricolage and Cat’s Cradle</i>	85
<i>(Not) Reading The Handmaid’s Tale</i>	88
<i>Why Reading The Handmaid’s Tale In School Matters</i>	90

Reference List	97
Appendix 1	110
Appendix 2	111
Appendix 3	116

Abstract

Debates about book censorship and selection are far-reaching and ongoing, however little research has lingered in the spaces of irresolvable tension within these debates, and specifically the debates that focus on novels read in school. In an intertextual analysis of literary theory and editorial-blog responses to a recent debate about the suitability of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* as a high school text, I work to broaden and trouble understandings of what it means to read this novel in school. The online forum for discussion is a unique space that offers new and different insights into an age-old conversation. Weaving online reader responses to the *Handmaid's Tale* debate with a large body of research that struggles with our complicated relationship with reading, this thesis strives to add complexity and depth to an often-polarizing issue.

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I would like to thank my committee, Cynthia Morawski and Raymond Leblanc for their thoughtful readings, questions and conversations. Thank you to Linda Radford for igniting the spark that led to this project and helping me to find a way to make it work. And finally, thank you to my supervisor, Patricia Palulis, for creating the space and guidance I needed to realize this project. Pat's ability to read otherwise encouraged me to tarry with/in new places and perspectives and taught me to embrace the many swerves that research and writing demands.

Better never means better for everyone, he says. It always means worse for some.
(Atwood, 1998, p. 264)

Prologue: The imperative to respond

I must

*Bleary-eyed on a dark morning in January, I leafed through the morning paper and paused on a small article that tells me that in Toronto, a parent has made a formal complaint to the school board about the fact that his son, a high school student, has been assigned Margaret Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, in his English class. Upset by the "brutality" and "profanity" in the novel, Mr. Edwards, I was horrified to read, couldn't "really understand what it is [his] son is supposed to be learning from this fictional drivel" (Mr. Edwards cited in Rushowy 2009c).*

I seethed, hunched over the page. "Fictional drivel"?! This man couldn't have read the book. "Profanity"? Oh, please...

*A few days later, the story was brought up in one of my classes. I felt my heart rate climb as we discussed how teachers and schools address situations like this one, balancing the teacher's desire to bring interesting, and potentially controversial texts into the classroom, with the spectre of stirring up conflict with parents or administration. For me it kept coming back to this particular novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*. Had it been J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* or Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*—novels that have also received attention from would-be book-banners—I might have forgotten about it, moved on. But this time was different. *The Handmaid's Tale* was important to me. It was a novel I first encountered in high school English class, then again in an undergraduate course on feminist fairy tales, and again in teacher's college, and here it was once more, peeking up at me from a newspaper as I prepared for a day of reading for my master's courses.*

My first encounter with the novel was memorable and, I think it is safe to say, life-changing. This was not just a novel, this was feminism, women's rights, censorship,

fundamentalism, religion, sex, love and loss. It was poetry and history, the promise of what was to come—not in the dystopic sense the novel itself describes, but in the direction this particular reading propelled me. Reading *The Handmaid's Tale* as a 17 year-old sparked something in me, demanded I respond. And so I went on to study English literature, women's studies, cultural studies and philosophy. True, I may have followed a similar path had I not read *The Handmaid's Tale* that year. But I did, and my other readings shifted after that, and have continued to shift as I continue reading.

I am pulled back to this text, again and again, each time with new readerly eyes, listening with a different “reading ear” (Wolfreys, 2000). In this latest, and most surprising encounter with *The Handmaid's Tale*, I am called to respond differently. It is not up to me to settle a dispute or defend Atwood's work. My task is to listen carefully to the reading ear, my own and others', and dive into the murky depths of what it means to read this novel in school. As I take this plunge I pull with me the reeds, weeds, hooks and netting of my past and present readings, tangling and weaving as I pause and pay particular attention to the knots and tensions.

Neither stopping our ears... nor leaving them totally open (which is not to be receptive, merely passive), we must discompose ourselves by seeking to control the opening of the reading ear, so as to make reading possible. This is, in one sense, what it is, to read an exercise in patience which is to give oneself over

losing your proper form to the knowledge that reading is never finished.

(Wolfreys, 2000, p. 99)

Chapter One

The Right (Not) To Read: An Introduction

In General: A Glance at Book Censorship

Any history of censorship... will show that the exercise of censorship always did and always does tell the story of someone (an individual, a group, an organization, the state, or the church) who imposes or threatens to impose his or its will on others. (Petersen, 1999, p. 10)

Alberto Manguel's (1996) *A History of Reading*, tells us that book censorship and reading have always gone hand in hand, and 1660 England illustrates an early example of this. In 1660, Manguel explains, England's Charles II decreed that servants and slaves should be taught to read. Charles II wanted everyone to be able to read the Bible, with the hopes that society would improve as a result. The British people, however, feared that the Bible wouldn't be the only thing newly literate slaves would read and "notions of revolt and freedom" (p. 283) might ensue. According to Manguel, those in the American colonies were most perturbed by the idea of literate slaves to the extent that laws forbidding all blacks to read were made and maintained in some regions until the mid-nineteenth century. Censorship, Manguel says, "is the corollary of all power, and the history of reading is lit by a seemingly endless line of censors' bonfires, from the earliest papyrus scrolls to the books of our time" (p. 283).

The written word has a powerful history and reading, specifically who reads what when and how, is never a trivial matter. As Maryanne Wolf (2007) reminds us, a great deal of blood has been shed as a result of different interpretations of certain sacred texts. Reading can mean both freedom and enslavement, can give birth to new ideas and silence others.

The same act that can bring a text into being, draw out its revelations, multiply its meanings, mirror in it the past, the present and the possibilities of the future, can also destroy or attempt to destroy the living page. (Manguel, 1996, p. 289)

Censorship, as Klaus Petersen (1999) asserts, tends to come out of an effort to protect certain values. In the effort to protect one set of values, Petersen argues, another set is suppressed. Even at its most basic the censorship debate is a question of value judgment: Is my right *to* read more important than your right *not to* read?

That the controversial reading I am addressing is happening *in school* makes the issue that much more complicated. For many, public school is thought to be where cultural norms and values are passed on and children are educated towards becoming good citizens (Shariff and Manley-Casimir, 1999).

In implementing this curriculum, teachers will help students to see that language skills are lifelong learning skills that will enable them to better understand themselves and others, unlock their potential as human beings, find fulfilling careers, and become responsible world citizens.
(Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 5)

What children read in school, then, is scrutinized for the extent to which it promotes certain values, and, “disagreements arise as to whose values represent the “canons of truthfulness” (Shariff and Manley-Casimir, 1999, p. 158). Given the largesse of the popularly believed ‘goal’ of schooling and the books intended to deliver these goals, it comes as little surprise that books are regularly contested. While it is initially easy to scoff at the “ignorant” (Cosmo, 2009) book banners, as Shariff and Manley-Casimir

remind us, “we often ignore how easily we fall into the role of the censor when our own (legitimate) interests are at stake” (p. 14).

According to the website *Freedom to Read*, in the past nine years over 40 books have been “challenged” in Canada. As the website explains, many of these “challenges” are dismissed and never become big stories in the news. However, *Freedom to Read* feels it is important to take note of all of these instances as many books, once they are deemed ‘controversial’ frequently (quietly) disappear from reading lists and curricula, despite the fact that they have not been officially banned. The “challenged” books and magazines in recent years include popular titles for youth such as J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series and Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, as well as such controversial non-fiction works as William Pierce’s *The Turner Diaries* and Mike Pearson’s *Waging War from Canada*.

As several scholars have noted (Booth, 1992; Dick, 1982; Petersen and Hutchinson, 1999; Cohen, 2001; Lesesne and Chance, 2002), the reasons readers, or parents of readers, object to certain books remain largely unchanged. The list generally includes objections to religious and/or moral values portrayed in the book, the use of profane language, sexuality, violence, and content deemed inappropriate for the particular age group. To use the above-mentioned examples once more, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has been objected to for its use of the word “nigger”, and *Harry Potter* offends some religious readers who object to the wizardry and witchcraft in the books. *The Turner Diaries* was said to have inspired the Oklahoma City bomber to commit his horrific crime in its descriptions of white supremacists launching a race war and has never been allowed in

Canada, and Mike Pearson's book, which argues that Canada is an ideal terrorist launching pad, was detained at the border in the days following the September 11th attacks. (*Freedom to Read's* "Challenged books and Magazines List", February 2009).

As this small list of examples hints, the titles on the "Challenged books and Magazines List" cover a wide range of texts, and cause in me an equally diverse spectrum of reactions. To many of the works of fiction on the list, I find myself shaking my head and wondering how anyone could wish to ban some of my favourite books like Mordecai Richler's *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, or Timothy Findley's *The Wars*. But these feelings quickly shift when I find it difficult to justify welcoming hate-literature such as *The Turner Diaries* onto library and bookstore shelves. Tensions like these remind me that censorship debates are not only about the freedom *to* read, but also about the freedom *not to* read.

In Particular: The Right (Not) To Read *The Handmaid's Tale* in School

There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it. (Atwood, 1998, p. 31)

The Handmaid's Tale is a dystopian story set in the Republic of Gilead, a totalitarian state founded on 'traditional' values and a strict adherence to the teachings of the Bible. Due to environmental degradation, reproductive rates are dangerously low, so any fertile women become handmaidens for the elite. The story is narrated by Offred, a handmaiden in Gilead. Her story is one of a woman without any freedom, valued only for her womb and subject to the severe restrictions and surveillance of Gilead. Offred remembers the

not so distant past when women were free to work, read, protest and do many other seemingly trivial things many women take for granted. The novel is both a warning of the precariousness of some of the freedoms women have fought (and continue to fight) to enjoy, but also a questioning of what it means to be 'free' as citizens and as women.

In December 2008, *The Handmaid's Tale* raised an objection from Robert Edwards, the father of a student in grade 12 at Lawrence Park Collegiate in Toronto. Edwards wrote an official letter of complain to the Toronto District School Board and is quoted in the *Toronto Star* as saying the book "is rife with brutality towards and mistreatment of women (and men at times), sexual scenes, and bleak depression...I can't really understand what it is my son is supposed to be learning from this fictional drive!". He also feels the book is anti-Christian, arguing that, "if the book was anti-Islam, it wouldn't be allowed" (Edwards cited in Rushowy, 2009c).

(Mis)Shaping My Response

This story made headlines in the *Toronto Star* for several days in January 2009, and articles and editorials appeared in Canada's national newspapers, *The Globe and Mail* and *The National Post*, as well as in local papers such as *The Ottawa Citizen*. Online, the story ignited a lively discussion on the *Toronto Star*'s blog as well as on *The National Post*'s site. As I read the comments posted on the media websites, I began to realize that woven within the conversation on book-banning and censorship were threads of deeper questions struggling with the nature of reading itself. As readers responded to the headlines and editorials about Mr. Edwards' complaint, they revealed their own

complicated relationships with reading as they seemed to be attempting to answer the question, “What is it to read?” (Wolfreys, 2000). As readers displayed their passionate relationships with books and reading, my own response began to materialize: this was not a matter of ‘resolving’ the censorship debate or championing the right (not) to read, but rather, a gutsy leap into the tensions of reading as they played out in the responses to *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

I read as I jump, as an anacoluthon, or a break of classical construction.
(Cixous, 1990, p.74)

This project is a game of Cat’s Cradle where in the place of string, I play with texts, pulling one through another, knotting a novel with a blog, winding scholarly citations around editorials and weaving personal and public reading experiences. Donna Haraway (1994) uses the metaphor of a game of Cat’s Cradle to describe how one can bend and tangle the linear, disrupting the categories and binaries of our lives as we turn our gaze away from the straight-and-narrow towards the blurry bends and knots. Just as a game of Cat’s Cradle could be dismissed as a mess of twisted string, spaces that are neither/both *here nor/and there*, demand a different type of attention, a reading *otherwise* (Felman, 1977). Like Haraway’s (1994) work on cyborgs which blurs the distinction between science and nature, human and machine, my thesis strives to “provoke interest in zones of implosion” and to “explore what forms of life survive and flourish in those dense, imploded zones” (p. 62).

As I read readers' responses to *The Handmaid's Tale*, the following questions emerged:

- How do blog-posters describe what it means to read *The Handmaid's Tale*?
- What tensions emerge and are repeated in online conversations about Atwood's novel?
- Why does reading *The Handmaid's Tale* in school matter?

To answer these questions I become the quilting reader, the *bricoleuse* entangled in an intertextual analysis of readers' responses to *The Handmaid's Tale*.

The Chapters

*The Warp and the Weft*¹

The second and third chapters, in their rootedness in scholarly literature, give structure and academic rigour to this project, forming the *warp* of my thesis. Chapter Two outlines the methodologies and theoretical frameworks that structure this thesis. As a quilter I connect this craft to my research methodology, articulating the similarity in creativity and creation between the two passions. Just as my quilting demands that I look between fabrics, inter-textile, stitching scraps, overlapping textures, appliqu  ing images, my research demands the same method of piecing and weaving. From inter-textile to intertextual I use the second chapter to describe my work as the *bricoleuse*.

¹ Following Barthes (1977) in his use of textile metaphors, as the threads of my and others' readings entwine, I think it is useful to acknowledge some of the components of the cloth that is my thesis: "In weaving, the **warp** is the set of lengthwise yarns through which the weft is woven... Warp means "that which is thrown across" (Old English *wearp*, from *weorpan*, to throw, cf. German *werfen*, Dutch *werpen*). When weaving with a loom, the warp yarns are fully attached before weaving begins." (Warp (weaving), 2009)

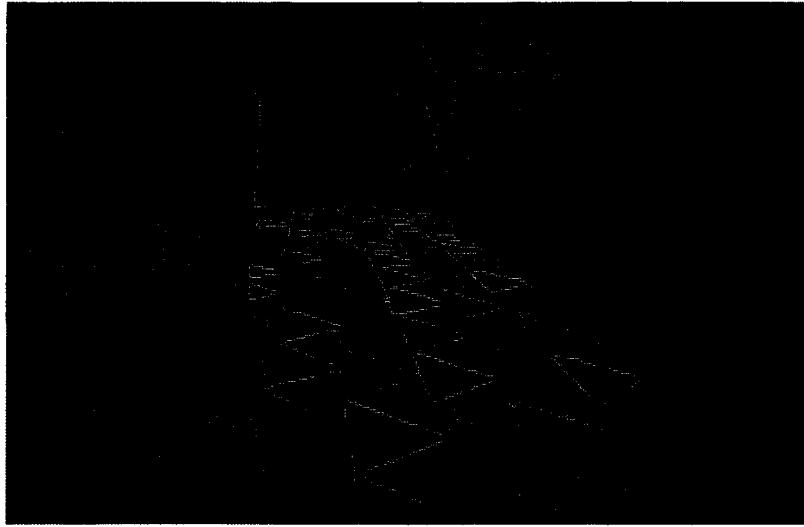
Chapter Three is a foray into the textual, a literature review of the works that have helped broaden my understanding of *what it is to read*. I explore literary theories from Formalism and New Criticism to Reader-response and then consider their limitations. I learn to misread, to take on the risky business of reading and acknowledge my own guilty readings. Readers such as Dennis Sumara take me into the context of reading—specifically the readings in school that are the focal point of the *Handmaid's Tale* debate. The chapter ends with ruminations on the ethics of reading, from the pragmatic to the philosophical.

The fourth chapter, the *wefi*, is where my weaving begins. It is the game of Cat's Cradle in action, the quilt scraps being stitched together, the 'data analysis'. Carrying with me the threads of my readings, I (re)read the blog-posts and stitch together my intertextual analysis. In this chapter I engage blog-posters in a type of conversation, mingling my readings with theirs, weaving citations. The conversation is assembled into three 'parts', collected thematically according to my own (guilty) readerly intuitions. Part I is a discussion of censorship and some of the common concerns readers have about book selection and banning and the effects these actions have on readers and on society. In Part II, I explore readerly understandings of reading, and linger with the question of what it is to read. Part III moves momentarily away from *The Handmaid's Tale* and towards the context of reading, including a brief critical discourse analysis of the online conversation itself.

Finally, the thesis closes with not so much a conclusion, but with my parting thoughts on the right (not) to read *The Handmaid's Tale* in school. In the last paragraphs I discuss my own journey in this project and my hopes for a continuation of this and other conversations that attempt to linger in the uneasy spaces in-between.

Chapter Two

Methodologies and Theoretical Frameworks



Quilting

As a quilter, the researcher-as-quilt-maker or *bricoleur* (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000) is easy to identify with. My quilts begin with research, trawling through books, magazines, websites and blogs for design ideas, borrowing from here and there, making notes and sketches. Then I am sifting through piles of fabric, trying different combinations of colours and textures, trying to imagine how everything will look cut up in various shapes and sizes. Next I am up-ending the house, re-arranging my living space in order to create space for my new project, scraps of fabric litter the floor as I shift and scatter, work and rework. My research process follows a similar path of searching, pulling scraps of knowledge from here and there, allowing it all to invade my living space and rearrange my thoughts as I attempt to pin and stitch the bits and pieces together: “Focusing on webs of relationships instead of simply things-in-themselves, the bricoleur constructs the objects of study in a more complex framework” (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 323).

I follow the research methodology of a quilt-maker, borrowing from many different disciplines, working within “intersecting contexts” (p. 328) and, intertextually, within intersecting texts. Always self-reflexive, I struggle to shape my research in “as thick a way possible” (p. 334), appreciating the complexity that rigorous research demands.

Theoretical Backing

Perhaps best described as the quilt-backing² of my research-as-quilt, several theoretical perspectives influence my work: feminism, deconstructivism and cultural studies. The three perspectives overlap and intersect a great deal, but each provides unique and important insight into both my work and myself as a researcher.

Feminism began to take shape for me in my first, teenaged, reading of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Classroom discussions of the oppression and silencing experienced by women in the novel gave voice and critical space to my own experiences as a girl-soon-to-be-woman. I embraced feminist criticism with an exhilarated *at last* almost as if I finally heard my mother tongue after a lifetime of speaking another’s language.

Like Littau (2006) I see feminism as offering the possibility for an affective and embodied reading by allowing space for a “gynocritical” (Showalter, 1990) reading that acknowledges that it makes a difference that I am a woman (Rooney, 2006). It is also an opportunity, no, rather, an imperative, to dismantle the binary oppositions that restrict our

² The quilt-backing is the large piece of fabric that forms the back, or underside of the quilt. Not intended to be displayed, the quilt-backing is often plain but offers important structure and complements and enriches the lively top pattern when it peeks out from under a fold.

readings of the world. As I break apart and work between categories I am also creating anew as the feminine *bricoleuse*. Allen (2000) sees the opportunity for the feminine to reappear in the intertextual approach that bricolage implies: “the notion of intertextuality, with its connotations of webs and weaving, constitutes an opportunity for such feminization of the symbolics of the act of writing” (p. 146).

In demanding an explosion of rigid categories and preferring to dwell instead in the murky in-between spaces, I pull from **deconstructivism**. My project is not one that seeks to ‘prove’ victory of the freedom-to-read-ers over the book-banners or vice-versa. Instead, I am choosing to focus on the site of tension between categories, abandoning the patriarchal value system that establishes a powerful versus a powerless, masculine over feminine. Feminist and deconstructivist Hélène Cixous (1997) performs a similar struggle in her “desire to know” that she argues requires dwelling in “the place of the other”, a place that “tears me apart, disturbs me, changes me” (p. 94). This is the site of struggle from which I work as I throw my voice, “forward, into the void” (p. 99).

Cultural Studies

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) describe cultural studies as bricolage. Just as bricolage employs a practical, use-anything-you-can-find methodology, cultural studies is also rooted in the pragmatic, or ‘real world’ of cultural artifacts. Cultural studies theorists such as Stuart Hall (1997) emphasize the importance of interrogating and probing the things we take for granted, the representations that pose as ‘truths’. Hall argues that ‘culture’ is a framework of intelligibility, a map of meaning shaped by an ever-shifting

system of representation. What is crucial to recognize, Hall says, is our implication in meaning-making: that meaning is never fixed because it is constantly being (re)created by our own involvement in the discourse. As Johnson, Chambers and Raghuram (2004) put it, “meaning... is always produced in relation to other meanings” (p. 157).

Cultural studies reads not only the text, but its contexts (Johnson et al., 2004). This examination of both text and context is crucial for my work, as the discussion was not sparked merely by *The Handmaid’s Tale* itself, but by the act of reading the novel *in school*. Furthermore, the context of the conversation itself (online media blogs) is another important element that impacts the construction of meaning. In Johnson’s (1996) words, I have “decentre[d] the text as the object of study” (p. 97). The focus here is not Atwood’s novel per se (though the novel is most certainly a critical thread), but rather others’ readings of the novel and the ensuing conversation that flows around the controversy of whether or not it should be read in school: “The ultimate object of cultural studies is not, in my view, the text, but the *social life of subjective forms* at each moment of their circulation, including their textual embodiments” (p. 97).

Reading and Weaving: An Intertextual Analysis

As I cobble together my research amid a sea of resources—fervently stitching together here, folding and overlapping there, and constantly readjusting with each new text I encounter—the statement that all reading is intertextual (Allen, 2000) could not be more appropriate. I am reminded by Roland Barthes (1977) of the *textile* from which my *text* emerges. An intertextual analysis envisions a rich fabric, the threads of which are

borrowed from the “already” written and read. Wilson (1996) argues an intertextual approach to Atwood’s work is only natural, given the multitude of “intertexts” (p. 55) present in Atwood’s writing. I want to take this further still as not only is Atwood’s novel itself a beautifully crafted cloth, but yards of fabric continue to spin from it, cloaking the novel in a much broader, multi-voiced web.

Julia Kristeva (1996), famous for challenging the notion of the text as a stable object or ‘map’ capable of depicting the world and human experience, describes intertextuality as,

the recognition that a textual segment, sentence, utterance, or paragraph is not simply the intersection of two voices in direct or indirect discourse; rather, the segment is the result of the intersection of a number of voices, of a number of textual interventions, which are combined in the semantic field, but also in the syntactic and phone fields of the explicit utterance. (p.189)

Kristeva’s theory of intertextuality, born out of her study of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism (Hohne and Wussow, 1994), shook the text from its stable pedestal of self-contained ‘Meaning’ (decipherable only by trained ‘critics’) and cast it out into the messy world beyond the page. Not only did Kristeva redefine the role of the text, but the role of the reader also changed. Reading was no longer a private or secluded act between the critic and the text but instead a vast and tangled interaction between the world and its plural texts (Becker-Leckrone, 2005).

As I read and respond to other readers’ readings and responses, I am necessarily drawn into an intertextual web and compelled to perform an “intervention of plurality at different levels” (Kristeva, 1996, p. 190). Just as the posters themselves wrestle with/in a dense intertextual space where each reader’s own reading of the novel, the news coverage

and others' readings of these texts all collide, I struggle with/in this site of tension. In my quilted intertextual analysis, I work at the knots, but not to untie them—rather, I pull more threads into the fray.

Context/Content: Internet/Intertext

The Internet, some argue (David Coughlan, cited in Allen, 2000), is intertextuality par excellence. A vast network of quotations, e-books, articles, art, photographs, videos and podcasts, woven with/in conversations, subject to change with the click of a mouse, 'knowledge' created, disseminated and deleted in a matter of a few keystrokes. Each webpage is a porthole, via its links and references, to countless other sites creating an infinite web of texts. For some (Swope, 2005; Peterson, 2004), that the Internet solicits and encourages many users' participation and 'editing' (as in the case of Wikipedia) for its' content, has a democratizing effect: one need only to have access to a computer with an Internet connection to have one's voice 'heard'. At first glance this would seem to be the case with editorial blogs such as those I am examining—unlike traditional letter-to-the-editor responses where only a select few are printed, in online forums there is no limit to how many responses can be posted, or by whom. Or is there? Walker (2006) argues that beyond the blog's official mediator there are social forces at play that ensure certain opinions are more welcome than others, effectively casting out of the discussion posters who 'don't belong'. While I don't intend to perform an in-depth assessment of how 'democratic' the blogs about *The Handmaid's Tale* are, I think it is important to analyze the overall trends or patterns in the comments that point to certain opinions that are considered more valuable than others—to be watchful for what may be missing or dismissed by the dominant voices on the blogs.

Critical Discourse Analysis

To explore the social dynamics of online conversations, I turn to critical discourse analysis. Discourse, as Sara Mills (1997) states, cannot be analysed in isolation. All speech and writing evolve in and are shaped by a social context. As Tamara Witschge (2008) says, “it is important to realize that discourse is not constructed in a vacuum: in addition to the text, there is the environment in which the text is produced and consumed as well as the wider social practice to which it belongs” (p. 75). Witschge argues that aside from the text of the conversation itself, there are two dimensions that must be explored: how the discourse comes into being and how it relates to the larger social discourse (p. 76). A methodology that includes critical discourse analysis is attentive to the social dimensions of discourse, including relationships of dominance and discrimination (Wodak and Meyer, 2001). Never forgetting the specific importance of the *online* discourse I am analyzing, I borrow from Herring (2004) whose work in computer-mediated discourse analysis addresses some of the particularities of online conversations, acknowledging that “computer-mediated discourse may be, but is not inevitably, shaped by the technological features of computer-mediated communication systems” (p. 343).

Editorial Blogs

The context I will examine is more specific than Herring’s (2004) overarching “computer-mediated communication system”. I am entering the editorial blogs of Canadian newspaper websites. There is a growing body of research that studies blogs of many different varieties ranging from the more personal blogs aimed at immediate friends and family, to political or media blogs with much wider exposure and readership

(Witschge, 2008; Baumer, Sueyoshi and Tomlinson, 2008; Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht and Swartz, 2004; Walker 2006; Maryl, 2008; Hookway, 2008; Maratea, 2008; Chen and Chiu, 2006; Ho, 2008; MacDougall, 2005; Carrington, 2009; Stephanone, 2008).

Whether it be exploring the role of the reader in blogs (Baumer et al., 2008), *or* looking at the nature of online communities that form around blogs (Plant, 2004), *or* at studying blogging as political action (Maratea, 2008), *or* examining the nature of an online discussion (Chen and Chiu, 2006) and how it differs from a face-to-face discussion (Ho, 2008), *or* taking a look at *why* people blog (Carrington, 2009; Nardi et al., 2008), *or* considering the changes in research practice and ethics that blog research involves (Hookway, 2008), I continue to work as the *bricoleuse* and pull important threads from all of this research and incorporate it into my own.

Virtual ‘Participants’

The ‘participants’ in this study do not consent to participate in the traditional sense expected in research. No one is ‘recruited’ to participate in my study, and there are no questionnaires, interviews or consent forms. ‘Participants’ willingly participate in an online discussion in a public forum, but they remain anonymous and disembodied. I do not (and can not) know who “Vinnie’s boy” is or where he/she writes from or how old he/she is or what he/she does for a living. In so far as these bloggers participate in the online conversation, they become ‘participants’ in my study. Hookway (2008) describes these ‘participants’ as “a type of postmodern realization of the ‘decentered’ and ‘disembodied’ self” (p. 91). Hookway addresses the complicated scenario that the Internet and its contributors present for the researcher. Those online are aware that

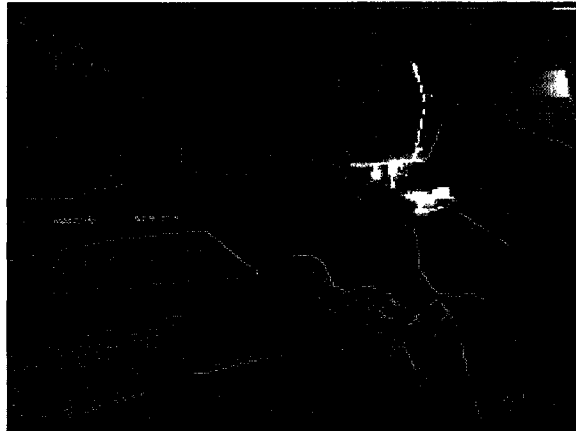
anything they post can be read by anyone, however some researchers prefer to take into account the intended audience of particular material. For example, a personal blog documenting the daily lives of a family might be considered more ‘private’ and worthy of different ethical treatment than the *Toronto Star* editorial blog despite the fact that both are accessible by anyone and everyone. Hookway argues, and the University of Ottawa Ethics committee agrees (see Appendix 1), that since blogs exist in the public domain and are accessible by anyone, it is not necessary to obtain consent from those who contributed to the blog.

Moving forward, into the void

Accepting all the risks such a project entails, I begin the “act or event” of a complex tangle of readings. Gazing through the lenses of feminism, deconstructionism and cultural studies I use the tools of the *bricoleuse* to perform an intertextual analysis of readers’ readings of *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

The act or event of reading is risky precisely because nothing is decided ahead of the event. (Wolfe, 2000, p. 56)

Chapter Three
Literature Review



An intertextual analysis invokes images of weaving—threads from many texts woven together into a rich, though often knotted and messy, tapestry. Roland Barthes (1977) uses the metaphor of weaving reminding us that *text* and *textile* share the same root, both demanding a close look at intricately woven webs of ideas and threads. For someone who struggles with both *texts* and *textiles* every day, the two sharing the same desk—fabric spilling over stacks of books, papers wedged beneath my sewing machine—text and textile are quite literally never far apart. My literature review brings together a variety of texts which contribute diverse theoretical and philosophical threads and textures to my analysis.

In our acts of reading, research comes back via the bodily ruins we call citations.
(Wolfreys, 2000, p. x)

This literature review is organized into seven sections, beginning with a glance at twentieth century literary theory, with special attention to reader-response theory. The second section will point to the limitations of reader-response theory, problematizing literary criticisms that fail to acknowledge the affect and/in the effect of literature. In the third part of the chapter I continue to struggle with/in literary theory, turning to the

deconstructivists and poststructuralists as I explore what Paul de Man (1983) calls the necessary “misreading” in any reading, the impossibility of interpretation or reading for meaning. The fourth section looks at risky readings, censorship, and why school readings are often so contentious. Following close on the heels of ‘risky readings’, in the section called “Guilty Readings”, I explore the guilty (dis)pleasure of reading, and the resistance to participating in the “scandal” (Felman, 2007, p. 18) of reading. The sixth section goes further to examine the importance of context in reading—in this case the public contexts of reading in school, and also of reading and responding on public Internet forums. The final section of my literature review addresses the ethics of reading, looking at the presence of morals and values associated with literature, as well as the ethical responsibility to respond to and engage with texts, while also troubling the very concept of ‘ethics’.

The Reader... in Theory

Literary theory, as Julian Wolfreys (1999) attempts to define in the forward to *Literary Theories: A reader and guide*, is an ever-expanding term that is used to explore many aspects of culture such as texts, film, history and psychology, to name but a few.

Wolfreys sums up literary theory as, “the name given to a number of different, differing, occasionally overlapping or related ways of reading and interpreting...” (p. x). As it is readers’ relationship with literature, and a specific novel at that, that is my focus, I will narrow the scope of literary theory to focus first on some of the most prominent forms of literary criticism in the twentieth century, namely formalism and its offspring New

Criticism, as well as reader-response theory. Important to note here, as Davis and Womack (2002) do in the introduction to their study of formalism and reader-response theory, is the intertextual nature of theory. Despite the tendency to describe different literary theories in a chronological manner, the new replacing the old, each ‘new’ moment in literary theory entwines with its predecessors, borrowing and reshaping, pulling ‘old’ ideas in new directions, using new language. That there can never be a ‘fresh start’ or ‘clean break’ from allegedly ‘outdated’ literary theory becomes strikingly apparent in the blog comments of readers who weave threads from all over the theoretical map into their articulations of what it means to read.

Formalism and New Criticism

...contemporary criticism may have lost a crucial element in its deconstruction of formalist thought: the ability to consider how literature ennobles and sustains the human experience.
(Davis and Womack, 2002, p. 17)

Formalist criticism viewed the text as “sacred”; as holding within its pages a unique form of knowledge thereby providing readers with insight into different truths that readers could experience imaginatively (Davis and Womack, 2002). Predated by “old historicism”, which emphasized the importance of the biographical context (author’s life, culture and political milieu) of the text, formalism continued in this scientific vein, establishing set formal criteria for gleaning the meaning of a literary work. As early as the 1920s, New Criticism began to take shape as what would become a popular strain of formalism that focused less on historical and biographical criticism and more on a “close reading” of the text:

New Critics viewed the poem as a well-wrought urn, impersonal and ahistorical, and the very existence of the poem implied that in some platonic fashion there also existed—waiting to be discovered by the diligent critic who studied the construction of the poem for efficiency and balance—some ideal reading of that object. (Davis and Womack, 2002, p. 21)

However, as Davis and Womack state, it was New Criticism's quest for universally agreed-upon and singular meaning that was the theory's primary shortcoming, paving the way for reader-response theory.

Reader-Response Theory

A novel or poem or play remains merely inkspots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols. (Rosenblatt, 1995, p. 24)

While reader-response theory is widely recognized as beginning in the 1950s with Walker Gibson's theory of the 'mock reader' (Davis and Womack, 2002; Tompkins, 1980), in the 1930s Louise Rosenblatt was already challenging the New Critics by focusing on the relationship between the reader and the text. While Rosenblatt is glaringly omitted from popular and oft-referenced anthologies of reader-response criticism (such as Jane Tompkins' *Reader Response Criticism*, Suleiman and Crosman's *The Reader in the Text* and Andrew Bennett's *Readers and Reading*), her contribution to reader-response theory is significant (Flynn, 2007; Connell, 2008). Rosenblatt's first book, *Literature as Exploration* was first published in 1938 (the revised 1995 edition is cited here). It was in this work that, much ahead of her time, she described reading as, "a constructive, selective process over time in a particular context" (1995, p. 26). Rosenblatt continues with what in hindsight can be seen as the beginnings of her 'transactional theory' of reading, arguing that, "[t]he relation between the reader and signs on the page

proceeds in a to-and-fro spiral in which each is continually being affected by what the other has contributed” (p. 26).

What Rosenblatt (1978), in *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*, calls the “transaction” of reading, is a concept frequently articulated by reader-response theorists. In *S/Z*, Roland Barthes (1970) describes the reading process as involving a fusion between the reader and text in which the reader is no longer a passive recipient of meaning, but rather an active producer of meaning. Similarly, Wolfgang Iser (1980) evokes images of reader/text synergy arguing that in literature, “the message is transmitted in two ways, in that the reader ‘receives’ it by composing it” (p. 107). Wayne Booth (1988; 2006) argues that there are strong interconnections between readers’ lives and the literature they read:

No one who has thought about it for five minutes can deny that we are at least partially constructed, in our most fundamental moral character, by the stories we have heard, read, or viewed, or acted out in amateur theatricals: the stories we have really *listened* to. (2006, p. 240)

For some theorists, like Norman Holland and David Bleich, the relationship between reader and text is best described in psychoanalytic terms (Suleiman and Crosman, 1980; Tompkins, 1980). Holland (1980) argues that, as readers, we “use the literary work to symbolize and finally to replicate ourselves. We work through the text our own characteristic patterns of desire and adaptation... We interact with the work, making it part of our own psychic economy and making ourselves part of the literary work—as we interpret it” (p.124). Bleich (1980) describes meaning construction as a highly social function, the result of collaboration between members of a group or ‘interpretive

community'. Text, for Bleich, is a symbol which only holds meaning in the mind of the reader, and the meaning is shaped by the social forces of the reader's community.

With a similar emphasis on the social element to reading, Stanley Fish developed his theory of interpretive communities. Much like Bleich, Fish rejects any 'objective' meaning, arguing that knowledge and interpretation are formed and acquired through specific contexts. Text, then, is highly unstable—shifting as circumstances and interpretive communities change—leading to Fish's (1999) claim that, "there are no determinate meanings and the stability of the text is an illusion" (p. 48). I will address Fish's theory of interpretive communities in more depth when I discuss the role of context in reading.

While reader-response theory is considered to have been at its peak in the late 1970s through the 1980s (Bennett, 1995), reader-response still maintains a strong presence both in more recent literary theories as well as in the blog conversations about literature and interpretation. Atwood (2002) herself seems to ascribe to some tenants of reader-response theory:

...works of literature are recreated by each generation of readers, who make them new by finding fresh meaning in them. The printed text of a book is thus like a musical score, which is not itself music, but becomes music when played by musicians, or 'interpreted' by them, as we say. (p. 50)

Gut Responses: Limitations of Reader-response Theory

The grotesque, corporeal aspect of reading is cleaned up, the act aestheticised, given a refiguration in a clean light. Yet in reading there is still, always, regurgitation.
(Wolfeys, 2000, p. x)

We are what we read. (Epstein, 1985, p. 395)

For Karen Littau (2006), reader-response theory has neglected a crucial aspect of reading: no one talks about the power of literature to *affect* a reader. So focused on the work the reader is performing on the text, theorists largely ignore that the text is also doing something to the reader. As readers, we know what it is like to be held captive by a book, reduced to tears, bursting with laughter, sunk into a “fallow state” (Atwood, 2009) for days after the final sentence, mourning the end of a good book. Even our everyday metaphors of reading invoke images of bodily action, consuming texts, our ‘gut’ reaction to literature both in the sense of some sort of primal instinct as well as a ravenous hunger for books:

Just as writers speak of cooking up a story, rehashing a text, having half-baked ideas for a plot, spicing up a scene or garnishing the bare bones of an argument, turning the ingredients of a potboiler into soggy prose, a slice of life peppered with allusions into which reader can sink their teeth, we, the readers, speak of savouring a book, of finding nourishment in it, of devouring a book at one sitting, of regurgitating or spexing up a text, of ruminating on a passage, of polling a poet’s words on the tongue, of feasting on poetry, of living on a diet of detective stories. (Manguel, 1996, pp. 170-1)

And yet, as Littau (2006) says, theory has largely ignored the bodily experience of reading. Littau reminds us that, throughout history, reading has often been associated with various physiological conditions:

These range from physical to psychopathological complaints, and cover everything from exhaustion, which Diderot experiences reading Richardson's *Clarissa*..., to fits of uncontrollable weeping over Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse*..., to attacks of 'brightness', which Kant suffers as it 'suddenly spreads over the page, confusing and missing up all the letters until they are completely illegible'... to more serious afflictions of 'hysteria and nervous diseases', which a health report on women finds to be the case 'among the highest of classes'... Symptoms seem to intensify or multiply when it comes to excessive reading.
(p. 38)

In, *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes (1975) performs a very sensuous, bodily exploration of language, reading and writing. Like Littau, he notes the affective lack in hermeneutical analyses of literature. In a wonderful final passage, Barthes imagines an "aesthetic of textual pleasure" which he says must include, "writing aloud":

writing aloud...searches for...the pulsional incidents, the language lined with flesh, a text where we can hear the grain of the throat, the patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of vowels, a whole carnal stereophony: the articulation of the body, of the tongue, not that of meaning, of language. (pp. 66-7)

Littau (2006) argues that readers are not just "sense-makers" but are also reading "for sensations" (p. 58)—something many reader-response critics fail to address. Littau calls for an "affective criticism" which she says was an important part of literary criticism up until about 80 years ago when formalism, New Criticism and reader-response theory took over. Like Davis and Womack (2002), Littau (2006) warns against the tendency to forget the longer history of literary criticism which she traces back to antiquity: "Literature's ability to stir the emotions, and ability to engender make-believe, is what renders it potentially dangerous, a conception which leads Plato not only to favour philosophy over poetry but to banish the latter from the Republic" (p. 86). This connection between affect

and censorship is impossible to ignore, and one that surfaces frequently in the conversations about *The Handmaid's Tale*.

An exception to the affect-less literary theories, Littau says, is feminist literary theory. A feminist reading must bring the body back into theory as the theory's primary concern is with the political and physiological differences of reading as a woman. In other words, "...feminist literary studies depends upon the premise that women read and on the conclusion that their reading *makes* a difference" (Rooney, 2006, p. 4). This is not to imply that there is a unified imagined 'female reader' with a specific set of concerns. According to Rooney, it is quite the opposite: "Self-questioning and an unwillingness to settle in a single location are characteristic of feminist literary theories" (p. 7). As Judith Fetterly (1978) asserts, the feminist critic is above all a "resisting reader", conjuring up images of forceful physicality brought on by an awareness of difference that being in a particular body makes.

Hélène Cixous (1990) advocates for and performs similarly powerful and embodied feminist readings and writings. Cixous' *écriture féminine* calls for intimate and messy encounters with text, exploding traditional categories and binaries, dismantling patriarchal rules, allowing oneself to be "carried off by the text" (p. 3). Cixous' (1997) writing itself is full of bodily movement, pulling me in, sometimes soaring, as I read: "To fly/steal is woman's gesture, to steal into language to make it fly" (p. 102). Reading sometimes feels like flying, other times presses down on me with a tremendous weight,

but either way I *feel* when I am reading. Impossible to dismiss is the sense that the text has done something to me, and for Littau, this means there *is* a text.

Littau is critical of those like Fish who claim there is no text, that readers are in fact the *writers* when it comes to creating meaning. Valentine Cunningham is similarly, though more broadly, critical of ‘Theory’ which he sees as having gone so far to the extreme in “reading otherwise” (Felman, 1977) that very little is left of any text—never mind any hope of finding any meaning amongst the remnants:

Theory blurs texts. It has people misreading; reading otherwise in a bad sense; reading against the textual grain; against the verbal, the literary, odds; against good sense; against some very plain senses of the words. Theory just tears up the literature, the letters, whose reading it sponsors; and it does so with the ample resources in the thick stock of the Theory gumbo.

(Cunningham, 2002, pp.112-13)

While I think there is great deal that is valuable in literary theory, and in “reading otherwise” I think it is crucial to draw in the voices of opposition who remind me of what reading is for me, much of the time—a reckless and embodied plunge into a novel. Reading, Cunningham says, must go beyond theory as theory, “involves inevitable reduction” (p. 127). I hesitate to wholeheartedly agree with Cunningham here, as theory has, for me, often expanded my reading experience by offering a different interpretive lens, awakening formerly dormant passages. However, his point is important and central to my intertextual analysis: no ‘Theory’ can entirely encapsulate or explain what it means to read. And so I continue to weave, tying the abstract theoretical knots to the slippery, and hungry, gut responses.

Misreading

If we are to begin to be 'good readers', we must at least acknowledge that which always slips away, in that very moment when we believe reading has taken hold. (Wolfreys, 2000, p. 50)

In the online discussions of *The Handmaid's Tale*, readers argue over what the novel *really* means, or what Atwood is *actually* saying. It could be argued that these arguments illustrate a major tenant of reader-response theory, whereby individual readers interpret (or 'write') the text differently; but these squabbles are also interesting in light of Paul de Man's (1979) concept of "misreading" or the impossibility of reading. De Man (1983) is skeptical of any literary criticism that works towards unearthing the "correct reading" (p. 282) as, for him, reading can never be that straight forward. As Martin McQuillan (2001) says, for de Man, "not only does a reading say something the text does not say but it even says something the reader did not mean to say" (p. 17). Despite the desire, articulated both by blog-posters and by some literary theorists, to establish a fixed meaning derived from a text, this is an impossible task. 'Reading', in the sense of arriving at a fixed meaning, is impossible, says de Man. Reading involves not just the words on the page but the world and words around us and both are always influenced (and changed) by the reader's participation, leading to an inevitable misreading. Misreading is not an erroneous or flawed reading, but rather a necessary condition of making meaning (McQuillan, 2001). Reading, or perhaps more accurately, 'misreading' is not an arrival but a journey of constant motion with meaning perpetually deferred: "Reading denies the end of reading, that we can have done with reading" (Wolfreys, 2000, p. 22).

It is crucial for de Man and also for Shoshana Felman (2007), that literary interpretation or criticism not stifle meaning by stopping short, by trying to tie the text down to the literal, limiting meaning by confining the text to fixed parameters. Felman aptly calls such restrictive literal interpretation “vulgar”:

The vulgar is the literal, insofar as it is unambiguous: “the story won’t tell; not in any *literal*, constitutive of meaning, because it blocks and interrupts the endless process of metaphorical substitution. The vulgar, therefore, is anything that misses, or falls short of, the dimension of the symbolic, anything that rules out, or excludes, meaning as a loss and as a light – anything that strives, in other words, to eliminate from language its inherent silence, anything that misses the specific way in which a text *actively* ‘won’t tell.’” (See Felman, 2007, p. 26)

By denying the “silence” of a text, ignoring the necessary impossibility of reading, a reader risks limiting reading and the possibilities of the text itself. This is especially important for me to remember as I read and struggle to broaden my understanding of not just what it means to read, but also what it might mean to misread *The Handmaid’s Tale* and readers’ responses to the novel.

Risky Readings

The good reader takes risks. Reading entails risk. It is an act which takes risks, which is itself risking everything in the event of reading, because reading opens itself to the other, and to the chance encounter with textuality. (Wolfe, 2000, p. 56)

The shifting, murky and swiftly moving experience we call ‘reading’ starts to feel more and more dangerous, or ‘risky’. Anne Dufourmantelle takes up Derrida’s discussion of fear in *Of Hospitality* (2000). Just as there is fear and anxiety associated with meeting the “wholly other”, readers perform a similar fretful encounter in reading risky texts:

When we enter an unknown place, the emotion experienced is almost always that of an indefinable anxiety. There then begins the slow work of taming the unknown, and gradually the unease fades away. A new familiarity succeeds the fear provoked in us by the irruption of the “wholly other.” (Dufourmantelle and Derrida, 2000, p. 26)

As Dufourmantelle describes, there are moments in reading where we are stopped short, “scared” (p. 24). Such moments are often followed by a type of reworking of both the self and the text to render the new place familiar. As Sumara, Davis and Iftody (2006) found in their study of English teachers, conversations around risky texts quickly drifted away from the risky text in question to a more comfortable space, shying away from an encounter with the “wholly other”:

This would be an excellent novel to use to help students understand the negative effects of bullying. But I would avoid talking about gay issues. (“Robert” cited in Sumara et al., 2006, p. 55)

In *Private Readings in Public*, Dennis Sumara (1996) describes a particularly pertinent theme for my study, the “risky venture” of reading in school. Reading is ‘risky’, Sumara says, because “it is not a virtual experience; it is caught up in life itself” (p. 1). In the space between reader and text, what Sumara calls the “commonplace”, the reader negotiates imaginative experiences in reading with real-life experiences. Similar to Rosenblatt’s concept of reader-text “transaction”, Sumara allows for the possibility of life-altering experiences stemming from reading novels. The distinction between oneself and the fictional characters can become blurry, and both the reader and the text are “altered” (p. 71) for having read and been read, respectively. In this “transformative”

space where the “reader’s world becomes re-woven” (p. 80), would-be censors may begin to shift uncomfortably in their seats.

Deanne Bogdan (1987) addresses this tension in her study of a conflict in Peterborough over the reading of Margaret Lawrence’s *The Diviners* in school. What for teachers of the novel was a wonderful opportunity for transformation through literature was, for some worried parents, an exercise in the moral corruption of their children. Bogdan finds that the argument can never be resolved as both ‘sides’ follow a literature-as-life or “truth of correspondence” line of reasoning to arrive at their opposing viewpoints. When Sumara (1996) says, “we know that once we have had an experience with another person or with a literary fiction, we cannot leave that experience unchanged” (p. 86), this presents a great deal of concern for the parent of a young reader who does not wish his/her daughter’s world rearranged according to *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

For Bogdan, this scenario is irresolvable so long as readers’ adhere to the literature-as-life model, something many blogging readers still seem to do. The long lists of censored or banned books put together by *PEN Canada* and *Freedom to Read*, would indicate censorship debates are continuing to spin in the circular fashion Bogdan observed in her study. In Pearce Carefoote’s (2007) book *Forbidden Fruit: Banned, Censored and Challenged Books from Dante to Harry Potter*, the perceived ‘risks’ of contentious books remain largely unchanged over time. Between 1990 and 2000, the American Library Association (ALA) received 6,364 challenges to books for young adults. The top reasons why people challenged these books were: sexually explicit material, offensive language,

unsuited to age group, occult themes, violence, homosexual themes and promoting a religious viewpoint (Lesene and Change, 2002). James Moffett (1990) found objections to 'risky' books included: "immoral, unchristian, un-American instruments of a communist community" (p. 7), "morbid", "negative" and "depressing" (p. 10). Parents in Moffett's study were angry that these books were, "not passing on *our* heritage and values. They are indoctrinating our children with someone *else's* way of life" (p. 10). The challenges to *The Handmaid's Tale* repeat similar themes.

Guilty Readings

...the guilty reading—is opposed to other readings... (Wolfreys, 2000, p. 5)

Guilty readings, like any other readings, mean several things. To read guiltily evokes for me, at first, trysts with 'risky' texts. In these 'guilty' readings, I remember myself as a child, devouring a banned-in-my-house Archie comic, riskily tucked inside another, approved-of book in order to conceal my forbidden book. There was also the surreptitious reading of books that were "too old for me", late at night, sweltering under the covers with a flashlight. I was guilty of certain risky readings.

But another type of 'guilty' reading is harder to catch, or rather, to be caught at. It is the reading that takes place through my own eyes, laden with my own philosophical baggage and biases, too often held rigid within the parameters of my knowledge, experience and situation. As Deborah Britzman (1995) says, there is no such thing as an innocent reading as it is impossible to read 'objectively'. Wolfreys (2000) speaks to this same readerly

guilt. Reading, he says, “can never be returned to a state of purity and innocence” (p. 6).

If there is innocence in reading, it is because reading has come “to a halt” (p. 6).

However, as Britzman (1995) says, as much as all readings are guilty, what we as readers must work towards is, “building suspicious texts and encouraging suspicious readings” (p. 135). Or, as Felman (2007) puts it, the reader must “participate in the scandal” (p. 18) in order to read. In such textual encounters, Felman says, “the reader’s innocence cannot remain intact: there is no such thing as an innocent reader of this text. In other words, the scandal is not simply *in* the text, in the text’s *effect on us*, its readers: what is outrageous in the text is not simply that *of which* the text is speaking, but that which makes it speak *to us*” (p. 18).

Participating in the scandal of reading is “dangerous work” (Britzman, 1995, p. 135). It requires a continual deconstruction of the self, a steady “gesture” (p. 151) to remind myself of my own guilty readings. It is perhaps my greatest challenge—to work at pulling myself away from the readings of *The Handmaid’s Tale* I am so guiltily drawn to and instead linger in the sometimes awkward and uncomfortable spaces of tension that pull at my readings.

Context

Public and private readings

On the one hand, reading is a private act—readers finding a quiet corner away from distractions, hiding behind a book on a plane to avoid a chatty neighbour, ‘bookish’ often used interchangeably with ‘introverted’ or even, ‘anti-social’. On the other hand, as Sumara (1996) reminds us, our quiet private readings rely on a public context in order to become significant. There is, Sumara goes on to say, an interplay between *text* and *context* each one altering the other creating a “reading relationship” that is “continually evolving” (p. 81).

“Context,” says Richard Johnson (1996), “is crucial in the production of meaning” (p. 97). In this specific instance, *The Handmaid’s Tale* comes under fire in a public space (the Internet) because of a particular public reading context (high school English class). Both the Internet and the high school English class are social contexts—communities centered, for a moment, at least, around a particular novel. Willie Van Peer (2008) links literature with the power to create “group cohesion and solidarity” (p. 123). He argues that, “literary canons thus act as a cultural cement among individuals of a certain social group, often to the extent of excluding those not familiar with the canon” (p. 123). As bloggers ‘take sides’ in the discussion, staking out the parameters of ‘us’ versus ‘them’, Van Peer’s image of setting cement seems quite appropriate.

Stanley Fish offers significant insight in the role of community in literary interpretation. Fish (1980, 1999) argues that all meaning is dependent on the situation one is in.

Language is always encountered from within a structure of norms that determines what is within the realm of possible meanings: “Meanings come already calculated, not because of norms embedded in the language but because language is always perceived, from the very first, within a structure of norms” (1980, p. 318). Meaning, according to Fish, is created and circulated in “interpretive communities”. This is not to say that meaning is fixed, as Fish is careful to point out. Because situations are continually changing, interpretive communities are not fixed entities. The systems of intelligibility within interpretive communities, which are intelligible only to members of that community, are in constant flux.

Online Communities

The online context presents yet another interpretive scenario, another space for gathering in interpretive communities. Unlike in face-to-face discussions when it might be possible to know the actual situation (who they are, where they’re from, etc.) of the participants, the people in online discussions are free from such categorical constraints. However, as Dana Walker (2006) notes in her study on blog commenting, it doesn’t take long to get to ‘know’ the posters, as systems of norms are quickly established, rendering certain comments intelligible over others. Walker says this ideological homogeneity often leads to a “short-hand discourse... where people stereotype or create caricatures of opponents’ views or even where people don’t need to spend time acknowledging a different viewpoint” (p. 6). As we will see in the *Handmaid’s Tale* discussions, different media sites are hospitable to different opinions, each site displaying a dominant political ideology. Tamara Witschge’s (2008) study which performs a critical discourse analysis of

online discussions draws similar conclusions to Walker, noting that Internet forums operate to exclude certain discourses. Fish's (1999) argument that "there's no such thing as free speech" becomes relevant here as discussion forums establish (both overtly by using a mediator to censor comments, as well as organically with the social forces of inclusion and exclusion at play) a political agenda:

... any speech community is constituted by virtue of norms that govern what will and will not qualify as communicable speech, and that these norms necessarily render incommunicable or non-sensical certain forms of expression.... To be a member of a speech community means to have accepted as a first presupposition that certain kinds of expressions will not be possible... If censorship conditions the very possibility of speech, then no speech is absolutely free. (Judith Butler in Introduction to "There's No Such Thing As Free Speech", by Stanley Fish, in Veenser, 1999, p. 146)

In a similar vein, Robert MacDougall (2005) argues that "all communication is political" (p. 575) and points to a body of research which contends that online communities "tend to engender more homogenous than heterogeneous groupings and social affiliations" (p. 579). The homophilic nature of blogs is important to note with news blogs in particular as it is tempting to interpret the blog posts on public media sites as a sort of litmus test for what the general public opinion on a particular issue is. As MacDougall says, however, people often find it easier to exit a blog when they disagree rather than engage in a debate.

That said, Ho (2008) finds quite the opposite in his study and says, "respondents were more reluctant to express opinions in the FTF [face-to-face] setting than in the online chat room setting" (p. 200). Once again entering into a space of tension, both MacDougall's

and Ho's perspective prove to be valid in my reading of the *Handmaid's Tale* debate. Like MacDougall says, there is a dominant opinion on each media blog, but there are also some blog-posters who disagree with the majority, and perhaps, as Ho found, they feel comfortable doing so in part due to the online context. As *bricoleuse*, I continue to draw seemingly dissonant research into my quilt, leaving space for the blog-posts that are not quite *this* or *that*, allowing for endless possibilities to emerge.

In School

Reading in school presents yet another contextual dimension. While readers may not object to specific books appearing in bookstores or public libraries, once they appear on a course syllabus the books are subject to greater scrutiny. As an aside, I think it is ironic that parents are so concerned about the impact of the novels their children read in school when, as Daniel Pennac (1994) points out, many readers blame school for sucking all the life out of perfectly good literature: "A book is a blunt instrument, a block of eternity. The material manifestation of boredom" (p. 22).

Louise Rosenblatt's (1995) belief in the transformative power of literature gives more credibility to the concerns of worried parents. Statements Rosenblatt makes such as, "the implied moral attitudes and unvoiced systems of social values are reinforced by the persuasiveness of art" (p. 8), or "notions of complex patterns of behaviour, such as courtship or moral and social attitudes can be assimilated from books" (p. 183), ring true both for those who argue for the merits of *The Handmaid's Tale* and those who see it as threatening.

Similarly, in *Why Reading Literature in School Still Matters*, Sumara (2002) argues that, “literary engagement can become an important site for the ongoing interpretation of the personal, the communal, and the cultural” (p. 12). Too often, Sumara says, the study of literature in school is about excavating for ‘Truth’ when what is most beneficial is the engagement with someone else’s way of thinking. Cynthia Lewis (2000) is similarly critical of literary practices in school, arguing that a poorly understood version of reader response theory has led to too much emphasis on personal responses to the text, and not enough attention has been given to the insightful exploration of the different social and political perspectives offered by another (the author’s) voice. Reading in school, despite its reputation for being overly scripted and dry endurance-test, can be as diverse, inspiring and baffling an experience as reading ‘alone’. A teacher ruminating on her life’s work in Marilynne Robinson’s (2008) novel *Home* captures the mystery of reading in school nicely:

Why do we have to read poetry? Why ‘Il Penseroso’? Read it and you’ll know why. If you still don’t know read it again. And again... She was helping them assume their humanity. People have always made poetry, she told them. Trust that it will matter to you. (p. 21)

Ethics of Reading

Literature calls on us to respond fully, viscerally, with every dimension of our psychological and moral being. (Schwarz, 2001, p. 6)

That this entire project stemmed from a ‘visceral’ response to a newspaper article means I cannot ignore the ethical dimension of every reading. As Wayne Booth (2001) says, regardless of what theorists say to devalue ethical criticism, the ‘proof’ that it deserves at least some recognition lies in these unavoidable and undeniable responses to stories that are impossible to ignore. However, as Booth is quick to note, the vast variety in both literature and in criticism means an ‘ethics of reading’ can mean many different things indeed.

For Schwarz (2001), the key element uniting ethical critics is the belief in a connection between art and life. He argues that reading experience, wherein the reader is shaped by the text and the text by the reader, contributes to moral development and maturity. Martha Nussbaum (1995; 2001) makes similar claims, arguing that novels are highly relevant to citizenship as they foster empathy and compassion in a way political and social writings do not. For Nussbaum (1995), the literary imagination is “an essential ingredient of an ethical stance that asks us to concern ourselves with the good of other people whose lives are distant from our own” (p. xvi).

An ‘ethics of reading’ can address questions of morality or ‘ethical situations’ raised by the story, and this is, as Booth (2001) states giving the example of the Bible or Aesop’s fables, an important aspect of ethical criticism. Another ‘ethics of reading’ hinted at by

Schwarz's description of literature's call for response is explored in depth by Hillis Miller (1987) in *The Ethics of Reading*. For Miller, the ethical moment is, "not a matter of response to a thematic content asserting this or that idea about morality. It is a much more fundamental 'I must' responding to the language of the literature it itself" (p. 9-10).

Miller's (1987) ethics of reading require a response that is both "necessitated" and "free" (p. 45). The response answers literature's call, submitting to the "I must", but this response must also be ethical, meaning that I must "take responsibility for my response and for the further effects" (p. 45). Miller's ethical moment is one of particular importance for teachers of literature, to be sure, but also one to contemplate as I read online comments, delay the call to respond, and then do so now, in this thesis. And throughout all of this, always keeping in mind the necessary misreading in even the most 'ethical' of readings:

We can never read Reading. This means that we can never understand why we cannot read our own epistemological wisdom clearly enough to avoid making ethical statements or telling ethical stories that are contradicted, undermined, and disqualified by that wisdom. (p. 56)

John Caputo (1993) troubles the notion of "ethics" further still, taking a stand "against ethics". Seeking to "minimize" the role of the metaphysical, Caputo argues against an overarching *telos* that attempts to explain or legitimize tragic events—the role of Ethics, as Caputo sees it. Instead, there is only "what happens", and to what happens we have an "Obligation" but no "cosmic backup" (p. 236). Caputo's stance against Ethics in favour of Obligation is one that creates space for a response without the need of a grand narrative to justify it. For me, Caputo speaks to the "obligations" of my own readings—

readings which do not culminate with a succinct Conclusion nor arrive at a final Meaning. Like me, Caputo finds a helpful metaphor in a quilt:

Minimalism means having been cut off from a guiding star and a Meta-event, a point outside of what happens that explains, legitimates, or gives happening. What happens is like a quilt: it has a pattern but it is not going anywhere. When you get to the edge of a quilt you have not found its *telos*, you have just reached the point at which the quilt ends. (p. 233)

An ‘ethics of reading’ becomes many things in this project, whether it is to tarry with questions of citizenship and education, or a powerful call to respond to literature, or an “obligation” for me as a researcher, to respond to *what happens*.

Chapter Four

Conversations

Fiction, it would seem, can still get people's blood up. (Sutherland, 2006, p. 26)

I may set out with the desire to read certain figures, but all too often there is something for which the act of reading cannot account. This something troubles not only my reading, but also me.
(Wolfreys, 1997, p. 17)

Reading and re-reading the comments on the editorial blogs, I find myself struggling with the overwhelming temptation to categorize and count, to place each blog-post in a labeled envelope with other similar posts. I can't help myself and begin this way, snipping bits of paper, labeling more and more envelopes as my categories multiply. It isn't long before the pile of comment-scrap that don't quite fit into any of my envelopes is larger than any of my 'categories' and I dump the whole pile, categories and all, into the recycling bin.

There are some themes that come up again and again, by many different blog-posters and on different blogs. It is tempting, and, in another research project with another methodology and another arsenal of theoretical lenses, altogether possible to assemble the collection of comments in an orderly fashion that culminates with a tidy 'conclusion' summing up the 'evidence'. Guiltily (Britzman, 1995), I am drawn into the world of categories and oppositions I (un)knowingly and (un)comfortably inhabit and (de)construct every day. So it was with my first attempt to enter into the readings of others that I am confronted with my own guilty readings, and I work to rail against the almost magnetic pull towards the *this* versus *that*, the *here* and *there*. The first of an endless series of struggles to enter the spaces of tension begins with my own reluctance to step into the muddy space of the neither/both here nor/and there, and the need to turn my reading eyes inward to my own guilty readings.

Exploring readers' readings, I notice the repetition of themes—sometimes as a back and forth discussion, other times as a random spattering of individual statements. I use these themes not to categorize, but as points of entry into the conversation. Whether the blog-posters intended to engage in conversation or merely make a singular statement, my readings of their comments turns individual posts into conversations, my own reading continuing and/or sparking the discussion:

Texts cannot be understood if we stop short at a presumed meaning. They must be allowed to continue their discourse. Only when they continue speaking can they survive as the expression of what has been expressed as the *irreducible relationship between the two*. A reader is not primarily a receiver of content. A reader enables a text to speak. (Hans-Jost Frey cited in Wolfreys, 1997, p. 21)

This chapter, the 'data analysis', is my conversation with the blog-posters³. It is divided into three parts. Part I addresses some of the prevalent themes surrounding the issue of censorship, Part II tarries with the question of what it is to read, and in Part III I delve into the complicated contexts of this particular reading of *The Handmaid's Tale*. I draw into this conversation my own scraps of already-read, weaving my readings into these new readings, allowing the two to *trouble* each other and, most of all *me*.

³ All citations from the editorial blogs are quoted as they were originally posted. Many blog-posts have spelling mistakes, grammatical errors and typos but these have been left uncorrected to accurately reflect how the comments appear on the blogs.

PART I

Censorship: Slippery Slopes and (Over)Protective Parents

I chose censorship as the first site of tension I visit. The word itself seems to ignite the debate and raises fearful spectres of totalitarian regimes and suppression of intellectual freedom. This section begins with a conversation about the politics of book selection. Book censorship and politics seem to go hand in hand (Hentoff, 1993) with blog-posters fervently defending or admonishing political beliefs and value systems and expressing the belief that what we (don't) read determines how (un)sure our footing is as we take the first step down a steep slope towards societal doom.

The conversation on censorship continues with another trail down the 'slippery slope': that of the shrinking reading list that has been trimmed of any remotely 'offensive' books to such an extent that there is little left worth reading. In a similar vein, the final theme in this section discusses the selection aspect of book censorship. How do we determine, and who gets to determine what books are (not) for children?

The Slippery (Political) Slope: Reading Republics

Just another form of censorship. Don't like a book, ban it. I know! Why not just burn them like the Nazis did which turned into a dark chapter for the history of the world because there isn't much difference when it comes to censorship. Once you ban one book, where will it end?

(Clare Ravenwood, 2009)

Be afraid... be very, VERY afraid!

This blatant attempt at censorship has dangerous historical precedent and ironically serves to validate Margaret Atwood's vision. So what's the next step for this overly uptight parent - lobbying for the renaming of this country as the 'Republic of Gilead'? (graemebacque, 2009)

Finally, oppression and forced conformity starts with censorship...
(drziggy, 2009)

If we start banning Atwood, it's a slipperly slope. Literature is LIFE.
(Erykah76, 2009)

Knowledge always trumps ignorance

Yet another attempt to ban a book by a well-meaning but ignorant parent. Mr. Edwards objects to *The Handmaid's Tale* because of "sex, brutal situations, murder, prostitution." Oh, well I guess we have to ban the Bible, and a whole stack of novels, newspapers, magazines, etc. etc. It's a *reductio ad absurdum* to say a literary work is unacceptable because it is "offensive." Many things are offensive, but one does not retreat into closed-minded intolerance. That only makes things worse. (cosmo, 2009)

Mr. Edwards, I hope you take a moment to realise what road you walk upon in your ignorance...one of them leads to Gilead... (wcullen, 2009)

The act of banning a book, for posters like these, is an 'ignorant' act of curtailing an important freedom to read, which in turn, is an important tenant of overall political freedom. These statements display a profound belief that, "literary engagement has clear political and social effects" (Bogdan, 1992, p. xxxiii). While book-banning seems to be easily connected by many blog-posters to restrictive political regimes, very few appeared to recognize that the particular books chosen for a school reading list may similarly be

accused of promoting a particular political perspective or agenda. Mrs. Jones was one of the few blog-posters who addressed the political nature of the debate:

A unbalanced and biased education system that is clearly not universal. This is precisely why a rapidly growing number of parents are becoming more and more non-supportive of public school systems that sink to the lowest common denominator - their parental right to influence the values of their children is not just rudely undermined, it is trampled. The ethics of left wing parents who support these types of value systems surreptitiously becomes the ethics for children whose parents do not. Allowing offensive forms of secularism in the classroom can also validate the very offensiveness of it for impressionable and confused teens - and this clearly is not in the interest of the public - nor is it a universal education system. While I don't believe that books like this should be withdrawn from school libraries, neither should they be promoted in the classroom by teachers who don't give a damn about what many conservative parents might want their children to hear, learn or experience. (Mrs. Jones, 2009)

Mrs. Jones suspects that certain books are put on the reading list as a means of teaching certain political values, in this case, “the ethics of left wing parents”. While many parents see banning *The Handmaid's Tale* as an infringement on the ‘freedom to read’, Mrs. Jones’ comments remind us that there are always limitations, set within whatever the dominant political value system is, on *what* we are ‘free’ to read.

Stanley Fish (1999) further articulates this point when he argues that, “there is no such thing as free speech” (p. 144):

“Free speech” is just the name we give to verbal behavior that serves the substantive agendas we wish to advance; and we give our preferred verbal behaviors that name when we can, when we have the power to do so, because in the rhetoric of American life, the label “free speech” is the one you want your favorites to wear. Free speech, in short, is not an independent value but a political

prize, and if that prize has been captured by a politics opposed to yours, it can no longer be invoked in ways that further your purposes, for it is now an obstacle to those purposes. (p. 147)

This is a particularly sticky point of tension for me, as I acknowledge my own acts of censorship and book-banning that stem from specific political and/or philosophical convictions. I will recount a recent example of my own censorship practices: There are several series of novels aimed at teenaged girls, such as *The Clique* by Lisi Harrison and *Gossip Girl* by Cecily von Ziegesar that are quite popular (there is also a *Gossip Girl* television series) and can be found on the shelves of the bookstore where I work. I sometimes purge the shelves of these books on the grounds that I consider them ‘bad’ for young girls as they glamorize mean, materialistic and boy-obsessed girls willing to do anything to be ‘popular’ and ‘pretty’. Because these books offend my (feminist) sensibilities, and I argue books like these are ‘harmful’ to young girls as they explore what it means to be female, I want to ‘protect’ young girls from reading these books (that I have heard myself refer to as “trash” on numerous occasions). Not so different from this parent’s response to *The Handmaid’s Tale*:

Society is a toilet
Garbage in garbage out-- Keep feeding our kids crap and we will find out the results- I think we are finding out now. Morality today is a moving target that some people find offensive. I choose to raise my family with morals. Attwood does not have a moral fiber in her whole body. Don't ban her books we will need toilet paper if the depression hits. (logos, 2009)

On the one hand, I condemn censorship and argue for the ‘freedom to read’. On the other hand, I banish certain books from the bookstore. It is in this space of apparent contradiction I find a difficult knot—I am both the censor and the free-reader—clutching

tightly some books while forcibly casting away others. As Wolfreys (1997) says, “this all seems very slippery” (p. 14). Contrary to what I might (un)knowingly seek out in my binary, or, as Wolfreys says, “polite” reading habits that are “keen to get rid of the inauthentic, the contradictory, the dissonant” (p. 14), there is an “affirmative resistance” in every text that troubles and surprises the reader at every turn:

Thus a text is made to slip by us; it slips by us *en passant*. In our attempt to capture the text, the text, through its figural play/gesture/gambit, has resisted ahead of our strategy, broken the square, affirming its own waywardness by sidestepping, apparently with a wry smile on its face. (p.13)

The Slippery Slope: The Disappearing Reading List

Mark Cohen (2001) notes that, “most advocates of free speech, confronted with offensive material, oppose its censorship not because they condone the material but because they are afraid its censoring will lead to the censoring of other benign or worthwhile material” (p. 73). A number of blog-posters make this point as their versions of the ‘slippery slope’ paint a picture of what school reading lists will look like if we start banning novels like Atwood’s:

Seriously....

If we start removing every book from the high school curriculum that MIGHT offend someone, we will end up with "See Spot Run" as the novel study in grade twelve. (Parthanon, 2009)

Slippery Slope

Although the issues presented in the book *The Handmaid's Tale* may be considered too dangerous for high school students then so would many of the books considered classic literature that students have read for many years. To mention but a few...Adventures of Huck Finn has racist comments throughout,

just about any Shakespeare could be considered too sexual or violent for any class (Macbeth, Hamlet, 12th Night...), Lord of the Flies has bullying and violence. I guess the question now becomes, where do you draw the line? It's a slippery slope once it gets going. (watsonomics, 2009)

In the 'disappearing reading list' arguments, it is frequently implied that any 'worthwhile' reading will be offensive to someone and to find a text that doesn't run such a risk is to limit ourselves to only the most mundane or simplistic of stories.

Along similar lines, there are those who point out that, depending on how one reads a given text, no matter how seemingly 'innocent', that text can be interpreted to be controversial:

Better ban Snow White while we're at it, exposing kindergarteners to the concept of a woman living with 7 men is teaching bad morals, isn't it?
(countrysmom, 2009)

Countrysmom's suspicion that, depending on the values and beliefs of those selecting the reading material any number of titles could be deemed questionable, is elaborated upon by Stanley Fish (1999) when he describes the nature of "interpretive communities".

When interpreting texts, Fish says, readers are guided by the norms and assumptions of their "situation", a context that forms "systems of intelligibility" (p. 39) in which certain arguments and interpretations are deemed intelligible and obvious. In another "situation", the same text would be interpreted much differently. Fish asks us to, "imagine other circumstances in which the same words would be equally, but differently, clear" (p. 47).

Meaning, Fish says, is shaped by the norms of each situation and so changes as each situation changes. Within the parameters of one's "interpretive community", meanings

appear to be “obvious”. This obviousness shines through in the incredulous tones many posters take on when expressing their shock at Mr. Edwards’ aversion to *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Comments like, “you missed the point” (Lindsay, 2009) or “read between the lines” (Sylvie, 2009) reveal that another reader has read the same words, but “differently”. That we are all reading the same words adds to the frustration expressed in the posts. Has the would-be-book-banner even read the book?! For Fish the answer would be both yes and no. The book is the same, but each reader’s situation shapes how it is read—*The Handmaid’s Tale* I read is not *The Handmaid’s Tale* Mr. Edwards read. While intellectually, I can appreciate this difference of readings from within different interpretive communities, I still struggle with where this leaves my gut reaction which would agree with ‘Lindsay’—Mr. Edwards must have “missed the point” because, for me, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is the furthest thing from “fictional drivel” I can think of. It would seem that, as Dennis Sumara (1996) states, “neither readers nor literary fictions can escape their prior histories of interaction in the world” (p. 112).

(Not) For Children

As a student who just finished Grade 12 last year I find this whole debate...offensive. At that age we are still young adults, and I would hope you'd treat us appropriately. Are we to read happy go lucky novels? What about the realities of the world? ... Are your 'children' just going to have a none the wiser mindset until they get out of high school? I don't think so, we've been exposed to much worse outside of school, trust me. (A Student’s Point of View, 2009)

I remember reading this book in High School and having to compare it to 1984..... Looking back I thought it was a wonderful project, I learned a lot from it and it's not like I was surprised by the content or felt that it wasn't age

appropriate for me. I had certainly already seen, read, heard much worse by the age of 17 and was certainly mature enough to see the difference between a novel like this and the trash in films and on TV. If anything, high school students should be encouraged to read wonderful books like these so that they are able to take certain subjects and themes such as those in these books seriously instead of reiterating the unrealistic crap and trash that they are no doubt looking at on the Internet when their parents aren't watching. (carcar, 2009)

Banning this book or any book from the school is kind of moronic, based on the movies available, video games, music lyrics, movies available on MXS after midnight, the language kids use today, porn freely available on the Internet, the example the rap singers set for our kids, etc, and you're worried about a book?? Give me a break. (pilot604, 2009)

I suppose if you are old enough to consent to sex or surgery you still aren't of age to decide what is an appropriate novel? (countrymom, 2009)

Does this man allow his children to watch television or even walk outside?, there are far more stuff that depict "brutality" on television and on the outside world. (Helen Tsamis, 2009)

These posts all speak to the issue of 'sheltering' young readers from the many aspects of the 'real' world/life that are upsetting or unseemly. Many blog-posters who seem to object to banning *The Handmaid's Tale*, or to censorship in general, bring up the point that nothing in a *novel* can possibly be any worse than the violence/sex/profanity children and teenager are exposed to through various forms of popular media. However, others argue that just because kids are exposed to a great deal of 'negative' material in the 'real' world doesn't mean parents and teachers should accept anything and everything as 'worthwhile', 'educational' reading. It is the role of parents and educators to monitor and access the suitability of viewing/reading material for kids:

According to some of you, we shouldn't censor, those kids are really adults, they've seen it all, etc. From that point of view, it means that we could include all sorts of propaganda, or even Hustler and Playboy (because of, you know, their "insightful articles") in school curriculum under the guise of "opening their mind"! I, for one, applaud Mr. Edwards for having the backbone of being a parent. (Nick1236, 2009)

Atwood herself addresses this censorship-as-protection debate in *The Handmaid's Tale*. In the pre-Gilead society, Offred remembers groups of feminists burning pornographic films and magazines, railing against the harmful effects pornography has on women. Flashing forward to the repressive regime of Gilead, where censorship has been taken to an extreme—what began as a liberating banning of offensive and damaging pornography has morphed into a heavily policed totalitarian nightmare:

The problem with censoring pornography is that it gets people in the habit of censoring things. Usually the course of events is that pornography gets censored and then that extends to things like sex education and feminist writing would be on the line as well, once people started getting going with scissors and bonfires. And the next thing that usually goes is political freedom. (Atwood cited in Cohen, 2001, p. 78)

We come full circle as the 'slippery slope' once again looms large. A well-intentioned act of protecting the vulnerable from unpleasant, or even harmful portrayals of 'real' life is risky both for readers (who may not have much left to read), and for the population in general as censorship slides us into a debilitating political regime.

PART II

What is it to read?

As the blog-posters and I struggle with the ‘censorship issue’, another, perhaps deeper question is exposed: *what is it to read?* Once again, there are a number of themes related to this question that surface time and again, by many different blog-posters. And again, while I don’t pretend these links and re-iterations of common ideas are the keys to unlocking some of the mysteries of ‘Reading’, these shared spaces (that have become thus largely through my own reading) are where I enter (and continue) the conversation.

I begin Part II with a glance at the popular idea that literature is rife with important lessons—that we read to learn more about ourselves, our history and our future (Pennac, 1994). Blog-posters debate what the novel *actually* means, and the “point” of reading this and other works of literature. Next, I discuss the ‘ethics’ of reading by weaving the blog-posters’ concerns with morality and the moral teaching of *The Handmaid’s Tale* with my own readings of ‘ethics’ and the twists and knots such a complicated idea brings to the discussion. Part II of the conversation ends with “risky readings”, tapping into the discomforts and fears of blogging readers, struggling with the risks of (not) reading, and becoming attentive to the real and imagined effect *and* affect of literature, guided by a powerful gut response.

Lessons in Literature

“You missed the point”: Necessary Misreadings

The thing Edwards and most of these book-banning morons fail to grasp from the book (course they’d have to read it first) is its warning. It’s not saying, ‘Wow. Look at this awesome world we can build for ourselves where we can treat people like slaves and blow ourselves up. It’s saying quite the opposite. It’s telling us this sort of thing could happen here and probably will if we go down the path that book banning always leads to. (Benoit, 2009, p. 2)

He said the book has been accused of being anti-Christian and, more recently, anti-Islamic because the women are veiled and polygamy is allowed. But that ‘misses the point,’ said Brown. ‘It’s really antifundamentalism.’ (Russel Morton Brown cited in Rushowy, 2009a)

Readers struggle to make solid slippery interpretations, attempting to nail down some sort of absolute ‘meaning’, looking for tangible reasons why others may (not) have read otherwise—a common explanation being that these ‘others’ are “morons” or they haven’t read the book. Readers seem to be struggling with what Paul de Man (1979) calls the impossibility of reading, or the necessary misreading of any text. Replacing one misreading with another (“It’s *really* antifundamentalism”) creates an endless spiral of meaning-making, each ‘new’ meaning revealed as the other meanings fold back on themselves only to resurface again as each reader (re)engages with the text. Readers throw their comments down with such force and seeming finality, but other readings always prevent any one reading from settling and gathering dust:

Meaning relies on misreading. If there were a simple and transparent relation between what I said and what you understood me to say then there would be no need for interpretation, no possibility of multiple meanings in a text, and only

one authoritative centre (me) producing a single, stable meaning. We know this is not the case and that meaning is always plural. (McQuillan, 2001, p. 35)

In attempting to proclaim a singular, static meaning, readers reveal their own guilty readings, and sometimes go so far as to point out the guilty readings of others:

It is apparent to me that Mr. Edwards is a religious zealot and over protective parent. (forfairness, 2009)

Such readings, as all readings, are guilty because they bring to the text one's own subjectivities, truths, myths and tendencies to categorize and sort according to who *I* am and how *I* am in the world. As Britzman (1995) says, there is no such thing as an innocent reading as I have no choice but to read through my own eyes and "readerly identity" (p. 137). Blog-posters seem to recognize the necessary guilt in any reading and attempt to 'blame' others' misreadings on particular stereotyped "readerly identities". However as Britzman emphasizes, and some blog-posters do too, "these readerly identities can be narrated and textualized in ways that allow everyone involved new kinds of interpretive power and perhaps more problematized readerly identities" (p. 137).

I too studied this book in high school, some fifteen years ago now, and I still remember how it sparked fascinating classroom discussions and debates. Simply put, it's a great book that inspires its readers (of any age) to think - that's never a bad thing. (death of cool, 2009)

As readers laud the benefits of reading *The Handmaid's Tale*, another theme takes shape: the reasons we (don't) read literature.

The 'Point' of Reading

The Handmaid's Tale is one of those masterpieces of literature that warn us to be careful which path we take as a society. (Benoit, 2009, p. 2)

The novel as a type of moral map or a guidebook of important life lessons is a common theme in blog posts. Blog-posters arguing in favour of reading *The Handmaid's Tale* in school seem to feel strongly that novels like Atwood's have crucial messages to impart, teaching readers valuable lessons about the human condition, the various pitfalls of history and the frightening consequences of our actions.

The point of having children read all kinds of books is so that they can gain a full, round personality. They will be able to empathize with people who have gone through similar situations to the characters in the book (and there are many) without having to go through them themselves. It's why we read about Anne Frank, about Romeo and Juliet, about Big Brother, about anything really. It's not only the words on the page, it's about the message. If you don't want your child to read the book, that's fine. Why should mine lose the opportunity because of you? (nina28, 2009)

Book is more relevant than ever

This book must be taught to all students. When we have fundamentalists of all religions trying to usurp power and put women back in their place, this book is a must. Atwood should get the Nobel prize for literature and those parents who don't want their 17 year old children reading this book must have their motives questioned by their kids. (Bootle99, 2009)

Literature's purpose is not to offer a code of behaviour, but to put readers in touch with themselves and with the infinite possibilities involved in being human.... [The novel] may take young people beyond the mores in which their parents raised them; and it may even cause them to rethink some of those mores. If a book opens young people's minds, it is probably a good book. (*Globe and Mail*, 2009)

Comments such as these are reminiscent of formalism as they work to “identify the unique knowledge that art may communicate” (Davis and Womack, 2002, p. 27). These blog-posters, like the formalists, insist that literature can offer insight into other ‘truths’, other lives and realities, thereby allowing the reader, through her imagination, to gain wider ‘life’ experience. Of course, as Deanne Bogdan (1987) found in her study of a censorship debate about Margaret Lawrence’s *The Diviners*, it is this type of literature-as-life, or “truth of correspondence” approach to reading that can form an equally powerful argument for banning a book. If, as many blog-posters argue, the ‘point’ of reading is to glean life lessons or to set up moral guidelines, if I am offended by the message in the novel or it contradicts my beliefs, there is no ‘point’ in reading it.

Too stupid

Handmaids tale may be relevant in Saudi Arabia, but not here. Its a third rate bit of poorly-written fluff. My kids will not be wastign their time reading it.

(Right is Right, 2009)

One blog-poster was particularly concerned about the effect literature can have on readers:

re: Fiction does not = reality

No it doesn't, but at the same time there have been countless instances where fiction has altered the reality of individuals with fatal consequences. Even Stephen King has said that had he known the effect that "Rage" would have had on some kids (some school shootings have directly been attributed to the reading of this short story) that he would never have written it. He has since ensured that it will never be published again. (DSO, 2009)

Louise Rosenblatt (1995) acknowledges what she calls a “typical fear” that literature can incite readers to action, arguing that this “unrealistic idea” is born of Victorian moralism

(p. 187). Rosenblatt's response to these fears is similar to those who believe that to shelter adolescents from books is a waste of time, given all of the other things they are exposed to through various media: "If the interplay of forces acting on the individual, the literary work, unaided, will probably have little weight if its emphasis is opposed to images that many of the agencies in the society about him are reiterating" (p. 187).

At the same time, however, Rosenblatt admits that reading a book, "has sometimes changed a person's entire life" (p. 188). While she is careful to specify that this is usually the culminating event in long list of gradual shifts, lines become blurred and it becomes harder to deny a parent's concern over a specific text when, in the same breathe we are justifying the novel based on the book's power to "open" one's "mind" or "rethink" one's "mores" (*Globe and Mail*, 2009).

The Ethics of Reading

The conversation about what values or beliefs are promoted or rejected in *The Handmaid's Tale* and how they may challenge, support or even shift my own values sparks another conversation about the ethics of reading. The 'ethics' of reading is itself a complex and tangled idea, bursting with (im)possible meanings. 'Ethics', in the way Mrs. Jones used the term above ("left-winged ethics"), seemed to imply a political value-system—one that, we might assume, holds high the freedom to read over and above the freedom of the individual to choose only texts that coincide with his/her own value-system. 'Ethics', in this case, is about morality. Mrs. Jones objects to the 'ethics' of the novel in so far as it exemplifies a system of morality that contradicts her own. Like

ethical literary critics, her understanding is that reading can affect one's moral development (Schwarz, 2001; Nussbaum, 1995; 2001). This line of ethical reasoning appears frequently as justification for why reading literature is so important:

If anything young adults learn more from reading about the downfalls of society, as they are more apt to help change these downfalls and contribute to society in a positive manner. (Sonntag, 2009)

Sonntag's comment is mirrored by Nussbaum (1995) when she argues that literature allows people to empathize with others whose realities are much different than our own—encouraging individuals to become better citizens as they extend their compassion into the wider community:

I make two claims, then, for the reader's experience: first, that it provides insights that should play a role (though not as uncriticized foundation) in the construction of an adequate moral and political theory; second, that it develops moral capacities without which citizens will not succeed in making reality out of the normative conclusions of any moral or political theory, however excellent. (p. 12)

Just as reading is never straight-forward, ethics is not such a neat and tidy subject. As Caputo (1993) argues "life in general, and the life of obligation in particular, is a rather more difficult, risky business than ethics would allow" (p. 4). Ethics, Caputo argues, attempts to make safe by upholding "reason and intelligibility... to keep its house in order" (p.7). Constantly interrupting ethics, however, is *obligation*. Caputo describes obligation as "a feeling" which catches us in its "grasp":

When I am obliged I do not know by what dark powers I am held. I only know/feel/find myself caught up, in the midst of obligation, in its snare, in the scandal, in a panic—perhaps even blinded. (p. 7)

Caputo's argument *against* ethics is reminiscent of Miller's (1987) ethics of reading, in which one is powerless to *not* respond to literature's call. Blog-posters seem to be caught in the throes of Miller's ethical "I must" and bound by Caputo's inescapable *obligation* as they passionately answer the call to respond to a tangled web of readings. And here I am, no different than any other reader, caught in the "scandal" (Felman, 2007) as something also compels me to respond.

Risky Readings

The possibility of a text moving the reader to unknown and/or unseemly places introduces the unavoidable risk of reading:

...the risk which cannot be avoided is the encounter with, and the consequences of, that which *can never be known in advance*. There is always the chance of coming face to face with that which, in the event of reading, will disarm all protocols, all programmes, all methodologies, all self-circumscribing modes of exegesis *finding in the text something one does not expect* we cannot account for this, nor can we anticipate it, and it is precisely this in/conceivable encounter which we hazard every time we read. (Wolfe, 2000, p. 57)

Sometimes, this risk is articulated as a specific concern:

A Handmaid's Tale isn't drivel because of the sex and violence, the parent's concern. It is drivel because it is a scaremongering fantasy cut from whole ideological cloth, whose principal purpose is to stir up hatred of men.
(Kay, 2009)

Other blog-posters seem to articulate a more general unease and a yearning for the known over the unknown:

the father has a legitimate point. An Atwood is not a cannon or literature. There are many other books that can be used for class requirements and discussions. Leave the teenage sex, affairs and prostitution to shakespeare. (Trekker1, 2009)

It could be that some readers are reacting to an encounter with what Derrida (2000) describes as the “wholly other” (p. 26) as the novel leads the reader into new and unfamiliar places, forcing the reader to shift, often uncomfortably. As Wolfgang Iser (1980) states, “...it is only by leaving behind the familiar world of his own experience that the reader can truly participate in the adventure the literary text offers him” (p. 57). Perhaps out of a reluctance to abandon the familiar in favour of the world of the “wholly other”, blog posters frequently seemed to slide away from discussing the novel directly, and spoke (perhaps more comfortably) to other issues:

So what?

It's not like it's good literature. It's only being taught because of the Canadian complex regarding presenting and supporting Canadian artists at the expense of better work. (thenuthouse, 2009)

If, as Sumara (1996) argues, reading is not simply an imaginative exercise but rather “life itself” (p. 1), choosing a novel for reading in school is indeed risky business. Like Rosenblatt, Sumara sees reading as a powerful, potentially life-altering experience. Some blog-posters spoke to how *The Handmaid's Tale* impacted them:

The book wasn't a part of my curriculum, but I did buy it in my late teens. I remember sitting in the garage reading it to my boyfriend while he fixed my car. I wasn't impressed by the writing, but my boyfriend kept asking me to continue reading. It had a profound effect on him, and after all these years (19) the story still lives on in his memory. Sometimes It'll be a story in the news, or the neighbor lady across the street, that triggers the memory. He'll turn to me and remark,” Reminds me about that handmaiden story.” Well, as embarrassing as it is

to admit, the stirrings of feminism took a while to take root. In my adolescent brain, feminism was a war already won. Until I found out that Atwood's novel was inspired by the Taliban take over of Afghanistan in the 80's. "But, but, but," I sputtered, "those women have always been that way. For thousands of years. No? You mean they were actually modern? Disco's? Jeans and t-shirts? School? Women were doctors? But that place has been fundie Islamic since the dawn of time. Whaddya mean everything changed in the 80's? Buddhist statues? Huh?." I'm glad my adolescent self had enough sense to re-read the book. (Leanne, 2009)

This specific post mirrors my own experience with reading and re-reading *The Handmaid's Tale*:

I'm a young woman in my late 20's and I remember reading this book in High School. It changed my life. Reading *The Handmaid's Tale* opened my eyes. It made me think about the suffering of women around the world. It made me question the way I treated my sisters, the degrading words I used, the way I was treated, the music I listened to (God did I listen to some misogynist crap back then I'm ashamed to say). I am now an advocate for women's rights and I know that reading *Handmaid's Tale* had a great deal to do with my career choice. I am a strong woman who owes a lot to the genius that is Margaret Atwood. (Sojie, 2009)

There is a feeling expressed in these posts that the text has *done* something to the reader.

Some articulate it in concrete terms like Sojie did above, while others are simply expressing a gut feeling of having been affected.

I was so disturbed by this book. It is full of despair, sinister thoughts and cruelty. Problem is it is also far removed from our reality that I wasn't sure what was the point of reading it. It was forced upon me in my grade 13 English class, because it was part of the curriculum. Worse yet, we had to watch the movie of the book. That gave me nightmares. Some people, like myself, are just not cut out for this

type of imagination. Please stop forcing students to read what we can not stomach. (Halva, 2009)

As Littau (2006) reminds us, novels have often been “blamed for endangering a reader’s health” (p. 63) and Halva’s complaints of nightmares and nausea speak to this very bodily reaction to literature. Littau argues that the risk or “danger” of reading novels has been “associated with the loss of control over the body, as if a translation of the body of the text takes place in to the body of the reader” (p. 65). When DSo (above, cited on page 66) cites the example of a school shooting that was alleged to have been inspired by a Stephen King novel, or we hear in the news that the Oklahoma bomber held a copy of *The Turner Diaries*, the ‘danger’ of reading materializes in very concrete terms (Hetnoff, 1993). As readers it is hard to ignore this ‘risk’ when we ourselves have come undone, weeping or laughing in the clutches of a novel. On some level, we suspect that a novel really does *do* something to us:

If novel reading is processed sensually, through the body, the danger is that reader might switch off their minds, allow themselves to be absorbed so utterly in the fiction, an identify so closely with what they read that they might well succumb, animally, to its pleasures, and therefore forgo becoming, to use Mary Wollstonecraft’s turn of phrase, ‘rational creatures’ and remain ‘creatures of sensation’. (Littau, 2006, p. 65)

Once again, some would say, isn’t that the ‘point’ of reading? To be moved, to emotionally connect and to be swept away by the story? Furthermore, isn’t this ‘good for’ us? After all, if the senses aren’t engaged, how can we expect to ‘get something out of’ a book? In her book *Negotiating With the Dead: A Writer on Writing*, Atwood (2002) addresses what she calls the “improving function of art” that she argues “every parent longs for” and “every school board in North America would agree with” (pp. 103-4). But,

as this current debate can attest to and Atwood astutely observes, this assumption creates a messy spot of tension:

But *improving to people* how? And which people, and in what ways do they need to be improved? Improved, and also protected from influences that some might consider counter-improving? (p. 104)

Much like these blog-posters, I did not leave Atwood's novel "unchanged" (Sumara, 1996, p. 86) and this is the 'risk' of reading. However, as we have already seen, this is a risk some parents do not wish to have imposed upon their children, and especially not in school.

PART III

Context Is All

It is important to remember, however, that these relations between individual readers and texts, although generally developed amid private relations between one reader and one text, are never really private, since the significance of the reading depends upon the public context of reading while, at the same time, it alters the very context in which it is situated.
(Sumara, 1996, p. 81)

The "public context of reading" takes me in several directions. The first lies in one of the important themes of the *Handmaid's Tale* debate, that this is not just any novel on a bookstore or library shelf, but a novel to be read *in school*. For some blog-posters, it is this (publicly funded) context that forms the crux of the issue. The second context, that could easily open up into another research project in and of itself, is the online discussion forum. That this debate takes place online affects the content and shape of the conversations. Context and content are intricately woven together.

What (not) to read in school

It is not a matter of some parent not wanting their daughter to read the book, it is some parent not wanting anyone to read the book in school. Schools accomodate parents wishes on reading material for their own children -- it becomes a bigger deal when a parent wants a book banned, as in this case. (CaTe, 2009)

Lets stick to basic education first. Tons of children dont have proper reading and writiing skills and we're worried about them having a discussion. save it for university where it belongs. not in public school. (Trekker1, 2009)

Reading in public school bears a different weight than other types of reading. The context of reading in public school is always political as tax-payers question how their hard-earned dollars are being spent, and whose systems of values are being represented in classrooms:

Of course, why encourage your kids to think critically and form their own opinions when you can waste taxpayers money in an effort to shield them from anything and everything you are not comfortable with? And it is a shame that the "educators" would actually go along with this. This book is not new to school curriculum, so obviously there are merits to its study. Someone needs to stand up for education. (eyeball, 2009)

If this book had been written by an Americanit would have been blacklisted and no child would be forced to read this boring...shrill...ultra--radical-feminist book. Make the new immigrant parents of these children read this book. They will not be impressed and provide their support for this tax-funded book to remain on the school's shelves. (JMJ, 2009)

The books on school reading lists seem to be understood by many readers as a means of promoting specific political perspectives and value systems. Given how the curriculum documents describe the role of literature in education, this assumption is not unfounded:

Language is a fundamental element of identity and culture. As students read and reflect on a rich variety of literary, informational, and media texts, they develop a deeper understanding of themselves and others and of the world around them. If they see themselves and others in the texts they study, they will be more engaged in learning and they will also come to appreciate the nature and value of a diverse, multicultural society. (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 4)

However, as other blog-posters are quick to point out, that certain sets of values are prioritized based on who has been voted into government is part of what it means to have public education:

The TDSB should stand behind their curriculum and teachers and tell this parent one simple thing: "If you don't like our standard curriculum, send your children to another school or home school them. Bye Bye!" I am so sick and tired of helicopter parents objecting to anything that might inspire teenagers to think for themselves. We live in Canada, therefore one of our greatest living author's books should be an integral part of study and classroom discussion. Any parent who doesn't like it can figure out a way to home school. End of story.
(miz g, 2009)

Reading, as Sumara et al. (2006) say, renders "explicit the complicit ways knowledge, experience and identities are continually in the process of being co-produced" (p. 60). The conversation is never just about *The Handmaid's Tale*, nor the state of public education, nor corrupt morals, but is a complex tangle of all of these issues and countless others all brought together in converging/conflicting readings of Atwood's novel. That *The Handmaid's Tale* is a school text opens both the novel itself and this conversation to take on many possible meanings that would likely be quite different in another context (Johnson, 1996). While I have looked at some of the 'issues' related to reading *The*

Handmaid's Tale in school, I have yet to delve into another important contextual element of this conversation: the *online* conversation.

(Dis)Connecting: Online Conversations

Online conversations share some characteristics of a face-to-face conversation, but just as the meaning of a face-to-face encounter that happens at the kitchen table is likely very different from a conversation at a board-room table, the online context plays a central role in shaping the meaning of the discussion (Baumer, 2008; Witschge, 2008; Walker, 2006). In this particular online context of the editorial blog, the Internet is seen as tool for democratizing the media, allowing anyone to contribute their perspective and have it made public:

Whereas citizens' participation in traditional media has generally been limited to one's ability to get an op-ed piece published, the Internet has provided cost-effective, easy-to-use forums, such as blogs, message boards, and search engines, that provide new channels through which information can be circulated.

(Maratea, 2008, p. 142)

Ho (2008) found that participants in his study were more likely to express their opinions in an online chat-room than they were in a face-to-face context. Ho concluded that, "computer-mediated communication may avoid some of the dysfunctional social-psychological influences found in face-to-face interaction and create a forum conducive for public deliberation" (p. 190). Ho argues that features of the online discussion such as anonymity and "reduced observable social cues" "level the social playing field by encouraging more lively discussions and by generating more interesting arguments" (p. 191).

It is impossible to know how (or if) the blog-posters in the *Handmaid's Tale* debate would alter their responses in a face-to-face context, but my 'gut' response when reading the posts align with Ho's observations. Blog-posters are frequently blunt (sometimes to the point of insult) in a way that would seem much more offensive and inappropriate in a face-to-face context.

Re: Society is a toilet @ logos

While whatever books you read might contribute to your morality, they do not seem to have helped make you an open minded, interesting and contributing member of any society I would like to be a part of. Go back to Bountiful.
(my2centsworth, 2009)

To help expand my reading of blog-posts, I turn my attention for a moment to the social dynamics of the context, rather than the thematic content of the comment. Similarly, in her study on issues of power in the online public discussion forums, Witschge (2008) focuses on the role of the context in shaping discourse:

Studies that only analyse the content of the online discourse ignore essential information regarding (1) how this discourse comes into being (which determines to a large extent the boundaries of the potential online discussions), and (2) how this discourse relates to the larger societal discourse. These two dimensions, together with the text, form the online discourse. (p. 76)

Witschge makes the important point that, while for many the Internet may seem to encourage wider public participation and allow more voices to be heard, discussion forums and blogs are "controlled and restricted spaces as well" (p. 81). Internet spaces are restricted not just in the sense of passwords and logins, but more broadly, "because the web forums themselves can actively exclude participants and discourses" (p. 81) in

much the same way people are excluded from face-to-face conversations despite being in the same room. As can be seen below, as I describe the general landscape of the *Handmaid's Tale* discussions, each forum creates a different type of conversation, giving voice to certain comments over others.

***Breaking down the Blogs: Critical Discourse Analysis or,
Who Says What Where***

On the *Toronto Star* editorial blog, where the most extensive discussion took place, there are a total of 217 comments posted and 172 usernames. It is difficult to imagine 172 people in any sort of face-to-face 'conversation', never mind a 'conversation' where the participants only make single statements. Only 24 people posted more than once. On the *Toronto Star* blog, blog-posters would only occasionally directly address the comments made by another poster. More often the blog-posters addressed the original news article (see Appendix 2) or broad themes related to the issues presented either in the article or by other blog-posters.

On the *National Post* blog, however, the discussion quickly turned into a back-and-forth conversation between only a handful of participants. On this blog, people were responding to an editorial written by columnist Barbara Kay (see Appendix 3), rather than to the news item itself, as in the case of the *Toronto Star's* blog. Kay's reading of *The Handmaid's Tale* focuses largely on matching elements of the novel with political and historical events and, ultimately, Kay dismisses the novel for what she perceives as its failure to accurately 'predict' the near future we are currently experiencing. Her article

inspires blog-posters to continue discussing the finer details of the various political regimes Kay mentioned. The bulk of the discussion centered around defining socialism, facism, Nazism, and what it means to be 'right-wing' or 'left-wing'. There were 34 different usernames (so one would assume people) that posted comments. Only 11 people were responsible for 141 of the 174 total comments posted, leaving only 33 comments for the remaining 23 blog-posters. One particularly chatty blogger (ShayGaetz) posted 44 times. Only 21 of the total comments addressed Atwood's book and/or the issue of banning *The Handmaid's Tale* from the classroom.

It goes beyond the scope of this study to draw any firm conclusions from this brief overview of the *Toronto Star* and *National Post* blogs, but I believe it is still worth noticing the different social dynamics of each site and how this is manifest in the breakdown of the blogs. If for no other reason than to acknowledge what may *not* appear in these blogs, by gazing with empirical eyes on the data for a moment, it becomes clear that each site establishes a set of social norms, creating a more welcoming space for some types of comments over others (Walker, 2006). On the *Toronto Star* blog, the overwhelming majority of comments were opposed to censoring *The Handmaid's Tale*. Of the 217 posts on the *Toronto Star* website, only 35 sided with the parent who questioned the place of *The Handmaid's Tale* on the high school reading list. Again, while it would require another research endeavor to ascertain precisely why this might be, a number of questions immediately spring to mind: Is this spread of opinion reflective of the larger opinions of *Toronto Star* readers, or of Canadians generally? Or is this simply

the dominant opinion of those who chose to post? Are those who don't share this opinion more numerous but are somehow excluded from this particular community?

The discourse can be exclusive in that it suggests that certain participants and/or viewpoints are inferior to others or because it altogether ignores certain participants or their contributions. Second, exclusion and inequality in a debate can be established by distinguishing between "us" and "them," thus creating a division between those who are seen as belonging to this society/public/group, and those who are not. (Witschge, 2008, p. 85)

Because, as Witschge points out, there are so many social forces of exclusion and inclusion at play in online communities, it would be disingenuous and misleading to use this data as 'proof' of what Canadians think about book censorship. I notice myself being drawn to the dominant "us" in the *Toronto Star* blog community, and catch myself when I am tempted to dismiss a radical voice that interrupts the conversation with a jarringly different comment: "The analysis shows that even though an alternative or radical voice is expressed online, it is not successful in opening up a dialogue. Instead, the participants were unanimous in trying to find ways to exclude it" (p. 85).

While the *National Post* blog initially seemed less relevant to my project, as so much of the discussion had little to do with *The Handmaid's Tale*, it does show how different conversations can be from one blog to the next. The posts that are ignored on the *National Post* blog would have been very much part of the dominant thread of voices had they been posted on the *Toronto Star* blog. "Context," as Atwood (1998) reminds us in her novel, "is all" (p. 80).

Chapter Five

Final Thoughts: (Un)masking My Readerly Innocence

I believe that reading, in its original essence, [is] that fruitful miracle of a communication in the midst of solitude. (Proust, 1971, p. 31)

Who are you writing for? Why do you do it? Where does it come from?
(Atwood, 2002, p. xix)

Margaret Atwood (2002) has been asked, and has asked herself these questions, over and over again. Her response is long and varied, filled with quips that seem both trivial and profound:

To record the world as it is. To set down the past before it is all forgotten. To excavate the past *because* it has been forgotten. To satisfy my desire for revenge. Because I knew I had to keep writing or else I would die. Because to write is to take risks, and it is only by taking risks that we know we are alive. To produce order out of chaos. To delight and to instruct. ... To please myself. ... To express myself beautifully. To create a perfect work of art. To please myself. To express myself. To reward the virtuous and punish the guilty; or – the Marquis de Sade defense, used by ironists – vice versa. To hold up a mirror to Nature. To hold a mirror up to the reader. To paint a portrait of society and its ills. To express the unexpressed life of the masses. To name the hitherto unnamed. To defend the human spirit and, and human integrity and honour. To thumb my nose at death. ... To say a new word... To make myself appear more interesting than I actually was. ... To thwart my parents. To spin a fascinating tale. To amuse and please the reader. To amuse and please myself. To pass the time, even though it would have passed anyway. ... Because I was driven by some force outside my control. Because I was possessed. ... To justify the ways of God toward man. ... To subvert the establishment. To demonstrate that whatever is, is right. To experiment with new forms of perception. ... Because the story took hold of me and wouldn't let go. ... To bear witness to horrifying events that I have survived. To speak for the dead. To celebrate life in all its complexity. To praise the universe. To allow for the possibility of hope and redemption. To give back something of what has been given to me.
(pp. xx-xxii)

As I read through the list, I identified with many of her answers in the capacity that I write, but even more so as a reader. Reading and writing, after all, are deeply entwined, even inseparable:

There is no writing without reading. Writing is actually a kind of alliance between writer and reader. The reader within myself and the reader outside. Readers don't realize enough how much they are implied in the writing, how much they are at work, how much they write. They give rebirth.
(Cixous, 1990, p. 26)

Borrowing Atwood's words, I often read as though I am *possessed*, as well as *to take risks* as well as simply *to amuse myself*. Though I must catch myself at saying "simply", as even what might begin as 'simply' reading for amusement's sake often leads me to unexpected places, challenging and unraveling dismissive comments like 'it's *just a novel*'. For the reading pedagogue, teachers may have students read *to experiment with new forms of perception*, as Louise Rosenblatt suggested, or simply *to delight and instruct* with a wide variety of texts in the hope that one might grab a student and not let go. *The Handmaid's Tale* seems to contain all the elements of Atwood's list and the blog-posts in particular speak to the limitless possibilities in such a text. *The Handmaid's Tale* caused the blog-posters great (dis)pleasure, blinding moments of insight, wry smiles, (un)knowing nods and (un)welcome (dis)locations. And, just as the debate around book censorship will continue in all its glorious circularity and contradiction, the answer to *what it is to read* weaves in more and more threads, ever expanding and undoing, an ongoing game of Cat's Cradle with all of its knots, snags and fleetingly beautiful designs. This too, is why reading *The Handmaid's Tale* in school *matters*.

Reading Writers and Writing Readers

Atwood the writer is also Atwood the reader, just as I am always both reader and writer. She plays with the shared space of reader and writer, blurring the boundary between the two, challenging any rigid images we might have of what it means to read/write. Earlier this fall, Atwood sent waves through the literary world with her book-launch tour, a wonderful performance of reading *otherwise*. Her novel, *The Year of the Flood* had just come out and Atwood was making her way across the country promoting her new work. There was a buzz around the event—this was no run-of-the-mill book-signing tour—Atwood was going to be doing something *different* with this launch.

As I lined up for Atwood's 'reading' outside Saint Brigid's church in Ottawa with the other eager readers this fall, I wondered what I was in store for, both in terms of the performance, but also in how Atwood the author would materialize for me as I saw her in the flesh, so to speak, for the first time. I was curious if this 'meeting' would shift my reading, if this Atwood writer/reader I was about to see would change something about how I read/write Atwood. Now settled on the hard pew of the old stone church, I watched hundreds of heads turn as the building filled with beautiful voices; a choir, followed by the great dame of Canadian literature herself, made its way down the aisle in an impressive procession. Atwood's 'reading', as it turned out, was partly the author reading excerpts from her book, but it was also an adventure in song and theatre as a choir sang hymns from her novel and actors playing characters from the novel performed dramatic readings of passages. This 'reading' played out on a colourful, almost chaotic stage of lights and textures, a true *bricolage* of artistic expression, voices, colours, fibers and

shapes. Moved by the music and the words, and the presence of an author I have long admired, I sat in awe: this too, is *what it is to read*.

Quilting, Bricolage and Cat's Cradle

In this project I am always both reader and writer, reading writings and writing readings. As the intertextual *bricoleuse*, I worked at weaving, stitching, overlapping and knotting my readings of theory, novels and readers' readings. My theoretical lenses of feminism, deconstructivism and cultural studies, while not often overtly stated, run as subtle but powerful threads throughout my work, informing my 'gut' responses, my writing style and always locating me within the many contexts of this project. In my piecing together, I strove to converse with all of these readings, dialoguing with blog-posters and theorists as I worked towards a richer understanding of *what it is to read*. And not just read in general (although it is also always that as well), but to read *The Handmaid's Tale* in school.

My methodology of intertextual analysis and bricolage created a theoretically rigorous *warp* as well as a spacious and open *weft* to explore the complex and winding narratives of reading, encouraging me to move towards the difficult places of tension and struggle rather than dismiss the sticky, messy spots as 'anomalies' or 'insignificant data'. My quilting research approach encouraged me to squeeze in interesting scraps here and there, rearranging as I went, to allow other readings to interrupt and redirect any 'patterns' or 'meanings'. As a result, the 'conclusion' of this research journey may not seem very 'conclusive' at all. No sooner has one knot been tied than another reading interrupts me and reshapes the string, joining me in my reading game of Cat's Cradle:

I was so disturbed by this book. It is full of despair, sinister thoughts and cruelty. Problem is it is also far removed from our reality that I wasn't sure what was the point of reading it. (Halva, 2009)

Life is full of despair, sinister thoughts and cruelty...how is this book any different than life? (D.J., 2009)

Knots like the one D.J. and Halva tied are at the very heart of this project, and, I would argue, of what it is to read. *The Handmaid's Tale* is an important school text because it creates these tangled spaces of passionate discussion, because it complicates reading and pushes readers to probe further rather than calmly reach a 'conclusion' and walk away.

Texts, if there is anything to them, elicit, call for, and provoke other texts – responses, commentaries, interpretations, controversies, imitations, forgeries, plagiarisms, echoes, effluences, influences, confluences, transformations, bold misinterpretations, creative misunderstandings, etc. (Caputo, 1997, p. 189)

Just a few days ago, I found myself quite literally caught in the middle of a giant web of knots, a huge game of Cat's Cradle. At the Ottawa Art Gallery, artist Ed Pien's installation piece *Corridor* was featured—quite literally a corridor of knotted string reaching from floor to ceiling. Initially, I was so focused on the intricate knots of the piece that I almost missed looking up to see my shadow projected on the wall beside me, a shadow of me, caught in a giant web. This experience in Pien's *Corridor*, has been my experience throughout this project—I am both examining the knots and caught in the web of readers' readings.

Still speaking of webs (and this time spider's webs as well as metaphorical webs), I am reminded of another bookstore encounter that caused me to *swerve* once again and pulled

me deeper into another reader's game of Cat's Cradle. I offered to help a woman, a primary school teacher, find books for reading aloud to her grade one students. I started by suggesting some old favourites and pulled *Charlotte's Web* from the shelf. The woman shook her head and sighed, a concerned expression on her face. She used to read this book to her students, she said, but then last year one of her students became upset while they were reading E.B. White's classic. The student had recently lost a parent and the death of Wilbur's beloved spider Charlotte was upsetting for this child. From that day forth, the teacher won't read the book in class for fear of upsetting another child. I was stunned. Here was a book that is so powerful for me and for so many young readers—as my supervisor Pat said when I told her this story, this is a book that moves many children to become vegetarians! But here we both were, the teacher and I, caught again in the messy web of reading. *Charlotte's Web* is both a beautiful story I link with fond memories of childhood as well as a traumatic reminder of loss for a grief-struck grade one student. It is stories of reading like these that make the tensions of reading so palpable, sending shivers down my spine, stopping me in my readerly tracks.

But for me, this is what it is to read. To be interrupted, jarred, forced to *swerve*. And as I have learned, it can be this same risk of a swerve that causes some to resist reading.

(Not) Reading The Handmaid's Tale

For those (like me) who *love* reading, the threat of *not* reading causes a sort of crisis, sending us into a state of panic. Timothy Findley (2001), a renowned Canadian author whose book *The Wars* has frequently been challenged and who, during his lifetime spoke out regularly against book censorship, said that, “to urge the destruction of books—in whatever context—is to urge that we despair” (p. 301).

I reacted to the news that *The Handmaid's Tale* was being ‘challenged’ with a mixture of sadness, anger and frustration, but not with a great deal of surprise. My lack of surprise comes partially from the knowledge that so many books come under fire each year, but also from a deeper sense that these outrages against books speak to the powerful relationship we hold with literature. As one blog poster commented, “is the sheer number and diversity of comments on here not a sign that this is a novel worth discussing” (Lindsay The Great, 2009)? This possible “diversity” of responses troubles the notion of a “universal reader” (Littau, 2006, p. 2) and moves me into other, often difficult spaces. Reading, as it is often articulated in literary theory, can be an intellectual endeavor, and this is true but is not all. While, as Littau says, the emotional and bodily responses to literature are often deemed “trivial” by “our own age”, it has not always been and still is not thus: “Whether what is produced is tears of sorrow, bellies filled with laughter or hair-raising terror, such symptoms belong to the body” (p. 2). I was reminded of these embodied readings as children squirmed and squealed with delight and horror at the adventures of Mordecai Richler’s *Jacob Two-Two and the Hooded Fang* at a local reading event I attended. But again, though it would paint a pleasing picture to leave this

experience with the image of a room full of enraptured young readers, there were other moments too. There were other bodily ‘reader-responses’ such as when a girl demanded a snack from her father a few sentences into the story, or when a young boy wouldn’t sit still and was whisked out of the auditorium. And, finally, at the end of the reading/performance, there was a quiet, troubling moment when a disgruntled father strode purposefully from the auditorium to the information booth to lodge a ‘formal’ complaint. I don’t know what the complaint was, but, just as I have learned and experienced in this thesis, it reminded me there are always other readings happening during my readings.

As I assemble the final scraps of my research-as-quilt, I am tempted to pick out a nice binding, a long, uniform band of fabric that will contain the project in a neat square. Here, however, I must leave jagged edges, raw bits of fabric and unfinished readings dangling around the edges, because to bind this quilt would be to close it off, to end the conversation. It would be an act of “violence” (Wolfreys, 2000) to ‘finish’ this project thus. There is a *violence* connected to reading, but this violence is also never straight forward. There is a *violence* in the imposition of a particular “totalizing” reading of any sort, in “resisting or avoiding the process of analysis” (p.138), in pretending we *know* what it means to read. This *violent* reading is in fact an avoidance of reading, it is an “innocent reading” (p. 139) that can claim to know reading. This project has been, for me, a process of learning to read *guiltily*:

The *guilty reading*, however, *takes the responsibility for its crime* exposes the way in which every reading is a *guilty reading* by *posing every guilty reading the very question that unmasks its innocence, the mere question of its innocence: what is it to read?* (p. 139)

Why Reading The Handmaid's Tale In School Matters

Daniel Pennac (1994) begins his book *Better Than Life: The Secrets of Reading*, lamenting his son's lack of enthusiasm for reading. Once a lover of stories and books, Pennac's son has been burdened by an assigned reading that puts him to sleep, that makes him *hate* reading. Pennac probes the drive of the book-loving parent to force literature on his children and questions what he calls the "dogma" of reading and the accompanying feeling of shame if you, for some reason, *don't* like reading. The reading dogma, Pennac says, states that you read *for* many things: "To learn. To do well in school. To stay informed. To discover where we came from. To discover who we are. To get to know others better. To discover where we're going..." (p. 83). And the list goes on....

But, says Pennac (1994), "when a book changes our lives, we didn't read it *for*, but *against*, something" (p. 94). If I have learned anything from this journey in reading it is that we read both for *and* against, and often simultaneously. For reading to be meaningful, the text has to be able to *do* something to the reader, suck the reader in, unsettle or *trouble* the reader. If a novel doesn't grab you as reader, doesn't push you into uneasy spaces, it is, as Pennac's son found with a particularly dry school reading, enough to put you to sleep, to make a reader turn away from reading, to lose the "pleasure of reading" (p. 48).

As the blog-posters' and my own reading experiences attest to, it is not just any novel that holds transformative power, that compels the reader to respond. *The Handmaid's Tale*, as we have seen (even if only by virtue of its ability to stir up controversy), has this power, has *done* something to readers whether they liked it or not, and this is why reading this novel in school *matters*. Reading, as Sumara (1996) reminds us, does not come without risks but they are undeniably important risks to take:

Including the practice of reading in one's life – particularly the practice of reading literary fictions – means being prepared to have the order of one's life rearranged....[T]he reading of the literary fiction, because it requires the invocation of the reader's imagination, allows the reader to eventually perceive and interpret her or his world differently. (p. 9)

English class, as the Ontario curriculum itself states, should not be a place to be reassured of the centrality or permanence of one's own perspective, but rather should be a space that seeks out and welcomes opportunities to engage with other 'different' perspectives:

By reading a wide range of materials and being challenged by what they read, students become receptive to new and widely varying ideas and perspective, and develop their ability to think independently and critically.
(Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 5)

Blog-posters like nina28 seemed to agree; reading risky texts like *The Handmaid's Tale* is vitally important for students:

The point of having children read all kinds of books is so that they can gain a full, round personality. They will be able to empathize with people who have gone through similar situations to the characters in the book (and there are many) without having to go through them themselves. (nina28, 2009)

And as the blog conversations revealed, even those who objected to reading Atwood's novel in school did so in large part out of a belief in what Sumara called the "transformative" power of literature, or what Rosenblatt (1995) described as the possibly life-changing reader-text "transaction". Reading, or perhaps more accurately, *misreading* in school, theorists and blog-posters all seem to agree, matters deeply. It is not, I have learned, simply the right to read in school that is at stake when we discuss banning a particular novel, but also the right to misread—to step unsteadily onto uneven, unfamiliar ground, to read towards something (like 'meaning' or 'truth') only to be interrupted and forced to swerve, "caught within the perpetual frontiers of misreading" (McQuillan, 2001, p. 58). Sumara (2002) argues that it is important that students (and teachers) be encouraged to linger in these uneasy spaces, and to be given ample space and texts to misread.

As Littau (2006) says, reading is not a tidy, comfortable pass-time. It is dangerous, it makes our hearts race, palms sweat and sides split. Reading disrupts and challenges us, and as Sumara (2002) says, this is why reading in school matters:

In order for literature to matter in school, one must abandon theories of learning that insist on excavating Truth, or representing commonsense. This means creating conditions for people to learn to be surprised by what might happen if they dedicated themselves to literary practices that require a sustained engagement with someone else's structure of thinking. (p. 160)

Beyond the Page⁴

It is my hope that, with this project, I have added another layer to an ongoing conversation about reading in school. By delving into a public discussion of the right (not) to read *The Handmaid's Tale* in school, I hope to have complicated things further. Reading, as so many blog-posters and theorists remind us, is *never the same*. The passionate responses of blog-posters are a reminder that reading in school matters deeply, but that this is only the very beginning of a limitless conversation that struggles with how, why, to/for whom, and which books. Reading is an irresolvable and important source of tension and *The Handmaid's Tale* will not let me forget this.

Reading, as bloggers, authors and theorists have stated, can be a philosophical experience as well a visceral one. An abstract literary criticism is often woven with a slippery gut response. Still piecing scraps and tying knots, I am left reflecting on what a project like this one would look like in the classroom. What would the English class of Mr. Edwards' son look like with a more complicated, or even messy approach to reading *The Handmaid's Tale*? Allowing myself room to speculate, I imagine wider conversations, much like those here, welcomed into the class discussion. Perhaps a class blog that invited a discussion between parents, students and teachers. Or, simply more time spent with the novel as Sumara (2002) suggests, allowing for re-readings and re-writings, re-visiting an old text anew and examining the changes both in the reader and in the reading that took place in between.

⁴ 'Beyond the page' sounded familiar to me, a phrase I had heard before but couldn't quite place. I plugged it into Google and the results were interesting and, I think, worth noting. The first result was for a special curriculum for "gifted and creative children". The next nine hits were a mixture of art websites and scrapbooking resources. Online, the scrapbooker or *bricoleur*, the artist and the teacher, all moving 'beyond the page'...

Sheila Ross and David Jardine (2009) criticize the hurried, superficial reading that happens in school—the pursuit of knowledge and understanding that is linked to a linear methodology of effortless steps leading to a singular meaning which, once gleaned, allows the students to be ‘finished’ with reading. Instead the authors call for an effort-full, time-consuming rigorous engagement with reading, emphasizing the importance of taking time and “whiling, tarrying, gathering” (p. 1). Like Ross and Jardine, my project demands a laborious engagement with reading, one that necessitates more time spent with texts and a shift away from the current curriculum requirement to “demonstrate[] thorough *understanding of the text*” (Ottawa-Carleton District School Board Quality Control Division, 2006, p. 5, my emphasis) in favour of demonstrating a thorough *engagement with* texts. Just as my project moves away from the linear path toward fixed meaning, students must be given space and time to *misunderstand* and *misconstrue* their readings, something the current Grade 12 examinations in my local school board firmly discourage:

Note: An answer in which the student shows she or he has seriously misunderstood or misconstrued the author’s position cannot receive an evaluation higher than 3 marks out of 6 on this part of the examination. (Ottawa-Carleton District School Board Quality Control Division, 2006, p. 37)

Students, teachers and parents would need to move beyond the page both as they experiment with reading ‘otherwise’ and as they delve deeper into the journey of self-knowledge such readings demand. Entering into chaotic spaces of tension is a call to move beyond, but also requires a close and continuous examination of the self as readers wrestle with their own guilty readings. As so many of the theorists and blog-posters expressed, reading is never straight-forward or even containable in a given text. When I

read I am reading words on the page, but also the world around me and myself, and each reading tugs at the others, troubling me and my readings. Reading in the classroom needs to account for all of this and more, needs to move beyond the page but also return to the page, (un)settling (un)easily into tangled spaces between/within reader and text.

As I continue to struggle with how to draw this project to an 'end', Alberto Manguel (2004) reminds me that readers and writers have always been caught in this same awkward space—the limits of the page. Manguel recounts writers and readers who came up with various means of subverting the confines of the page, whether it was by tearing out pages, ripping apart texts to rearrange the words and meanings, or simply claiming the white spaces of the margins for comments and continuations:

These blank spaces, left after the writer has crossed the page to vanquish what Mallarmé, once and for all defined as 'le vide papier que la blancheur défend' (the agony of the white page), are the very spaces in which the reader can exercise their own power... (p. 32)

When I encountered this passage I was instantly cast back to a childhood memory of reading. When I first began reading 'chapter books', I noticed that sometimes there were a few blank pages at the end of the book. I remember thinking that these pages must be designed for the reader who wished to continue on writing the story, some space to go beyond the page, as it were. It always struck me as odd that not all books had these extra pages for readerly writings. It wasn't until much later that I learned about the mathematics of book-making, page clusters (or 'signatures') that must fall in groupings of eight, sixteen and thirty-two pages. Fortunately, these pages I have written with their

wide margins and spacious typesetting leave the reader the necessary space to go *beyond the page*.

The last sentences here indicate merely a pause in the ongoing work of the reading *bricoleuse*, an *obligation* to leave stray threads for future readings. My writings are an intertextual weaving on another woven surface, that of the page itself. My text is “scratched, cut stamped, poured out, imprinted, or embroidered on a blank integument that is itself already a woven fabric” (Miller, 1992, pp. 7-8). This image of woven words on the tissue of the woven page illustrates the depth of possibility in reading and writing, the network of the already read and written tangling with the not-yet written and read. My woven scratchings here are a few more knots to *interrupt*, or/and unravel what it is to read, a call to bend and *twist* the lines of reading:

The intelligibility of writing depends on this twisting and breaking of the line that interrupts or confounds its linearity and opens up the possibility of repeating that segment, while at the same time preventing any closure of meaning. (p. 8)

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Appendix 1

Ethics Approval

from **Ethics** <ethics@uottawa.ca> [hide details](#) Jul 16  Reply ▼

to Heidi Laing

date Thu, Jul 16, 2009 at 12:27 PM

subject RE: ethics question

mailed-by uottawa.ca

Hello,

In response to your question, as long as all the information you will be using is accessible to the public, you do not need an ethics certificate. Also, Leslie-Anne apologizes for not being able to respond sooner to your inquiry.

Have a nice day,

Riana Marcotte
Administrative Assistant
Research Grants and Ethics Services
University of Ottawa

Appendix 2

Toronto Star Articles retrieved from www.thestar.com

School board says it's taking complaint about book seriously
January 17, 2009
Kristin Rushowy
Education Reporter, *Toronto Star*

The committee reviewing *The Handmaid's Tale* will meet again before deciding how to handle a parent's complaint that the book violates the Toronto public board's policy of respect and tolerance.

Melanie Parrack, an executive superintendent with the Toronto District School Board who co-chairs the book review committee, said it met Thursday to discuss the complaint and share research on the 1985 Margaret Atwood novel.

"We take all of these concerns about learning resources very seriously," she said yesterday.

"We are following the process and once the deliberations are complete, we'll be forwarding a report to the director" of education, who will make a final decision.

Parent Robert Edwards lodged a formal complaint before the Christmas holidays, arguing the book is inappropriate because it contains foul language, anti-Christian overtones, violence and sexual degradation.

He also said if students were to repeat the novel's words and phrases in the hallways at school, they'd be suspended.

"If you look at the board's policies, it goes to these great lengths to talk about respect and not using profane language, and in fact so do the policies at Lawrence Park Collegiate," where Edwards' 17-year-old son was studying the book in his Grade 12 English class.

"The board is adamant about those policies, but then puts books like this in place," he has told the *Star*.

If Edwards isn't satisfied with the director's decision, he can appeal to the board of trustees.

His son was reassigned to read Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and will step out of class during any discussion on *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Russell Morton Brown, a retired University of Toronto English professor who has taught *The Handmaid's Tale*, said the book is entirely appropriate for 17-year-olds.

He said he's pleased there has been a complaint.

"I'm glad to see that books go on having enough power to dispute," he said.

The Handmaid's Tale is listed as one of the 100 "most frequently challenged books" in the 1990s, according to the American Library Association.

Complaint spurs school board to review novel by Atwood

January 14, 2009

Kristin Rushowy

Education Reporter, *Toronto Star*

Toronto's public school board is reviewing Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* after one complaint from a parent whose child was studying the novel in a Grade 12 class.

While the board would not discuss the nature of the concern over the 1985 dystopian novel that is used nationwide – described by some educators as a staple of its genre – a source said it was believed to be over sexuality and criticism of religious fundamentalism.

According to board policy, it is obliged to investigate any complaint about a book that can't be resolved at the school level. The process involves a committee of roughly eight experts and a community member, and it is time-consuming.

The review committee meets tomorrow at Lawrence Park Collegiate, where the complaint originated.

"Any controversial novels that we use sometimes generate comment from the public, and I think that's quite normal," said Melanie Parrack, the board's executive superintendent of student success, who also co-chairs the committee.

Atwood could not be reached for comment yesterday.

The last time the Toronto District School Board faced a similar controversy was in 2006, when the Canadian Jewish Congress lobbied boards to restrict access to *Three Wishes* by Deborah Ellis, complaining about its portrayal of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Parrack would not speculate on possible outcome for Atwood's novel, but said if something is "extraordinarily offensive" it could be taken off the shelves.

The book is used in an English literature unit on social commentary, alongside *Brave New World* and *1984*. The acclaimed novel – which won the Governor General's Award in 1985 – is about a futuristic theocracy in which women are used as breeders.

Trustee Howard Goodman, who represents Lawrence Park Collegiate and has read *The Handmaid's Tale*, called the book "fascinating, controversial and challenging." He is not on the committee, nor does he know the basis of the complaint. Once the committee meets, it will make a recommendation to the board's director of education, who makes the ultimate decision. If the parent is still not satisfied, only then does the issue come before trustees for a vote, Goodman said.

"Grade 12 is the transition preparation year and it's likely that there will be some challenges to pre-existing attitudes and some parents might be uncomfortable with that," he said.

Goodman said all complaints are taken seriously and if someone is sensitive about a book, "maybe it's something we overlooked. We have to be open to new information at all times.

"When a complaint comes in, we want to be completely open to understanding what the problem is and if there's something we can do to mitigate it or maybe what we are doing is bang-on and then we work with the parent and explain why we are doing what we are doing."

Parrack said the committee comprises librarians, curriculum experts and educators at the school, as well as the principal and a community member.

"This doesn't happen very often," Parrack said of the review committee process. With the elimination of Grade 13, students are now reading more challenging novels at age 16 or 17, instead of 18 or 19.

"It's interesting how things may have changed. It might be troublesome for parents." Parrack said.

Liz Kerr, education director for the Ontario Library Association, said any book used in an English class has been closely vetted by department heads and consultants.

"Certain objections to certain books and authors come in waves," she said. "I haven't heard anything about *The Handmaid's Tale* for many, many years, although I suspect there may have been issues when it first came out."

The Handmaid's Tale is listed as one of the 100 "most frequently challenged books" from 1990 to 1999 on the American Library Association's website.

The Canadian Library Association says there is "no known instance of a challenge to this novel in Canada" but says the book was called anti-Christian and pornographic by parents after being placed on a reading list for secondary students in Texas in the 1990s.

Atwood novel too brutal, sexist for school: Parent
January 16, 2009
Kristin Rushowy
Education Reporter, *Toronto Star*

Robert Edwards says if students repeated some of the words from Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* in the school halls, they'd be suspended, so he questions why it is okay in the classroom.

And what about the foul language, the anti-Christian overtones, the violence and sexual degradation, asks the parent who launched a formal complaint about the Canadian novel. Don't they violate the Toronto board's policies of respect and tolerance?

"If you look at the board's policies, it goes to these great lengths to talk about respect and not using profane language, and in fact so do the policies at Lawrence Park Collegiate," where Edwards' 17-year-old son was studying the book in his Grade 12 English class.

"The board is adamant about those policies, but then puts books like this in place." Edwards, the father of three sons, said he hasn't complained to the school about a book before. He only read *The Handmaid's Tale* after seeing his middle son with it.

He considers himself religious, and believes religion should be discussed, but if one faith is going to be "cast in a critical light, then the board ought to open it up" to others.

"I'm not looking to ban books," he said. "I'm just looking for justification as to why this is an appropriate book ... if the board can declare to me that in their view it fits within their policy, I'd like them to explain how."

A spokesperson for Atwood said the author has already said a lot on the topic and her opinions are widely available on the Internet.

Edwards filed a formal complaint with the Toronto District School Board before the Christmas holidays, arguing that while the futuristic theme of the book is acceptable, its focus on "sex, brutal situations, murder, prostitution" is not.

The book "is rife with brutality towards and mistreatment of women (and men at times), sexual scenes, and bleak depression," Edwards said in a letter to the school's principal. "I can't really understand what it is my son is supposed to be learning from this fictional drivel.

"I have a major problem with a curriculum book that cannot be fully read out loud in class, in front of an assembly, directly to a teacher, a parent, or, for that matter, contains attitudes and words that cannot be used by students in class discussion or hallway conversation. Let alone a description of situations that must be embarrassing and uncomfortable to any young woman in that class – and probably the young men, too."

He said if the book was anti-Islam, it wouldn't be allowed.

According to board policy, any complaint that can't be solved at the school level goes to a review committee.

Such a committee is now reviewing *The Handmaid's Tale*, which was first published in 1985. It met yesterday at Lawrence Park and will eventually make a recommendation to the director of education.

If Edwards still isn't satisfied, he can appeal to trustees.

The novel centres on a futuristic, theocratic world where women are used as breeders.

After Edwards complained, his son was assigned another book, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, and will step out of class during any discussions on *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Russell Morton Brown, a retired University of Toronto English professor, said *The Handmaid's Tale* wasn't likely written for 17-year-olds, "but neither are a lot of things we teach in high school, like Shakespeare.

"And they are all the better for reading it. They are on the edge of adulthood already, and there's no point in coddling them," he said, adding, "they aren't coddled in terms of mass media today anyway."

He said the book has been accused of being anti-Christian and, more recently, anti-Islamic because the women are veiled and polygamy is allowed.

But that "misses the point," said Brown. "It's really antifundamentalism."

At one time, Brown taught a graduate course to high school teachers on Canadian fiction, which included *The Handmaid's Tale*.

"It's the most taught Canadian novel at the high school level," he said. "I think it provides a lot to talk about, and generally speaking it does engage students."

Appendix 3

The National Post article retrieved from:

<http://network.nationalpost.com/np/blogs/fullcomment/archive/2009/02/23/barbara-kay-teach-atwood-s-handmaid-s-tale-as-the-story-it-is-a-nasty-trifecta-of-feminist-bigotry.aspx>

Teach Atwood's Handmaid's Tale as the story it is, a nasty trifecta of feminist bigotry
February 23, 2009
Barbara Kay
The National Post

There's a first time for everything, and Monday's front page news astonished Canadians with an unprecedented case of literary *lèse majesté*. A parent of a Grade Twelve Toronto high school student dared to petition for the removal from the school's reading list of *The Handmaid's Tale*, a 1986 novel by the queen of Canadian literature, Margaret Atwood.

A review board concluded that the book should remain a classroom text. No surprise there. It is hard to imagine the venerated Ms Atwood being effectively "dissed" by a mere parent.

The parent thinks the novel, a futuristic fantasy of a totalitarian society in which women become the slaves of conservative patriarchs, is "fictional drivel." Well, of course it is, and so is much else of Ms Atwood's diverse oeuvre, but the parent misses the point of why.

A Handmaid's Tale isn't drivel because of the sex and violence, the parent's concern. It is drivel because it is a scaremongering fantasy cut from whole ideological cloth, whose principal purpose and effect is to stir up hatred of men. On that ground the parent in a fair world would have a moral case for its removal. Sadly however, rather than an aesthetic and ethical crime, inciting hatred against men in the guise of art is today a positive virtue, borne aloft in a cultural zeitgeist Ms Atwood was herself largely responsible for creating.

The setting of *A Handmaid's Tale* is "the recent future." The U.S. has morphed into the Republic of Gilead, dominated by Christian fundamentalists, who have conscripted fertile women into a program of forced breeding. Allusions to pre-Civil war slavery and the Nazi persecution of Jews abound.

That gender relations ever did or ever could descend to such a Manichean reality is absurd. History does of course provide horrific examples of totalitarian-regime eugenics,

but they were not devised by Christian conservatives. Conservative Christians are the last people on earth to impose government-run programs of any kind to govern private sexuality.

The Chinese program of forced abortions came from the atheist, utopian left. The Nazi Lebensborn program, in which fertile young women were lodged at breeding farms, there to be serviced by SS officers, which seems to have been Ms Atwood's inspiration, came from the pagan, anti-religious right.

The Nazis' goal with the Lebensborn project was conceived as a means to improve Germany's Aryan racial stock and to repopulate the war-ravaged nation. On its face, the project seems like something of a harbinger of Ms Atwood's vision.

But with one crucial difference that makes a mockery of Ms Atwood's alarmist projection. German women were never forced to breed. In the Lebensborn project, the "handmaids" were volunteers. Indeed, very willing volunteers, seduced by the perks of higher social status, nutritious food and high quality medical care, luxuries ordinary Germans could only dream of at the time. Women in Germany were not even forced to work in the armaments industry, as women did in Britain, since the Nazis had slave labour for that.

On the other hand, German men were forced to fight, millions of them to die ghastly deaths. If you want to know what history's real forced sacrifice looks like – forced *genderized* sacrifice, that is – think of the millions of young healthy males in World Wars One and Two who were maimed, shell-shocked and blown to bits to satisfy or subdue the bloodlust of tyrants and ethnic nationalists. Given the choice, having sex with fit, virile men, living in luxury for nine months and earning the plaudits of your nation would seem an enticing alternate reality. A choice men didn't have.

But in Ms Atwood's conspiracy-theorist feminist universe, all men are the enemy of all women. Therefore women cannot be seen as opportunistic or exploitative, and men cannot be seen as objects of pity. The society she imagines must show women as innocent dupes of powerful male control freaks. Thus the men in *The Handmaid's Tale* are presumed to enjoy fighting, and take delight in their warrior nature.

There are warrior cultures, but boys must be initiated and brainwashed into loving it, as anyone who has seen Hamas "training" videos can attest. Even in Nazi Germany, where every effort was made to inculcate young boys with a love for war, conscription was necessary. That is because while all decent men will instinctively fight to protect women and children, and while most men aspire to be courageous under fire if it is necessary to defend their country, few men naturally enjoy killing for its own sake or for dishonorable reasons.

The Handmaid's Tale is a nasty trifecta of bigotry: a cheap thrust at men, conservatives and religious Christians. It is not a "cautionary tale," as one admirer characterized it in the Toronto controversy. Here we are 23 years later. Where are the forced-breeding

camps? Women rule; abortion is rampant; fertility technology has run amok; and men – insofar as their traditional roles as providers, progenitors and protectors are concerned – are an endangered species. Some cautionary tale. *The Handmaid's Tale* is rather a tale told by a feminist, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.