

**“A Woman’s Place”:  
Myth, Body, and Nation in Hulu’s *The Handmaid’s Tale***  
by  
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Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters  
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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate’s thesis advisor, Dr. Gerald Sim, Department of Communication and Multimedia Studies, and has been approved by all members of the supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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## ABSTRACT

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This thesis investigates the role of myth in Hulu’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Through an analysis of concepts such as the body and nation, I investigate the mythical underpinnings of gender, race, social reproduction, and capitalism in Gilead as well as the veritable history of oppression and imperialism in the United States that informs the Gileadean imaginary. I interrogate myth’s utility in creating nations and worlds, real or imagined, and the mechanisms of myth that make this possible. Using the works of authors such as Roland Barthes, Kalindi Vora, Achille Mbembe, and others, I read *The Handmaid’s Tale* series as a text that reveals how truth can be distorted by myth but can be demythologized to belie intention, historically contextualize, and inspire resistance. Written in the midst and wake of the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, this thesis is also a meditation on auto-ethnographic and textual resistance.

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## Introduction

I was at a friend's birthday party when I learned that *Roe v. Wade* had been overturned. I hadn't looked at my phone all day—I make it a habit of not reading the news on happy days. After an hour or two of enthusiastic chatter and loud music, I went inside to get away from the noise and scroll on my phone for a while. It was the very first thing on every single one of my feeds: *Roe v. Wade overturned*. When I returned to the party, I must have looked concerned. My face always gives me away. “What's wrong?” someone asked me. Once I told one person, they told another, and then they told someone else and so on. Just a minute ago, it was like every other birthday party. The smell of barbeque hung thick in the air. There were twinkling rainbow lights and balloons and familiar faces with carefree grins. The music continued to play, but the party seemed hushed now, everyone murmuring in solemn, reverent tones like we were mourning someone instead of celebrating their birth. The birthday girl frowned and said something like, “Well, this sucks.” And it did.

It wasn't long before I began to see the Facebook statuses, Reddit threads, and Instagram memes referencing *The Handmaid's Tale*—posts like: “All we need now are red cloaks and bonnets.” I'll admit, although the reference seemed tired and overused, posts like those made me wonder what else indeed we would need to find ourselves in a Gilead of our very own. I reread the book, rewatched the series from the beginning, and tried to learn more about body politics in the United States. It wasn't difficult to

understand, whether referring to Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel or Hulu's series rendition, how *The Handmaid's Tale* became a common cultural anecdote that would be brought up in conversations surrounding women's rights, women's bodies, and past and contemporary American policies that seek to limit and control the two. Atwood's story became a speculative point of reference employed to understand and further prophesize the fate of Americans after the Supreme Court overturned abortion as a constitutional right. Today, *The Handmaid's Tale* functions as a warning of the political trouble to come. Capitalism in America has begotten systemic racism, institutionalized misogyny, and the destruction of the planet for power and wealth—it is only logical that our downward spiral would continue and result in scary consequences. In this way, we recognize ourselves in *The Handmaid's Tale*: women losing the right to their own bodies, people stripped of their privacy, their right to survive, and perhaps even their will to live. As Americans cling to their remaining freedoms, *The Handmaid's Tale* reminds us of all of what we have to lose.

I can't say that the overturning of *Roe* was a surprise, though I'd rather not have learned about it at a birthday party. By that point, it was a reality that was already well on its way. It began in early May of 2022, when an initial draft of a majority opinion was released that suggested that the Supreme Court voted to overturn the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* ruling, a decision that protects a citizen's liberty to choose whether or not to terminate a pregnancy with little to no government intervention, as well as the 1992 *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* ruling, which challenged restrictive provisions that allowed states to intervene in a citizen's decision to terminate pregnancy (Gerstein and Ward). The first draft of the majority opinion, penned by Justice Samuel Alito, deemed the *Roe* and *Casey*



rulings unconstitutional, with the strong suggestion that these rulings did not coincide with American “history and tradition.” This comment likely alludes to the United States’ rooting in Christian traditions. As such, Alito asserted that the right to abortion was therefore subject to reversal (Alito 5). The rulings were initially dependent on the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, which acknowledged that not all rights were necessarily mentioned in the Constitution itself but could be surmised if the right was considered “implicit in the concept of ordered liberty.” Alito, in no uncertain terms, clarified the majority opinion on the matter: “The right to abortion does not fall within this category” (5). In June of 2022, the Supreme Court officially overturned *Roe v. Wade*. At the thought of impending loss of rights and bodily autonomy, rectified some 50 years ago via *Roe v. Wade*, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, for many, is no longer mere fiction but a horrifying blueprint for societal regression come to fruition.

In putting *The Handmaid’s Tale* and the current American state of affairs surrounding abortion in conversation with one another, the issue of privacy is crucial to acknowledge, as the right to abortion is essentially the right to preside over one’s own private matters (Davis 203). In the United States, the people have lost this right to privacy, and with it, they have lost a sense of safety and comfort knowing their rights are protected. In the more literal sense of safety, those affected by the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* may only have access to unsafe, illegal abortions and may face legal repercussions for exercising their autonomy. Moreover, if *The Handmaid’s Tale* series, or the trend of data-driven governance in the United States for that matter, are any indication of what is on the horizon, extraordinary surveillance measures will replace our right to privacy, which will further strip us of any independence with respect to our bodies or otherwise.

Privacy is at the heart of abortion laws in the United States, not unlike other laws that sought to amend outdated and intolerant sodomy laws that targeted the private lives of queer people. For this reason, many Americans are understandably alarmed at what the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* might mean for other privacy laws that protect the rights and freedoms of the people. It can be argued that religious liberty, with particular regard to non-Christian religions, is at stake as well, as it is obvious that the American predilection for Christian values has bled into the decision to overturn *Roe* and may continue to bleed into other legal decisions in the United States. When these rights to privacy are dissolved, an unrestrained regulation of bodies can proceed, reminiscent of the bodily governance observable in *The Handmaid's Tale* universe. Under such surveillance, people are guilty before any crime or sin has been committed, and they must live at the mercy of those who watch over them, like children under God.

For this project, I chose to analyze the Hulu series rendition of *The Handmaid's Tale* rather than the book. It is undeniable that the dystopian horror of Atwood's 1985 novel is still incredibly relevant against the growing fears surrounding extremist religious revival and bodily governance in the United States today. Nonetheless, the series rendition brings *The Handmaid's Tale* into the familiarity of the contemporary world as we know it, allowing the story to take on a new texture that encourages the audience to feel how the residual and recurrent histories of misogyny, racism, surveillance, and capitalist agendas interact and evolve alongside the prevalent post-racial ideologies and surveillance measures of the present-day. This project is a product of its time, written during a time of uncertainty, loss, and anxiety for the future. Therefore, it was only fitting

to choose my object of study in a version that felt the closest to the time, place, and struggle that inspired its conception.

As I watched season one of Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale*, I began to trace Christian myth as it was utilized to construct the Republic of Gilead. I realized that, although Gilead was purposefully distinct to the United States in many ways, the fictitious Republic utilized Christian myth in the same ways that the United States had throughout American history. Thus, the mythological underpinnings of Gilead became a main point of interest in my analysis of the series. I wanted to know how myth could be used to inspire worlds, like mine, or like the one in *The Handmaid's Tale* universe. I wanted to know how myth could be laid as a foundation on which new nations could be constructed. I especially wanted to answer the questions: if myth is often used to provide some fantastical explanation to something in order to obscure the true origin of said thing, how did the series depict myth being used to explain away hegemony and organized oppression? How did myth inform bodily governance in Gilead? Why was mythologizing the body so integral to the capitalist nation-building we observe in the series? How was the propagation of myth analogous to the social and biological reproduction Gilead relied on to burgeon its power?

Throughout this project, I argue not only that myth informs Gilead's understanding of the body as well as its practices that surround the body but also that it acts as the infrastructural body on which Gilead is built. Gilead makes use of creation myths, gendering myths, and racializing myths after which it models its society, economy, and constituents to justify its abuses. Through my analysis of myth in Gilead, I reveal that myths are tools that are used not only to substantiate certain practices in

Gilead, such as institutionalized rape, forced gestation, and slavery, but to facilitate the negotiation between life and death. Myth functions to propagate certain beliefs or manufactured truths and thus is like the function of social reproduction, a process of instituting and propagating ideas, norms, and accepted means of survival. In this way, throughout this thesis, I argue that myth and social reproduction are, in essence, the parents that breed and propagate categories of social difference—gender, class, and race—and that these concepts interact with one another to build and sustain worlds. The political moment in which this project emerges has encouraged the investigation of such mythologies, as the fictional Gilead eerily mirrors the realities of lost reproductive rights, racial tension, and class disparity in the United States today.

My research will contribute to a larger discussion and body of works that interrogate how and why the body is at the center of capitalist imaginaries by investigating one in particular, *The Handmaid's Tale* universe's own Republic of Gilead, and the bodies on which and of which it is composed. These bodies act as canvases on which Gilead will project the myths it was built upon and that will be tasked with legitimizing these myths through their labor and suffering. While many of the literatures that have led up to and contributed to this project have gestured toward myth as foundational to American and European nation-building, I address myth directly as a tool used to imbue bodies and body politics alike with qualities that convenience nations: fear, obedience, strata, and, perhaps most important of all, a false sense of purpose, some irrefutable reason for their eternal suffering.

## Myth

In order to investigate the function of myth in the construction of Gilead, it is necessary to acknowledge origin and creation as central elements to myth. In his book *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes reveals the irony of myth—it exists to explain the way things are or how they came to be, always posed as some inherent truth, but, in fact, “cannot possibly evolve from the ‘nature’ of things” (Barthes 110). In actuality, myth can only have an historical basis; it relies on what has happened to provide form to its explanation of how or why something happened. Not only does myth rely on history, but myth is also *tasked* with “giving an historical intention a natural justification.” It is this intent that gives myth its insidious and almost imperial demeanor: Myth can, for instance, posit power as something “eternal” rather than “contingent.” It can suggest that that which was appropriated was actually divine right all along, destiny manifested (Barthes 142). It is in this way that myth can provide a displaced origin or some contrived cosmogony that inevitably led us all here to this reality and convinced us that all things are the way that they are because they *ought* to be, and not because they are the intended consequences of our actions throughout history.

Myth is, thus, a grand tool for explaining historical outcomes, but it is also abundantly useful in the construction of nations and societies. Like God made man in his image, why should man not strive to construct a world that mirrors God’s prototypical heavenly creations? In “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being,” Sylvia Wynter discussed that many societies, large or small, modeled their “governing master codes on the heavens.” Wynter went on to suggest that in mapping their civilizations after the heavens, they also “mapped out their specific criterion of being human...onto the physical

cosmos” thereby absolutizing their social orders, morals, and laws “as if they had been supernaturally (and, as such, extrahumanly) determined” (Wynter 271-272). In this way, all facets of a society are constantly informed and justified by the cosmos and therefore indisputable.

It is with these understandings of myth and cosmogony that I approach my analysis of the mythical underpinnings of the Republic of Gilead’s construction in season one of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. At once, myth is the rationale for certain practices in Gilead and myth is the foundation on which Gilead is built. In particular, throughout this thesis, I argue that Christian myths permeate the roles, traditions, and laws that exist in Gilead. Biblical myths like creation, original sin, and impending doom at Armageddon are the myths I assert are most influential or relevant to the processes of nation-building we can observe in the series. In the series, these myths, however imaginative, are narratives that push particular ideas in Gilead, like the permissible subjugation of women, the female duty to her husband and to surrender her body to procreation, the similarity between a nation’s power and Divine power, and the legitimacy of hegemonic structures of power that model the steep climb to heaven and the inferiority of all that exists below it.

In this way, myth is something that breeds the construction of categories of social difference, namely categories such as gender, race, and class. In Gilead, the most overt category of social difference that is employed to differentiate between the powerful and the powerless is gender, where the series depicts the women of Gilead as an oppressed population under the thumb of wealthy men. Jane Caputi, in her work “Green Consciousness,” might describe the construction of social difference as a kind of “splitting,” where categories that are designed to be perceived in opposition with one

another are associated with particular ideas convenient to the disparity of power the categories are meant to justify, such as men's association with "master," "aligned with culture/order," and women's association with "slave," aligned "with nature/chaos." This is especially purposeful considering that nature, here, "is understood as something that must be mastered, tamed, controlled" (Caputi 25). Carol Merchant demonstrates that this notion is nothing new in her book *The Death of Nature*, in which she illustrates the long, rationalized history of rape and exploitation of women and nature in Europe, even as the scientific revolution threatened to modify religious thought (Merchant 164-170). We can see how this mode of thinking would lead to labor exploitation for profit, as well as the concurrent development of other categories of social difference that would be weaponized by social elites to proliferate more avenues to accrue power over certain populations. In the Hulu series, myth and the institution of social reproduction provide both the rationale and method of cultivation necessary to make these categories of social difference appear natural, as well as to imbue them with other associations similar to the ones Caputi mentioned above. For instance, in Gilead, gender, race, and class intersect and relay information about a person's role in the Republic with respect to labor and social responsibility. Women in Gilead are expected to carry out their roles while propagating them socially by surrendering themselves to these roles, teaching other women how to participate in these roles, and through child-rearing. The series makes abundantly clear that without the mythical basis of certain beliefs, these disparities of power and social functions in Gilead would not be viable. In Gilead, myths provide powerful justifications for the Republic's hegemonic social order, its allocation of labor, and its accumulation of wealth.

## **Social Reproduction**

Gilead is a nation whose economy was built by and on the backs of commodified bodies; put another way, Gilead runs on biopower. In the series, the great conundrum Gilead takes on as a blossoming nation is that of mass infertility. To rectify this issue, Gilead institutionalizes rape and forced pregnancy—in effect, organized, compulsory, and violent biological reproduction. What goes unseen in Gilead, but is discernible in the series' depiction of it, is another form of reproduction: social reproduction. A process that occurs concurrently with biological reproduction, social reproduction is carried out through what Cindi Katz describes as “the acquisition and distribution of the means of existence” (Katz 711). This can mean providing food and shelter, or even social and emotional rearing of children or burgeoning societies. Social reproduction, especially in the context of how it manifests in the series depiction of Gilead, is a process that propagates certain cultural, social, religious, and political ideas, traditions, and practices within the population through forms of social conditioning, the most prevalent form being the rearing of children to replenish Gilead's workforce and elite population.

As such, in my discussion of the body as it relates to the Republic of Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale*, I turn to the works of Silvia Federici, Cindi Katz, Kalindi Vora, and Sophie Lewis to ground my understandings of the body and bodily labor in some of the most relevant forms of labor in Gilead, social reproduction. These scholars made clear the gendered basis of certain forms of labor, the normalcy of unwaged labor among women as a result, as well as the ways in which the commodification of the body through surrogacy revealed the realities of a profound lack of resources and financial instability among women (Vora 683-695). According to Angela Davis and Sarah Haley, the effects



of these issues are compounded by a long global history of racism, enslavement, and sexual violence that render certain bodies only as valuable as the labor they can produce, including the forced biological reproduction of future labor forces (Davis 207-208; Haley 115). Such sentiments bore racial stereotypes like those that appear in the works of Patricia Hill Collins, such as the “mammy” and “jezebel” figures who are characterized by socially reproductive labors such as surrogate motherhood and sex work that would serve to reinforce the submissive and physical nature of women’s value in a society (Collins 72-82).

These stereotypes, as well as their socially reproductive expectations, are demonstrated in the series through Gilead’s version of stereotypical organizing in which the women of Gilead are organized into categories based on their class and which forms of labor they could engage in, mostly differentiated by their ability or inability to conceive children for the state. These stereotypes and methods of differentiation tie into the next and final concept this thesis engages with, categories of social difference.

### **Categories of Social Difference**

As I previously mentioned, Hulu’s series rendition of *The Handmaid’s Tale* was a version of the story I chose deliberately over the book, the main reason being that the series brought the 1985 novel into more contemporary times. This way, I could analyze *The Handmaid’s Tale* even more closely alongside the social and political strife of the present, namely the overturning of *Roe* and what this would mean for the people of the United States going forward. I mentioned that a main feature of the series that brought it into contemporary times and made the series a more interesting object of study for my

purposes was the show's implication of post-racialism in Gilead. According to Ellen E. Jones of *The Guardian*, Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale*, which premiered in April of 2017, was received favorably by audiences and critics alike, save for the show's controversial "inclusion of race without the depiction of racism." Criticism about this aspect of the series pushed back on what Jones referred to as "colour-blind casting," citing Atwood's novel which intentionally and blatantly depicted Gilead as an unsettlingly white world, completely absent of Black people and other people of color. However, the depiction of Gilead in the television series does not subscribe to this racially homogenous feature as the series creators elected to cast racially and culturally diverse actors. Showrunner Bruce Miller addressed this decision as something he discussed at length with author Margaret Atwood, referencing the struggle to differentiate between "making a TV show about racists and making a racist TV show where you don't hire any actors of colour." Miller also admitted that he felt in a world like Gilead, where fertility has plummeted at such an alarming rate, racism would take a backseat to the need to correct global infertility. The problem with this interpretation is that the mechanisms of oppression present in the show were not "inventions of Atwood's imagination" but actual features of "245 years of slavery in the U.S.," yet were ignored as such in an effort to emphasize gender oppression rather than racial oppression in the series (Jones). The intersections of race, gender, and class are, of course, integral to systems of oppression and to ignore these relationships would be to undermine the true weight and insidiousness of hegemonic power. While color-blind rhetoric implies itself as having transcended the conversation of racial difference, contemporary Western ideations of a post-racial world only emphasize the

United States' propensities for erasure, inculpability, and carelessness when faced with its long and torrid history of racism.

Regardless of the intentions of the series creators, the inattention to race as a point of tension in Gilead did not preclude the series of racial analyses, particularly not in this project. Instead, the series depiction of post-racialism in Gilead inspired me to work with unconventional definitions of race, racism, and racialization that exceeded traditional or colloquial understandings of race as something that could solely be differentiated by physical and cultural difference. In the series, the nature of race was realized: it is assigned, like the assignment to a particular job. Race conveys more about what types of labor one engages in, what kind of life they will lead, what kind of death they will be led to, than it conveys anything about biology or culture (Mbembe 17). The nuances of race, gender, and class that manifested in the televised version of *The Handmaid's Tale*, as well as the methods through which these social constructions were proliferated and maintained, prompted this project.

In the series, Gilead appears to be a nation that does not claim U.S. histories of racism and slavery. As a new nation, multiculturalism and post-racialism seem to be features of Gilead's culture. While Gilead is very much in the business of slavery and trafficking, though they would not describe their practices as such, no one race or culture is made a target of these abuses. The series depicts people of a variety of cultural backgrounds in a variety of social stations, including elite positions within Gilead's government (Jones). For this reason, it might appear that racism is not featured in Gilead. However, racism is deeply entrenched in the fabric of both the history of the United

States and the practices observable in the fledgling Republic of Gilead, and while this racism has been obscured, it cannot be ignored.

While racism is often referred to as the oppression of people from particular racial, cultural or ethnic group, in this project, I utilize Ruth Wilson Gilmore's definition of racism. According to Gilmore, racism is a state-led practice that seeks to "[produce] and [exploit]...group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" (Gilmore 247). Achille Mbembe would likely agree with this definition, as his theorization of necropolitics suggests that death was a tool of the state that could be distributed to certain populations to regulate the quality of life of others (Mbembe 17-18). In the series, women are "othered" by their assigned gender and physical capabilities to procreate. However, they are also further differentiated by their labor class, such as Handmaids, Marthas, and Unwomen, which are characterized by socially reproductive duties such as gestation, childrearing, and environmental sanitation. The women in Gilead's labor force demonstrate that their daily lives are a constant negotiation with their desire to survive and their engineered susceptibility to death, as their lives are marked by marginalization, violence, and abuse, whether or not they comply. In this project, I discuss how this susceptibility to death corroborates Gilmore's nuanced definition of racism, which denotes the nature and scope of oppression as ironically more inclusive, extending beyond categories of ethnicity and culture. This is not to say that these traditional considerations of racism have no place in Gilead. On the contrary, I highlight the ways in which the historical frameworks for slavery and racial oppression, particularly those weaponized against Black women in the United States, inform the forms of oppression we observe in Gilead. Collins' racial stereotypes, for instance, are constructed categories

used to further marginalize and differentiate between “types” of Black women, their types usually referring to what kinds of physical or social labor they must engage in, whether it be wet nurse or scapegoat (Collins 81-82). This is a practice similar to Gilead’s organization of the female labor force, and these stereotypes also inform the kinds of labor the women of Gilead are expected to perform.

For the purposes of my research, and by implication of Hortense Spillers who noted that her existence as a Black woman was “invented” by her country to fill its needs, I specifically read these Black female stereotypes as mythologies in and of themselves (Spillers 65). As such, these stereotypes and other assignments of Blackness could be employed to mythologize the exploited bodies of Gilead as inherently submissive, fine-tuned for the labors they engaged in, and ultimately, deserving of abuse. In this way, the racialization of bodies is yet another way that myth pervaded body politics in Gilead. Michel Foucault, Achille Mbembe, and Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s scholarship reveal that the racialization of bodies is a tried and true method of stripping certain groups of people of their subjecthood, at once allowing them to be commodified as objects and providing justification for their susceptibility to death so that others might live and thrive on the fruits of their labors (Foucault 243; Mbembe 18, 40). The mechanisms of racism worked well to build the American economy, and it would do well for Gilead as well.

## **Methods**

For this project, I focused my attention strictly on season one of Hulu’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* as this season establishes the Republic’s rise to power. To locate and analyze areas of the show that were most relevant to my discussion of myth and the

mechanisms of myth within the process of nation-building, I close-read scenes and details that appeared in season one that had particular relevance to my discussion of myth as a world or nation-building tool. Interpreting the text itself was important to my method of analysis as season one simultaneously showcases the series' world-building alongside the diegetic nation-building Gilead engages in within the series. In this way, I analyzed how the show set up its critiques of Gilead while being able to formulate my own and put the two in conversation. Myth, as depicted in the series, "harmonizes with the world, not as it is, but as it wants to create itself" (Barthes 156). Like the concurrence of the dominant reading of the show (what the series intends) and the non-dominant reading of the show (my own analysis of the series), Barthes refers to a fascinating split when attempting to demythologize an object, here, a text and the world within the text: "drifting between the object and its demystification," negotiating between what it is and what it wishes itself to be, "[reconciling] between reality and men, between description and explanation, between object and knowledge" (Barthes 159). In this project, my attempt to demythologize Gilead within the series is a negotiated version of decoding, acknowledging the legitimacy and intentionality behind the dominant readings and critiques of the series while "reserving the right to make a more negotiated application to 'local conditions.'" In other words, I make my own judgements through a situated lens that takes into account the time and space I received this text and how these considerations influenced my reading of it (Hall 60).

## **Organization**

I began this project with the intention to build each chapter around particular types of myth (creation/destruction myths, gendering myths, and racializing myths) that served the greater purpose of the Republic's nation-building in the series. I used each type of myth to reveal its relation to the values and practices that appeared in Gilead, and to analyze the function of each mythology as it informed the Republic's understanding and attitude toward the body and the body's role in its construction through conformity and social reproduction. This project is designed to produce a kind of genealogy of myth, revealing a cycle that begins with creation and ends with destruction, only to be birthed again. It seems right that its organization turned out this way, as so much of what I take up in this project are the politics of creation and destruction, good and evil, and life and death.

In my first chapter, I begin with mythologies that inform the body politic, namely Gilead's creation through destruction. I posit that the body politic is constructed by and on the backs of its constituents, but not for them. I use the Christian myths of Armageddon and Judgment Day to analogize Gilead and its creation with an attempt at realizing the prophecy of Armageddon, a battle between good and evil that ultimately results in the dissolution of heaven and earth in favor of an entirely new and exclusive paradise. Gilead supposes itself to be a divine and eternal state. To legitimate the notion of its perfection and power locally and globally, its appearance and reputation must be spotless. Thus, to appear as a nation akin to paradise and morality, Gilead imposes on the bodies it has enslaved to construct such a world by participating in its rituals and literally cleaning up toxic waste that would suggest its imperfection. The restoration of nature is

central to Gilead's global legitimation and economic stability. Gilead's environmental success appears to be nothing short of a miracle when compared to much of the world's pollution, infertility, and harvest problems, granting it the air of a nation that has its issues under control and that has the power to apply pressure on its population and reap positive results. It also provides a kind of alibi which obscures or even justifies many of the abuses that go on in Gilead. Environmentalism in Gilead provides it with the appearance of paradise, as if it were in fact a new nation, a new heaven, with legitimized power and wealth.

In chapter two, I shift my attention to the bodies that built Gilead to analyze Gilead's understanding of the body through gendering mythologies. Continuing the trend of analogizing the mythical speech and thinking that occurs in Gilead to Christian myths that might yield the same societal results if propagated, I use the myth of original sin to discuss the position of women in Gilead. The message a myth like original sin conveys is, in essence, an explanation and justification for the sexualization and subjugation of bodies of certain gender to certain forms of labor. This chapter's attention to the story of Adam and Eve paves the way for my discussion of the mechanisms of capitalism within a society like Gilead's and how capitalism itself is modeled after these Christian mythologies. Sexualizing and gendering mythologies are important to my discussion of bodies in this chapter, and throughout the project, as they are used to set the process of objectification in motion, paving the way for Gilead's profit. The objectification of bodies is vital in Gilead because stripping bodies of their subjecthood and thus reducing them to objects allows for a commodification of these bodies that is integral to Gilead's economy. Bodies, reduced to tradeable objects, become biocapital Gilead owns and



amasses in its attempt to primitively accumulate wealth and resources that would legitimize and propagate Gilead's capitalist agendas. As Gilead struggles to legitimate itself globally, it relies entirely on slave labor and forced reproduction to stabilize its wealth and power. As such, I reveal the myth of original sin's role in not only the oppression of bodies in Gilead but also in Gilead's overall hegemonic social structure. In this way, I point to Christian cosmogony as a kind of blueprint from which Gilead took its inspiration.

In the final chapter, I shift my discussion to racializing mythologies that aid the objectification of bodies discussed in chapter two. The biblical story of Rachel and Bilhah is central to many of the ritualistic practices in Gilead, as well as its social order. In this chapter, I take on the Rachel and Bilhah story as well as racial stereotypes as mythologies the Republic employed to racialize certain bodies, namely the women of Gilead. I explain how race in Gilead strays from traditional conversations and understandings of race, while employing the mechanisms of racialization and racism in nuanced ways. Race in Gilead is deduced by one's susceptibility to death, which is nothing if not abundant in Gilead. Gilead utilizes the racialized figure of Bilhah alongside other racial stereotypes and figures, like the "mammy," to effectively assign Blackness to a wider scope of enslaved women. In doing so, the Republic at once successfully insinuates an historically substantiated inferiority to certain groups of 'others' and constructs strata within its female labor class according to the forms of social reproduction and labor each racial stereotype is known for. Thus, this chapter mainly deals with racializing mythologies that are used to further Gilead's agenda to objectify certain bodies, rendering the value of these bodies equivalent only to their labor or

(re)productive output. To reinforce the ‘otherness’ of these bodies, the Republic also institutes a taxonomy of dress which lends itself to the more traditional visually-motivated forms of racialization, that allows the Republic and its constituents to quickly identify certain bodies. Particularly in this final chapter, I gesture to the cyclical nature of creation and destruction as it pertains to the construction of a nation in my discussion of “recycled” and “repurposed” forms of oppression even as they exist in a supposedly post-racial world.

## Chapter One: Mythologizing the Body Politic

*And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth. (KJV, Gen. 1.28)*

Every myth depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale* series showcases the importance of construction in Gilead, whether it be social constructions like gender or race or the literal construction of a nation. Worlds are made in the image of larger cosmogonies, or what Sylvia Wynter would likely describe as the origin and nature of the physical cosmos (Wynter 272). In the Christian myth of creation, God created the heavens and the earth. In kind, people could also create their societies, communities, and nations—and for Gilead, what better blueprint for their nation than Eden, the heavens, or any one of God's other creations? To build anything of relevance, it is imperative that it is built upon a strong foundation; foundations provide structure and sustain or attempt to sustain stability. States establish capitalist systems, for instance, by accumulating a reserve of capital that is only rarely, painstakingly, and conservatively redistributed by those in power in exchange for cheap, exploitative labor that expands this reserve of wealth (Federici 62). In this case, wealth breeds wealth—stockpiled wealth is the foundation to capitalist systems. Even mythologies themselves can only be sustained by their historical

bases—myths do not simply “evolve from the ‘nature’ of things.” Rather, myths are structurally supported by the history they simultaneously seek to obscure (Barthes 110). In Gilead, myths are alibis. They present reason while distancing meaning (Barthes 123). When the Sons of Jacob imagined Gilead, it was not an original idea. It couldn’t be, otherwise they could not legitimize it. Put another way, Christianity is a long-established religion with exceptionally well-known texts, expected moral codes, and beliefs. The Republic, especially as an authoritarian Christian theocracy, rooted their values and practices in ideas that already existed, that were widely accepted for centuries, and that already purported to answer the big questions about existence and human worth. This is part of what makes Gilead appear so established, so powerful even. Enlightenment could be as simple as surrendering to things we cannot control or know for sure. A Christian did not have to understand the mind of God, simply follow his will. A constituent of Gilead did not have to question the Republic’s intentions, simply obey. The Republic constructed itself in the image of God, and God constructed man in his image and willed the universe into existence. The Republic, modeled in the image of a divine entity, could do the same: build the ideal submissive population and command a nation in place of another. It could even physically construct the nation of Gilead with inspiration from some of God’s more popular geographical creations—a sinless garden surveilled by an all-seeing power. But the Sons of Jacob, nor any other elite class of a capitalist nation, need not worry themselves over the labor it takes to construct a stratified world. The real work could be left to the working class—they could propagate, participate in, and replenish the system, and they would do it simply because they were afraid for their lives.

The Republic's reliance on its enslaved laborers to build Gilead sounds biblically familiar. For instance, in the Bible, creation is initially described as something God exercised. He created the heavens and the earth. Then he created the living creatures, and then man to preside over them. Later, God would create woman to accompany man, or to be another creature under his charge. His creations were awe-inspiring and gorgeous—they were grand tokens of his infinite love. Take Eden, the garden Christians know as paradise. Every tree was fruitful and the river's water would satiate thirst, so that Adam and Eve might eat without worry and drink to their content. God made everything for them, his children, so that they might live in the glory of his benevolence. But there were rules to be heeded, and if these limits were crossed, God's wrath would outweigh his love. So, when Eve defied him, he would punish her with the burden of creation. It was different for Eve who could not, like God, simply dream up her next creation and behold it. Eve's creation would see her body torn and wounded; birth would be bloody and painful. Thus, the necropolitical condition of Eve is revealed—tasked with populating the earth with more who would follow God or man, her enslavement, labor, and punishment was unending, “a form of death-in-life” (Mbembe 21). Bilhah, an enslaved daughter of Eve far removed, would continue this penance. In the series, this perpetual, exploitative atonement would build the new world, Gilead, divided by difference, and those in power would oversee the powerless, admiring their work as if it were their own.

By establishing their power as analogous to God's, the Republic named itself the creator, the mastermind that designed the parameters of life and death. “The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away” (*KJV*, Job 1.21). Especially considering Gilead's

reproductive initiatives and abusively loose labor regulations, Gilead fancies itself an Utopia with the control necessary to intervene when

The mortality rate has to be modified or lowered; life expectancy has to be increased; birth rate has to be stimulated. And most important of all, regulatory mechanisms must be established to establish an equilibrium, maintain an average, establish some sort of homeostasis, and compensate for variations within [its] general population and its aleatory field.

(Foucault, "Society Must be Defended" 246).

Effectively, Gilead is the site of a struggle for order, constantly grasping at the harnesses that would steer a select few away from the chaotic inevitability of death, while others were strategically placed within its reach. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the massacre of the US Congress and the Second American Civil War preceded the establishment of the Republic. When the war was won, the Sons of Jacob would erect Gilead, a new nation to replace the United States that had, by their estimation, succumbed to godless villainy. Their new nation would correct for the old mistakes, where sin is a thing of the past.

Although the concept of Armageddon is perhaps popularly understood as a world-ending event, scripturally, Armageddon is actually a place, the site of conflict between the forces of good and evil (*KJV*, Rev. 16.16). The day following this battle would be the day of judgment when the son of God, Jesus, would consider both the living and the dead so that he can deliver the worthy and God could cast his final judgment on those remaining. He would destroy the old, corrupted heaven and earth, and institute a new one in its place without sin nor curse (*KJV*, Rev. 22.3). In my comparison between Gilead and Armageddon, I also acknowledge a cyclical nature, where creation precedes

destruction, which only makes room for new creation. There is a life cycle to nations as there is for existence. One country is destroyed and another is erected in its place the way one person dies and another is born—a nation’s life cycle is so comparable to the life cycle of actual living things that it would almost appear natural, as if Gilead sprang up from the ashes of the United States because it was meant to and not because it burned it down. On the contrary, Gilead trumpets itself as such an Edenic paradise, an afterlife established after a deadly battle between the demons and angels, legitimizing their violence as if it were the will of God. This is precisely the work of myth in the world of Gilead, to naturalize events, customs, and actions, to conceal the Republic’s hand in suffering, and to act as the pillars on which a nation could be built.

Myths are, perhaps, ultimately creation stories that function to explain how things came to be, why we are here, and why things are the way that they are thereafter. Throughout this chapter, and throughout this project, I illustrate that creation stories also have another function: to be used as a foundation, a tool to construct a world in its image. In this chapter, I deconstruct the creation, and implied destruction, of Gilead in season one of Hulu’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* by analyzing the mythical groundwork that would inspire the Republic’s construction. I argue that Gilead is created in the image of Christian cosmogony from its hierarchical structures of power to its public image. Using Sylvia Wynter’s scholarship on cosmogony’s role in constructing social order, I discuss the ways in which the Republic of Gilead construes itself as a divine power to rationalize its power and subsequent abuses of it.

To start, I propose Gilead to be a nation that has sought, through myth, to regulate life and death and has, in some manner, organized its society’s hierarchy using these

concepts. I begin by exploring the images of nature employed in season one of *The Handmaid's Tale* to illustrate how these images contribute to the series' depiction of social hierarchy in Gilead as well as the unique ways that Gilead deals in the business of life/death and creation/destruction. For example, the Bible is well-known for its natural imagery, especially with respect to its descriptions of creation and destruction, like the beauty of the garden or the horror of the sea turning crimson. In the series, the trouble of infertility first reared its head because of global pollution and natural disaster. When Gilead was established, restoring nature was a priority, among other agendas. Gilead's green initiative would give the rest of the world reason to believe in its credibility as a nation. Eco-friendliness would be a key selling point of Gilead's legitimation, although the Republic's repossession of an ailing environment would mirror biblical calls for the conquest of nature and multiplication (Krupar 22). I will discuss how the images of nature in the Bible underpin the Republic's economic system, at once naturalizing the subjugation of women in Gilead and the Republic's power to do so. Afterward, I reference the Republic's attempt to constitute Gilead as a kind of 'new heaven' by restoring nature. I argue that the restoration of nature depends on its culture of surveillance and its negotiation between who lives and who dies. Meanwhile, I gesture to the ways that Gilead's greenwashing disguises and even negates many of the abuses in Gilead. In this final chapter, with particular attention to Mbembe's necropolitics, I ultimately analyze the Gileadean body politic and how, through its relationship to nature, the Republic mythologizes itself as an "eternal state" with the godlike power to judge people's worthiness of deliverance from death.



## Nature and Women in Gilead

Gilead's relationship to nature is essential to its mythology. In the Bible, the nature that surrounds humans was every bit as important to God's creation as humans were, otherwise humans would have nothing of their own to master. The destruction of nature in *The Handmaid's Tale* universe symbolizes the death of a nation where another could grow in its place, a "transition from one power to another," from the secular to a kingdom of God (Foucault, "Society Must be Defended" 247). This transition is line with the principle of ecological secondary succession, which is when a catalyst event like a fire or storm decreases a preexisting ecosystem's biodiversity—depending on how devastating the event, while the soil and surrounding areas are nutrient-rich enough for regrowth, recolonization may only be possible for a few select species (Odum and Barrett 257). The term secondary succession has also been used to describe the environmental policing of areas (and its residents) that have been purposefully devastated only to be recolonized. Andrea Miller, in their chapter "Securing Nature's Return," points out that the "scientific discourses of succession sanitize the violence of displacement and dispossession" and obscure the histories of this violence and therefore culpability, giving the example of "Indigenous presence...succeeded first by 'pioneer' colonial settlement and plantation economies" (Miller 110). Similarly, the series portrays the Republic's ruthless, Armageddon-esque takeover of the United States, which resulted in the deaths of many. The Republic, if only implicitly, describes this as more of a cleansing that actually resulted in *new* life, with the "help" of the Handmaids and other women forced to literally give their lives to their country. In this way, I suggest once again the cyclical nature of Gilead's mythos wherein even the dead have purpose, some afterlife that allows

them to become “a renewable material resource . . . [an] opportunity to economize the body in death and put the dead body to work” (Krupar, *Green Death* 271).

The emergence of Gilead after the “natural” death of the United States was a transition “from a civil or public right over life and death, to a right to either eternal life or eternal damnation” (Foucault, “Society Must be Defended” 247). To replenish and subdue the earth as God intended, the series depicts the Republic focusing its efforts on reestablishing natural phenomena, human reproduction, and the propagation of nature. The Republic would exercise its divine right to will life to camouflage Gilead’s negotiation between its exacerbation of mortality among the masses and its mitigation of death for a select few. While ecological disaster at one time may have been lucrative for the elite, its price may have proven exorbitant over time as its unwieldy repercussions began to impact everyone. As the show would suggest, the elite of Gilead would do everything in their power to deflect their own deaths in the face of ecological disaster “insofar as it is the end of life, the term, the limit, or the end of [their] power too” (Foucault, “Society Must be Defended” 248). Gilead’s association with the restoration of nature would thus become a tool the Republic utilized to legitimize itself in the wake of American failures.

In the following section, I point to the ways that the Republic employs images of nature, from biblical contexts or otherwise, to naturalize its subjugation of women and nature alike. The biblical quote I included at the beginning of this chapter is important to acknowledge when discussing Gilead, as it is what inspires and justifies the Republic’s conquest of bodies and nature. In the series, replenishing the earth through forced reproduction was critical in Gilead to subdue the earth, establish its future labor force,

and provide heirs to the elite class. The women of Gilead were enslaved for this purpose, birthing children to the Republic's men, cooking and cleaning for them, mothering their children, providing sexual favors, or otherwise bringing them wealth. Where biological reproduction couldn't occur, a social reproduction could through the unwaged labors of women who would act as pillars to their communities and facilitators of their nation's procreation and capital accumulation (Federici 56). Where Handmaids and other female labor classes in Gilead exhaust their biological bodies, their labor "extend[s] "life"" in Gilead (Vora 684). Because of this, the women of Gilead were more akin to natural resources than people—fertile women were stockpiled and preserved, while infertile women were instrumentalized in other ways. While the series explicitly demonstrates Christian values as the reason for institutionalized gender oppression, I further suggest that the subjugation of women in Gilead is predicated on their (Eve's) violation of God's will. Eve's transgressions were characterized by a violation of nature in her fraternization with the serpent and her consumption of the forbidden fruit. These transgressions were no doubt metaphors for Eve's sexual awakening, thus God punished her with the pains of childbirth. Attributing these mythical events to the Handmaids would provide a powerful rationale for their enslavement. In this way, Gilead weaponizes Christian mythology to regulate and discipline bodies. As in Genesis when God urged Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply, sexuality would become the "point where body and population meet," but fornication that occurred in the name of pleasure rather reproduction would justify a "permanent surveillance" of this "corporeal mode of behavior" (Foucault, "Society Must be Defended" 251).

In the Bible, women's inferiority always seemed to be paired with images of nature, whether it was Eve's disobedience in the garden or the suggestion that, in her submissive relationship to Adam, Eve was merely another creature under his care. In fact, many different mythologies surround the word nature itself, described with monikers like "Mother Earth" or "Mother Nature" and prescribing the dimension of motherhood and reproduction to the female image (Caputi 35). In kind, the series characterizes the women in Gilead as mythologized by the Republic alongside images of nature to rationalize the exploitation of both. Serena Waterford, for instance, Wife to Commander Waterford and mistress to June, was depicted as a scholar in the time before. Her scholarship focused on what she called "domestic feminism." The audience learns that she wrote an infamous book on the subject called *A Woman's Place*—ironic, considering it is illegal for women to read or write in Gilead. A popular quote from the book read, "Do not mistake a woman's meekness for weakness," which advocates for the empowerment of women through their amenability to the authority of men. To further the irony of Serena's work, her use of the word 'meekness' recalls the biblical quote, "Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth" (*KJV*, Matt. 5.5). Though this is a biblical idea that is explicitly expressed in the show by the Aunts and by June herself, it is obvious that meek, here women, will inherit nothing in Gilead. If anything, women are compared to the earth because they can be conquered. Serena wrote the book in response to the widespread decline in birthrate, chalked up to an unfortunate turn toward secularity, casual sex, and contraception. Ultimately, it was Serena's championship of radical, Christian change that would inspire the formation of the Republic and its exploitation of nature and bodies.

In episode six of the series, “A Woman’s Place,” Serena would reveal the most important development of her scholarship: “fertility as a national resource, reproduction as a moral imperative” (“A Woman’s Place” 18:05-18:39). Framing fertility, and by extension women’s bodies, as a “national” resource suggests that these bodies are mere biocapital, or literal and commodifiable livestock, which can be taken, managed, distributed, and traded by the state (Rose 42). This implication clearly denoted an opportunity for enslavement that would later serve as the foundation for Gilead’s economy—revealing that, in fact, it was not solely Gilead’s agriculture that would serve as the true basis of its economy as was initially misrepresented by the Republic. The Republic would utilize images of both women and nature to propagate an internal culture of enslavement, the true basis of its economy. Externally, or outside the walls of Gilead, these conflated images would work to boost Gilead’s geopolitical image. Especially with respect to Gilead’s global economic standing and international relations, the mythology of Gilead’s control over an otherwise deteriorating nature works to legitimize it in the eyes of prospective global allies while shrouding the enslavement that made it possible. As such, the enslavement of women and nature would work in tandem to support the Gileadean economy and its global reception. The connection drawn between women and nature in Gilead would also reveal the irony of the Republic’s dependence on biopower to build and sustain itself, while it also relies on its ability to control “what must live and what must die” to buttress its power over the masses (Foucault, “Society Must be Defended” 251).

Serena’s proposal, though fictional, was not the first of its kind and echoed actual historical sentiments made in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Carolyn

Merchant's account of scientific and philosophical developments made by English philosopher Francis Bacon revealed that Bacon was responsible for a "program advocating for the control of nature for human benefit" (Merchant 164). In the midst of the European inquisition of witches, Bacon took advantage of the prevailing negative "female imagery" and witch polemics of his time to support his program, which aimed to do away with the old notions of nature as a "nurturing mother and womb of life" and instead "reduce women to psychic and reproductive resources . . . for economic production." Bacon utilized the inquisition of witches to parallel his proposed inquisition of nature. Nature, like women, he believed, was "a source of secrets to be extracted for economic advance" (Merchant 165). While previously society in this time believed that nature was a force better left undisturbed, Bacon advocated intensely for a new era in scientific advancement in which "nature must be 'bound into service' and made 'a slave,' put 'in restraint' and 'molded' by the mechanical arts. The 'searchers and spies of nature,' are to discover its plots and secrets" (Merchant 169). Merchant points out how easily Bacon was able to justify the degradation and "exploitation of the natural environment" by equating nature with "the female gender" (169). Bacon, a self-proclaimed man of both science and God, even ventured to argue that man's dominion over nature was lost when Eve tempted Adam and that this dominion could be repossessed through his methods. Merchant puts it eloquently: "Although a female's inquisitiveness may have caused man's fall from his God-given dominion, the relentless interrogation of another female, nature, could be used to regain it" (170). Utilizing language which incorporated the imagery of a female nature, slavery, and even the sexual innuendo of bondage in nonconsensual terms, Bacon championed the rape and enslavement of both nature and

women, an implication not unlike that which can be deduced from Serena's scholarship. As such, Serena's kindred proposition allowed for the eventual profit of women's bodies as enslaved surrogates and commercial objects meant to produce and reproduce at the will of the Republic. Particularly insidious about Serena is that her proposition was not simply born of her piety or observations of a dying world, but her own wish to be a mother by any means possible, even at the expense of the other women she purports to be in solidarity with. In some ways, Serena was the benefactor of the role of the Handmaid, but this role would reveal that women could build a nation in more ways than one.

### **The Colonies**

Comparing and conflating images of women and nature made it possible for Gilead to exploit the two in its pursuit to build a nation. However, to truly see the construction of such a nation through, appearances and reputation are everything. The United States left a mess and, in order to appear as a permissible replacement, Gilead would need to clean this mess up. Only then could Gilead legitimately sell itself to other nations as a desirable ally, if only in business. Gilead's environmental success would have them seen as saviors to the rest of the world, who are also battling the same issues of infertility and harvest, while disguising Gilead's subjugation of women.

In episode six, Gilead's greenwashing and attempts to appear legitimate at international scale become apparent. The episode opens on a grim winter day. The Handmaids in their crimson cloaks are the only pop of color against the gray cast of Gilead other than the blood they are attempting to wash away. The Handmaids are at the Wall scrubbing away at the stone to eliminate any trace of bloodstain from the bodies that

usually hang there on display, which have since been removed. This scene takes place at a time when Gilead is about to receive an international guest, Mexico, for trade talks. With the Mexican delegates on their way to the capitol, it is imperative for the Republic to put forward the best possible image of Gilead so that Mexico is encouraged to accept the impending trade deal. Off-screen, Aunt Lydia's voice booms: "Spick and span, girls. He loves us for our labors!" The scene cuts to footage of the water the Handmaids use to scrub the Wall flowing down nearby steps in a sea of red. The water almost appears to be the same color as the Handmaids' dresses, as if the Handmaids were marked with the violence their bodies would be forced to endure. Offred pauses in front of the Wall, before filing off with the others, to watch as another rush of water is released over the Wall to remove the remaining stain, as if brushes and hoses were enough to wash away the sin ("A Woman's Place" 01:34-03-17). In this scene, the Handmaids of Gilead are tasked not only with the messy parts of imparting life but also with the dirty work necessary to remove the stain of death that tarnishes Gilead's literally and morally clean image. This scene is a chilling reminder to the audience of how much blood the Republic has spilt in the interest of power and wealth, and to what degree the Republic is willing to hide their crimes to maintain that end.

Imagine now how Gilead might obscure the true nature of its green initiatives. As mentioned above, the Republic would make it seem that agriculture was the main economic trade in Gilead. With Gilead on the precipice of making a trade deal with Mexico that would legitimize its economy at the global scale, the Waterfords host the Mexican trade delegation, presumably to discuss agricultural trade that would greatly alleviate some of the harvest issues Mexico has been experiencing. Ironically, the



Ambassador of Mexico is a woman, and Commander Waterford must appeal to her to reach a trade deal. Commander Waterford pitches Gilead as something of an Edenic state compared to other parts of the world that have not been “blessed” with Gilead’s resources—an appropriate, albeit veiled, account of the goings-on in Gilead considering their Christian fundamentalism: “We’ve transitioned to a completely organic agricultural model.” Serena also later reveals that Gilead has “reduced its carbon emissions by seventy-eight percent in three years.” What the Republic’s representatives fail to mention to the Mexican trade delegation are the other realities in Gilead, environmental or otherwise. While these realities aren’t mentioned, the series would have you believe that the Ambassador isn’t all together fooled by the Republic’s pious display. The Ambassador seems acutely aware of the palpable tension in the room, even commenting on the uncomfortable and overly-deferential demeanors of the women in the room, who she refers to as “the quiet half.” Nonetheless, the Ambassador seems satisfied enough with the Republic’s performative decorum. This is likely because Mexico, like much of the rest of the world, suffers from the consequences of environmental decline—confirmed in the scenes following. In this way, Gilead’s mythical, greenwashed image is successful in its legitimation. It would appear as nothing short of a miracle that Gilead would be able to cultivate such a thriving, ordered state in the face of such chaos, to appear to grow life where there has only been decay.

What the Mexican delegates may not know but the audience has been made privy to is that the incredible rate of reduction of carbon emissions in Gilead would not have been possible without the enslavement of women. In many ways, while Gilead seems to correct the ecological mistakes of the American past, its method of doing so is

nonetheless reminiscent of imperial expansion. Extractivism is the removal of natural resources to exploit and commodify those natural resources, as well as to free up land or space for development (Blaser and de la Cadena 2). While Gilead's greenwashed reputation claims to be above this sort of practice, it participates in something similar under the guise of environmentalism. The Colonies, for instance, are locations within Gilead that are typically out of sight. This is because large masses of toxic waste and radioactive debris is dangerous to the public and needs to be contained. These sites would also likely give the visitors and tourists of Gilead the wrong idea.

The laborers in the Colonies are the Unwomen, tasked with cleaning up the waste as punishment for their dissent. Their slave labor is characterized by a kind of extractivism—while what is being extracted are not natural resources, it is presumably the waste that has accumulated because of the extraction of natural resources, among other ecological aggressions. The Unwomen are perhaps the most marginalized female labor class in Gilead—while all women in Gilead face different forms of violence, the Unwomen are essentially sentenced to death when they are sent to the Colonies. Unwomen usually succumbed to cancers, tumors, poisoning, or starvation within short periods of time. Others, under constant armed surveillance, may die by brute force. Gilead's attractive and restorative initiative to clean up the mess left by environmental carelessness and nuclear technologies, and therefore vindicate Gilead's existence as a benevolent global power, was implemented by condemning particular women to certain death. Joseph Masco might include this practice as a form of what he calls *radioactive nation-building*, which can involve “projects that pursue the public good through means

that are simultaneously corrosive of the social contract” as they “contaminate the public sphere, invading bodies and disrupting cosmologies” (Masco 25).

The series makes clear that the work done at the Colonies is both a form of punishment and a clean-up/cover-up that contributes to Gilead’s “green” reputation. While the show does not depict Gilead’s plans for imperial expansion in season one, I question what will be done with the Colonies once they have been cleared. Richard Clayton, who discussed extractivism efforts that occurred in the early 2000s in Colombia, argued that “state and paramilitary violence . . . played a fundamental role” in these efforts. He proposed that “in the expansion of the extractive economy over the past decades, [state and paramilitary violence acted] as a guarantee for territorial control and allow[ed] capital to penetrate areas of the country where previous conditions limited accumulation” (qtd. in Hernández Reyes 225). In the case of Gilead’s state-led extractivism, I think with Castriela E. Hernández Reyes, an Afro-Colombian feminist scholar, to read Gilead’s intentions for the Colonies. She writes that the “state uses violence to control territory, bodies, and everyday lives to guarantee foreign investment and private capital” (Hernández Reyes 225). Cleaning up the Colonies “actively creates space for the tangible expansion of the one world by rendering empty the places it occupies and making absent the worlds that make those places” (Blaser and de la Cadena 3). It provides another violent avenue for the exploitation and punishment of certain bodies. Finally, cleaning up the Colonies protects Gilead’s image in order to establish international and economic relationships globally.

Like the prophetic myths of Armageddon and Judgment Day, when God made a new heaven and earth, Gilead would make room for its new version of paradise by

ridding the land of sinners and transgressors of the state. The Colonies are perhaps the most poignant depiction of ecofascism in the series—it is difficult not to compare the Colonies with the death camps of the Holocaust where the imprisoned people worked and starved until they couldn't anymore. In twentieth century Germany, environmental cleanliness quickly intertwined with national and racial purity. According Dyett and Thomas, the

interactions between ecologist and fascist social thought crystallized into distinct policy positions of the Third Reich and their accompanying rationales. The racially “superior” German people were cast as the protectors of environmental purity to help justify expansionist lebensraum (living space) projects, and later exclusionary and genocidal policies. This was under the guise of protecting the health and well-being of the German people. (Dyett and Thomas 218)

While the series does not depict traditional forms of racism in Gilead, purity was still a societal feature for which Gilead strove. In some sense, it was moral purity that Gilead encouraged, but the existence of the Colonies reveals that Gilead also wanted to cleanse its society of those that would undermine it, administering death to clear the way for new, obedient life. Where Unwomen could not be forced to procreate, be sold, or submit to superiors, they could still be forced to clean up the state, and with it, the state's reputation.

## **Agriculture in Gilead**

Apart from the Colonies, it is also important to note that Gilead's agricultural pursuits were similarly corrupt attempts at stabilizing the nation's economy at the expense of their female labor forces. In Federici's historical account of Europe's transition into capitalism, she makes it clear that agricultural commercialization did not improve the common people's access to food as one might expect. While more food was produced, it was not produced with the intention to feed the starving masses nor the workers who themselves labored to produce this food. Instead, produce was "available for the market and for export." Federici argued that, in fact, "the development of agrarian capitalism "worked hand in glove" with the impoverishment of the rural population" (Federici 70). While Gilead boasted of its bountiful harvest to the Mexican trade delegation, the series heavily alludes to the problem of limited access to food, demonstrated by an apparent struggle to acquire uncontaminated food in Gilead, as well as the intentional starvation of the Unpeople in the Colonies. The audience is made privy to this struggle throughout the series, but it first appears in episode one, when Nick, an Eye employed by the Waterfords, warns June to "avoid the chicken" on her shopping trip due to the "crazy levels of dioxin." Nick also warns against tuna—he jokes that it is simply because he doesn't like tuna, but June suggests it must be the high levels of mercury ("Offred " 11:07-11:28). For a country that purports to be so concerned with public health, environmentalism, and the propagation of new life, the fact that these foods are widely known to be contaminated yet are still available for public consumption reveals the contradictory nature of Gilead's mythos and negotiation between life and death.

The Ambassador reveals that harvest in Mexico is a struggle due to the “new weather patterns,” not unlike “the rest of the world.” It is unlikely that Gilead’s abuses would deter them from considering an agricultural trade deal when their own country was facing food shortages. Commander Warren, a colleague of Commander Waterford’s, boasts of Gilead’s citrus orchards in Florida and remarks, “I hope we’ll find other valuable resources to share with you as well.” His comments foreshadow both the consequences of Serena’s initial proposal, “fertility as national resource” and the Mexican trade delegation’s convenient ignorance of Gilead’s abuses (“A Woman’s Place” 10:09-14:05). The details of Gilead’s trade negotiations with Mexico are centered on the agricultural and sustainable element of its economy, although produce is not the only commodity Gilead is peddling to Mexico. June, who is in attendance at this meeting, is forced to regale the Ambassador with her “positive” experiences as a Handmaid in Gilead. It becomes clear that Mexico is even more interested in Gilead’s stock of fertile women than their agricultural harvest. While the Ambassador seems unsure of Gilead’s treatment of women or their extreme culture, it would seem that Mexico is in no position to refuse Gilead’s resources, and thus must proceed with the trade regardless of Gilead’s rather conspicuous disregard for human rights. In this way, it would seem that while Gilead’s environmental and agricultural initiatives camouflage the abuses going on in Gilead, these abuses aren’t entirely a secret and create lucrative opportunities for Gilead to establish relationships with other countries that have struggled with pollution and infertility.

Under the guise of their benevolence toward nature, the Republic could hide their malevolence toward human beings. At once, the Republic propagates new life and

condemns others. To outsiders, Gilead is a new paradise characterized by its removal of all unnecessary qualities—the poisonous frivolity of social media, the dangers of sexual liberation, the consequences of a neglected earth. By design, it appears to be that very next place described in Revelations after the battle of Armageddon: “the city [that] had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof. And the nations of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it: and the kings of the earth do bring their glory and honour into it” (*KJV*, Rev. 21.23-21.24). Myth, here, was a tool to literally construct a nation. As I continue my exploration of Gilead, I reveal the ways in which myth would construct the nation from within, divided by difference. In the following chapter, I investigate gender in Gilead and the different forms of labor that are prescribed to it.

## Chapter Two: Gendering Mythologies

*The LORD looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, and seek God. They are all gone aside, they are all together become filthy: there is none that doeth good, no, not one. (KJV, Ps. 14.2-14.3)*

In the previous chapter, I discussed Gilead's mythical foundation as it relates to Christian creationism (and subsequent destruction). In the following chapter, I shift my attention to another kind of myth, gendering myths. As I argue throughout this thesis, the Republic of *The Handmaid's Tale* universe has no shortage of Christian myths to justify its practices; the elite need only implement them. The Republic employs the regulation of bodies and extraordinary surveillance, first, to ensure that all constituents of Gilead are beholden to the religious values and economic needs of the Republic, and, secondly, to establish a culture that normalizes hegemony and therefore the accumulation of wealth and power for a select few. The gendered mythologies that persuade Gilead's way of life are plentiful, but I assert that the myth of original sin is the most instrumental in the construction of Gilead's society and its social practices. Chief among these practices is the enslavement of women. In this chapter, I pay particular attention to the Handmaid—the crux of Gilead's economy, an instrument of social reproduction, and the victim and facilitator of the Republic's accumulation of capital. Finally, I posit original sin as the



myth most likely to have influenced the construction of gender as a social category of difference in Gilead. Through analysis of the myth and the gendered punishments assigned to Adam and Eve, I reveal that this myth, among other biblical references, is at the heart of hegemonic power, gender politics, and allocation of certain forms of labor in Gilead.

### **Blessed Be the Fruit**

In Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Republic of Gilead rose from the ashes of the former continental United States. As the series begins, the audience is introduced to a bleak world facing rapid and frightening political change. Before the citizens of what was previously Boston could even make out what was happening to them, the Sons of Jacob, a Christian extremist initiative, commenced a swift and violent takeover of the United States, erecting the Republic of Gilead in its place. After what became known as the President's Day Massacre, a planned attack resulting in the mass murder of congress, civil war erupted: The Second American Civil War. Although Gilead sought distance from American legacy, I nevertheless situate the Republic's traditions within this legacy and that of the seventeenth-century Protestant colonies. Puritan New England, for instance, was characterized by austere and cruel practices rooted in theological underpinnings, the unforgiving conditions of early settlements in the Northeast, and the persecution and mass murder of Black and Native peoples, as well as women deemed witches. Similarly, Gilead is known for its reverent and violent faith, an ever-deteriorating environment and dwindling economy, and the persecution and mass murder of women and rebels branded sluts and slaves by the Republic. Among these parallels is

also the fact that Puritan New England and the Republic appear to employ the same Christian myths, like original sin, to model their societies after. Consequently, the constituents of these societies would suffer similar conditions.

To begin this discussion, I analyze scenes from season one of *The Handmaid's Tale* to demonstrate how Gilead institutionalized misogyny in the early stages of its establishment. This allows me to parse the misogynist overtones of Gilead's culture in the series, arguing that the Republic's social hierarchy and prescription of labor according to gender as predicated on the myth of original sin. In the preliminary stages of the Republic's establishment, it was vital that the Sons of Jacob acted quickly during their takeover of the United States—speed and efficiency were necessary if they were to succeed. If US residents anticipated the coup, there might be a mass exodus of people seeking political asylum elsewhere, causing the Republic to lose too large a piece of the labor force they were counting on. In this way, it is apparent that the people, especially women, of what would soon be known as Gilead were not seen as citizens but, rather, as resources to be hoarded during the Republic's process of primitive accumulation. Part of the Republic's agenda to regulate bodies was to limit their mobility while taking measures to implement and institutionalize misogyny.

In “Late,” episode three of the series, the creators employ flashback scenes to show the audience the events in our protagonist, June's, life leading up to the Republic's takeover. Tinged with a melancholic, dreamy sepia tone, the audience is confronted with a scene from June's past depicting the loss of her money, her job, and, ultimately, any semblance of control she had over her life. The scene opens with a disembodied automated voice: “Thank you for your patience. Due to unexpectedly high call volume,

we are experiencing longer than average wait times . . . A customer care representative will be with you shortly.” June is on the other end of this call. She replies to the automated voice’s promise exasperatedly, “Frickin’ liars.” This phone call was to the bank, presumably because June is having trouble accessing her money—and the “high call volume” suggests that she is not the only one. It is later revealed that June’s company is firing June alongside other female colleagues, though her male manager is evasive when asked why only the women are being terminated. Later, it becomes evident that June lost her job as a result of a new law that disallows women from working freely at wage-earning jobs and among men as equals. To add to June’s disorientation, she realizes that the banking issues women experienced are not the result of mere coincidence. The Republic has frozen all bank accounts belonging to women and transferred the funds to male next of kin (“Late” 04:50-06:24).

In this scene, it is notable that while the women in the office are baffled at the news of a law preventing their ability to work, the manager, despite his evasion, seems to know much more about the situation. While the women in the office seem confused and upset by what seems to be their random termination, their manager mentions he has no other choice, implying that he was, at the very least, briefed by the authorities about the new law going into effect. The fact that men seem to hold an advantage over women, whether it is their ability to continue working or their being privy to certain knowledge, is a tell-tale sign of what life in Gilead would be like. Although women are the ones primarily affected by this law, men are the first to know, exemplifying the favor and power men will receive in Gilead on the mere basis of being men. This is, of course, predicated on the idea that women are inferior to men by design—according to Christian

cosmogony, man has always come first. In the series, the form of Christianity depicted in Gilead is extreme and rather literal in its interpretation of biblical myth, thus the aforementioned sentiment would be a premise of Gilead's way of life. In Genesis 2, God created the Garden of Eden and placed Adam within it as its first occupant. When Adam becomes overworked taking care of his livestock, God decides to fashion him a helper. God put Adam to sleep and took one of his ribs, which he used to make Eve (*KJV*, Gen. 2.20-2.22). This myth of creation, at least in the context of Christianity, was the first to suggest that women's very existence was contingent on that of men, quite literally *made* from man's side to *exist* by his side, but that women's reason to exist was to serve these men, their mates. Genesis, in no uncertain terms, proposes that women are inferior to men by God's design. Presumably, this is because women are "excessively emotional and lusty, unable to govern themselves—and [therefore] had to be placed under male control" (Federici 101). Women cannot be trusted and certainly not their ideas or desires. This sentiment is depicted throughout the series—even women of a certain station, such as the Wives, are not free from it. For example, in the previous chapter I mentioned how Serena Waterford, a Commander's Wife, was actually the one to spearhead Gilead's formation. One scene in episode six, "A Woman's Place," depicts Serena waiting to speak before The Sons of Jacob about official matters. Fred tells her that his colleagues will not entertain her presence, at first expressing some discomfort about Serena's treatment after her contributions to their cause. Serena insists she understands their decision, though it is clear that her contributions are beginning to work against her. After she leaves, a colleague of Fred's asks if Serena was upset about being sent away. Fred uncomfortably replies that Serena has been there supporting them from the beginning, but he is quickly

waved off by his colleague: “It’s our fault. We gave them too much to handle. They focus so much on academic pursuits and professional ambition. We let them forget their real purpose. We won’t let that happen again” (“A Woman’s Place” 31:48-33:17).

In many ways, the Republic’s fear of and subsequent restrictions on information, particularly for the female population, manifests from this very notion of distrust. One could assume from the series that the Republic believed that women, weaker than men, couldn’t handle the responsibility of knowing important information. However, there is also the suggestion that women are more corruptible, insurgents if armed with fact. Similar to the Puritan assertion that women were particularly susceptible to the influence of the devil, the women of Gilead are at best treated as though their ideas didn't matter and at worst received with great and harsh suspicion. Reis explains,

Puritans believed that Satan attacked the soul by assaulting the body, and that because women's bodies were weaker, the devil could reach women's souls more easily, breaching these "weaker vessels" with greater frequency. Not only was the body the means toward possessing the soul, it was the very expression of the devil's attack. Among witches, the body clearly manifested the soul's acceptance of the diabolical covenant. (Reis

15)

In the contemporary, albeit puritanical, depiction of Gilead in the show, the devil is not referred to often as an entity of malicious influence. The concept of education or accessible information, among other things like autonomy and liberated sex, takes the devil’s place. But like anything forbidden, there is a temptation to consume it anyway—fruit, information, pleasure. All forms of freedom, whether in Gilead or Puritan New

England, seemed to be scandalized and the actor who exercises these freedoms sexualized, as there is a profound conflation between sex and knowledge in the Bible. After all, when Eve took a bite from the forbidden fruit, she gained knowledge of the unknown. But with this newly acquired knowledge, she exchanged her innocence. In Gilead, promulgating this conflation would reinforce the two most integral features of a woman's place: that sex is solely a punishment that should result in a child, and that, like the rape and abuse they must endure, they must accept but never question the information they are given. Thus, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, we can begin to deduce how Christian cosmogony and other Christian myths, like how men and women came to be or how the consequences of sex would forever change the trajectory of the female experience, ground Gilead's attitudes toward gender and underpin the role of women with the Republic's society and economy.

Myth in Gilead is embedded in the very language the Republic pushes to promote its interests. According to Barthes, a myth is a sign or message constructed with the intention to permeate, or even mold, a culture and to be consumed by people (Barthes 109). Myth is suggestive and therefore a rather powerful tool for mass social manipulation, not unlike that depicted in season one of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Myth emboldens its propagators to hide nothing of their intention in the use of myth, for it is not the message itself that matters, but how it is presented—“Myth hides nothing and flaunts nothing: it distorts; myth is neither a lie nor a confession, it is an [inflection]” (129). For instance, the Republic employed mythical speech by referring to Gilead as the “Divine Republic.” This nickname can be read as the mere suggestion that the Republic is ordained by God, which would certainly be a beneficial sentiment for the Republic to

circulate to justify its power. However, it is interesting to instead read “divine” as the suggestion that the Republic itself is *the* Divine— “godlike; heavenly, celestial” (*OED*). As a divine entity, the Republic’s power would be eternal, as is the nature of God. Of course, the manner in which the Republic came to be, striking a former nation down to build its own, would suggest that no nation, Gilead or otherwise, can actually be eternal or insusceptible to outside forces. However, the insinuation of Gilead’s everlasting, god-like power, or its attempt to “[make] contingency appear eternal,” is integral to the Republic’s grip on its constituents (Barthes 142). Humans compared to God are flawed and subservient, thus so too would the people of Gilead be compared to the Republic. Of course, this would apply especially to the women of Gilead.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the basic structure or hierarchy of power in Gilead followed the notion of order established in Christian cosmogony, which sprung from ancient Greek cosmogony: “increasing perfection from earth to the heavens” (Wynter 272). By establishing itself as the “Divine” or a divine realm, Gilead, hierarchically positioned itself above its “worldly” constituents. In doing so, the Republic enforces an “ontological difference of substance” between itself, “the celestial realm of perfection (the realm of true knowledge),” and its subjects, an “imperfect realm of the terrestrial (the realm of doxa, or mere opinion)” (Wynter 272-3). The Republic is the only keeper of true knowledge, and therefore it can do no wrong nor can it mislead its population. The population must simply follow the Republic’s decrees as Christians must simply follow God and trust that no harm will come to them as long as they do. Like Copernicus, who was inspired by a Christianized cosmogony that professed God as the creator of the universe so that mankind might prosper, the Republic would proclaim to its

people that Gilead “had been made for [their] sake by the best and wisest of master craftsmen” (Wynter 278). In Gilead, myths like original sin rationalize the Republic’s power as a divine nation: all humans are sinners from inception who must follow God to seek redemption. If Gilead is analogous to God himself, then only Gilead could redeem or punish these sinners. If God had the power to simply decide that Eve be met with eternal suffering for her transgressions, the Republic too could make such a judgment on the women of Gilead. For the purposes of this chapter, it is necessary to acknowledge that original sin is a gendering mythology in Gilead—while it serves to justify Gilead’s power over a morally imperfect population, it also makes the gendered social hierarchy in Gilead possible.

With birth rates dropping and the effects of climate change increasing, the Sons of Jacob reared its head to “correct” this issue head on. The Sons’ new regime included the reclassification of the constituents of Gilead and their terms of personhood. While this reclassification affected the men of Gilead, women most often and forcefully bore the brunt of these changes—classified mainly by their ability or inability to breed. As such, it is the bodies of women that faced the most scrutiny and violence in Gilead. In the following discussion, I point to original sin as gendering mythology that can be read implicitly in the series. To this point, I argue that, in Gilead, original sin is the myth that rationalizes violence against women. The women Gilead’s structure is most dependent on are the Handmaids, arguably the class of women who experience the most bodily regulation.

Handmaids are fertile women who are forced to carry children for the Commanders and their Wives. Other than the Unwomen, women who are forced to clean



up toxic waste in what the Republic refers to as “the Colonies,” the Handmaid’s position in the Republic is perhaps the least covetable. This is because Handmaids are made to participate in rituals that are of a sexually violent nature. Commanders rape Handmaids monthly in the presence and with the participation of their Wives. These ritualized rapes take place around the time of ovulation, or when a Handmaid is most “fruitful,” in the hopes that the Handmaid may conceive a child. Here, the timing of the ritual evokes the oft-heard phrase “blessed be the fruit,” a common greeting or well-wish in Gilead. When a Handmaid is pregnant, they are usually treated with at least slightly more respect from their host family, but they must ultimately face the inevitable event of childbirth, which itself can be traumatic. Doubly traumatic is the fact that Handmaids may not keep the babies they are forced to have. The child was specifically bred for the Handmaid’s host family. Therefore, the child’s legal parents would be the Commander and Wife of the household, making the Handmaids involuntary surrogate mothers. For this reason, the Republic closely monitors Handmaids’ bodies, as they are the rare “vessels” that carry the children born to the elite.

The figure of the Handmaid, I argue, is a mythical one. In many ways, the Handmaid is shaped after Eve, the first woman in Christian myth. Impelled by her “sinful nature,” the Handmaid would be forced to “seek redemption from enslavement” through her labor to the Divine Republic (Wynter 274). In Genesis 3, Eve receives a similar punishment for her womanhood. The beguiling serpent convinced Eve to eat the forbidden fruit that hangs just beyond the garden’s edge. Eve later offers some to Adam. As punishment, God tells Eve that she must devote herself to her husband and that she will be tasked with painful childbirth. The myth of original sin is a thinly veiled story

about sex and disobedience. From its suggestive imagery of succulent taboo fruit and phallic serpents to the more biblical use of the term “knowing,” which insinuates the satisfaction of sexual curiosity, the entire story is wrought with sexual innuendo. This myth establishes several ideas: the first and most impactful sin was that of fornication; women are more susceptible to temptation than their male counterparts; and procreation began because women deserve to be punished for their weakness. This myth imbues bodies, especially the bodies of women, with an association with sex, shame, and temptation. It is clear to see how a Christian regime like Gilead’s might use such a myth to justify its “cultural practices.” This sentiment is implicitly confirmed in the series when Aunt Lydia lectures the new incoming class of Handmaids at the Red Center.

In a scene of episode one, “Offred,” an older woman in a coffee-colored, conservative dress, Aunt Lydia, can be seen lecturing a crowd of Handmaids. Aunts are a specific class of women in Gilead, tasked with indoctrinating and disciplining soon-to-be Handmaids with brutal force and managing their labor arrangements. The Aunts, though women themselves, hold a rare position of rank in Gilead for facilitating the Republic’s power. Aunt Lydia shows a slideshow on the projector, clicking through images of a crying newborn child and what appears to be a factory emitting polluting substances from chimneys. “They made a mess of everything. They filled the air with chemicals and radiation and poison. So, God whipped up a special plague.” Aunt Lydia clicks forward to another image, a graph using baby-shaped symbols to show the decline in births over time— “A plague of infertility . . . As birth rates fell, they made things worse. Birth control pills, morning-after pills, murdering babies! Just so they could have their orgies, their Tinder” (“Offred” 16:06-16:50). The “they” to which Aunt Lydia refers is made

clear as she continues: “They were dirty women. They were sluts. But you are special girls. Fertility is a gift directly from God. He left you intact for a Biblical purpose. Like Bilhah served Rachel, you girls will serve the Leaders of the Faithful and their barren wives. You will bear children for them. Oh! You are so lucky! So privileged!” (“Offred” 17:48-18:26). In this portion of the scene, there is quite a lot to unpack, including the intentional and aggressive scapegoating of the Handmaid.

Handmaids, from the beginning of their violent indoctrination, are faced with the blame for the failures of their country. To that effect, Aunt Lydia suggests that it was women’s promiscuity and lack of family values that destroyed the birth rate. Of course, in the same breath, she discusses environmental catastrophe, which seems to be a much more valid explanation for mass infertility around the globe. On one hand, the sexual shaming the audience witnesses here could be attributed to the Republic’s goal to make women feel small, repentant, and ashamed so they are more likely to submit to the state. On the other, we know that Gilead is a Christian theocracy, and that unsanctioned sex is something the Bible established early on as something that angers God. Remember here that Gilead has modeled itself in God’s image, the Divine Republic. The Republic regulates sex and bodies, and those who do not comply with these regulations are punished. Under Christian myth, I argue that the women of Gilead are guilty from the beginning. On the mere basis of being women, they are the perpetrators of sexual sin like Eve before them. In this way, the series demonstrates the implications of Christian myth in Gilead’s practices and language and shows how these myths became justifications for the institutionalized subjugation of women in Gilead. Just as God saw the sins of Adam

and Eve and punished them, the Republic would surveil its constituents, anticipating their fall from grace.

This anticipation is similar to Gayle Rubin's discussion of the relationship between sexual essentialism and what she coins "sex negativity" (Jakobsen and Pelligrini 20). Rubin gestures to the way that sex has been morally condemned while Jakobsen and Pellegrini contextualize this notion against the backdrop of politics and society in the United States. This context is important to my tracing of sex and religion in Gilead because of Gilead's rooting in American history. To begin with, sexual essentialism perceives sex as a force that is both "naturally occurring [and] presocial . . . internal to an individual but outside history" (20). To insinuate that sex predates society and therefore "the rules that govern it" is to suggest that if "left unchecked, sex threatens the moral order of things" (Jakobsen and Pelligrini 20). Thus we are brought to the idea of sex negativity, which Rubin describes as the belief that sex is "guilty until proven innocent" (qtd. in Jakobsen and Pelligrini 20). The notion that sex exists outside the bounds of constructed society proposes that it is a force society would want to harness with moral reins. Otherwise, sex could become a driving force in the way that people comport themselves. After all, people who express their desires, explore their curiosities, question their limits, and demand their individual freedom to do so would threaten the hegemonic interests of a stratified whole—a society whose concerns do not lie in the rights of any one human being but in the power of the ruling class to whom the masses are subject. Unsanctioned sex under such conditions, then, is treacherous, an act of revolt against the status quo. This is particularly true for societies rooted in religious tradition, like Gilead. Original sin is a myth that suggests perpetual punishment. Thus, it did not end with Adam

and Eve—their sins were imputed unto their children and their children after that. In this sense, a person's assigned gender could seal their fate and, in truth, women were worse off. Women were damned with the pain of childbirth and the responsibility of serving their husbands. Original sin contributed to Gilead's gendering mythology, if only implicitly in the series, where women were prisoners to men and nation, and their prisons were often their very own bodies.

I further suggest that the gendering myth of original sin did more than simply intimate at the inferior, fragile, and flawed nature of women in Gilead. Rather, original sin also wields great influence over Gilead's economy and informs the gendered and commodified roles with that economy. To explain this assertion, it is important to note that the Republic's establishment could not have been implemented without the necessary resources, namely capital and labor. Marx famously wrote about how capitalist nations came to be after a deliberate process of what he called "primitive accumulation" (Marx 873). Silvia Federici discusses Marx's thoughts on primitive accumulation, defining the term by positing two fundamental features of the process. First, to achieve the ultimate goal of metamorphosis from the vestiges of feudalism to capitalism, a nation must first have acquired "a prior concentration of capital and labor." Second, "the divorcing of the workers from the means of production . . . is the source of capitalist wealth" (Federici 62-3). Here, Federici explains a process of hoarding resources, including the commodified worker, whose only recourse is to exchange their labor for the means of survival, to establish a capitalist system. Federici describes the primitive accumulation process as "among the bloodiest and most discontinuous in world history" (62). In Marx's *Capital*:

*Volume One*, he draws a poignant comparison between primitive accumulation and original sin:

Adam bit the apple, and thereupon sin fell on the human race... In times long gone by there were two sorts of people; one, the diligent, intelligent, and, above all, frugal elite; the other, lazy rascals, spending their substance, and more, in riotous living . . . Thus it came to pass that the former sort accumulated wealth, and the latter sort had at last nothing to sell except their own skins. And from this original sin dates the poverty of the great majority that, despite all its labour, has up to now nothing to sell but itself, and the wealth of the few that increases constantly although they have long ceased to work. (Marx 873)

Thus, based on the idea that capitalism follows the same structural principles as the myth of original sin, I assert that the fictitious Republic of Gilead and its economy are modeled after it as well.

To expand on the gendering aspect of the myth and how it pertains to the gender and labor roles in Gilead, I look back on the punishments God gave Eve and Adam for their transgressions, as it is their punishments that would later represent gender roles within Christian communities. Eve's punishment and the Handmaid's labor both cohere in the form of biological and social reproduction. Cindi Katz defines social reproduction as a process that "hinges upon the biological reproduction of the labor force, both generationally and on a daily basis, through the acquisition and distribution of the means of existence, including food, shelter, and health care" (Katz 711). In Gilead, the Handmaid physically carries the child to term but does not rear the child. Nonetheless,

the children she bears may one day join Gilead's labor force. Where the Handmaid cannot interfere in the rearing of the child, the other enslaved classes of women in Gilead can proceed. There are the Marthas, who manage the households of the elite, cook and shop for food, clean on their hands and knees, and nanny the children their masters demand of the Handmaids. And there are the Aunts, tasked first and foremost with the propagation of values in Gilead, educating each class of woman on the duties their nation expects of them. Even the Unwomen, those the Republic keep out of sight, toil away, ridding the earth of toxic waste while the Republic rids the earth of them.

I think with Kalindi Vora to suggest that the women of Gilead engage in a “degraded feminized labor” that the ruling class in Gilead would depend on “even as it used them up” (Vora 683). In this way, the Republic is in the business of imparting and eliminating life—the very basis of Foucault's “biopolitics” and Mbembe's “necropolitics” (Foucault 243; Mbembe 40). The decision of whether one may live or die under the rule of the Republic is almost entirely dependent on what value one brings to Gilead. Thus, especially with regard to bodily labor in Gilead, the more bodies the Republic stockpiles, the more capital it is able to generate. To this point, the Republic is also in the business of accumulating “biocapital” in the form of what Vora calls “vital energy,” or “the value imparted by labor” (Vora 684). Take the Handmaids, for instance. As punishment for their lasciviousness and immoderate freedoms in the time before, women would pay with their bodies to reclaim the privilege of survival in Gilead. Like Eve, they would be punished with the task of child birth and subjugation. Reduced to products themselves, Handmaids were resources the Republic accumulated as a nation. The Handmaid, however, would also *facilitate* primitive accumulation for the Republic.

To accomplish this, the Handmaid could theoretically churn out more and more children to replenish a dwindling labor force in Gilead. The Handmaid would also birth children for the Commanders and their Wives, replenishing the ruling class by giving birth to its successors. The children they would birth would go on to inherit the earth—and all of the resources and wealth their “parents” have hoarded. Even still, during the gestational period of their “surrogate” mothers, the “future child” itself is “protected as property” (Vora 695). This is perhaps best illustrated in episode nine, “The Bridge,” through depictions of Jeanine, a Handmaid who becomes pregnant with her Commander’s child. Jeanine’s mental health is unstable throughout the first season, beginning as a headstrong, contemporary woman and quickly deteriorating into a woman beaten down by authority and brutality. Jeanine’s vulnerability is something her Commander takes advantage of. He convinces her that he is willing to run away with her to raise their baby. When these promises do not materialize, Jeanine, who has already given birth, takes the baby and threatens to throw herself off of a local bridge while holding the child. Jeanine’s Commander and his Wife plead with Jeanine not to jump, even blatantly lying to her by suggesting that she could live with them and the baby if she would just get down. It seems clear that the Commander and his Wife don’t care at all for Jeanine; they simply want “their” child. Under the conditions of forced surrogacy in Gilead, Jeanine’s child is the property of her Commander’s family. Meanwhile, Jeanine, like Eve, is sentenced to relive the horror of rape, forced pregnancy, and stolen children until her body can no longer withstand the abuse.

Meanwhile, most of the men in Gilead have very different roles than women. While I posit that women in Gilead suffer for Eve’s transgressions, I would not suggest



that the men in Gilead suffer for the sins of Adam. Recall that Adam's punishment for succumbing to the whims of his wife would be a different bodily penalty. Adam, responsible for caring for livestock and harvest, would be cursed with working barren soil. After eating the forbidden fruit, Adam would need to labor even harder for his food, or more broadly his survival (*KJV*, Gen. 3.19). This inspired Marx's comparison between original sin and capitalism, where man is condemned to ironically fruitless labor, and woman is condemned to serve man and propagate new life, which will only perpetuate a long cycle of people serving the terms of this punishment—eternal suffering.

Nonetheless, I am not of the opinion that the men of Gilead are modeled after Adam, nor are they those who would carry on the legacy of his sins. Men in Gilead usually do not face the same types of violence that women do. More often than not, men who have transgressed the Republic in some way are executed. For example, in episode one, "Offred," three men can be observed hanging on the wall as June and her fellow Handmaid take a stroll along the river. The three bodies are hooded, each hood imprinted with a symbol that denotes the person's crime. The three bodies that hang were once a priest, a doctor (presumably one that administered abortions), and a gay man—enemies of the state ("Offred 15:22-16:00). Very few serve sentences out at the Colonies, where women, or Unwomen, outnumber the men. As I discussed in the previous chapter, in Gilead, women unable to biologically conceive children bear Adam's punishments, working endlessly to harvest the Republic's fruitless soils until they return to the dust from whence they came. The men of Gilead do not associate themselves with Adam because that would mean they, too, would need to labor for their sins. Instead, the men of Gilead, particularly the elite, liken themselves to Jacob—recall the Sons of Jacob—the

patriarch of his family, husband to Rachel and Leah, and patriarchal ancestor of the people of Israel.

In the Bible, Jacob did not begin with the best reputation. Jacob was a deceiver who impersonated his brother, Esau, to receive a blessing from his father. Jacob was a usurper. In kind, the Sons of Jacob usurped the United States and used biblical language to shroud its practices of enslavement. In episode eight, “Jezebels,” the audience is introduced to a flashback occurring in the time just before Gilead’s official takeover. Nick, the Waterfords’ driver and resident Eye, is driving for a few members of the Sons of Jacob who are devising a way to frame the rape of the Handmaids in the best possible light. Although it seems as though the conversation begins with better intentions, it quickly devolves into a frank discussion about the true nature of the Handmaid’s role in Gilead. “We must treat these girls respectfully, in a Godly fashion despite the moral stain from their lives before,” one member, a man named Pryce, suggests. “Pryce, ease up. We can’t afford all the window dressing. The human race is at risk. What is important is efficiency,” another man, Guthrie, disagrees. Commander Waterford, who is also present, asks “So, what do you propose?” Without hesitation, Guthrie replies, “It’s not rocket science. All remaining fertile women should be collected and impregnated. By those of superior status, of course.” Pryce, initially slightly bewildered and disgusted by Guthrie’s proposal exclaims, “You’re talking about concubines!” Guthrie all but shrugs, replying, “I don’t care what you want to call it.”

Commander Waterford looks pensively out of the window before offering, “The wives will never accept it.” Guthrie suggests that this is nothing to worry about, but Waterford disagrees. He believes the wives’ support is integral to their movement. Pryce

offers a solution, “Maybe the wife should be there for the act. It would be less of a violation. There is scriptural precedent.” “‘Act’ may not be the best name from a branding perspective. The ‘Ceremony?’” Waterford suggests. “Sounds good. Nice and Godly. The wives should eat that shit up” (“Jezebels” 17:26-18:30). At this point in the conversation, the audience is fully aware that this discussion maps out how the atrocity of enslavement will be marketed, emphasizing the dishonesty of the Sons of Jacob and their use of myth. There is no doubt that the Sons of Jacob appear to take after the untrustworthy biblical figure Jacob, but it begs the question, why would they name themselves for a biblical figure associated with lies?

The myth follows Jacob, impersonating his brother, from his initial lies to eventual redemption. Jacob, waiting to be confronted by his brother, finds himself struggling with a stranger. Jacob realizes the stranger is some manifestation of God who seems know of his lies. In the midst of their struggle, the stranger asks Jacob, *what is thy name?* When God, aware of Adam and Eve’s misdeeds, had asked where they are, Adam and Eve hid from him to avoid his wrath. As such, God punishes them. Here, when God asks Jacob who he really is, Jacob, faced with the choice of persisting in his lies or coming clean, succumbs to God’s will and gives God his true name. In Genesis 35, God would not punish but praise Jacob for his dutiful honesty:

And God said unto him, Thy name is Jacob: thy name shall not be called any more Jacob, but Israel shall be thy name: and he called his name Israel. And God said unto him, I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall be of thee, and kings shall come out of thy loins. (*KJV*, Gen. 35.10-35.11)

From this passage, we can see how directly the Republic has used biblical myth to shape itself in the myth's image. The elite men of Gilead pridefully name themselves the Sons of Jacob, literally likening themselves to kings. They would go on to usurp the United States and erect a nation in its place, the Republic, and multiply as God intended in the face of mass infertility. Like Jacob, if their wives could not conceive their heirs, then they would take their wives' servants, the Handmaids, as their concubines, just as Jacob took Bilhah from Rachel. If their concubines could not conceive their heirs, then they could be put to work in other ways or be disposed of like all other faulty products. The Republic was built on the premise of biblical concubines and surrogate mothers, and like Bilhah, the women of Gilead were enslaved to fulfill purpose.

While original sin is not explicitly expressed in the show as an influential myth in Gilead like the Rachel and Bilhah myth, nor is it implicitly expressed like the myth of Jacob's redemption, none of the atrocities depicted in the series seem possible without first establishing the inferiority of women. It is logical, then, to assume that original sin was a myth that would inspire the sexualization and degradation of bodies in Gilead, a Christian state, and encourage the notion that the body must be regulated, harnessed, and exploited to work off the shame and earn one's right to exist. Original sin naturalizes women as the inferior of men and men as their shepherds, allowing gender to operate within the social hierarchy as a defining feature of one's right to their own bodies.

Of course, gender is not the only feature that can and has been weaponized against certain groups of people. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the presence of race as a defining and marginalizing feature within Gilead's social hierarchy is covert but

significant. When dissecting the first season of the series, the season that is most concerned with diegetic world-building and Gilead's construction, racially motivated violence is key to understanding the mechanisms within the state of Gilead and, like violence motivated by gender, takes refuge behind the righteous veneer of myth.

### Chapter Three: Racializing Mythologies

*What? Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's. (KJV, 1 Cor. 6.19-6.20)*

Myths are the underpinnings of the Republic of Gilead. In chapter one, I broadly discussed Christian myth, particularly original sin, and the influence of early American and European nation-building as they shape the gendered hierarchical structure and values of the Republic. Like the gendering mythologies of chapter one, racializing biblical mythologies provide precedent and rationale to the Republic's societal hegemony, means of economic growth, and subjugation of women. Thus, in this chapter, I continue my analysis of Christian myth but shift my focus to racializing mythologies, as in the biblical story of Rachel and Bilhah, that further inform the Republic's hierarchical structure and practices. Although Gilead's social practices in the series do not demonstrate a particular attention to race that we would readily liken to early American colonies, the Jim Crow South, or even the contemporary United States, I argue that the mechanisms of racism and racialization still take place in Gilead in nuanced forms, namely through the assignation of Blackness to Black, non-white, and white female laborers in Gilead and through the implementation of a taxonomy of dress. Beginning with the assignation of Blackness to female labor classes in Gilead, I suggest the Rachel and Bilhah story operates as an integral foundational myth of *The Handmaid's Tale*

universe. I unpack how the figure of Bilhah typifies the role of the Handmaid as well as how it reveals the Republic's recurrent employment of Black female stereotypes and depictions of enslaved women to model their female labor classes after. While the Handmaid is still at the forefront of my discussion, I also gesture frequently to the other classes of women in Gilead to demonstrate their likenesses to Black female stereotypes, such as the "mammy" and "Jezebel" figures, mythological figures in their own right. While the attribution of Blackness informs the subjugation of women in Gilead, I propose that this practice provides only a conceptual otherness to the women of Gilead rather than sensorially detectable otherness such as physical traits denoting race. By contrast, but also to further emphasize the alterity of these women, I argue that the series depicts the Republic's implementation of a visual otherness, a taxonomy of dress, that appeals to the senses and makes difference an unavoidable and perceptible feature of daily life.

### **The Conceptual Reconstruction of Race in Gilead**

In season one of *The Handmaid's Tale* series, there are very few, if any, allusions to racism based on one's proximity to or distance from typified whiteness, at least among the working classes. Where the power of whiteness seems to remain stable is among the Commanders, although in Gilead, whiteness or proximity to whiteness does little to protect those of socially inferior stations. This is because racism in Gilead is not wholly dependent on the oppression of people of color—while the systematic marginalization of certain groups of people remains operative in Gilead, the Republic's oppressive reach exceeds these conventions. In Gilead, the category of race includes and expands beyond Blackness and other non-white identities. Mark M. Smith writes that "modern discussions

of ‘race’ and racial identity are hostage to the eye,” whereby contemporary ideas on race often reference it as something “seen” (Smith 2). However, this characterization of race ignores the “nonvisual . . . markers of racial identity” that antebellum slaveholders, for instance, would cling to in order to reaffirm the construction of race and racial hierarchy. Such a reaffirmation was necessary, as “the logic of racial slavery” predicated on the visual alone grew muddied as mixed-race slaves increased in number as a consequence of slaveholders’ sexual abuse of enslaved Black women. I do not mean to say that visual characteristics have no relevance in the racialization of women in Gilead, as this is a feature of racialization Gilead does employ, and it is one I will return to later in this chapter. Instead, I propose that Gilead’s methods of racialization necessarily extend past the mere color of one’s skin in order to oppress a larger and more varied population of women.

Gilead’s taxonomizing gaze surmises the female body’s value to the Republic based on what forms of labor in which the body can engage and, as a form of labor, what kinds of pleasure it can provide (Mulvey 64). The different types of labor to which the women of Gilead are assigned are characterized by capacities to endure varying forms of violence respective to their positions. The commodification of women in Gilead represents a metaphorical death of their humanity and personhood, while also exposing women to the very real possibility of literal death if they reject their objectification. Racism in Gilead is best described by Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s definition, as “the state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death” (Gilmore 247). Gilmore’s definition suggests that race is a construction that facilitates hegemonies that afford the powerful the means to decide



who lives and who dies. In kind, thinkers among the likes of Achille Mbembe, Hannah Arendt, and Michel Foucault argue that “the politics of race is ultimately linked to the politics of death” and that “the function of racism is to regulate the distribution of death and to make possible the murderous functions of the state” (Mbembe 17). The elite of Gilead exploit their women’s devised vulnerability to death by offering only the *possibility* of survival in exchange for labor, and they justify this exploitation through the process of othering. In the previous chapter, othering occurred through the construction of an inferior gender. In this chapter, othering takes place through the construction of a reimagined inferior race, a race that is not so much differentiated by their proximity to literal whiteness, but that is informed by a history of marginalization. Here, I argue that the oppression of Black women in the United States is the model the Republic used to sketch out the various labor classes within Gilead, with a few changes. The most significant and insidious change made is possibly the Republic’s apparent color-blindness, the insinuation that their particular brand of oppression is somehow more inclusive. What this reveals is that the category of race is not contingent on the biology or phenotype of a person. The intent of racialization is to draw attention to that which visually, physically, or socially differentiates people and cultivate an environment or society where their differences instigate such a hostility that the justification for their oppression is so normalized it goes without saying. As such, the enslaved women of Gilead are necessarily racialized by the Republic so that they can be instrumentalized or disposed of at its mercy.

Racialization does not occur in any one uniform process, whether in the fictional state of Gilead or the nonfictional United States. For example, in the antebellum period of

the United States, Smith notes that slaveholders often relied on a sensory racialization that focused on how “blacks smell, sound, look, feel, [and] even taste” to explain and justify their view of racial inferiority and exploitation. Herbert J. Gans proposed that racialization could also manifest socially, economically, and politically. Socially, racialization affects relations between different groups of people, particularly between the more general majority and minority subsets of people in a given place. “Economic racialization” steers racialized peoples into dangerous, “dirty,” and exploitative work by design. Finally, people can also be racialized politically, which typically involves “exclusion from various citizenship rights, as well as disproportionately high levels of punishment, including incarceration.” According to Gans, “racial biases are also built into some government programmes that offer benefits from which the racialized are excluded” (Gans 343). The Republic’s approach to racialization draws more on the social aspects of racial marginalization than the visual, at least in the sense that women are not further differentiated by phenotype or ethnicity. In Gilead, racialization occurs through the organization of women into labor classes, which pave the way for social, economic, and political repercussions for these women.

Each female labor class in Gilead, I argue, is based on several racial stereotypes used to describe the roles of Black women within white narratives throughout history. In many ways, I suggest that these racial stereotypes themselves are forms of myth, reproduced and readapted for its specific usage in Gilead (Hall 51, 57). Strictly speaking to the American milieu, the mythologizing of the Black woman has occurred and evolved over centuries of colonial thought, whereby “portraying African-American women as stereotypical mummies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas helps justify

U.S. Black women's oppression" (Collins 69). These stereotypes are alibis constructed for the purpose of rationalizing long histories of Black enslavement and exploitation. As Hortense J. Spillers argues, "My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented" (Spillers 65). As previously mentioned, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, race as popularly understood in a US context is not a main point of tension within the Republic of Gilead. However, racialization is applied to all enslaved women in Gilead and does not, in this case, exclude those Handmaids who are typified as white. While not all of the women who are enslaved are Black or nonwhite, the assignation of Blackness is instrumental in the Gileadean process of racialization and allocation of labor. Black female stereotypes reduce Black women to the kinds of labor roles they fill, as with "mammies," who maintain the household and mother white children. Other times, Black female stereotypes scapegoat Black women, as with "welfare queens," who are blamed for draining the economy and taking advantage of their nation (Cohen 455). While Gilead does not exclusively enslave Black women, the Republic is able to utilize these historical stereotypes to marginalize its labor classes. There is no reason to reinvent the wheel—after all, "myth is speech *stolen and restored*" (Barthes 125). Before I continue my discussion of these stereotypes, which I argue are implicit to the Republic's female labor classes, I must begin with Bilhah. The enslaved biblical figure underpins many of Gilead's practices, including the role of the Handmaid. It is important to start with Bilhah because she is explicitly identified within the series as the inspiration and justification for Gilead's reproductive politics. Bilhah herself is a stereotype, a powerless myth on which to base the submission of woman to man in Gilead.

As discussed in chapter two, the Handmaids, the “fruiting bodies” of Gilead, are the surrogates to elite families in Gilead. While the Handmaid bears a striking resemblance to Eve and her plight, Eve is simply the beginning of a genealogy of subjugation. The role of the Handmaid within the Republic is more directly modeled after the biblical figure Bilhah, concubine and slave to Rachel and Jacob. The biblical story explicitly referenced in the series and from which Gilead took inspiration begins with the sisters Rachel and Leah—the namesakes of the Red Center, dedicated to the training of Handmaids. Rachel was barren, while her sister Leah was not. Further complicating this fact, Jacob is husband to both Rachel and Leah. Although Leah, the eldest, was not Jacob’s preferred wife, she is the wife who first births him a son. Out of jealousy, Rachel hastily offers up her maid Bilhah as a surrogate: “Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her” (*KJV Bible*, Gen. 30.4). While Bilhah is referred to as a maid, it is more likely that her position and rank would be that of a slave gifted to Rachel by her father Laban for her wedding (Claassens 23). Bilhah is given to Jacob as a concubine with whom to conceive children. It is important to note here that the biblical text makes no mention of Bilhah’s consent to this exchange, nor does it mention her thoughts or reaction to that with which she has been tasked. Bilhah eventually births two sons to Jacob and Rachel. The absence of Bilhah’s perspective in Genesis 29-30 is glaring. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Bilhah’s absence is even observable in the naming of the Rachel and Leah Center. Although Bilhah is obviously the biblical figure meant to represent the role of the Handmaid, her name does not appear in the Center’s name. The positions that Rachel and Leah held bear more resemblance to the Wives of Gilead than the Handmaids; yet it is their names that are

“honored.” The motivation behind this redaction seems clear enough: Bilhah was a vessel, that is all.

Biblical concubines like Bilhah conceived children for their masters but were not considered wives or afforded other roles of consequence within the family unit. Similarly, in the series, Handmaids are primarily tasked with conceiving and birthing children for their masters. As such, Handmaids breed children who would go on to not only pass on the values of the Republic but also inherit the resources of the Republic. This inheritance ensures that wealth could not be recirculated and would, instead, remain exclusive to the ruling class. However, the Republic’s economy rests on the labors of the subjugated. Therefore, there would be great incentive to replenish the labor-force as well. Thus, it is left implicit within the series that certain children may go on to serve the economic demands of the Republic. In the biblical story, Bilhah birthed two sons who were both claimed by Jacob and Rachel; however, I imagine if she had other children outside of her relation to Jacob and Rachel, those children would likely have gone on to be slaves as well. As with enslaved women in the pre-Civil War American South discussed by Angela Davis, Bilhah and the Handmaid were “not mothers at all; they were simply instruments guaranteeing the growth of . . . the labor force.” This distinction would be especially important with respect to children bred for the elite of Gilead, as Handmaids would have no parental rights over the children they conceived, much like the enslaved women of the pre-Civil War South who were branded “breeders” rather than “mothers” (Davis 7). In this way, the figures of Bilhah and the Handmaid echo that of “African American women in slavery . . . [who] were forced to produce children that would be taken away from them” (Federici 57). As such, the Handmaid is typified by prescribed racial inferiority

without necessarily being distinguished by conventional visual and cultural markers of race.

Bilhah inspired the figure of the Handmaid and informed the construction of many of the female labor classes in Gilead as well. In chapter one, I briefly discussed a scene that depicted June's first experiences with the Republic process of implementation, where she and other women were forced out of their waged jobs. At first, no one seems to understand what or why this was happening. But soon, it becomes clear that the system of labor the Republic had in mind would not be possible if women had the freedom to engage in this kind of work. "Women's . . . [pursuit of] careers and . . . paths of self-development outside of marriage and motherhood could only be realized if they could limit and plan their pregnancies"—an outcome of sexual liberation and contraception the Republic sought to eliminate (Davis 208). Thus, an unwaged and exploitative system of labor was born in Gilead, which forced fertile women to reproduce for the state and forced infertile women to facilitate this reproduction by other means. This system would be designed around the Handmaids, who are integral to the Republic's process of nation-building, as their bodies are the force that drives the economic growth of the state. To ensure that Handmaids produced the yield that the Republic expected, bodily surveillance, especially related to pregnancy, was crucial. The close surveillance of Handmaids is intriguing because the Republic's interest in monitoring them, besides wanting to confirm their obedience to the state, is likely a result of wanting to ensure that any pregnancy was carried to term. There was the risk that a pregnant Handmaid might endanger herself or engage in activities she shouldn't be. Here, the implication is that the Republic *expects* Handmaids to partake in "illegal" activity if given the chance, placing

the onus of respecting life on the Handmaids and not at all on the Commanders who have raped them.

In the story of Rachel and Bilhah, enslavement and concubinage was normalized and legal as well. Bilhah is never referred to as a rape victim because, as a slave, she had no say in the first place. Thus, rape was legal and categorically *not rape*. According to L. Juliana Claassens, a feminist religious scholar, Bilhah's rape has literal and mythological repercussions that Claasens refers to as "insidious trauma." In essence,

Such acts where an individual or group is constantly degraded, or one could say dehumanized, due to one's gender, class, race or sexual orientation are "insidious" in nature because they are "cumulative," hence occurring throughout the individual's lifetime, sometimes even starting from a very early age. Moreover, directed toward an individual or an entire group of people, acts of micro and/or macro-aggression may recur in such a manner that relationships of power and control are both established and sustained. (Claassens 14).

Applied to *The Handmaid's Tale* universe, it is clear that Bilhah's rape and forced pregnancies are, in some ways, reproduced and perpetuated at an even grander scale to sustain certain dynamics of power in Gilead. This idea would be replicated when constructing Gilead and the role of the Handmaid. This practice recalls a 1556 royal edict in France that "required women to register every pregnancy" so that the state could ensure the successful birth of the child, or the punishment of the mother should the pregnancy fail for whatever reason. It was during this time that rape was legalized in Europe, which, in addition to laws that mandated full-term pregnancies, reinforced the

idea that women's bodies and the decisions made over these bodies were not their own (Federici 88). Conversely, in the American South about three centuries later, while the explicit registration of pregnancies would not be enforced, rape was nonetheless an institutionalized and normalized practice. While carceral institutions and convict camps of the late 1800s did little to document pregnancies of the Black women they held captive, the white male guards surveilling them often raped and impregnated Black female prisoners. Sarah Haley points out that the lack of records kept on inmate pregnancies and childbirth was "an instrument through which to mask, and thereby enable, rape" (Haley 109). On the other hand, this is not to say that no forms of documentation aided the surveillance of Black bodies. Simone Brown's research on *The Book of Negroes* reveals that there were, in fact, "archival documents to provide textual links that evidence the accounting of black bodies," and that these ledgers included counts of enslaved women and their children followed by physical descriptions which may have covertly signaled whether or not the child was of mixed race (Brown 4,17).

In Gilead, there is no such need for the concealment of rape, as it was appropriated into daily life in the form of religious ritual. Through this ritualization, the Republic had free reign to document and follow pregnancies closely to make sure that their goal to increase birthrates is met and to ensure that Handmaids remain within their control. Haley argues that "the rape of black women was an institutionalized form of violence and oppression that pervaded black women's lives and subjected them to the violence of compulsory pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood" (Haley 115). In many ways, while Bilhah is the explicit inspiration for the role of the Handmaid, the Handmaid's condition would always bear an implicit likeness to the enslaved Black



women of America. Tasked with physical and social reproductive labors, Handmaids would do for Gilead what Black women did for the United States: nurture a nation while they themselves suffered at the hands of it.

Meanwhile, for the women of Gilead who cannot conceive children, the Republic has other opportunities for reproductive exploitation. For example, many infertile women are assigned to be Marthas. Where their bodies have failed in the ability to biologically reproduce, the Republic has identified other useful modalities of extraction to be reaped from the working bodies they have selected to be Marthas. Marthas maintain an uncanny resemblance to the “mammy” figure, a racial stereotype Patricia Hill Collins defines as “the faithful, obedient domestic servant.” Collins argues that the mammy figure was constructed as a kind of rationale for “the economic exploitation of house slave” and was “sustained to explain Black women’s long-standing restriction of domestic service.” As such, the mammy figure was tasked with “loving, nurturing, and caring” for the white children and family she worked for while being forced to neglect her own (Collins 72). Likewise, Marthas are household laborers—they cook, they clean, they shop, and they often also do the brunt of the child-rearing for high-ranking households. June’s host family, the Waterfords, for instance, have a Martha named Rita, a Black woman who serves the household and would be expected to provide childcare should June have a child. As previously mentioned, Handmaids do not reserve any rights over the child they conceive and therefore are not permitted to interact or form relationships with the child once the child can be successfully weaned from breastfeeding. However, once Handmaids are excused, Commanders’ households have staff, like the Martha, that can

take responsibility for the messier or undesirable parts of parenting. While a Martha may not be able to produce children, they are still expected to mother them.

Rearing children is not the simple act of making sure they are fed and looked after. Marthas are also tasked with socializing the children that will grow up to become their masters. In doing so, Marthas are forced to act as pillars to the household that imprisons them, teaching and propagating the social values of Gilead unto the child, even if those values are to their own detriment. As such, Marthas cannot reproduce physically but do so socially. Marthas provide the basic socially reproductive services required of a nanny or mammy figure, what Kalindi Vora describes as “activities of service, care, and nurture.” Not unlike Collins’ mammy figures, Vora stipulates that these socially reproductive labors are usually at the cost of the laborer’s “sense of ‘autonomy’” (Vora 689). In the series, this stipulation holds true. For instance, during the Marthas’ forced surrogate motherhood, they may not tend to their own lives or preexisting families. The Martha and the mammy figure alike take on the responsibilities of raising children instead of her own in the pursuit of subsistence. Rita reveals in episode nine, “The Bridge,” that her son, Matthew, was killed following the Republic’s takeover at only nineteen years old (“The Bridge” 20:55-21:54). After the death of her son, Rita would become a Martha forced to mother children who were not her own. Rita is thus forced to sacrifice herself to her masters. She may not cultivate outside relationships; a Martha must remain unmarried and serve her assigned families. As with Collins’ articulation of “the mammy image,” the Martha is an “asexual woman . . . a surrogate mother in blackface [with] historical devotion to her White family” (Collins 74). Considering the ‘asexual’ nature of the Martha’s labor, it is clear that Marthas devote their bodies to the

state much differently than the Handmaid. Marthas are forced to devote their bodies to the labors of the household, the rearing of children, and to celibacy. The Martha is a surrogate mother removed from the process of biological reproduction, sex, and gestation but responsible for the social aspects of reproduction, such as the cultivation of cultural beliefs, sociality, and even feelings of safety unto children that are not her own.

While Marthas embody the mammy figure, there is an undisclosed class of women in Gilead who embody another racial stereotype, the Jezebel, which is, appropriately, their namesake. Collins describes that the Jezebel stereotype relegated “all Black women to the category of sexually aggressive women, thus providing a powerful rationale for the widespread sexual assaults of White men typically reported by Black slave women” (Collins 81). Once again, the audience is faced with Gilead’s state-sanctioned agenda to institutionalize rape through the scapegoating of so-called female aggressors. In line with this description of “sexually aggressive” Black women, Gilead constructed the Jezebel, a class of woman characterized (and sexualized) by her resistance. In Gilead, Jezebels are involuntary sex workers, and it is implied in the series that their existence is kept secret from other classes of women in Gilead. Jezebels are women of various backgrounds and who, variously, did not conform to the desired archetype of the Handmaid. This could mean that they were infertile to begin with, yet deemed attractive enough not to discard, or it could mean that they were simply more resistant to the way of life in Gilead. Since many of the women who work as Jezebels were scholars or otherwise successful women in the time before, their defiance can thus be attributed to higher education---a knowledge that bred sin, a notion that recalls Eve’s disobedience.

Ever engaged in the politics of life and death, the Republic gave most of these women a “choice” to either work as a Jezebel or meet their fate at the Colonies. “Choosing” forced sex work rather than a sure death sentence, these women would go on to work in exclusive brothels just beyond the city limits, where Commanders and other elite men visit secretly to satiate their less than pious appetites. The choice between enslaved sex work or laboring at the Colonies upon refusing the position of a Handmaid resembles a sentiment prominent in France in the 14th and 15th centuries that stripped women of their right to safety from rape—“their reputation destroyed, they would have to leave town or turn to prostitution” (Federici 48). Soon after the legalization of rape during this time, France institutionalized prostitution, which was “recognized as a public service” and “implemented by the opening of municipal brothels.” Though prostitution, whether in early France or the Republic of Gilead, would seem to be antithetical to Christian values, “even the Church [would come] to see prostitution as a legitimate activity,” as brothels were believed to i) curb the sexual appetites of opposing heretic sects and sodomites, and ii) act as a “means to protect family life” (Federici 49). Of course, in Gilead, brothels also protected family life in the sense that Commanders shielded their Wives from any knowledge that they, their “devoted” and “morally-superior” husbands, engaged in or desired such activities. While the Commanders enjoyed secret carnal pleasures, the women at home could take care of the household. In this way, Commanders were divine, sovereign entities that had the power and ability to engage in what was forbidden to women for their own protection. Women were corruptible by nature, especially if afforded with freedom. Free men, however, were

simply presiding over their domain, acting on their God-given responsibility to conquer the earth and multiply.

Interestingly, the Marthas and the Jezebels are intrinsically linked in many ways, both enslaved to the same expectations of social reproduction even though they may seem to be removed from one another. The Martha and the Jezebel align in much the same way as the mammy and the Jezebel stereotypes. While Collins' mammy figure is the metaphorical and literal wet nurse to white children, the Jezebel, in the words of Jewelle Gomez, is a "sexually aggressive wet [nurse]" (qtd. in Collins 81). Jezebels metaphorically "wet nurse" or "emotionally nurture their White owners." In this way, "the controlling images of jezebel and mammy [are effectively tied] to the economic exploitation inherent in the institution of slavery" (Collins 82). Like these stereotypical figures, Marthas and Jezebels, and all of the labor classes of women in Gilead for that matter, contrast each other only in the way that puzzle pieces are shaped differently yet fit into one another, filling in where the other lacks to create a whole picture. While Marthas rear the new generations of elite families and poise them for privileged futures, Jezebels pacify the dominant generations of men and leaders of Gilead, validating the Commanders' usurped power with their marginalized deference and sexual obligation. The working-class woman in Gilead is expected do it all: "have children . . . not have children . . . want children of her own (and not feel entitled to them), display humility, accept full self-responsibility, surrender, and (perhaps above all) be heterosexual as well as asexual—maintaining a perfect absence of desire" (Lewis 66). The figures of Bilhah, the enslaved Black women of the antebellum South, the mammy, and the jezebel all inform the labor and subjugation of women in Gilead by providing what are basically

blueprints for the constructions of social difference and labor classes in Gilead. In this way, the Republic does not racialize others by emphasizing their embodied differences and identities as conventionally understood in a U.S. context. Rather, the Republic bases racialization in these constructs conceptually: the women of Gilead are characterized by what they can do for their country and marginalized by the stereotypically subservient nature of their labor.

### **The Visual Reconstruction of Race in Gilead**

As I have demonstrated, the Republic expends most of its energies in constructing its female labor classes in the image of Black female stereotypes rather than racializing the women of Gilead by the physical markers of their racial identities. Nonetheless, sensory-based racialization was still a necessary tool in establishing the ‘otherness’ of women in Gilead. Smith discusses how “racial sensory constructions were introduced with a ferocity and frequency that slaveholding paternalism had muted during the antebellum period. Southern whites focused on reconstructing a ‘sensory otherness’ that perpetuated and reconfigured “old stereotypes concerning black distinctiveness and inferiority.” This established a “customary and, later, legal segregation” (Smith 49). In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, a similar process of reconstruction of sensory otherness would occur in Gilead to reinforce the inferiority of women in the Republic’s society and emphasize key distinctions between female labor classes. While the Republic turned away from racializing people on the basis of, for instance, visually perceptible physical traits such as skin color, I argue that another form of visual racialization was instituted in its place: a taxonomy of dress. This form of racialization is customized to the social

organization of Gilead, while also contributing to the Republic's ability to surveil certain groups of people. I propose that each class's mode of dress serves as a racializing set of physical traits in and of itself, allowing observers to immediately distinguish through visibly discernible markers between the fertile and infertile, the powerful and powerless, and ultimately, their susceptibility to life and death.

The series is visually striking to the audience. The backdrop of most of season one is decidedly gray and cool-toned, but the women of Gilead add color as they walk the streets of what had previously been Boston. The clothing the women wear in the series indicate quite a bit about their station and the kind of labor they are forced to engage. Mimi Thi Nguyen argues that "clothes are often understood through an indexical relationship to the person who wears them, functioning as clues to a person's existence in the world" (Nguyen 792). Smith, for example, noted that observers in Virginia would identify "the Negro "propensity to dress"" as flashy, adorned with costume jewelry and brilliantly colored clothes. This mode of dress made freedpeople quickly identifiable, denoting their place in a new world following slavery (Smith 53). Nguyen acknowledges, however, that certain modes of dress can be perceived as a "costume" to create a "false perception." Therefore, she suggests that "clothing might also provide an alibi for a racial colonial optics as a surrogate for flesh." In this way, certain clothing on certain bodies "imbue them with affective properties that legitimate forms of governance or violence," rendering certain "ontologically [othered]" bodies more vulnerable to "rape, conquest, detention, or death." Here, fabric is weaponized "in the racial mattering and sovereignty of bodies in world-shaping ways" (Nguyen 792). For Smith's freedpeople, their mode of dress denoted a freedom to dress as they pleased but, perhaps, also made them susceptible

to mistreatment by those that opposed their freedom. For the women of Gilead, their modes of dress denote their lack of freedom and to which labor class they belong. Much as Ngyuen describes, these modes of dress replace flesh as a racializing feature while retaining the qualities of flesh that predisposed certain people to state violence.

I begin, as always, with the Handmaid. All Handmaids wear long, crimson dresses and cloaks with white bonnets, which they refer to as “wings.” Their hair, a feature of vanity, is always in a bun hidden beneath their wings. Perhaps the redness of a Handmaid’s dress denotes her fertility because it recalls her monthly blood, or perhaps red is merely the most alarming and eye-catching of the colors, making her easily discernible in a crowd. The red color of the Handmaid’s dress also recalls the infamous scarlet letter sewn Hester Prynne’s dress, a shameful reminder of Hester’s sexual guilt, in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel *The Scarlet Letter* (Hawthorne 60). Their red dresses signify to watchers that they are Handmaids and, therefore, a fertile “breed” of women beholden to the reproductive enslavement initiative in Gilead. As mentioned in the above section, Handmaids are a particular interest within the surveillance calculus of Gilead, as their denoted fertility signals that they could be carrying children that belong to the state. As such, if nothing else, the redness of their clothes are akin to a red target on their backs, their very own scarlet ‘A,’ at once identifying them as state property and making them particularly “available to state violence” (Nguyen 793). Thus, in the case of the Handmaid in particular, the enforcement of color-coded modes of dress makes surveillance a thing of ease. Members of the Republic can visually identify a woman of Gilead and immediately discern a physical trait about their person that would ordinarily be understood as invisible to the eye: their ability or inability to conceive and reproduce.



By contrast, Aunts' brown dresses and bonnets denote two important traits to those who may observe them: i) that they are usually older women who are infertile and ii) that they hold more authority than many of the other classes of women in Gilead. The neutral tone of the Aunt's dress may be important to note in terms of surveillance because Aunts are afforded a certain degree of power and therefore, usually, do not require the level of monitoring ascribed to a Handmaid. As such, there is no need for an Aunt's dress to be quite so discernibly colored. Alternatively, Wives, whose crisp blue robes typify their class, move through *The Handmaid's Tale* world in technicolor not because they are particularly marked for surveillance but because the attention-drawing color of their dresses differentiates them from more inferior classes of women in Gilead. While Wives are nonetheless mere women in Gilead, as spouses to the Commanders, their dresses signify their superiority over the other classes of women. Wives are also the only class of women in Gilead who are not mandated to hide their hair beneath bonnets, as they are allowed a certain degree of vanity that other female classes are not. Modes of dress racialize the bodies of women in Gilead and, therefore, manifests in its culture as a form of racial profiling. The modes of dress observable in the female labor classes contribute to "racial optics that target the body as a contiguous surface of legible information about capacity and pathology" (Nguyen 799). Where the narratives of biblical concubines and Black female stereotypes provide a mythological and racializing understructure to the female labor classes of Gilead, enforced modes of dress mythologize each body itself, caricaturing its otherness and reducing it to its state function.

In this closing chapter especially, the ways that myth, social reproduction, and social categories of difference interact and manifest in the series depiction of Gilead's

nation-building/world-making are apparent. While the series creators chose not to depict traditional forms of racism, they did create an on-screen world that, if only inadvertently, allowed me to reimagine modes of racialization and racism that transcend popular or traditional definitions and explore how these nuances intermingle with other social categories of difference like gender and class to create naturalized rationales for hegemony. As my interrogation of *The Handmaid's Tale* comes to a close, I step away from the bleak world of Gilead and look to my own nation in search for answers and peace, although I know I and everyone I care about may only be met with strife. Even so, I thank Margaret Atwood, the series creators, and the concept of Gilead itself for inspiring me to keep questioning and fighting for the answers.

## Coda

*Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. (KJV, Heb. 11.1)*

Throughout this thesis, it was my aim to reveal the interconnected relationships between myth and social reproduction, two concepts I ironically described as the parents that bred categories of social difference, and how the depiction of these concepts within *The Handmaid's Tale* revealed insidious mechanisms of world-making and nation-building. These mechanisms could be observed in the fictional state of Gilead, and they explained the hegemonic social structures and marginalized forms of labor that defined the Republic. Admittedly, I explored these concepts through the lens of the TV series not entirely because I was curious about oppressive capitalist imaginaries on screen but because I was interested in how imaginaries, specifically myth, gained the power to influence realities—*my* realities, even. This thesis was a meditation, allowing myself the temporary space to regard the state or *possible* state of things from a distance.

The anxiety of possibility is what sensationalized the series. For many, watching *The Handmaid's Tale* invoked the feeling, maybe even the fear, of being on the precipice of the fictitious materializing. The book invoked this same eerie feeling, and for that reason, Margaret Atwood pushed back on those who would call her work 'science fiction.' She argued that her work would be more accurately described as 'speculative fiction,' that which already exists, the realm of possibility rather than a world of wild

hypotheticals. Atwood commented during an interview, “I like there to be some resemblance between what is promised on the outside and what you get on the inside, and if it says ‘science fiction,’ I want there to be something that doesn’t already exist” (qtd. in “Margaret Atwood on Science Fiction”). Atwood’s work, particularly *The Handmaid’s Tale*, does not imagine new, outlandish technologies or extremist practices outside the realm of reality or possibility. *The Handmaid’s Tale* very clearly depicts misogyny, racism, slavery, and ecofascism, which are neither new nor fanciful things. They exist and continue to mold our contemporary world. Further, it should be maintained that Atwood’s speculative imaginaries do not assume a prophetic nature—Atwood did not predict that the world she wrote about would begin to take shape outside the bounds of her mind or the pages of her book. *The Handmaid’s Tale* is no revelatory, oracular myth or prophesy. She simply wrote about what she knew existed. She speculated about some dystopian future, traced and conceptualized from a logical genealogy of events and movements in history that would suggest that violence, bigotry, and greed are and always have been the means that sustain hegemonic power. Myth comes in later, depicted as a tool employed to obscure these means. The United States today was not dreamed up by Atwood or any one of the Hulu series creators; it came to be and continues to evolve from the annals of European and American capitalism and imperial brutality.

Working with Hulu’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* for this thesis was a sublime experience for me. In many ways, analyzing Gilead’s system of oppression, figuring out how the Republic built it, and how they got away with it, was easier than directly contemplating the similar path my country is headed down. In other ways, the series reminded me that atrocities occur when people believe that there is a threshold for greed

and intolerance, that because something is extreme it is implausible. Perhaps there are people who watch *The Handmaid's Tale* and think, "That would never happen in real life, not to me." Others might watch the series fretfully, agonizing over the fact that last June, the Supreme Court voted to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, and the following July, when legislation to protect nationwide access to contraception was proposed, 195 Republicans voted against the measure (Karni). Although the legislation was passed, the thought that there were state forces working steadily to undermine the freedoms of certain bodies was unshakeable.

More unshakeable still was the fact that women and uterus-bearing people in the United States are not safe regardless of any so-called protective legislation. In June of this year, a woman in Missouri became pregnant for the first time. She and her husband were elated until a nine-week scan revealed that the pregnancy was not viable. Her doctor made her aware of her options: pass the fetus naturally, take medication to accelerate the passing of the fetus, or surgically remove the fetus. Because she was not showing signs of miscarriage, her doctor expressed concern that the passing of the fetus could take weeks, putting her at a high risk of sepsis. Of the options, the woman elected for a prescription of misoprostol which would induce the passing of the fetus within 48 hours. When she went to the pharmacy to have this prescription filled, a male pharmacist refused her the medication and refused to speak to her directly. This information was relayed to her by a technician working under the pharmacist. If another pharmacy had not filled her prescription, she could have faced serious medical danger (Thomson).

Another pregnant woman in Texas experienced a premature rupture of the amniotic membrane. If the pregnancy was not terminated, the fetus would likely die on its

own, putting the mother at risk for infection or hemorrhage. If the fetus in some unlikely event did survive, the amniotic fluid lost after the membrane rupture would present the child with underdeveloped lungs and high risk of stroke, among other illnesses. Faced with these horrific possibilities, the woman chose to ask for termination for which, even with the support of her doctor, she was denied by the hospital administration. She was told to wait until the situation evolved into a medical emergency and was promptly sent home. In the coming days, she was bedridden, she vomited, she passed blood and discharge, and still the hospital refused to terminate. Finally, she experienced another violent rupture within her body and knew she needed to be rushed back to the hospital. However, she had already been refused treatment before in spite of her symptoms. On her way out the door to the hospital, she managed to put a sample of the bloody, foul-smelling fluid she had just passed into a plastic baggie. This way, she had proof, a definitive sample that could be tested for infection. Finally, at the eleventh hour, she was approved for termination and labor was induced. She gave birth to a stillborn (Feibel).

These are two stories. Just two—two tragic, traumatic stories about women who were dismissed, devalued, humiliated, and almost left for dead. This is the present, this is reality in the United States today. Where we do not see Commanders and Eyes, we can still see those who establish laws to legitimate the endangerment of certain lives and bodies. Where we do not see outright authoritarian theocracy, we can still see how mythical speech infiltrates our daily lives and justifies our daily suffering. Where we do not see red cloaks, we can still see every effort our country makes to further disenfranchise the marginalized. *The Handmaid's Tale* was originally written in the format of a fictional testimony, a recorded experience of an oppressed person in Gilead.

The stories I relayed above are no different, save for one thing: they really happened. They will continue to happen. And they won't stop happening until there is radical change. I make no assumption that this project will, on its own, change the trajectory of events in the United States. What I can say with certainty is that this thesis has encouraged my own resistance, whether it is exercising my ability to lift up mythical shrouds and question what I find hidden beneath them or pen more works like this one, each work more headstrong and defiant than the last. I suppose, in spite of it all, I have faith.

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