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**Dominick M. Grace**

***The Handmaid's Tale*: "Historical Notes" and Documentary Subversion**

Although only a dozen pages long, the "Historical Notes" appearing at the end of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* have been the subject of repeated critical scrutiny. Commentaries on the "Historical Notes" consistently suggest that the world of 2195 depicted therein is far from an eutopian alternative to the dystopia of Gilead; indeed, commentators consistently note the sexism of Pieixoto and suggest, more or less explicitly, that the conditions that led to the founding of Gilead in the first place still exist in the world of 2195. Ken Norris, for instance, argues that "The desire of future scholars to dress up in period costumes and 'play' at the roles of Gileadean society, the sexism of Professor Pieixoto, and his failure to learn anything of the human equation in Offred's story, all suggest that the informing principles of Gilead have not entirely disappeared" (363-64), and his is far from the strongest articulation of this position.<sup>1</sup> The world of 2195 is one in which women once again assume positions of authority, in which Native North American peoples are evidently part of dominant North American culture, and in which there is a renewed respect for nature (which one could contrast with Serena Joy's gardening strategies). This future might appear, therefore, to be an eutopian alternative to Gilead, and perhaps even to the world of today, if we can accept at face value that the sexist and racist assumptions prevalent in Gilead (and today) have been eradicated; this, however, we cannot easily do. The dissatisfaction readers feel with the alternative to Gilead offered by the world of the "Historical Notes," and the discomfort readers feel when faced with Pieixoto's perpetuation of attitudes that the novel suggests helped create Gilead in the first place, are inconsistent with the expectations often aroused by dystopian fictions.

That the future world of the "Historical Notes" is far from ideal is one of the easily-recognized devices Atwood employs to undercut our traditional expectations; while the opposition between alternate societal models in utopian fiction often serves to provide a simple binary opposition between eutopian and dystopian possibilities, Atwood instead offers degrees of dystopia. Similarly (and less evidently, perhaps), whereas science fiction often uses such devices as the pseudo-documentary to create verisimilitude, to validate the tale as real or true—to encourage us, in effect, to suspend our disbelief and accept that we are reading history, not fiction—Atwood eschews the conventional function of the pseudo-documentary voice. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood invokes a model that, in its standard use, serves to validate, or support, the authority of the work, but she does so in ways that subvert the conventional function of

pseudo-documentary devices in science fiction. David Ketterer notes that “The different realities of science fiction are generally located in what purports to be the real future” (3), but Atwood ultimately denies her tale this purported historicity.

The seminal utopian text, Thomas More’s *Utopia*, and the originary science-fiction text, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, firmly establish the often-invoked pseudo-documentary convention in their narratorial claims to documentary evidence to validate the truth of the narrative (Walton claims to have even the letters exchanged between Felix and Safie, which were taken by the creature, passed on to Victor, and thence to him [§24:209]). The documentary gestures in such texts invite readers to accept the historicity of the primary narrative by providing witnesses to at least some of the events narrated and by providing putative documentary evidence, such as Walton’s letters to his sister as well as the primary documents he claims to have seen. Of course, in such texts as *Utopia* and *Frankenstein*, the action occurs in the “past,” Raphael Hythloday recounting his adventures to Thomas More and the internal chronology of *Frankenstein* dating the action at least two decades before the novel’s publication in 1818.

*Frankenstein*’s pseudo-historicity is less developed than *Utopia*’s, consisting really only of the Walton frame narrative, which provides a fairly straightforward and believable context for the novel’s more fantastic narrative. More makes use of rather more elaborate pseudo-documentary techniques, including pseudo-correspondence and extensive reference to real historical figures—himself included—as witness to Hythloday’s account. Hythloday is even represented as having “joined himself in company with Amerigo Vespucci, and in the three last voyages of those four that be now in print and abroad in every man’s hands, he continued still in his company” (15), thus neatly inscribing Hythloday in contemporary travel literature and thereby “historicizing” him.

Like *The Handmaid’s Tale*, these texts are presented as oral performances recorded (or edited) by others; unlike *The Handmaid’s Tale*, they represent actions which are historically anterior to the time at which the texts were published. As a text purporting to recount future history, Atwood’s novel confronts a rather greater credibility gap than do texts such as those of Shelley or More. Nevertheless, the extension of pseudo-documentary devices to various kinds of sf narrative, including narratives set in the future, as a legitimation device is a logical enough application of this principle and one that has a long history in science fiction, whether written within the genre or outside it.<sup>2</sup> Any number of texts provide purported documentary evidence of different kinds to enhance narrative verisimilitude. Even claims of editorial intervention in the text presented can serve to validate the text, by suggesting that the editor has devoted time and care to a careful representation of an “original” text. In *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933), for instance, H. G. Wells presents himself as a sedulous editor who has “had indeed to arrange and rearrange [the chapters] after several trials, because they do not seem to have been read and written down by Raven in their proper chronological sequence” (“Introduction” 27-28), while in *The Purple Cloud* (1930), M. P. Shiel more modestly claims

merely to have translated a shorthand document and notes that "the title, division into paragraphs, &c., have been arbitrarily contrived...for convenience" ("Introduction" 8).

Such strategies conventionally serve to invite the reader's suspension of disbelief, and, on the face of it, Atwood's "Historical Notes" might seem to do the same. Patrick Murphy identifies several examples of such devices in his "Reducing the Dystopian Distance: Pseudo-Documentary Framing in Near-Future Fiction." Murphy considers Atwood's novel at some length in his discussion and, although he recognizes that Atwood does not use the "Historical Notes" section simply to suspend disbelief, he also asserts that the section "tells readers that it did happen and that the journal is being critically studied in 2195" (34). Chinmoy Banerjee also sees the function of the "Historical Notes" as an attempt to contextualize Offred's narrative historically: "The main function of the notes is apparently to ground and explain the tale" (89).

However, the extent to which the "Historical Notes" section provides any validation at all to the narrative that precedes it is open to considerable discussion. The section is radically disjunctive, leaping forward some 200 years, totally abandoning the characters and narrative perspective of the bulk of the novel, and in fact querying that perspective in several ways, including querying its status as text. Even the purely retrospective aspect of the notes disorients readers. While *The Handmaid's Tale* is often described as a frame narrative, in fact there is no analogue for the "Historical Notes" at the beginning of the text to signal to readers that Offred's narrative is unfolding within a different and larger context. The "Historical Notes" force a purely retrospective re-evaluation of the text, unlike the pseudo-documentary strategies in the vast bulk of such fictions, which almost invariably precede the text or are incorporated throughout it, to signal clearly to the reader their presence. Because there is no hint in the body of the text of the recontextualizing to come at its end, the "Historical Notes" are discontinuous and disjunctive; they invite us to question, rather than accept, the authenticity of what we have just read. These factors discourage suspension of disbelief, rather than encouraging it. They invite an active interrogation of the text.

The historical leap, and the re-evaluation it forces of our assumptions about the historicity of the action, are significant and serve as challenges to our view of the status of the text we have been reading; they destabilize the reader's sense of Offred's narrative as history. Two binary models of historical representation may be applied to *The Handmaid's Tale*. Jamie Dopp contrasts an essentialist view of history with a materialist view, and concludes that the novel is basically essentialist, asserting the inevitability of oppression. David Ketterer contrasts the linear model of history with the cyclical, suggesting that Atwood adopts the latter model—a position consistent, incidentally, with Robert H. Canary's discussion of far-future sf (the "Historical Notes" are placed 200 years in the future) as contrasted with near-future sf. What makes the "Historical Notes" so important, and indeed the question of history in the novel so important, however, is the abrupt shift required by the "Historical Notes"

in both models, and the consequent damage to verisimilitude. For nearly 300 pages, we have been located in a near-future dystopia, vividly realized and recognizably derived from our own time (albeit with minimal attention to detailed extrapolation): the model seems linear. Similarly, we have for nearly 300 pages watched Offred become increasingly abject until she finally surrenders to forces beyond her control: this is what Dopp sees as the novel's essentialist position. However, in the "Historical Notes" we leap forward 200 years and discover a society much like our own pre-Gileadean society, which suggests a cyclical rather than a linear model of history, and we discover in that society that the extreme repression of Gilead has ended, so the apparently essentialist model is replaced by a materialist model, one that suggests that Gilead is neither inevitable nor permanent. We are thrown into disarray, explicitly invited to reinvestigate the text because of the revelations about its nature in the "Historical Notes." As we look back, we find that the apparently simple linear and essentialist historical model is deceptive. In short, we find that the application of a single, simple historical model to the action is impossible; *both* the linear/essentialist *and* the cyclical/materialist models are invoked because of the disjunction between Offred's narrative and Pieixoto's academic address.

Indeed, Atwood shows little interest in validation devices that create the illusion of historicity at all. Although the bulk of the novel is set in a very near future, for instance, there is virtually no explanation provided of how we got from "now" to "then"; the novel is a third of the way to completion before Offred offers a few paragraphs of the sort of expository extrapolation which we would expect to be essential and to appear early in the novel, and in fact the bulk of the contextualizing exposition occurs in the "Historical Notes" section, a curious narrative decision given the novel's repeated assertion that context is all, and the cause of numerous complaints that the novel does not provide a believable rationale for the rise of the Gileadeans—it does so only retrospectively, and in the voice of a highly questionable authority. As Jamie Dopp avers, "The novel offers no explanation of the larger political context of [the Gileadean] regime, nor any explanation for its resort to such extreme levels of terror" (49); indeed, Chinmoy Banerjee complains that "the critical force of Atwood's dystopia is...put into doubt by the historical superficiality of the fiction" (78). However, such complaints approach the tale from Pieixoto's perspective. Far from providing a validating context, the "Historical Notes" serve to undercut our faith in the reliability—the historicity—of the tale because they demonstrate the limitations of a univocal, factual approach to understanding Offred's experiences.

But neither does the bulk of the text invite us to accept its voice as historically authoritative. Offred's voice itself does not encourage us to see her tale as history. She speaks in the present tense, a fact which in itself discourages us from seeing her narrative as fixed, final, and anterior; it is, instead, ongoing, and it unfolds for us as it does for her. We might note here, incidentally, that Atwood manages by the use of this device to echo the use of the journal prevalent in such seminal dystopian works as *We* and *1984*, the

influence of which on *The Handmaid's Tale* is fairly evident. This device denies the idea of historicity by having the action, even the "past" action, unfold in an eternal "now," rather than in a closed and finished "then." When Offred does use the past tense, she uses it in relation to her life before the Gileadean regime—in our "now"; our present is Offred's past. Offred also repeatedly acknowledges the contingency of her own narrative, acknowledging that, despite her use of the present tense, she is not experiencing events but recounting them. "This is a reconstruction," she tells us; "All of it is a reconstruction" (§23:126). She acknowledges that she has silently expanded Moira's account of her attempted escape, although she asserts that "I've tried to make it sound as much like her as I can" (§38:228); she provides multiple narratives of Luke's fate, claiming to believe them all: "The things I believe can't all be true, though one of them must be. But I believe in all of them" (§18:100). She provides multiple versions of her first sexual encounter with Nick, and finally concludes, "I'm not sure how it happened; not exactly" (§40:246). Even her final words provide no definitive truth: "And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light" (§46:277). That is, Offred's account is clearly experiential, a reflection of her own thoughts and perspectives, rather than an objective and historical report.

Offred's narrative strategies consistently stress the failure of any single reading of an event to be valid. Indeed, they challenge the very notion of a textually fixed, historical truth. Offred comments at various points, for instance, on the failure of texts to provide convincing pictures of reality or to account for female experience. "The newspaper stories were like bad dreams to us," she observes; "How awful, we would say, and they were, but they were awful without being believable" (§10:53). Such accounts of rape and mutilation, of women "interfered with as they used to say" (§10:53), are supposedly factual and objective, but nevertheless feel "melodramatic" and do not seem real in the context of the lives lived by Offred and her friends prior to the Gileadean takeover. The texts do not capture their experiences: "they were about other women, and the men who did such things were other men" (§10:53). Instead, Offred says, "We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print.... We lived in the gaps between the stories" (§10:53). That is, accounts of female experience are partial and limited, leaving much out, perhaps more than is included. The "reality," or a significant proportion of it, exists outside the texts, so the texts provide only stories, not the whole story.

Gilead represents perhaps the most extreme example of textual reductionism, for it reduces all experience to a single perspective, a single story, and not even an unadulterated one, for the scriptures that serve as the basis of Gileadean society are read selectively and even modified, as Offred recognizes at different times; one example is the version of the Beatitudes recited at lunch at the Red Centre: "*Blessed be the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the silent. I knew they made that up, I knew it was wrong, and they left things out too, but there was no way of checking*" (§15:84). The Gileadeans combine a belief

in the authoritative power of a text to determine truth with the power of those who control the text to alter it to suit their needs. That is, their practice points up the failure of text as text, free from the power of the interpreter, to determine or even reflect truth.<sup>3</sup>

Offred, by contrast, attempts to find the truth in multiple, subjective perspectives. As David S. Hogsette suggests: "Offred gradually recognizes that she can manipulate language in order to create her own subjectivity, a subjectivity that can enable her to act as a subversive agent against the oppressive reality created by the Republic of Gilead" (265). Offred's own litanies contrast with those imposed by the Gileadean regime, as we see in her reflections on the word "chair":

I sit in the chair and think about the word *chair*. It can also mean the leader of a meeting. It can also mean a mode of execution. It is the first syllable in *charity*. It is the French word for flesh. None of these facts has any connection with the others.

These are the kinds of litanies I use, to compose myself. (§19:104)

While Offred insists on the multiple yet distinct meanings the word carries, Pieixoto plays on the multiple meanings of the word "chair" to collapse them, thus making a sexual and sexist pun at the expense of Maryann Crescent Moon: "I am sure we all enjoyed our charming Arctic Char last night at dinner, and now we are enjoying an equally charming Arctic Chair. I use the word 'enjoy' in two distinct senses, precluding, of course, the obsolete third (*Laughter*)" (282). For Pieixoto, and for his audience, as the laughter indicates, joking about Maryann Crescent Moon's sexual appeal—she's good enough to eat—is acceptable, and is indicative of his reductive and simplistic view. Unlike similar Gileadean litanies of singular, univocal conformity, Offred's litanies are personal, multivocal, and self-defining; they are her mode of self-composition.

Indeed, to some extent, Offred liberates herself from her oppressive reality by transforming it into a fiction:

I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it. Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance.

If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending. Then there will be an ending, to the story, and real life will come after it. I can pick up where I left off.

It isn't a story I'm telling.

It's also a story I'm telling, in my head, as I go along. (§7:37)

By fictionalizing, by thinking of her experiences as those in a story, by inventing multiple possibilities, Offred can come to terms, to some extent, with what is happening to her. Her life is not a story, but a genuine sequence of experiences—but it is also a story, a sequence of experiences given meaning and context by her process of self-composition, and the truth resides more in the story Offred constructs (or reconstructs) than it does in the facts.<sup>4</sup>

Offred's account is on its face, then, not a conventional singular, univocal expression of "truth," but a "contra-logical, hierarchy-resistant, circularly ambiguous narrative" (Verwayen 53). The "Historical Notes" section further

undermines the historical authority of Offred's account by revealing that the text of the novel is not the direct record made by Offred of her experiences, but is itself a construct, a transcript of tape-recorded commentaries, edited and structured, and interpreted by its twenty-second-century editors, who have, in a way, repeated the very process that Offred herself uses, but with a very different agenda. In effect, our entire experience of Offred's account has been deceptive, for we have been reading it, but it is not a document at all, but a series of recorded audiotapes. The text we have read is a documentary study, a transcription edited by male scholars, not an unmediated account of Offred's experiences; it is a retrospectively organized interpretation of that account. All that we have assumed about the text we have been reading, including the authority of the order in which the events are narrated, is violated by the "Historical Notes," and the voice we thought we were listening to is subsumed, even fictionalized, by Pieixoto.

Documentaries purport to record accurately a moment in history, but manifest in Atwood's "Historical Notes" is that in fact they do nothing of the kind. Far from adding to the authority of Offred's account by providing an objective, historical context for it, far from making her tale more believable, the "Historical Notes" section casts doubt on the validity of the entire documentary mode. It does so in several ways. One of those ways, of course, is by providing such a clay-footed figure as Pieixoto as the voice of authority; we can hardly accept that he could be the arbiter of truth. But there are more significant questions raised about the historicizing of Offred's account.

Pieixoto's acknowledgment that the tale we have read is an editorial construct "based on some guesswork...and to be regarded as approximate, pending further research" (284) recalls Offred's own acknowledgments of her reconstruction of events, but whereas for Offred the possibilities opened up by reconstructions and the alternate possibilities they provide play a key role in the narrative, for Pieixoto such contingency is a blemish to be removed, he hopes, when further research provides the univocal, final, true account. Completely lacking in Pieixoto's commentary is any recognition that the very process of transcription and editing makes such a univocal truth impossible to find.<sup>5</sup>

The *Canterbury Tales* analogy Pieixoto cites itself underscores this point. First, the fact that Professor Wade has labeled the account "The Handmaid's Tale" "in homage to the great Geoffrey Chaucer" (283) undermines the claims he and Pieixoto make about the truth value of their transcription by likening that transcription to a work of fiction, "a literary creation" (Freiburg 281) rather than a historical account. Second, and more significantly, Chaucer's works have themselves been shaped by editors; indeed, just as the order of Offred's tapes has been determined by Pieixoto and Wade, so has the order of the *Canterbury Tales* been the subject of considerable editorial speculation, so much so that there are two different ordering principles (by Fragment, based on the order of the Ellesmere manuscript, or by Group, based on the "Bradshaw Shift") followed in editions of the work: which *Canterbury Tales* one reads depends on which edition one reads. The Chaucer reference doubly underscores the impossibility of Pieixoto's desire to arrive at a single, true

version of the tale Offred recounts by likening her tale to fiction and by pointing up the problems inherent in editing the account.

His concern with such a search, and the implications of such a search for the idea he has of history, are key to an understanding of the "Historical Notes" section. Pieixoto sees history in terms of observable fact, in terms of simple and unequivocal truths and ordered cause and effect relationships. Because Offred has not provided the facts, Pieixoto has cause to lament the gaps that remain because of Offred's limitations:

She could have told us much about the workings of the Gileadean empire, had she had the instincts of a reporter or a spy. What would we not give, now, for even twenty pages or so of printout from Waterford's private computer! However, we must be grateful for any crumbs the Goddess of History has deigned to vouchsafe us. (292)

Even in this passage, we see Pieixoto's privileging of text over Offred's oral account; he would prefer computer transcripts to tape recordings. As Sandra Tomc notes, "It is no accident that Offred's tapes are discovered among other tokens of popular passion and bad taste—Elvis Presley tunes, folk songs, Mantovani instrumentals, and the screams of Twisted Sister—nor that all of these are laughed at and dismissed by Professor Pieixoto" (23). Waterford's computer printouts might no doubt provide useful data, but how much understanding might they provide? Offred notes that the Commander is "truly ignorant of the real conditions under which we lived" (§25:149). The value of his testimony to provide understanding of life in Gilead is therefore highly suspect.

Of course, the other factual records to have survived have provided enough information for Pieixoto to consider two likely candidates for Offred's Commander, and to conclude that the most likely one was Frederick R. Waterford, but it has left no evidence of Offred's true name.<sup>6</sup> Or so Pieixoto argues, at any rate, concluding that the names Offred uses in her account are "useless for the purposes of identification and authentication. 'Luke' and 'Nick' drew blanks, as did 'Moirra' and 'Janine.' There is a high probability that these were, in any case, pseudonyms..." (287-88). He ignores the fact, noted by numerous readers from Harriet Bergmann onward, that of the names listed at the end of chapter one, only June is unaccounted for in the text.<sup>7</sup> Whether June is in fact Offred's real name is probably immaterial (and Pieixoto's point that the names used on the tapes are probably pseudonyms should not be dismissed lightly), but Pieixoto's failure even to address the possibility helps underscore the extent to which Offred is really invisible to him and thereby helps point up the failure of his approach to Offred's account.

Commenting on the photograph she's shown of her daughter, an example of the sort of concrete physical evidence that can pass from age to age and that Pieixoto wishes he possessed, Offred notes, presciently, "From the point of view of future history, this kind, we'll be invisible" (35:214). Her qualification—"this kind"—is crucial, for it implies alternate models of history, and those models are distinct from Pieixoto's. For Pieixoto, history is artifact; for Offred, it is experience.

Indeed, if Pieixoto resembles Offred in one respect, in his reconstruction of the past into a coherent narrative, he resembles the Gileadeans in others. We have already observed his sexism, a trait that the Commander explicitly relates to the Gileadean takeover. Pieixoto's attitude to history is Gileadean as well. Like Aunt Lydia, "who was in love with either/or" (8), Pieixoto seeks for the wonderfully simple, easy answers that Gilead attempted to provide. "Did our narrator reach the outside world safely and build a new life for herself? *Or* was she discovered in her attic hiding place, arrested, sent to the colonies *or* to Jezebel's, *or* even executed?" he wonders (293; emphasis added). Was Fred Waterford or Judd, he wonders. Only one answer is possible, of course, and we as readers probably wonder also. However, the answers are really irrelevant, except as facts. As we have seen, one of Offred's comforts is considering possibilities, not facts, and leaving the truth unfixed and open; even in her litany, "chair" means several different things simultaneously, unbound by "either/or." Knowing the answers Pieixoto seeks will add nothing to our ability to understand Gilead or to evaluate it. But we can recognize the desire to ask such questions in the Gileadean mentality.

When commenting on why the revolution occurred, for instance, the Commander rejects the abstract in favor of the concrete: "We have the stats from that time," he asserts; "Men were turning off on sex, even. They were turning off on marriage" (§32:198). When Offred notes that the Gileadeans overlooked love—which, incidentally, Offred identifies as by definition incapable of reduction to the singular and known: "the way love feels is always approximate," she tells us (§40:246)—the Commander says, "But look at the stats, my dear. Was it really worth it, *falling in love*?" (§34:206). For the Gileadeans, truth is reducible to numbers, or stats—or to scripture. That such a reduction is manifestly inadequate is demonstrated amply by the novel—and that Pieixoto has not recognized this truth is equally manifest.

Pieixoto's search is for facts only. His desire for twenty pages of printout from Waterford's computer is unsettlingly reminiscent of the Commander's blithe assertion of the power of statistics over human experience. Pieixoto has a compelling record of a human experience, but he wants names and dates; because we don't know Offred's real name, we don't know much about her, according to Pieixoto. He wants history, but Offred gives him only her story, and he is hesitant to accept its validity. He is more concerned with the mechanics involved in transcribing, and validating the authenticity of, the tapes—even going so far as to state, "if the author is telling the truth, no machine or tapes would have been available to her" (285)—than he is with their contents.

His attitude to the contents of the tapes, and to their implications, is revealing:

If I may be permitted an editorial aside, allow me to say that in my opinion we must be cautious about passing moral judgement upon the Gileadeans. Surely we have learned by now that such judgments are of necessity culture-specific. Also, Gileadean society was under a good deal of pressure, demographic and otherwise, and was subject to factors from which we ourselves are happily more free. Our job is not to censure but to understand. (284)

In assuming here the editorial role, Pieixoto is assuming his authoritative role in order to abdicate the very essence of that authority. The process of editorial reconstruction he claims will lead ultimately to a reclamation of the truth is nothing if not a process of judgment, but here he denies the necessity of judgment. Judgment and understanding cannot, of course, be separated. Tellingly, though, Pieixoto couples his apparent abdication of judgment with an excuse for the Gileadeans' behavior, an excuse completely unnecessary if all we are concerned with is the facts, and not judgment. One cannot excuse Gilead without at least implicitly judging it. Pieixoto's is not a reliable voice.

Attempts to create pseudo-documentary or historical status for science-fiction works usually function to invite our suspension of disbelief, to see the story as history, as "real." Such works may well offer powerful and compelling visions of what might come, in the hope of preventing such events, but, as Pieixoto's attitude here suggests, our judgement of what *has* happened is very easily colored by our belief that we live outside, and are superior to, the closed and finished world of that historical past; we tend to view history from "the clearer light of our own day" (293), as Pieixoto claims. Atwood does not wish to create such a historicized world in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

The "Historical Notes" require us not to accept as valid and authoritative what we have read, nor to believe passively what we are told, as documentary requires, but rather these Notes invite us to reject Pieixoto's model of complacent historical understanding and instead to engage in the far more challenging, and far more important, task of using our judgment, a faculty which Pieixoto suggests we ought to abandon when he asserts, "Our job is not to censure but to understand" (284). Pieixoto, the documentarian, wants us to suspend our judgment in favor of his own putatively non-judgmental judgment. The novel requires us to recognize the folly of such a surrender to the documentary. If history is fixed and final, as Pieixoto would have it, if facts are just data—stats—and the past (and therefore, by implication, the future as well) is unitary and unalterable, we can learn nothing here. Instead, the novel undermines this notion of history, requiring us to recognize that gleaning truth from this text requires accepting its fictionality as the medium for that truth. Stories describe what *might* happen, and what might happen remains susceptible to change. Atwood's foregrounding and subverting of devices of verisimilitude makes our recognition of the possibility, rather than the reality, of the story evident. We recognize that Pieixoto's historicizing will only justify, not prevent, Gilead, and, one hopes, we are encouraged to adopt a different stance. The necessity of doing so is clear enough: as Atwood herself has pointed out—and so does Pieixoto, for that matter—this story is not really fiction at all, for all of the Gileadean atrocities have occurred, in reality, already. They will continue to do so as long as we contextualize, compartmentalize, and historicize them, in order to avoid judging them.

#### NOTES

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1. Atwood's claim that the "Historical Notes" reflect the fact that she's "an optimist" and "show that the Third Reich, the Fourth Reich, the Fifth Reich, did not last forever" (Hancock 141) is often challenged by readers. David Cowart, for instance, suggests that Pieixoto's sexist jokes "set the teeth on edge" (108), while both Brian Johnson and Joseph Andriano echo Offred's gardening metaphors to express their sense of the dangers underlying the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies. Pieixoto's sexist jokes "ominously reveal that though Gilead is no more, the seeds from which the weed grew are still alive," according to Andriano (95), and Johnson notes that, "while the political republic of Gilead may have fallen, the seeds that produced it are comfortably gestating in the heads of the scholars" (48). Other commentators who see Pieixoto's world as an ominous—or at best an ironic, rather than an optimistic—alternative to Gilead include Harriet F. Bergmann, Arnold E. Davidson, Jamie Dopp, Michael Foley ("Satiric Intent"), Dominick M. Grace, Coral Ann Howells, Michele Lacombe, Bob Myhal, Debrah Raschke, Roberta Rubenstein, Hilde Staels, Karen F. Stein, and Sandra Tomc. And this list is by no means exhaustive.

2. For that matter, the pseudo-documentary is hardly confined to science-fictional texts. Virtually every Sherlock Holmes pastiche, for instance, is represented as a "lost" Watsonian manuscript, found or somehow acquired and "edited" by the author. An example of a more extensive and detailed non-sf pseudo-documentary might be Michael Crichton's *Eaters of the Dead* (1976), which is presented as "the earliest known eyewitness account of Viking life and society" ("Introduction" 1); it comes complete with scholarly apparatus, including a history of the "manuscript," editorial interpolations, footnotes, and a bibliography.

3. As Marta Carminero-Santangelo observes, "the ideology of Gilead identifies subjects by their location in only one context, thus attempting to reduce the multiple construction of subjectivity" (26-27); and Kimberly Verwaayen notes the "authorizing, normative, univocal language of patriarchy" that typifies Gilead—and Pieixoto, for that matter (47).

4. Ursula K. Le Guin begins *The Left Hand of Darkness* with the following statement from Genly Ai: "I'll make my report as if I told a story, for I was taught as a child on my homeworld that Truth is a matter of the imagination" (§1.1). Indeed, Le Guin's novel, like Atwood's, plays with pseudo-documentary techniques in its use of field reports, recounted Gethenian myths and history, an appendix on Gethenian time-keeping, and the combination of multiple accounts of the same story in the intermixed narratives of Estraven and Genly Ai. And, like Atwood's novel, Le Guin's insists on the simultaneity of apparently contradictory "truths":

Light is the left hand of darkness  
and darkness the right hand of light.  
Two are one, life and death, lying  
together like lovers in kemmer  
like hands joined together,  
like the end and the way. (§16.233-34)

Offred observes, "I believe in the resistance as I believe there can be no light without shadow; or rather, no shadow unless there is also light" (§18:99). At the end of her account, Offred steps "into the darkness within; or else the light" (§46:277). The parallel use in the two novels of the idea that opposites are equally true and interdependent, even to the use of the same image for that interdependence, is striking, even if it is purely accidental.

5. One might contrast Pieixoto's methods of dealing with a limited source text with that invoked by other authors of texts purporting to be historical documents. H.G. Wells

uses lacunae in the reported text to enhance our belief in *The First Men in the Moon* (1901) by providing numerous editorial interpolations by the reporter of the message from the moon indicating with remarkably precise detail gaps in the transmission: “[*The record is indistinct for three words*],” for instance, or “[*A word omitted here, probably ‘brains’*]” (both §24:276). Herman Wouk uses a similar device in his version of the first humans to the moon novel, *The “Lomokome” Papers* (1949), by having an editor describe the various changes to and gaps in the written narrative being represented, as suggested in the following example: “[*Editor’s note: There is a noticeable difference in the handwriting on the rest of the sheets. This factor simplified the arranging process. Though the writing in all the papers is rather rough and hurried, from this point on it is barely legible, due to haste, or weakness, or both*]” (§7:102). Philip José Farmer even uses the mere “word or two or...enigmatic smile” given by the “real” Lord Greystoke in response to some of Farmer’s questions to validate the process of “reconstruction applied with logic and common sense” (“Acknowledgments” xi) effected in the compilation of Greystoke’s biography as *Tarzan Alive* (1972). Farmer, of course, has written several novels and pseudobiographies that purport to report real events; *Tarzan Alive* merely carries further the techniques employed in such other texts as *A Feast Unknown* (1969), *Lord of the Trees/The Mad Goblin* (1970), *Doc Savage: His Apocalyptic Life* (1973), and others. In texts such as these, the very limits of the source material serve to validate those source materials, by reproducing precisely the sorts of limitation that affect electronic transmissions, written documents, and oral communications and by presenting editors whose ongoing efforts to address these limitations are evident. Pieixoto’s problems authenticating Offred’s account suggest instead that we should question what he presents to us.

6. Note, incidentally, Pieixoto’s reliance on “the diary kept in cipher by Wilfred Limpkin” (288), a privileged text, as it is a text, as it is by a man, and as it is by a sociobiologist, one who applies scientific principles rather than subjective ones to truth valuations. Of course, this diary was in code, so is as much a product of editorial interpretation/creation as is Offred’s tale.

7. Offred’s real name has concerned many readers, although most commentators on the novel simply use Offred. Michael Foley avoids the problem by simply calling her the Narrator (‘Basic Victim Positions’); at least one critic, Joseph Andriano, argues that to call the narrator Offred “is implicitly to accept the sexist order of the society” (90), so he appropriates the name June and uses it throughout his study.

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#### ABSTRACT

The "Historical Notes" appearing at the end of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* have been the subject of repeated critical scrutiny. Commentaries have suggested that the world of 2195 is far from an eutopian alternative to the dystopia of Gilead; indeed, commentators consistently note the sexism of Pieixoto and suggest that the conditions that led to the founding of Gilead in the first place still exist in the world of 2195. The world of 2195 is one in which women once again assume positions of authority and in which Native North American peoples are evidently part of the dominant culture. It might appear, therefore, an eutopian alternative to Gilead, and perhaps even to the world of today, if we can accept at face value that the sexist and racist assumptions prevalent in Gilead (and today) have been eradicated; but we cannot. Instead, we are forced by the inconsistencies and disjunctions created by Pieixoto's deeply flawed analysis of Offred's account to question the documentary method itself as a valid arbiter of truth. (DMG)