



An Army of Me: Representations of Intersubjectivity, Relational Ethics, and Political Resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Introduction:

Viewers of the Hulu hit series *The Handmaid's Tale* immediately sense a pivotal change in the main character, Offred, after she finds an inscription at the bottom of her closet. Prior to the discovery of this inscription, Mrs. Waterford, the household wife, had punished Offred by secluding her in her room for weeks; during this confinement, she finds the Latin inscription that translates as, “Don’t let the bastards grind you down.” The imperative to resist, and the act of resistance by writing in a world where women are not allowed an education, appears to breathe new life into Offred.

The neo-realism of Offred’s dystopian society in Gilead’s version of America, along with the personal accounts of trauma that Offred suffers, are details from Margaret Atwood’s bestselling novel of the same name. The most notable quality of the show, however, is the manipulation of formal elements in its cinematography, which creates an unstable reality. When meaning after trauma is ambiguous and open to multiple interpretations, the show encourages the viewer’s active participation in generating the narrative and engages their response to experiences of trauma.

In this article, I show how certain formal aspects of the show—such as its use of slow motion and narrative form, particularly in relation to its themes of trauma and personhood—illustrate recent shifts in the development of psychoanalysis and moral theory. I argue that Offred’s trauma, obedience, and most successful forms of resistance to her extremely patriarchal society visualize recent shifts from Freudian drive theory in psychoanalysis to intersubjective approaches that challenge traditional cultural values of psychic mastery and individuated self-sufficiency. I locate specific scenes and events in which Offred’s character is depicted as most successful at navigating her oppressive reality through empathetic flashback memories.

In contrast to depictions of defense mechanisms in Freudian ego-psychology, I consider how the show’s exploration of relational subjectivities opens new ethical and political horizons for viewers, who can find curative possibilities in being with another. Finally, I show how the aesthetic content that represents Offred’s world coupled with the viewer’s shifting social contexts together affectively shape the viewer’s subjectivity and motivate their action. Viewers have culled new creative possibilities out of the show to resist their own oppressive social norms, giving momentum to progressive social movements like #MeToo and mobilizing visual signs like the handmaid’s robes at political protests. The show’s emphasis on empathy and relationality as resistance to patriarchal forms of power also helps explain why these new forms of resistance are so prevalent during the show’s release.

Formal Cinematic Elements that Challenge Ego-psychology

The Handmaid's Tale is an original series created in 2017 by Hulu, an Over the Top (OTT) streaming service. The opening scene of the first episode depicts the most important traumatic event of Offred's life in the series. As the show opens, viewers see police sirens and a car chase, while a father's eyes look through the rearview mirror at a mother's torso cradling a child. Like an ego in traumatic disintegration, the viewer's sight is limited to these discrete body parts before the car crashes. Gunshots are heard off-screen as the mother and child run and hide in the forest, only to culminate in the final fragmented camera shots of a child forcibly taken away by armed men while the mother is knocked unconscious. The screen turns to black before viewers awake back with the mother who is now wearing an oversized red robe with a white cap, and is showing signs of outward obedience.¹

Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel was written in a divided Berlin in 1984 and published two years later in 1986. In Atwood's introduction to the book and in later interviews, she emphasizes that the book's details include facts meticulously researched from history, particularly seventeenth-century Puritan customs in early America, which add realism to the characters and coherence to the storyline. Every detail in the book has a corresponding reality either in contemporary conditions or historical fact (Schreiber, 1986, p. 209). From the technology to its events, "there are no imaginary gizmos, no imaginary laws, no imaginary atrocities" in Atwood's creation of the dystopic reality (Atwood, 1998, p. xiv). These historical facts set the stage for a show that primarily follows Offred, a "handmaid," who lives in a totalitarian and oppressively patriarchal society whose political norms are based on right-wing literalist interpretations of Biblical verses. Cuts to Offred before the traumatic events depict her in a city that feels much like any other progressive city today. She goes to Yoga and swipes her phone left or right on Tinder, the popular dating application that is contemporary to the show's airing. One set of flashback scenes dates them around the late 2010's where another central female character, Ofglen, has an approximately 6-year-old child in a same-sex marriage. The realism established by the show's flashbacks to Offred's life in the U.S. enables the viewer's identification and empathy with her character because she engages in the kinds of activities that are familiar to viewer's own lives.

The plot, however, does not only unfold through an objective lens that aims at mechanically reproducing these realities but also includes the filmmaker's intent and context (Kracauer, 1979, p. 21-22). Its cinematography is used to reflect the characters' experiences from a subjective point of view in relation to their political institutions and popular culture. Long camera shots and slow motion are used after traumatic events, which serve to position the viewer in an identification with the narrating handmaid. Through the interiority of a woman, the viewer comes to learn about the workings and emotional effects of living under an outwardly oppressive regime. Women in Gilead are treated according to a hierarchy of ability; however, unlike their male counterparts, women's only recognized abilities are tied to their reproductive destiny. These include being an upper-class but typically barren wife, a biologically reproductive handmaid

¹ In the interest of space, this paper will focus narrowly on significant details from the show, and assume that the reader is familiar with its overarching themes and storyline.

forced to “serve” varying high-ranking families, or a laboring domestic servant conscripted to work as a “Martha” for respectable families. If they cannot do any of these—or if they prove too politically subversive—they are banished to the dreaded “colonies,” a literal wasteland of toxic soil that quickly kills anyone stationed there.

After Offred learns there is an “eye,” an official government agent, living in her house, a full-frontal shot shows her surveying its exterior with an immediate slow-motion take of the first-person view of the house’s exterior. The full-frontal shot of her face invites the viewer’s complicity with her perspective, as if they need as much time to deliberate as she does. We follow her into the house’s interior, which is crowded by figures in dark lighting. The viewer is urged to suspect with Offred each person inside the house and is made to wonder: who can I trust and how much threat are we under? Similar to the uneven camera work and fragmented body parts in the opening scene, these cinematic gestures point outside the show’s frame into the internal life of a character. These spaces in the plot, narration, and perception force the viewer to participate in their construction through Offred’s experience of trauma. They also induce the viewer to reflect on their own levels of complicity and resistance to similar forms of oppression that might exist in their own reality.

Processes of identification and empathy create affective responses in the viewer and provide viewers an opportunity to then reflect on themselves in relation to their social norms. As Gordon Gray writes in *Cinema: A Visual Anthropology*, cinematic conventions do not only have to show a passive linear plot to follow, but actually “[t]hrough the subjective portrayal of characters, actions, and events, the audience both gained understanding of these elements and became involved in the *diegesis* (the world within the film, including elements not necessarily seen on screen) itself” (Gray, 2010, p. 64). Viewers bring their own experiences and points of view into dialogue with the portrayed reality. In Atwood’s book, for example, Offred’s story is found on tapes recorded for a liberated future. Internal to the novel’s plot, recording audio tapes, like writing letters, is a kind of labor that assumes a future reader (Atwood’s book of her tale) and forges a connection to another even while one may be undergoing trauma.

The show amplifies the dialogical nature of Offred’s narrative by additionally requiring the viewer to stitch disparate visual elements into a coherent whole. Instead of passively enjoying the spectacle or aesthetic qualities of the show as an art-object, the viewer is actively participating in its construction; they are, in Althusser’s language, becoming interpolated by the ideologies they are watching (Lapsley and Westlake, 1988, p. 7-8). After reviewing some of the ways in which the emotional effects of trauma are portrayed, and how the show’s cinematography engages and affects the viewer’s individual perception, I turn next toward contrasting ideological structures in the show that are useful for understanding whether (and how) a viewer’s subjectivity becomes complicit, resists, recapitulates, or reformulates traditional patriarchal norms that value individualized mastery. I will also return to the dialogical form of leaving tapes, or writing letters, that represents social and political forms of resistance to patriarchal norms in the last section of the essay.

At different times in the show, Offred’s behaviors and narration reflect two possible ways of maintaining psychic stability in her oppressive social reality: complicit psychic mastery and resistance through intersubjective relations. After the introductory

flashback of child-theft, the next scene shows Offred's obedience to the social system in Gilead. At the same time that Offred's internal monologue reveals a degree of cynicism, rebellion, and urgency to find her daughter, the viewer is initiated into Gilead's customs through Offred's obedient actions. These are met with favor when she stresses the importance of forgetting her old name, answering "Yes, ma'am," and "Blessed are the fruit" when appropriate. In this way, the show contrasts her internal thoughts with her external actions. Offred's external complicity to the oppressive social norms can be understood using ego-psychology, which would describe these behaviors as defensive strategies that aim at preserving the mind's internal cohesion in the face of traumatic disintegration.

According to Sigmund Freud, the ego reacts to cultural and ethical ideals that have been introjected in the formation of a super-ego. The super-ego works by repressing unacceptable individual desires, protecting the ego from what may be excessively excitable to it. At the same time, the ego is reacting to those norms that come from without. Strong feelings of shame and guilt increase in proportion to the level of exacting social and moral norms that are introjected. Especially in his development of the second topology in 1923—a time when different totalitarian regimes were quickly gaining the enthusiastic support of their citizens through Europe—Freud was concerned about the psychic impact of guilt that resulted from failing to meet unrealistic moral demands. Freud argues in his 1924 paper "The Economic Problem of Masochism" that 'Natural morality' is one way in which the cultured subject enjoys these restrictions that are imposed on what seem to be one's excessive drives (1924, p. 169).

Later in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud contends with the fact that unrelenting moral demands cause more disturbances for the emotional life of the mind, rather than offering a productive means for growing relations in developing cultures (1930, p. 143). Freud paints the picture of an individuated ego that forges relations with other objects in the utilitarian necessity to survive. For Freud in this text, repression is the cost of civilization. Individuated desires are sacrificed for the good of the group or society. Neurotic withdrawal of one's interests from social reality, for example, is a curative way for the ego to recover its individual mastery when transgressive desires overwhelm super-egoical restrictions. Freud's instinct/drive theory assumes a self-enclosed egoical system that finds no real curative possibilities in its relations with others. The relational context of personhood traditionally poses more threats to the mind's internal cohesion, which is always already divided against itself in the tri-partite structure that Freud envisioned.

Mastering desires through super-egoical restrictions and neurotic withdrawals are some defense mechanisms that the show depicts in several of its female characters' behaviors. Especially after their personal autonomy is radically circumscribed, isolating attempts at mastering excessive guilt are shown in the use of formal cinematic elements. In the fourteenth episode after Offred returns from her failed attempt at escape, the camera zooms-in on Offred's face while she counts 71 flower-objects on the comforter of her bed. The closely zoomed shot removes everything else from the background. The viewer focuses on one object in the shot, Offred's face, as she focuses on these flowers. At the same time, the episode shows that Mrs. Waterford meticulously counted the days when pregnant Offred was missing and her hopes of becoming a dutiful wife and "mother" were dashed. Psychic mastery of an individualized ego is achieved in the

sequential count of these discrete objects. Similar to Mrs. Waterford's knitting activity, which the show cuts to throughout the narrative, *The Handmaid's Tale* presents such predictable and circumscribed activity as soothing after traumatic experiences.

In this fourteenth episode, we see a more glaring ego-defense strategy when Offred suffers a neurotic disassociation from reality after Aunt Lydia forces her to split and repress her life as June (Offred's name before Gilead). In an attempt at reconciliation with her, Aunt Lydia explains that June is responsible for the execution of an unwilling accomplice to her recent failed escape. Aunt Lydia asserts that Offred, the obedient handmaid, is split from June and can be free from this guilt. If Offred chooses to return obediently to the Commander's house, then she would bear no responsibility for June's sinful attempt at escape. Aunt Lydia, as an embodied and immediate stand-in for the larger authoritarian structure of Gilead, is figured in this scene as an impinging super-ego. She urges "Offred" to repress and disavow her actions as "June" for the greater good of Gilead's strict social and moral norms. For the sake of moral demands made of women in Gilead, Offred must control and repress her desire to escape and disavow the escape she attempted. Bowed by Aunt Lydia's insistence, Offred obediently returns to the Commander's residence in the expectation that she will be able to psychically distinguish between June and Offred's actions.

In isolation and silence, June's ego acts to repress and master her guilt, illustrated by her increasing inability to integrate reality. Significantly, the inscription in Offred's closet was removed after her attempted escape. For the rest of the episode, she walks around mostly in silence, staring blankly ahead, and repeating phrases of obedience. Her dialogue is restricted to minimally answering anyone who speaks with her. Her silence is a sign that she is psychically split from external reality. Additionally, her compulsive mantra—"We've been sent good weather"—at the end of the episode points to her psyche's defensive attempts to regain internal cohesion through her circumscribed and controlled speech. These obedient responses for psychic integration and repair, however, are unsuccessful to motivate her political resistance. She narrates a wish that her daughter, Hannah, forget her. She also explicitly wishes to forget herself. Offred is not motivated to resist Gilead's oppressive regime in these behaviors, but they are contrasted with depictions of other behaviors that reflect intersubjective techniques that help her achieve psychic repair. These shifts will eventually shed light on why the show has been used for political and social activism against rising patriarchal authority since Donald Trump's election as U.S. president.

I return to the scene described in the introduction of this article, where Offred finds the inscription scratched into the wood of her closet baseboard, to show an intersubjective defense mechanism. The inscription is important because it empowers Offred more than any previous encounter with any other handmaid. Even her claim to survive for her kidnapped daughter, Hannah, in the first episode does not incite her to the increasingly overt forms of resistance that she engages after she finds the inscription to form an intersubjective relation. The viewer learns that Mr. Fred Waterford, the Commander and husband (and literal patriarch) of the household in which Offred serves as handmaid, shared this Latin phrase in confidence with the previous handmaid—likewise named Offred—who then etched it at the bottom of her closet. Alongside its depictions of traditional ego-defense mechanisms, the show constructs this relationship

between Offred and the woman who wrote the inscription that holds reparative potential and psychic integration. Rather than repressing personal desires because they conflict with introjected social norms, this turn in the narrative reorganizes private experience through an empathic relation, showing it as a more successful defensive strategy.²

Donna Orange writes on the intersubjective approach in psychotherapy that traumas and subsequent guilt from restricting social norms during adulthood can be re-signified, and qualitatively changed when shared with another (Orange, 1995, p. 177-178). The inscription is resistance enough to reshape Offred's experience of her punishment and find rejuvenated psychic energy to empower others. Following this discovery, Offred repeats the phrase "don't you dare let them grind you down. You fight!" to encourage resistance in her friend Moira who has clearly given-up. Moira subsequently delivers to Offred a central object for an upcoming resistance, a bundle of letters hand-written by other women in Gilead. As such, resistance to patriarchal norms does not only come in the form of neurotic annihilation or resignation to existing social and political forms, or even—and especially—in dis/identification, as Aunt Lydia wanted. Viewers who watch Offred's behaviors find that a more successful defensive strategy to resist patriarchal power occurs after her erasure of individuality in favor of a collective form of self.

The show thus presents a shift in Offred's character after her immersion in this empathic recognition of another, after she read the words and thoughts of one she calls "herself," who has her name. Significantly "Offred," whose proper name at birth is "June," integrates the previous "Offred" with parts of herself rather than disavow the experiences of a handmaid. June does not dissociate Offred since these experiences are nonetheless constructing her current identity. In this realization of her coterminous self, she who similarly suffered in the past is there to re-signify her trauma. Offred rhetorically acknowledges her bravery, asks how she survived Mrs. Waterford, and gives her thanks for placing this inscription. The viewer eventually learns that the former Offred hung herself, but the episode ends with optimistic music and the sun shining behind Offred marching in army formation down the street with other handmaids. She narrates, "There was an Offred before me, she helped me find my way out. She's dead. She's alive. She is me. We are handmaids. Nolite te bastarades carborundorum, bitches." The previous Offred is alive not as a different person. Offred proclaims, "She is me," and as such provides hope for continued resistance. Offred's transformation begins with an inscription by another that she welcomes as herself. It is no coincidence that empathic relations are forms of resistance in a strict totalitarian society since recognition of another is empowering for both, as Offred's character continues to indicate. The viewer witnesses one merging with another, not as a threat to the self but for a collective form

² Freud's descriptions of defensive strategies for preserving the ego's internal cohesion never sufficiently address the necessity that individuals develop socially among others. Freud also does not adjudicate which has priority in the conflict between the individuated ego and social community. Moreover, Freud never offered a solution to these conflicts that are as engrained as they appear insoluble, and which thinkers like Melanie Klein sought to more thoroughly address (Hinshelwood, 1989, p. 323-24). Thus, Offred's revitalized character could not be sufficiently explained only using psychoanalytic models of self that are traditionally depicted through Freud's instinct theory.

of self that is more favorable to resist oppressive conditions. After finding the inscription, she narrates that she feels like the word “shatter.” The value of an individuated and mastering self is shattered in these moments. A positive effect, however, follows as she shatters her individualism and builds it anew from this authentic exposure to another. At the same time that guilt and responsibility increase for Offred, since she sees herself as coterminous with the previous Offred, so too does the show represent more healing processes through interpersonal and empathic means.

The proposal that intersubjective relations are central for political resistance begins with how one understands oneself and one’s ability to affect social change. My argument here is not that any psychoanalytic approach is more objectively accurate in explaining behaviors, but that behaviors exhibit different moral assumptions and possibilities about individuals who always stand in relation to others. Put another way, I claim that *The Handmaid’s Tale* offers aesthetic ways of understanding these behaviors that can reveal a character’s moral standards and their political correlates. Even after Offred’s transformative experience, the show continues to depict these contrasting defensive strategies and their relative success. To me, this reflects the embeddedness of Freud’s ego-psychology in the show’s characters and in broader cultural norms that viewers vacillate between.

The show’s growing popularity, however, represents the increasing cultural shift toward more collective forms of relationality, which challenge contemporary (neo)liberal values of individualism, self-mastery, and self-sufficiency—all qualities characteristic of modern patriarchy. At the same time that psychoanalytic discourse began shifting away from ego-psychology toward more relational approaches, first-person points of view in cinema have also increased to represent the experiences of marginalized communities (Gray, 2010, p. 63). Offred, for example, represents the perspective of a marginalized woman who deals with trauma in a way that challenges the patriarchal values of individualism and self-sufficiency. *The Handmaid’s Tale* depiction of an identity constructed out of intersubjective relations and who is weakened in isolation thus uniquely offers its viewers more than just a way for critiquing patriarchal society. It visually presents an alternate conception of subjectivity, communal capacities, and gendered and political forms of resistance.

***The Handmaid’s Tale* as Aesthetic Object: Inter-subjectivity and Relational Ethics as Political Resistance**

More than just using formal neo-realism as a cinematic technique that facilitates the viewer’s contribution to the show’s narrative, and more than presenting contrasting ideologies in the content of the show that reflect cultural challenges to individualism, the show itself also places a proverbial call to the viewer’s unconscious to engage inter-subjectively. As the main character is motivated by her relations with others, so too does there emerge a possibility for viewers watching to identify with relational aspects of themselves. The show’s realistic depiction of a totalitarian U.S. and its use of first-person perspective effectively leaves each viewer to contend with their own personal gaps in knowledge. Similar to the show’s structure, which requires the viewer’s interpretation, Frie and Coburn find that meaning itself is created with others and that culture reflects

not a broad, monolithic entity, but is continually evolving and contested, made up of different perspectives and narratives that challenge and support dominant modes of thinking and acting. Whether we think about meaning as socially constructed, personally created, or biologically based (or some combination of the three), the point is that meaning is possible only within a world of shared, cultural understanding. (2011, p. 13)

In light of the growing relational view of subjectivity that is seeping into cinematic objects, the idea of having one body or isolated mind contending only with itself is replaced by a fully integrated account of human nature and motivation (Orange, 1995, p. 11). The coherent perspective of one who is socially marginalized, but whose experiences of marginalization can be similar to others' experience of marginalization, offers legitimacy to these perspectives and the meanings they portend (Cascardi, 1992, p. 143). Viewers who watch the extremely oppressive and violent conditions in the show empathize with Offred's perspective; they affectively identify with and thereby unconsciously work through their own experiences of social marginalization and institutional forms of oppression. For moral relations and political actions that do not merely replicate patriarchal forms of power, however, the impossibility of certain relations and a preservation of the other's strangeness must be guarded over.

Drawing a direct link between trauma and the unconscious work that art offers, Sam Durrant argues in *Trauma, Ethics and the Possibility of Community* that the working unconscious creates ethical possibilities when it is engaged with art (2007, p. 143). Repressed personal experiences can be managed through empathy, "allowing one's own discourse, one's own expression, to be affected by the discourse of the Other. In this respect, art 'works' in the same manner as psychoanalysis, via the transference of effect" (Durrant, 2007, p. 143). At the same time that the experiences of another can bring to life one's personal experiences, there is also a confrontation with the differences between two that could never be contained as one's own. Art visually delineates the limit of one's understanding that is present in what Durrant calls a working relation of impossibility (Durrant, 2007, p. 152).

The ubiquitous experience of oppression and trauma, however, initiates the possibility of recognizing the alterity and radical differences between personal histories so that the viewer can reflect on how these differences create unique forms of oppression. These working relations, which insist on the inability to fully know different subjectivities, sidestep patriarchal forms of power that require full knowledge of oneself in order to respond to another's suffering. The show provides space for unconsciously working through the radical intertwining of one with another through various forms of oppression that are both hyperbolic and unique to characters in the show, but yet familiar enough to viewers' experiences. I support Durrant's conclusion that more genuine moral relations for an ethics-to-come can follow from a recognition of these relations of impossibility, and acknowledgment of radical differences. The viewer's immersive experience in this work of art, the aesthetic-object of the show, and in Offred's interiority, provide the first act of resistance, which can later develop into additional creative responses to real political and social forms of oppression.

Viewers who watch Offred increasingly negotiate her interior life through relations with others begin to imagine how their own relations alleviate or exacerbate

personal traumas for others. For example, the use of flashback memories and fantasies of June's life provide renewed moral possibilities in Offred's oppressive reality. Meredith Ann Skura writes on literary representations of the psychoanalytic process where "different versions of the [literary] fantasy affect different parts of the manifest story in entirely different ways" (1981, p. 91). Manifest symbols in a fantasy are not just finished products of a primal wish; rather, the very depiction of fantasy production is a means for seeing a character's interior response to latent wishes that relate to their perception of the world. Within the boundaries of a text or show, the viewer feels comfortable imagining responses to repeating conflicts (Skura, 1981, p. 63). The viewer's latent and unconscious fantasies can also then find resonances with the show's manifest symbols and content. For example, extremely violent scenes often cut to flashbacks of Offred fantasizing about joyful memories at the beach or at a carnival with her family. According to Shah and Khoso's Freudian reading of the show, these cuts to joyous memories represent that "Offred is a character which uses the defense mechanisms to avoid or to survive the unavoidable reality of her life" (Shah and Khoso, 2017, p. 121). The viewer experiences the denial and repression of reality through Offred's blanking eyes, a common defensive strategy for an ego charged with mastering itself. Other flashbacks in the show, however, depict another kind of fantastic flashback memory that pulls from experiences in June's past to form an empathic relation in her present. These flashbacks more successfully relieve Offred's experience of psychic trauma and help her relate to other handmaids in her manifest reality, thereby making visible an interior psychic strategy for viewers.

The way the show parallels the content of a flashback with Offred's current reality indicates Offred's orientation toward a distinctly empathic negotiation with present relationships given her past experiences. For instance, in a set of scenes that includes another handmaid, Ofwarren, giving birth, the baby is immediately taken to the wives who gather to celebrate, while the handmaids mourn the loss of Ofwarren's baby. During the labor scene, there is an interesting flashback where Offred goes into June's memory of giving birth to her daughter. Still in hospital smocks, June asks to see her newborn baby. An alarm in the hospital then sounds, and gunshots are fired in an unknown location. After finding a dead nurse on the floor, June confronts a woman in the hallway who is trying to take her baby out of the hospital.

The father, Luke, also sees the thieving woman before police enter to arrest her and return the baby to its rightful parents. By cutting to Offred's flashback in this way, the show juxtaposes a parallel situation where a baby is stolen from a mother. However, while the flashback narrates the return of the baby and thus the restoration of justice and the effective functioning of the law and the state, Offred's current reality in Gilead sanctions baby theft. Such a juxtaposition demonstrates that Offred does not only retreat to happy memories for stabilizing her psyche in denial of her reality, as Shah and Khoso argue (2017, p. 120). The scene shows how she also retreats to memories that depict contrasting social behaviors and dichotic moral responses during these two very different phases in her life. The contrasting scenes of sanctioned baby theft in Gilead with memories of attempted baby theft thwarted by police protection illustrate how Offred psychically negotiates between current and past realities in order to repair herself in an empathic relation to Ofwarren. An experience of fear during this attempted theft helps her empathize with Ofwarren and recognize the differences of their circumstances. After

the cut to her flashback, Offred comes to help Ofwarren during the birth because she empathizes with the pain that she now realizes is soon to follow. After this bond is created, Ofwarren and Offred have increasingly intimate and personal exchanges. The latent fantasy image influences Offred's manifest reality for viewers to witness.

In scenes such as these where Offred builds lasting relations by recalling her own experiences, the show reflects the dynamic nature of defense mechanisms that adjust to the prevailing social values. Defense mechanisms do not only have to act as "a means of 'coping' with the outside world through the resolution of emotions in the inner self" as Shah and Khoso argue, but can also work to recall the particularities of one's lived experiences in relation to their social life, and the ubiquitous nature of human suffering (2017, p. 121).

As Offred switches between these scenes of the grieving handmaids and happy wives to her own experiences of a happy mother protected from this grief, her private guilt for losing her daughter is empathically shared with the other handmaid. Her negotiation between these social contexts is the means through which Offred makes sense of herself in a new social reality, its demands, and her increasing guilt. In parallel, after these scenes the viewer is unconsciously affected. They are prompted to reflect on the difference between having institutional protection from grievances, such as baby theft, and inhabiting a social and political reality that does not simply sanction the theft of women's reproductive and biological labor but in fact bases its whole political and social structure on the naturalization of this process. Although this gender and sexual violence is enacted in the fictional world of Gilead, the show's strategic cultivation of empathy prompts the viewer's reflection on instances when institutions discriminate and disenfranchise people in their reality.

Flashback scenes that inform the viewer about using experiences to empathically relate to others and thereby create new ethical possibilities are also presented in the 2013 Netflix original series *Orange is the New Black*. The show uses flashbacks to similarly build the viewer's empathy, but provokes less unconscious work since the depicted characters themselves are not negotiating their present lives using fantasies. Based on the experiences of a middle-class white woman who is incarcerated, the show often begins or ends with a flashback to the history of a main character. The flashback to a character's history provides a broader context for building empathy between the viewer and an incarcerated woman, for whom the viewer might not otherwise have much empathy. These flashback memories and experiences, however, are not available to the characters' experiences internal to the show's narrative.

Characters continue to act as if each is against the other. The biographical flashback parallels a main event in the episode's content, but the empathy that develops is limited to the audience in relation to the one character. *The Handmaid's Tale* shows Offred negotiating her present given these histories. Offred's actions towards others are more dynamic after these flashbacks inform her more empathic relations. As such, the show provides an example for how relations can be used as a defensive strategy not just as a passive means to cope with experiences of trauma, but to build alliances with others that re-signify these experiences, and as such, form a resistance to these oppressive threats.

When a viewer empathizes with the trauma, oppression, and forms of resistance in the show, there is an admission that the world internal to the show is common enough to the viewer's own world. In Oranges' intersubjective approach, the empathic relation is between a therapist and patient; however, the German *Einfühlung* that literally means "a feeling into" was originally used in aesthetics to denote one's appreciation of a work of art (Orange, 1995, p. 17). As an art object, the show visually provides characters like Offred so that viewers can *feel into* her experiences, where the art-object is affectively generative of their dynamic subjectivity. At the same time that empathy, identification, and sameness help viewers affectively feel into her, there is also always the impossibility of grasping her or any other's interior life. Viewers who watch the show know that Offred is not a real person, but more relevantly intuit that they could never occupy her experiences.

Orange addresses these important limits to identification, emphasizing the preservation of strangeness in empathy and the long process it takes to develop an empathic relation that attunes to the other's needs (Orange, 1995, p. 22-23). Extending Durrant's claim that a future ethic must acknowledge relations of impossibility and differences between two people, Orange provides guidance on how to use empathy in a clinical setting, such as the preservation of distance from—of strangeness in—the other for interpretive work on the particularities of their life. For a human subjectivity that is social, "feeling understood and responded to helps a person feel connected to others and thereby safe enough to develop and realize personal aims and ideals" (Orange, 1995, p. 22). Depriving an individual of the particularity of their social histories in an empathic relation risks perpetuating disintegration anxiety since there is no one to contain the other's unique subjective world.

Internal to the show's plot, the act of documenting a personal memoir aims to avoid this disintegration anxiety, which is how Atwood originally framed her novel. The tale is left by Offred on recorded tapes, a creative act that documents and generates her internal life, forestalls her disintegration anxiety, resists her isolation, and reveals her assumption of an interested recipient in the future—an avid listener, we might say. Chienyn Chi (2019) finds that Aimé Césaire's surrealist poetic language articulates and resists histories of colonial oppression, which is similar to the generative act that creativity as story-telling has in the novel. Rather than using irony to occupy and resignify "madness" in the colonized subject as Césaire does, we find in the show a form of resistance through communication that presumes an interested other. In the show, handmaids share their former names with each other, write letters about their lives, and leave secret inscriptions in acts of resistance to their systemic erasure and invalidation of their experiences.

The possible recognition by another motivates them. Even just the possibility that someone might read their internal thoughts and words in a distant future is enough to risk severe punishment and even death. Similarly, *The Handmaid's Tale* as an aesthetic object provides resistance by interpolating the viewer's subjectivity with relational ideals and the message that social mobilization is possible under the most restrictive conditions. The show's viewer is made to feel like a person, a respected partner in a conversation about the precariousness of social reality, and a notion to offer the feeling to others in their lives. The plausibility of these reparative relations is judged by an

audience that is empathically engaged in the show's world, storyline, and plot that is both strange, recognizable, and plausible. More than just producing a form of resistance in the viewer's subjectivity by watching these characters in their living room, however, the show's symbols and aesthetics are often pulled out of the private home and into the public streets for protesting real forms of patriarchal oppression.

Political Movements and the Aesthetics of *The Handmaid's Tale*

After tracking the ways in which the show formalizes trauma and represents obedience and resistance through its characters' behaviors, in this final section I turn to viewers' use of handmaid's robes and other visuals from the show during recent political protests in the U.S. The show's emphasis on intersubjective relations and empathy helps clarify why recent non-violent protests by marginalized populations have been so powerful. The show's horizons are especially important in the current U.S. social and political climate since Donald Trump's election, given that his administration unabashedly aims to amplify traditional patriarchal and exclusionary values that deny the interior life of women and other marginalized communities. The show's increasing popularity at the same time as the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements have gained traction registers the overlapping political concerns that viewers share with the show's characters. As the stories of the women of Gilead unfold in their dystopian reality, with every new restrictive bill or law so too does the viewer's imagination unfold about gender constraints that exist in theirs.

The use of the handmaid's costumes in political protests testify to viewers' experimental use of the show's aesthetics in their social and political realities. The novel's production as a visual television show is an important cultural detail that transfers relevant historical forms of oppression to current cultural contexts, making them available for political (re)mobilization. The show's visuals contribute to the book's relevance by making its world easily accessible to an audience who engages with streaming media. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1973) emphasizes the use of media as a form of text read by recipients who are capable of active and critical engagement. Viewers accept or reject the show's reality based on their cultural background, and their ability to empathize with its characters, while simultaneously navigating its fictional elements (Barker, 2000, p. 11). Protestors' use of the show's aesthetics portrays a declining interest in how the show's neo-realism merely conveys an author or director's vision (Gray, 2010, p. 47). Rather, the show's neo-realism appeals more to the viewer's contextual interpretations. Film theorist and director Andre Bazin has used deep focus, wide shots, and long takes, for example, to depict a perspective correlative to the viewer's external reality that also contributes to their experience of the internal realism of the show. Since the show aired in 2017, women continually prove critical engagement in what they created as a visual protest symbol, wearing red robes and white caps. Handmaids have appeared at protests in countries ranging from Ireland, to the United Kingdom, to Argentina—whenever the political State seeks to limit women's freedoms.

Current events in the U.S.—such as the threat posed by Donald Trump, a proven misogynist holding the highest office in U.S. government and coupled with Vice President Mike Pence who is a vocal advocate for religious rights—are shaping viewers'

cultural background in relation to the show.³ In 2017, handmaids protested at the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. against a bill that aimed to defund Planned Parenthood through Title X. In spite of these efforts, a bill to defund public health programs that provide reproductive services recently passed the 6th Circuit Court of Appeals in Ohio (2019). Additionally, forty years after protests against sexual violence on college campuses began as *Take Back The Night* (which Offred's mother attends as a young woman), handmaids appeared at the hearing and confirmation to the Supreme Court of Brett Kavanaugh, who was publicly accused of sexual harassment by Dr. Ford in her testimony about her experience of sexual assault at a high school party with him (2018). Protestors' use of these costumes reveal how the show's visual power speaks to real concerns of sexual oppression, and to the erasure of trauma inflicted by these acts. The costume's aesthetics function as a pre-linguistic symbol that carries a protesting "sign" outside of language.

Without saying a word, protesting women at the state capitol building in Texas (2017), also wore over-sized red robes and white caps in order to express their resistance to a bill that tried to ban abortion procedures as early as six weeks, often before a woman is aware of her condition.⁴ In spite of activists' expressed concerns about these imposed limits to women's freedoms, bills recently passed in the states of Ohio, Mississippi, and Kentucky that ban abortions once doctors can detect a fetal heartbeat, which is as early as six weeks (2019). Protestors wearing red robes stand in opposition to bills that also give doctors the right to withhold information from a woman about fetal abnormalities, which places reproductive destiny over her rational ability to freely choose a course of action.

The bill also ostensibly gives doctors legal protection to exercise their personal religious beliefs, explicitly recalling Gilead's Biblical fundamentalism that denies a woman's interest in the matter. Most alarming in these attempts is the denied significance of women's interiority in the proposition of laws such as House Bill 565 in Ohio's criminal code that seek criminal penalties, from life imprisonment to execution, for women who undergo abortion for a fetus at any stage of its development.⁵ In addition to psychological states of fear and despair, *The Handmaid Tale's* 2017 reboot of the novel portrays Offred's boldness in resisting these continued patriarchal attempts at oppressing her freedom and devaluing her interior life. When the red garments are worn in reality, they visually force the imagination to the oppression and trauma inflicted on women that is demanded in oppressive societies, such as in Gilead and, increasingly, in contemporary U.S. public policies.

Protestors' use of an external visual signifier to reflect the interiority of trauma successfully draws attention to various oppressive norms that are unknowingly

³ This paper focuses on American culture and politics because Gilead replaces the United States of America in the novel, but it can also reflect more general global concerns given the central role American culture holds in other countries.

⁴ See the news article: <https://www.npr.org/2017/04/26/525755370/handmaids-tale-wants-you-to-feel-like-this-could-happen-here> and <https://news.avclub.com/women-don-the-handmaid-s-tale-robos-to-protest-texas-ab-1798259510>.

⁵ Read about House Bill 565: <https://www.legislature.ohio.gov/legislation/legislation-summary?id=GA132-HB-565>

introjected through aesthetic codes, such as in color and body placement. The color is used in public as a condemnation of policies that devalue a woman's body, and when violence becomes implicit to her reproductive labor. In Gilead, a handmaid's red color signifies the reduction of her destiny to reproduction and her lack of personal choice in the matter. Red also makes capturing her easy in public if she flees, which reflects the undeniable risk of living in a certain kind of body, namely the female one. In this way, colored clothes in the show function as an index of a person's degraded social status and restricted freedoms, much in the same way that, during the Holocaust, yellow stars were affixed to the clothes worn by Jewish people while pink triangles were affixed to those worn by homosexuals. The parallel between reality and the show is that clothes have the power to strip a person's identity and instead support genocidal practices that publicly mark one for persecution.

In addition to the visual use of color, any assembly of handmaids are always ushered in perfect symmetrical order, conveying totalitarian control not only of mind but also of body placement. When protesting women entered the Congressional Gallery in Texas, they emulated this symmetrical formation. Their clasped hands and bent heads downward point explicitly to the parallels reflected in the show between totalitarian control of mind and body. When this total control of body and mind is made public, empathetic relations are formed between real survivors' bodies who suffer from discriminatory practices and the hyperbolically oppressive social norms in the show. When protestors position their bodies in these controlled ways for political resistance they are drawing an explicit relation to the effects of political policies on personal lives. The mobilization of these aesthetics at protests in contemporary US testify to how viewers can participate in someone like Offred's interpretation of a marginalized life, ultimately conveying that they too can create intersubjective relations as a viable form of political resistance.

The optics of physical control in Gilead's social reality, coupled with the first-person perspective of Offred's trauma, initiates the viewer into Offred's inner world, thereby generating new political possibilities for the viewer. The aesthetic object of the show itself is used to provide new insights about real forms of gender oppression, "enabling the creation of new spaces from which to imagine ontological change," where the viewer's unconscious has the opportunity to generate a yet-unknown future of ethical and political possibilities (Bainbridge and Yates, 2007, p. 109-110). Offred's relational sensibility can help explain broader cultural moves that use a similar sensibility to create new spaces and effect political changes, such as in the recent hashtag movements. Gaining momentum during the show's airing, the interiority of those who have experienced sexual trauma are shared in a #MeToo hashtag, which forms relations with and an acknowledgement of another's similar experiences.⁶ Before any possible further (legal) action is pursued these testimonies form an ontological space of non-violent resistance that effects social change.

The hashtag provides each story of sexual violence room to breathe and a space to speak with others. In what Lee and Webster call, "an affirmation by participatory

⁶ For a concise review of the history and development of #MeToo see Anne Pellegrini "MeToo Before and After" (2018).

association rather than associative identification,” the hashtag #MeToo is a collectivized subspeech act that expresses a will not to remain silenced any longer (2018, p. 250-49). The evocative-me positions itself with another and implicitly affirms its relation to another in the “too,” a homophone for two. The participatory hashtag #MeToo like Offred’s inscription, thus, reimagines gendered communal spaces and generates solidarity among those whose voices, bodies, and experiences are systematically erased.

In addition to offering users of the hashtag immersive experiences through empathic relations with the interiority of others, these stories (like the show) expose systemic forms of social and political oppression, violence, and trauma that are often forced to be held in shameful silence. More than ten years after the hashtag started in 2006, the staggering quantity of stories expose the systemic presence of sexual violence women experience in social and political life, in addition to the rampant institutional protections their abusers enjoy. When the significance of a woman’s interest, her circumstances, and the quality of her life is obviously neglected, protestors have taken handmaid costumes to the streets, or like Offred, generated and shared their stories as an active form of political resistance. Atwood makes this need explicitly clear in the extremely patriarchal dystopia where the political is invasively personal for women and when their interior life is forcibly denied through legal sanctions.

For Atwood, Offred’s personal story is essentially a political one that illustrates how people relate to power structures and vice versa (1985). Rigid political systems infiltrate the private sphere as much as the public sphere, from the clothes one is forced to wear to the language and gestures they can, or more importantly are restricted, from using. The personal, the embodied, is forcibly externalized, objectified, and marked. Offred, however, demonstrates the ability, through body and voice, to resist the body politic by taking risks and telling stories (Freibert, 1988, p. 285). Atwood’s novel turned into a major cultural icon 30 years later when Western phallocentrism returned to the world’s stage and women need a measure of hope, which Lucy M. Freibert argues is the original purpose of the novel (1988, p. 280). It seems odd to characterize the novel as one that provides hope, but the narration of a woman’s experiences in tapes and later through depictions in the show of intersubjective relations are in themselves creative forms of resistance to an erasure of their interiority under patriarchal oppression. Freibert finds that

Atwood demonstrates the absurdity of Western patriarchal teleology that views woman’s biology as destiny and exposes the complicity of women in perpetuating that view. [. . .] Ultimately, Atwood, with a bow to *écriture féminine*, suggests that even in such a context an imaginative woman willing to improvise and take risks can beat the system and savor a measure of joy in the process. (1988, p. 280)

Offred’s narration and relationships are her creative means for personal enjoyment and political resistance. Returning to Freibert’s view that Offred’s tale is a hopeful story, in her conclusion she acknowledges Offred’s need for others, and relates it directly to the resistance that might precipitate the fall of Gilead, an event revealed in the book’s epilogue. More than generating interior strength, “[Nick] and Ofglen and Moira – honest rogues who also know how to feel for others – have influenced Offred, have given her the support she needed at various stages in her development, and have taught her by

example that risk is inseparable from creativity” (1998, p. 289). Freibert writes on a form of creativity that is generative of psychic repair but is ultimately impossible for political reform, which is similar to the conclusion Carolyn Laubender reaches about feminine creativity in her article in this issue, “Empty Space: Creativity, Femininity, Reparation, Justice” (2019). Atwood fails to imagine a complete reconfiguration of patriarchal political and social norms since the book’s epilogue titled *Historical Notes on The Handmaid’s Tale* tells of an academic conference at least 100 years into the future when Gilead has fallen, but a time when academia still suffers from the same monotony and deprived relation to social reality that exist today.

The epilogue whose title confounds the reader about whether it refers to the real historical notes about Atwood’s novel, or a continuation of the hyper-reality internal to the plot, reveals that this is a story told about the past, which refers to the viewer’s present reality, and the projection of a future where institutional forms of power remain (maybe inherently?) oblivious to their own worst forms of oppression. Freibert, therefore, concludes that in the end one can only conjecture about the changes Atwood’s novel can have in society. One place I can see the show has effected social change is when viewers use its aesthetics as their symbol for protesting laws that restrict women’s freedoms. A place that I find the show represents cultural shifts is in the importance it places on relational personhood for moral accountability and political resistance. Any ethic or political system that does not acknowledge the systemic forms of abuse and trauma that arise from these newly exposed stories of marginalized interiorities in the show and in reality henceforth, can only be a farce.

Concluding Remarks

In regard to these histories of oppression, the reciprocal influence intended between the viewer and the show assumes that audience members have some amount of agency. Rather than create content for passive consumption, the depiction of identities that are constructed through intersubjective relations importantly appeals to viewers’ agency, opening for them new moral horizons in their own social and political contexts. There is no shame in admitting that this very essay is an attempt to master knowledge of the show in relation to the contingencies of cultural life today. A problem arises only when this kind of attempt at mastery leads to a hypnotically passive life that perpetuates oppressive practices. Both formally and through its narrative, *The Handmaid’s Tale* creates a new value for a form of intersubjectivity and contextual personhood and, in doing so, resonates with viewer’s unconscious concerns in their contemporary social contexts. Viewers actively fill gaps in the depiction of characters who become stronger when standing in a community with others against excessively oppressive conditions. Its tale told about a patriarchal society by an oppressed woman shifts the legitimacy from the privileged points of view within traditional structures of power to the marginalized outsider navigating within society.

The Handmaid’s Tale is narrated by a woman whose narrative reveals the fractures of social and political structures in the U.S. and represents the individual conceived not as a liberally autonomous and self-mastering subject. Instead *The Handmaid’s Tale* presents a subjectivity that is always contextual, always relational and so is vulnerable to repeat as much as resist social norms. The hyper-reality in the show may not be so far off from the cultural reality during the time of its broadcast and its

popularity indicates a horizon of meaning that is shared by its viewers, making material threats in their political and social realities more coherent. Empathy, identification with and participation in trauma performatively works to break the isolating shame real survivors of systemic oppressions suffer in their social reality. The development of Offred's character and the ways she deals with sexual trauma presents a variety of psychoanalytic techniques for her mental stability, from isolation to relationality, and leaves it for each viewer to feel their way into which method is best for stopping these cycles of oppression and trauma in their own invariably social and precarious lives.

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