



Abortion Bans and Handmaid Protests: The Connectedness of *The Handmaid's Tale* to the Disruption of Reproductive Rights

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ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* has gained relevance in recent years due to the popularity of the series adaptation by showrunner Bruce Miller. The genesis of the novel is tightly bound to the sociopolitical context in which it was conceived in the 1980s while the show was released just a few months after Donald Trump's election, both contexts marked by the looming threat of the limitation of access to safe abortion. The aim of this article is to analyze *The Handmaid's Tale* as a cultural artifact that transcends the fictional realm and has spilled into the real world by inspiring a global protest movement against restrictions on reproductive rights. While the handmaid protest movement has garnered media attention, its articulation and effectiveness present limitations.

KEYWORDS: Margaret Atwood; *The Handmaid's Tale*; Ronald Reagan; Donald Trump; Abortion; Reproductive rights; Dystopia; Feminism; Intersectionality; Performative protests.

1. INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood has repeatedly been praised for her almost prophetic ability to create dystopias that “predict” future events (Allardice, 2018; Finn, 2017; Mead, 2017). However, she has always denied her role as clairvoyant while indicating the real-life inspirations that she used to create the iconic dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. Atwood points out that: “I made a rule for myself: I would not include anything that human beings had not already done in some other place or time, or for which the technology did not already exist” (Atwood, 2018).

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The author intended to keep her novel plausible and connected to its sociopolitical genesis, her aim was to create a warning against future possibilities that might arise if those in search of power are posed with no resistance. Therefore, she defines the novel as speculative fiction, which she considers is based on what already exists in the real world as opposed to science fiction, which represents feats that “we can’t yet do or begin to do” (Atwood, 2022: 8)¹. The text is focused on speculation about reality, a warning about the future rooted in the latent possibilities of the present rather than a fictional world including sci-fi artifacts, which would diminish the cautionary power of the narrative.

The series adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale* has had a particularly successful run since it started being broadcasted in 2017². Its purely coincidental release just a few months after Donald Trump’s inauguration as president of the United States further highlights the connections of sociopolitical context and fiction. The former president’s attacks on women’s and minorities’ rights are easily associated with the ones depicted on screen, in which a Christian fundamentalist group rises to power to create a highly surveilled state where some women are forced to bear children for the elite families. The dystopian society portrayed on the show is an extreme take on the underlying prospects that are lurking in the current sociopolitical scene in a global context, with the rise to power of extreme right groups, but especially linked to that of the United States.

The genesis of Atwood’s tale is marked by the sociopolitical context in the United States in the 1980s: Ronald Reagan’s alliance with the Christian Right, the fight against abortion and the *backlash* (Faludi 2006). In addition, the series was released during Donald Trump’s presidency, a period marked by an exclusionary discourse coming from the White House that threatened to tamper hard-earned rights of women and other minorities. Throughout Trump’s term in office, the fight against legal abortion was invigorated, peaking in 2019 with a surge of bans across America (Nash et al. 2019), which continued with new restrictions in 2022 (Nash et al. 2022). To contest the political climate that has effectively reversed access to abortion, feminist protesters have used iconography from the series in demonstrations against abortion bans all over the world (Howell, 2019: 10). This article seeks to examine the sociopolitical contexts surrounding the creation and release of Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* in 1985 and Bruce Miller’s series in 2017. Both contexts and works of fiction are intertwined in such a way that the narrative may be used as a critical lens to analyze real happenings, such as the aforementioned chain of protests using the iconic handmaid costume as a symbol of resistance against abortion bans. The article will also consider the limitations and criticisms to the movement.

2. RONALD REAGAN'S ANTI-FEMINIST DISCOURSE AND THE ATTACK ON REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

In her most recent non-fiction book, *Burning Questions: Essays & Occasional Pieces 2004-2021* (2022), Margaret Atwood recalls the beginning of what would later become *The Handmaid's Tale*: "The 1980s began with our move from the farm to Toronto . . . , the election of Ronald Reagan in the United States, and the rise of the religious right. In 1981, I began thinking about *The Handmaid's Tale*, though I put off writing it because the concept seemed too far-fetched" (Atwood, 2022: XV). Ronald Reagan's presidency and his alliance with the Christian right seem to have been some of the main sources of inspiration for the configuration of dystopian Gilead, an extremely patriarchal society that interprets the bible in exclusionary ways to reshape the nation according to their needs. As mentioned above, Atwood insists on defining the novel as speculative fiction, inspired by events that have taken place in the real world, to create a distorted reflection of American society so that prominent issues become more apparent and accessible to examine.

One of the key features of the nation shaped by the regime in Gilead is the attack on reproductive rights, in particular for those considered "women" by the group in power³. When birth rates plummet in the United States, the right-wing Christian group "The Sons of Jacob" rises to power through a coup and forces fertile women to bear children for the elite families. These women, named handmaids, are raped at least once a month by the commanders, the men who run the country, and will later be separated from their children. In Gilead, the ideal American white family is taken as a model and everyone who does not meet this category is either punished or killed. Just to name a few examples of the workings of Gilead: black people are resettled into "National Homelands"⁴ while LGBTQ+ people are declared "gender traitors" and frequently end up executed with their bodies exposed on the wall.

The dystopian configurations of Gilead are directly connected to Ronald Reagan's presidency and alliance with the Christian Evangelists and the New Right. By listening to their concerns and making them a priority of his political agenda during the elections and presidency, he appealed to a sizable section of the electorate and earned their support. As Françoise Coste points out, Reagan listened to their three main priorities and adjusted his campaign to their demands: the denunciation of homosexuality, the fight against abortion and the rejection of the ERA (Equal Rights Amendment) (2016: 2). These three factors would become intrinsically tied to Reagan's discourse and deeply affect the sociopolitical context in the 1980s, but due to the scope of this study I will only focus on the latter two.

The second wave of feminism had achieved significant gains regarding women's rights during the 1960s and 70s, such as the landmark decision of the US Supreme Court that guaranteed the right to have an abortion in 1973: *Roe v. Wade*. Reagan made the reversal of *Roe v. Wade* a central claim of his discourse to appeal to conservative sectors. However, it seems that his position on abortion was somehow ambivalent, since he had previously signed

a law in 1967 that legalized abortion as the Governor of California (Coste, 2016: 3). Despite his previous actions, his stance during the electoral campaign and presidency was clearly against abortion. Reagan became the first US president to release a book while in office, *Abortion and the Conscience of the Nation* (1984), which focused on giving prominence to the personhood of the fetus during pregnancy thus contributing to his pro-life discourse and its dissemination. Nonetheless, Françoise Coste claims that his anti-abortion victories were few and far between and it seems that despite his poignant discourse, it never became a priority (Coste, 2016: 8). The main aim of his pro-life rhetoric was to please the New Right, not necessarily to act and change the laws that regulated abortion. Coste points out that women kept their reproductive rights in the aftermath of the Reagan years (2016: 10) and conservative sectors did complain about the lack of leadership in the battle against abortion by the end of his presidency (Flowers 2018: 1).

At this point, it is essential to mention that this was not the only conflict within the realm of reproductive rights at the time. While white women were preoccupied by the threats of the New Right to curtail their right to safe abortion, black, immigrant and indigenous women were targets of forced sterilization practices carried out by the US government during the 20th century (Silliman et al., 2004: 9). “For women of color, resisting population control while simultaneously claiming their right to bodily self-determination, including the right to contraception and abortion or the right to have children, is at the heart of their struggle for reproductive control” (Silliman et al., 2004: 7). Their efforts for reproductive justice are not accounted for if only abortion access is examined, since their right to have children of their own was systematically questioned and limited. For women of color, the issue of reproductive rights reveals the entanglement of their position regarding gender and race, and it calls for a more nuanced analysis that considers the interaction of intersecting oppressions, as theorized by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991). While Coste’s arguments may detail the situation of white women at the time, the circumstances of women of color are excluded by not taking into consideration the intersectional nature of their reproductive rights with a gender, race and class bias, in a country where the effects of colonization are still persistent.

Another front in the anti-feminist campaign during the Reagan years was the fight against the ERA. The ERA campaign had been taking place since the early 20th century when the National Woman’s Party proposed the amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1921. The drive to get the amendment ratified came back by 1967, but during the 1970s many conservative women were mobilized into action against ERA, which was depicted as menacing their traditional gender arrangements tied to the concept of the American family (Kretschmet & Mansbridge, 2017: 7). The ERA movement, however, was already fragmented on the inside due to ideological differences. There were tensions between liberal and radical feminists who considered ERA as a sell-out to a patriarchal citizenship that did not meet women’s needs, while racial differences were also prevalent in the movement, with Black and Chicana activists

torn between the feminist cause and other causes that also impacted them (Kretschmer & Mansbridge, 2017: 4-5). Nonetheless, the end of the movement would come as a consequence of what Susan Faludi names the *backlash*, a media campaign that targeted the feminist advances from the previous years in the United States. Reagan's anti-feminist discourse is part of this crusade, which was first articulated by the New Right (Faludi 2006: 242) and used false myths to counter feminist discourse that was fighting for real equality at the time. A shortage of men, an infertility epidemic or a decrease in economic status in divorced women (2006: 19) are just some of the myths supporting their main thesis: "that women's equality is responsible for women's unhappiness." (Faludi, 2006: 242)

Despite the general campaign against women's rights, access to abortion remained mostly intact by the end of Reagan's presidency (Coste 2016: 10). However, the impact of his discourse did damage public perception of abortion, as Prudence Flowers indicates: "When it came to symbolism and rhetoric, Reagan's eight years in office were a triumph for pro-lifers. [...] In his speeches and writing, Reagan brought pro-life arguments into the mainstream" (Flowers, 2018: 32). In fact, public discourse on abortion was severely affected by the vicious attacks by the Christian Right. Legal abortion was presented "as the great moral crisis of the age" (2018: 6) and there was a substantial escalation of violence, including bombings and death threats, against clinics and providers (2018: 8). Women seeking this obstetric care also experienced violence as they entered clinics with protesters using "confrontational protest techniques such as 'side-walk counseling' or 'rescues'" (2018: 8). Ronald Reagan's alliance with the New Right and their rhetoric against abortion had a direct impact on women who sought abortion care, even if laws remained virtually the same.

This polarized sociopolitical climate that directly struck at women's rights makes its way into the pages of *The Handmaid's Tale*. The moralistic echoes of the New Right resonate throughout the whole novel and some of the major myths perpetuated by the backlash are fundamental justifications to bring forward the remodeled society of Gilead. Shirley Neuman points out to Margaret Atwood's Gilead and its process of becoming a nation as "a fictional realization of the backlash against women's rights that gathered force during the early 1980s" (Neuman, 2006: 858). The fertility epidemic that the backlash suggests is the main argument used by The Sons of Jacob to seize power and reform the societal structure, while women in power like Aunt Lydia collaborate fervently with a regime that directly attacks their own rights. The figure of the aunts may have been inspired by those conservative women who actively organized anti-ERA campaigns, becoming vocal against their own expansion of rights, such as Phyllis Schlafly⁵.

Although the sociopolitical context in the US during the 1980s is a direct source for the creation of fictional Gilead, Margaret Atwood's references go beyond America. The newspaper clippings that she used as *The Handmaid's Tale* background material are kept in the archives of the University of Toronto (Margaret Atwood on the real-life, 2019). These

include the monthly monitoring for pregnancy women were subjected to in Romania during Nicolae Ceausescu's dictatorship, making pregnancy a central part of the country's politics by forbidding birth control and abortion (Neuman, 2006: 859). Ceausescu's focus on monitoring pregnancy becomes the central effort in Gilead, forcing women that "sinned"—that is divorced women or single mothers, for instance—to become concubines for upper-class families as a way of atonement. Besides, in 1984, Iranian women were forced back into their homes, without jobs or access to university (Neuman, 2006:859), which is also mimicked in the novel. In addition, the narrative adopts the Iranian imposition of the burqa in the form of differently colored clothes that must cover women's bodies⁶. The myth of the fertility epidemic is the main justification the group uses to impose the invasive new social structure that relies on the exploitation of women's bodies for the "improvement" of the nation. Women who had deviated from the puritanical roles they were expected to fulfill (divorced women, single mothers, lesbians, etc.) are regularly raped and perceived as vessels to bring forward a new generation that will already grow up within Gilead's rules⁷.

3. DONALD TRUMP'S ATTACKS ON REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS AND THE BIRTH OF THE HANDMAID MOVEMENT

During the 2016 electoral campaign in the United States, articles flooded the news by warning about the election of Donald Trump as president as a "threat to democracy" (Beauchamp, 2016; Chait, 2016; Dale, 2016; Editorial Board, 2016), a trend that continued in the weeks following his election. His campaign was overflowing with false data, marked by continuous attacks towards minority groups, immigrants, the LGBTQ+ collective, reproductive rights and even threats to throw his opponent Hillary Clinton in jail if he won the election (Beauchamp, 2016). Just a few months later, *The Handmaid's Tale* series started being released in April 2017 and the media could not help but relate Gilead, the dystopian world brought to the small screen by Bruce Miller, and the quasi-dystopian political arena with Donald Trump's arrival at the White House. Pilar Somacarrera-Íñigo points out that Atwood herself has encouraged this idea of the relevance of *The Handmaid's Tale* in relation to Trump's America by partaking in interviews and articles promoting the release of the series (2019: 88). While Ronald Reagan's rhetorical war against women's rights may have inspired Atwood's novel, the curtailing of rights during Donald Trump's presidency has also informed the viewing of the first season for the audience and the creation of the following seasons of the series.

The president has also emulated the rhetorical war against women's rights initiated by Ronald Reagan. Flowers signals Reagan's emphasis on demonizing abortion as a polarizing force that would shape the subsequent position of the Republican Party and consequently affect the legality of abortion in the United States in later years (2018: 3). The questioning of the legality of abortion has been recurringly pushed by conservative leaders and it has had an effect beyond US politics. On January 23, 2017, Donald Trump's third day in office, the

president reinstated and expanded the Mexico City Policy or global gag rule, a policy affecting abortion rights in foreign countries, and thus setting the tone for the battle against abortion rights that would come in the following years to the US. “The global gag rule prevents foreign organizations receiving U.S. global health assistance from providing information, referrals, or services for legal abortion or advocating for access to abortion services in their country — even with their own money” (“What is the global”, n.d.). With Trump’s expansion of the rule, it has also targeted access to contraception, prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS, and improvement of maternal and child health. (“What is the global” n.d.)

The president’s exclusionary discourse towards minorities together with his political actions have already had an impact in the societal fabric of the US. The full scope of the effects of Donald Trump’s rhetoric against minorities cannot be covered by this article, but recent scholarship has already documented some of the palpable consequences. Ruisch and Ferguson have analyzed potential effects of Donald Trump’s rhetoric in American’s attitudes finding that explicit racial and religious prejudice increased amongst Trump’s supporters, while decreasing in individuals opposed to Trump (2022). Moreover, Lee suggests an association of Trump’s tweets about Islam-related topics and anti-Muslim hate-crime (Lee, 2020 :140).

The president’s discourse was not only charged with racist prejudices, but it also threatened the legality of abortion in the US. During the 2016 electoral debate, Donald Trump commented on the possibility of overturning *Roe*: “Well, if we put another two or perhaps three justices on, that ... will happen automatically in my opinion because I am putting pro-life justices on the court” (Trump, as cited in Chung & Hurley, 2021). His actions followed his words by appointing three conservative judges to the Supreme Court whose stance on abortion would mean the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in June 2022. This has been a central goal of pro-lifers since *Roe v. Wade* was approved (Flowers, 2018:16). In order to achieve it, a majority of the Supreme Court had to be opposed to the legislation, which was easily obtained with the three newly appointed judges during Trump’s presidency: Neil Gorsuch in 2017, Brett Kavanaugh in 2018 and Amy Coney Barrett in 2020.

But before the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, the battle against abortion rights had already started with a wave of bans that swept America in 2019. A total of 17 states introduced bans on abortion which “vary in scope, with some prohibiting abortion after a specific point in pregnancy, others prohibiting a specific method of abortion, and other bans hinging on the patient’s reason for seeking an abortion” (Nash et al., 2019). Moreover, four states (Arkansas, Kentucky, Missouri and Tennessee) included “trigger bans” that would ban abortion if the Supreme Court were to overturn *Roe v. Wade* (Nash et al., 2019). The second surge of abortion bans came on June 24, 2022, as the Supreme Court effectively overturned *Roe v. Wade*, limiting access to abortion in those states that did not have regulations in place to actively protect it and causing immediate bans in those states with “trigger bans” in place since 2019. A hundred days after the removal of *Roe v. Wade* the effects of the loss of rights had started

to show: 66 clinics across 15 states were forced to stop offering abortions; there are no providers in 14 out of the 15 states and 26 of these clinics have had to shut down entirely (Nash et al., 2022). Moreover, those states where abortion remains legal see that patients come to seek care from states where there are abortion bans in place (Nash et al., 2022).

These restrictions have been met with activism and resistance, as part of the surge of feminist action considered as the beginning of the fourth wave of feminism (Chamberlain, 2017; Rivers, 2017). Within this context, characterized by the rise in neoconservatism that elected Donald Trump and the rise in feminist action that had already been warming up during previous years, feminist protests became a frequent strategy to combat each strike directed towards hard-earned rights. On January 21, 2017, the day after Donald Trump's inauguration, the Woman's March flooded the streets incited by the president's threats that had filled his campaign, including attacks on reproductive rights. Coincidentally, *The Handmaid's Tale* series' release in April 2017, just a few months after Trump took office, served to heighten the story's dystopic warning thus bringing Gilead closer to reality. Moreover, the genesis of the novel, amid pro-life rhetoric in America, the anti-ERA movement or the policing of women's bodies by the state in Romania or Iran seemed to be seeping into the 2017 context with the election of Trump as a real threat to the preservation of reproductive rights. The iconic handmaid costume, a red robe and white bonnet with wings covering the face⁸, started being used in protests as a chilling symbolic representation of the precarious situation of reproductive rights.

On March 20, 2017, a group of women wearing the handmaid costume sat in silence at the Texas State Capitol while the Senate was discussing a bill that would bring about restrictions on the right to have an abortion (Lavender, 2019: 6). It became the first protest that used the handmaid costume as a symbol of resistance, it was organized online and became an inspiration to many others that would follow them. In the United States, numerous handmaid protests have taken place when major restrictions on abortion have occurred or when conservative leaders become a threat to those rights. Some examples of handmaid protests within the US include: September 4, 2018 in Washington outside of the Supreme Court hearing for conservative nominee Brett Kavanaugh; May 15, 2019 in Alabama after the near-total abortion ban; October 11, 2020 outside of the Supreme Court during the confirmation hearing for nominee Amy Coney Barrett; June 24, 2022 in several locations across the country, including outside of the Supreme Court, to protest against the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*.

Nevertheless, in a globalized context characterized by "the intensification and expansion of cultural flows across the globe" (Steger, 2013: 74), the handmaid phenomenon has transcended national borders. Warsaw witnessed a group of handmaids protesting against Trump's visit to Poland in 2017; in Buenos Aires, the handmaids wore the green handkerchiefs of the Argentinian pro-choice movement in 2018; handmaids made an appearance outside the European Parliament in Strasbourg, France, to protest against the near-total ban on abortion

implemented in Poland in 2020; in 2021, handmaids appeared in Edinburgh when the government rejected the implementation of protest-free areas outside abortion clinics to protect vulnerable women; in 2022, they were present in the demonstrations on the International Safe Abortion Day in Madrid. These are just a few examples of the myriad of handmaid protests that have emerged since 2017⁹. The figure of the handmaid has expanded across pro-choice movements worldwide and was even referred to as “the viral protest uniform of 2019” (Ellis, 2019).

Amanda Howell refers to *The Handmaid's Tale* as a “a transmedia property whose dystopic storyworld extends beyond the bounds of any single text” (2019: 1). It is no longer limited to the official productions, Atwood's novel and Miller's series, but it also encompasses fan-produced texts, social media posts or even the leaking of the handmaids out of the fictional realm. As a transmedia practice, it manages to bridge the gap between fiction and reality, becoming embedded in the sociopolitical context as an effective cautionary tale against restrictive reproductive policies. The use of the costume as a tool for activism is likewise located at the threshold of reality and fiction, where boundary-crossing is at the heart of the performative protests as “activists capitalize on the entertainment value of Handmaid performances to capture media attention for political purposes, to voice their democratic rights” (Howell, 2019: 10). Media and public attention are garnered through the use of these symbolic fictional elements, which are visually striking and instantly recognized as the embodiment of severe limitations of reproductive rights.

Fiction thus works as an effective and accessible research practice, one which may invite diverse readers to examine nuanced issues in a pleasurable way while also blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction (Leavy, 2013: 21). By being employed in real-life happenings, the use of the iconic costume functions in a similar way, allowing readers and audience to use dystopian Gilead as a device for critical thinking and examination of social and political issues that remain deeply interconnected with the media productions. *The Handmaid's Tale* manages to amplify and focus on certain concerns so that the public may examine them in a different light, from a fictional perspective that allows them to both identify and evaluate them while keeping distance.

4. PROTEST ICON OR PUBLICITY STUNT? LIMITATIONS TO THE HANDMAID MOVEMENT

The handmaid protest movement can be considered as part of “a swell of activity that could be conceptualized as the arrival of the fourth wave” (Rivers, 2017: 25) that includes recent feminist action in movements like #MeToo or the Women's March after Trump's inauguration. Within this surge of feminist activism, *The Handmaid's Tale* series was promoted so that it became engaged in conversation with those then-current feminist demonstrations. The promotion strategies for season one included letting loose a group of

handmaids to walk the streets of Austin Texas as if they escaped through the crevices of the fiction-reality threshold. This stunt was reproduced a week later as the first handmaid protest at the Texas Capitol (Atkins, 2022: 192). Season two of the series included the use of the hashtag #resistsister on promotional material while its use by the audience was encouraged (Atkins, 2022: 199). These promotion strategies are encoded within what Zeisler refers to as “marketplace feminism”, “co-opted by the market” (2016: 19). The use of these references to promote the series profits from the success and wide acceptance of the feminist movement in recent years. Moreover, Boyle points out that visibility of feminism in popular media “has become an increasingly lucrative strategy for subscription services to create content in direct conversation with such mediated feminisms” (2020: 850-851). This commodification of feminism to be consumed in the form of bingeable media was paired with the conflict between the election of president Trump and the anti-Trump Women’s March, whose global dimension was capitalized on by Bruce Miller to promote the series (Somacarrera-Íñigo, 2019: 89). Indeed, Miller’s series adaptation and its advertising has leaned into the use of feminist messages to attract feminist audiences, co-opting its appeals to commodify and repackage them for mass consumption.

The handmaid protest movement has embraced the promotional strategies of the show and adopted them as a mode of resistance. Hashtags are used to disseminate feminist messages of resistance like #Nolitetebastardescarburondorum, a made-up Latin phrase that is used in the series and roughly translates to “don’t let the bastards grind you down”, while groups of women dress in the iconic handmaid gowns, now symbol of feminist activism. This raises the question of whether this movement, articulated through the mirroring of publicity stunts, can create meaningful and effective political resistance. It is unclear where promotion ends and activism starts, as the protest icon seems to strike because of its aesthetic impact rather than the voicing of specific concerns. The mode of operation is simple: “Drawing on the show’s choreography, cosplay activists appear in pairs and employ a bowed head. They walk with a slow steady gait and usually protest in stillness and silence” (Atkins, 2022: 189). Other instances include handmaids that simply stand still, head bowed, just by being present they embody the dystopian possibilities embedded in our present and blur the lines of the real and fictional, the present and future prospects.

Silence, meekness and homogeneity form the common thread to the handmaids’ protests. Their collective approach has caused tremendous impact by utilizing the imagery of the show to transform into an army taken out of the dystopian universe. Media attention was gathered by their aesthetic demonstrations that produce visual performances of the silencing of women and the withdrawal of their rights. Their silence, however, may turn into a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it creates impactful protests, on the other, it prevents the voicing of specific concerns and goals of the campaign, their politics defined solely by the aesthetic garb generated for mass consumption. Moreover, it may be questioned whether the homogeneity

generated by the movement and thus erasure of difference is a productive strategy in the articulation of the pro-choice cause.

If we cite a dystopian world as a world-destroying tactic to make way for an inclusive, queer, crip, feminist future, we must promote an aesthetic that acknowledges our differences clearly signaled by the class- and ability- based costuming of Gilead. We need to privilege nuance, specificity, and complexity over identicalness and recognizability. We need armies that represent all the regimes. Wouldn't it be more impactful and on message to imagine a world of heterogeneous collectivity? (Miranda, 2020:102).

Miranda criticizes the uniformity enacted by the movement and favors a nuanced approach that directly acknowledges difference. In Gilead, handmaids only represent a portion of the patriarchal regime. Those assigned the sex "female" at birth may also be included in other categories with different functions, such as marthas, who are maids for upper class families, or aunts, who are instructors in charge of regulating other categories like handmaids. And while Miranda's criticism is compelling, it seems that the movement has chosen the figure of the handmaid because of its direct connections with the policing of bodies that can get pregnant¹⁰, being the ones that will bear the burden of the limitations to reproductive rights.

Criticism of the movement has also come from Twitter, a prominent platform in the way the fourth wave of feminism operates (Rivers, 2017: 107) not only as a space to discuss and disseminate feminist messages or show support to victims of sexual violence, but also as a site to organize offline actions, such as the handmaid protests. Erin B. Logan (2022) reports that several users have criticized the handmaid movement for turning to fiction when there are real precedents, as Atwood has repeatedly explained, especially related to the ancestors of women of color who were enslaved or sterilized. By drawing from the fiction to create a language for protests, rather than real events, the movement ignores a wide range of experiences suffered by women in recent historical events. In particular, the experiences of racialized women in North America are extremely relevant to the narratives of *The Handmaid's Tale*. The protagonist Offred, along with many other women, enters a system in which she is imprisoned, raped, forced to breed, separated from her children and her identity is erased. This is a fictionalized account of the effects of colonization and exploitation on women of color and many histories can be easily connected to its pages: black women slaves brought to America through the transatlantic slave trade; the erased identities of indigenous women by the white colonizers, not only through the decimation of their population but through their colonization as well; or the separation of migrant families, as in the separation of children from their mothers who were held in cages during Trump's presidency, for instance.

The sheer violence Offred experiences is easily compared to any of these instances contained within the history of violence against racialized women, engraved in the recent past and present of the US. The symbol of the handmaid embodies the physical and institutional

violence that especially racialized women are and have been subjected to in America. Thus, the homogenizing quality of the performative protests does not contribute to the visibility and acknowledgement of who are the targets of these institutionalized acts of violence. Abortion restrictions will cause a bigger impact on vulnerable women, who, due to race and/or class inequalities, are more likely to find themselves in a position to consider abortion and will have more difficulty in getting to a different state to get access to the procedure (Kimport, 2022: 76).

The homogenizing strategy of the movement erases difference by assuming the handmaid outfit of the series, whose fictional narrative creates what Karen Crawley refers to as a “post-racial aesthetic” (2018: 335). Both show and novel have been criticized for their misrepresentations of race and racism, which should feature prominently if their aim is to create a cautionary tale since they are embedded in America’s society and institutions. Atwood acknowledges race in *The Handmaid’s Tale* novel by creating a white supremacist society that explicitly excludes people of color. But she has nevertheless been criticized for using histories of the violence suffered by people of color to create a story that garners sympathy for a white protagonist. On the other hand, while the series includes a diverse cast with actors representing various ethnic backgrounds, it creates a post-racial dystopia that depicts inclusion via erasure (Crawley, 2018: 344). Despite its engagement with feminism and the portrayal of struggles based on gender, the show seems depoliticized by failing to engage in one of the most prescient issues in American society: its deeply embedded racism through its colonial foundation and rampant capitalism. As Karen Crawley argues, “the show thereby assumes a white audience, or presumes that any audience member of colour will play along, suspending their lived experience of racialization and join in the post-racial utopian setting” (2018: 345). The show’s lack of engagement with real inclusion that goes beyond mere representation does not delve into the entangled nature of intersecting oppressions, thus creating a detached dystopia that is not fully effective because of its disregard for pressing issues. The same effect is pasted onto the handmaid protests, as the unifying red gown, wore by mostly white protesters who stand in silence reproduces the post-racial approach of the series. The movement itself is lacking an intersectional approach that goes beyond the performance of the archetype of the silenced white handmaid produced by the series.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The transmedia production of *The Handmaid’s Tale* is deeply interconnected to relevant social and political matters, from the connections of Margaret Atwood’s iconic dystopian novel with the Reagan years to Bruce Miller’s series with Trump’s presidency and the battle against legal abortion. But the close contact of fiction and reality has transformed into a two-way process where the immediacy of the narration has given way to a global pro-choice movement in the face of restrictive reproductive policies. The limited scope of this study has not covered the

workings of the handmaid movement beyond the US border. Nevertheless, the battle in defense of abortion rights continues in other countries such as Poland, where the handmaid costume has also been adopted in recent protests.

The use of the costume has been a useful tool to criticize restrictions on reproductive rights and garner media attention through the invocation of dystopian Gilead and its evident violence on bodies that can get pregnant. Nevertheless, even though the movement made its way to the front pages of news outlets, the homogenizing figure of the handmaid and the silence of the protests leave no room for nuance. Class and race inequalities should also be at the center of these movements, reclaiming rights for those who are in more vulnerable positions: black women are more likely to be in a position to consider abortion (Kimport 2022, 76) while “Native American women are over two and a half times more likely than other US women to be sexually assaulted; more than one in three will be raped in her lifetime” (Gurr, 2015:105).

The handmaid costume seems to be too tight for the pro-choice cause, as it puts the white audience that the show is directed towards at the center of a movement that must include a multiplicity of identities and be centered around intersectional politics. The post-racial approach of the show, where the inherent racism in America’s institutions is overlooked, is reproduced by a movement whose main characteristic is the aesthetic homogenization and silence of its participants. When the initial shock of the protests has faded, the question remains whether they can be reframed to truly face up to reproductive injustice from an intersectional approach that goes beyond gender and is also focused around how class and race complexify this issue.

Krista K. Miranda proposes to transform the movement into a plural demonstration that includes not only handmaids but also other categories for women in Gilead: wives, aunts, marthas or unwomen. Although this approach would give more visibility to a broader set of experiences beyond bodies that can get pregnant, it nevertheless lacks again an approach where race is at the center. By reenacting the restrictive and binary categories of the dystopian fiction, the same politics that the show portrays become alive in the real world. While the dystopia calls attention to pressing issues in real-life, it does not provide a language for change and moving forward. The question remains whether the movement can be a transformative agent that voices and fights for specific political goals while being limited by the gender, class and race restrictions that *The Handmaid’s Tale* reproduces. While the dystopian quality of our times has made Atwood’s fiction an immediate source to scan the present, in order to move forward we must find alternative ways for change that do not rely on the implicit negativity of examining reality through the lens of dystopia. For instance, Rosi Braidotti proposes the use of affirmative ethics as a tool that expands “one’s ability to relate to multiple others, in a productive and mutually enforcing manner, and creating a community that actualizes this ethical propensity” (2019: 166). Thus, this approach proposes a reworking of negative affects that transcends the initial shock to be transformed into relational empowerment (2019:166).

The dystopian offers a chance to be a transformative force through Braidotti's affirmative ethics, not through a disavowal of its negative qualities but through its reworking into something else. To move beyond Gilead's restrictions, the handmaid movement may be regenerated through an intersectional relationality that positions class and race together with gender at the center of its concerns.

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NOTES

ⁱ Atwood's definition of speculative fiction has generated some criticism as it contradicts other definitions of the term and of science fiction. For more information on this topic check Oziewicz 2017.

ⁱⁱ In January 2023, at the moment of writing this article, there are five seasons available, but a sixth season has been confirmed and will likely be released by the end of the year to conclude the series.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gilead reproduces essentialist views on gender, whereby only those assigned the female sex at birth are considered "women" and will occupy a set of categories. Transgender or nonbinary people are excluded from the nation, as they do not fit into the binary gender roles that prevail in the heteronormative social configuration.

^{iv} The situation of black people varies whether we take into consideration the series or the novel. The relocation takes place in the novel and it creates a white supremacy state, while the series follows what Karen Crawley names a "post-racial aesthetic" (2018: 335) that includes people of color on the screen without acknowledging race as a factor of oppression.

^v For more information on the ERA movement and the mobilization against the ERA led by women see McCammon et al (2017).

^{vi} In Gilead, women are divided into diverse classes with different status within the hierarchical class system. These categories are easily identifiable by the differently colored clothes that hide their silhouettes: handmaids, the concubines for the men in power, wear red; wives, married to the commanders, wear blue; the marthas or maids wear green; and aunts, women who act as instructors to other women in this new regime, wear brown. ^{vii} Drawing upon Julia Kristeva, Hinnov analyzes instances of what she calls "choran community" in *The Waves*, *Three Guineas* and *Between the Acts*: "encounters between characters, denoting an expansion that also includes the wider interconnective community" (2007: 2; emphasis in the original). Utell (2008) also discusses community in *The Waves*, in relation to mortality and mourning.

^{vii} This was a common practice in national Catholicism, as babies were stolen from "improper" mothers and given to Catholic parents in Spain (see Mediavilla 2021) and Ireland through institutions like the Magdalene Laundries (see "Publication of Research Report" 2021).

^{viii} The white bonnet with wings is reminiscent of the cornette used by the Daughters of Charity, Catholic nuns also commonly known in Ireland as "butterfly nuns".

^{ix} For photographic evidence of some of the handmaid protests, see "Las manifestaciones" (2018).

^x With the terms “bodies that can get pregnant” I aim to avoid limiting those affected by abortion bans to the category “women”. Not all those who identify as women can get pregnant, while some of those who identify as trans men or nonbinary can.

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