

Power, Consent, and The Body: #MeToo and *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract:

Feminist rhetorics have long been concerned with interrupting power, questioning norms, and challenging the status quo. First-wave feminists concerned themselves with not only women's suffrage, but also with the ways in which women were portrayed in cinema and other media. We believe critical attention must continue to be paid to the relationship between media and contemporary protest. As Simone de Beauvoir writes, "It would appear...that every female human being is not necessarily a woman; to be so considered she must share in that mysterious and threatened reality known as femininity" (253). Now, more than ever, women's concerns with rape culture, sexual assault, and sexism are making their way into public discourse. While the #MeToo movement has been a critical point of activism both on the ground and online, another axis from which women are questioning the normalization and silencing of sexual violence against women has been through television. One of the most prolific outlets has been the television series adaptation of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, which showcases the ways in which women struggle within power structures surrounding consent and the body. While Atwood's novel was published in 1985, in the midst of second-wave feminism, and while Atwood was living in West Berlin, surrounded by the Berlin Wall (Field), the 2017 adaptation of the text, for which Atwood is a producer, is a timely response to contemporary feminist concerns.

In this article, we unpack the ways in which *The Handmaid's Tale* provides a dystopic articulation of rape culture in the United States. While we relate some of the dis/connections between Margaret Atwood's novel and its televisual articulation, we foremost discuss the ways in which the adaptation uses ritualized rape to challenge the normalization of sexual assault and sexism in American politics, law, education, and family life. Drawing on the dialectic between the #MeToo movement and the series, we discuss the ways in which contemporary protest and feminist activism has integrated key terms and concepts that draw our attention to power, consent, and the body. Feminist narratologist Susan S. Lanser argues that narratives, text-based and otherwise, must be analyzed within the social context in which, and for whom, they were produced: "[T]he authority of a given voice or text is produced from a conjunction of social and rhetorical properties. Discursive authority... is produced interactively; it must therefore be characterized with respect to specific receiving communities" (6). Drawing from feminist narratology, we dissect the rhetoric of ritual to discuss how *The Handmaid's Tale* has become a critical counterpart to what has otherwise been conceptualized as a social media-driven fourth wave.

1 There are now square signs that hang on the doors of bathroom stalls, attempting to define consent. As we walk to our offices, we see brochure-like documents describing what sexual assault

is and how to get help. As we write this from the United States, one of us is in the Pacific Northwest and the other is in the West. A sexual assault has happened on both of our campuses within the last week. Sexual assault is a regular part of our lives. When we went away to college, our mothers gave us pepper spray to attach to our keychains—in case we had to walk alone from one building to the next. They would show us how to tuck keys between our fingers and make a tight fist. When we would leave a party, our friends would say, “Call me when you get there so I know you’re safe.”

2 Post graduate school, Zarah is at a conference and her friends are talking about Lyft¹. One woman in the room says, “I always take a picture of the license plate just before I get in the Lyft. I text it to my husband.” The three other women in the room seem to exclaim “Oh that’s smart!” at the same time. One thousand miles away, at a different conference, Samantha and the two other members of her all-woman panel are talking about whether it is safer to take an Uber or Lyft to their celebratory after-panel dinner, or if they should walk. Sexual assault and the power dynamics wrought by sexism have been a critical way in which we have structured our lives. We pay careful attention to who is walking near us. We check our cars before getting into them at night. We text or call each other to confirm our safety. We stay silent in meetings. We submit to men’s voices in group settings. We say “sorry” whenever we have something to say. But women are beginning to pay attention to the normalized, ritualized temporalities that structure our lives. In her famous 1971 essay “When we Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” Adrienne Rich writes:

It’s exhilarating to be alive in a time of awakening consciousness; it can also be confusing, disorienting, and painful. This awakening...has already affected the lives of millions of women, even those who don’t know it yet. It is also affecting the lives of men, even those who deny its claims upon them... [I]n the last few years the women’s movement has drawn inescapable and illuminating connections between our sexual lives and our political institutions. The sleepwalkers are coming awake, and for the first time this awakening has a collective reality; it is no longer such a lonely thing to open one’s eyes. (269)

When we read Rich’s words now, we see how they powerfully speak to the #MeToo movement nearly 50 years later, when thousands of women are waking up for the first time. Now, more than ever, women’s concerns with rape culture, sexual assault, and sexism are making their way into public discourse. We believe critical attention must continue to be paid to the relationship between media and contemporary protest.

¹ Both Lyft and Uber, mentioned later in this paragraph, are on-demand ridesharing services.

3 While the #MeToo movement has been a critical point of activism both on the ground and online, another axis from which women are questioning the normalization and silencing of sexual violence against women has been through television. One of the most prolific outlets has been the television series adaptation of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), which showcases the ways in which women struggle within power structures surrounding consent and the body. While Atwood's novel was published in 1985, the 2017 adaptation of the text, for which Atwood is a producer, is a timely response to contemporary feminist concerns. In this article, we unpack the ways in which *The Handmaid's Tale* provides a dystopian articulation of rape culture in the United States through ritual. While we relate some of the dis/connections between Margaret Atwood's novel and its televisual articulation, we foremost discuss the ways in which the adaptation uses ritualized rape to challenge the normalization of sexual assault and sexism in American politics, law, education, and family life. Additionally, we argue that sexism is an ideology that has become routinely ritualized in our lives. We unpack how ritual is co-opted by contemporary feminist activists to interrupt power. Drawing on the dialectic between the #MeToo movement and the series, we discuss the ways in which contemporary protest and feminist activism have integrated key terms and concepts that draw our attention to power, consent, and the body.

***The Handmaid's Tale* in Context**

4 Hulu's television adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* has become a critical counterpart to what has been conceptualized as a social media-driven fourth wave feminism. In a March 2017 essay in *The New York Times*, Margaret Atwood draws a parallel between the political context in which she wrote the novel and the one in which the novel was adapted into a television show. Atwood began writing the novel in 1984 while "living in West Berlin, which was still encircled by the Berlin Wall" (Atwood, "Age of Trump"). Though she grew up during World War II and learned that that "[E]stablished orders could vanish overnight... [and that] 'It can't happen here' could not be depended on: Anything could happen anywhere, given the circumstances," Atwood admits that "in 1984, the main premise [of the novel] seemed—even to me—fairly outrageous" (Atwood, "Age of Trump"). Atwood had a cameo in the adaptation's first episode entitled "Offred,"—the main character's Gileadean name. While the main character is given the name "June" in the television adaptation, she is known only by her given name "Offred" in the novel—Offred being a combination of the words "of Fred," or belonging to Fred. While speaking about

her cameo, in which she plays an “Aunt”—in Atwood’s dystopian story world, a woman responsible for re-educating the Handmaids to adopt their new identities—she reports that she “found this scene horribly upsetting” (Atwood, “Age of Trump”). In the scene, Atwood’s character is complicit in the “slut-shaming” (Atwood, “Age of Trump”) of a Handmaid named Janine, who is forced into “testifying” (Atwood, *Handmaid’s Tale* 71) to her peers about being gang-raped when she was a teenager, and who is forced into believing that the rape was her fault, and that she deserved it (72). In the novel, this scene is written as a ritualistic brainwashing meant not only for the person who is “testifying,” but also for the other handmaids, who are forced to continually yell out that the victim is at fault for her own rape, and that she deserved it. After repeatedly calling Janine a “Crybaby,” Offred reflects:

We meant it, which is the bad part. I used to think well of my myself. I didn’t then. That was last week. This week Janine doesn’t wait for us to jeer at her. It was my fault, she says. It was my own fault. I led them on. I deserved the pain. (72).

After filming this scene for the adaptation, Atwood writes that even though she “was ‘just pretending,’ she found the scene was “way too much... way too much history” and reminded her that women themselves gang up on each other to assume power, especially in “the age of social media, which enables group swarmings” (Atwood, “Age of Trump”).

5 The adaptation allows us the opportunity to interrogate anew the ways in which *The Handmaid’s Tale* speaks to concerns involving women’s rights. While the novel was written in the midst of second-wave feminism, the television adaptation is being received by audiences who see it as responding within a different framework of understanding, and a new context for feminist concerns. It is important to consider how the context in which a narrative is received—text-based, visual, or multimodal—dictates the ways in which audiences synthesize the narrative into their everyday experiences. Feminist narratologist Susan S. Lanser argues that narratives must be analyzed within the social context in which, and for whom, they were produced: “[T]he authority of a given voice or text is produced from a conjunction of social and rhetorical properties. Discursive authority... is produced interactively; it must therefore be characterized with respect to specific receiving communities” (6). That *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a narrative that has productively engaged with the feminist movement across decades is something to be considered. In 1985, when the novel was released to the public, there was a similar political climate and progressive downturn as the one we are living through today—the 80s were a decade that Atwood refers to as “a pushback

decade for women's rights" that postdated several decades of pushback and push forward (Menta). On being asked what decade we are in now, Atwood marked the 2010s as too early to call as an overall decade of pushback or push forward, but notes that the current climate is "more like the '30s than anything I've lived through [with]... a kind of battle royale between extreme right-wing and left-wing push backers... more extreme now than any time that I can remember" (Menta). The television adaptation, therefore, emerges from a specific discursive context in which women's rights have again reached a crossroads, and for a "specific receiving community" that will likely have a polarizing opinion on what those rights are. Unlike the book, perhaps, the television show is not one that will reach the target audience that would most benefit from it—Atwood notes that she thinks "it's quite unlikely" that Trump and his supporters would watch the series (Menta). However, the imagery of the dystopian story world, including the handmaid costume, has been co-opted by viewers as a form of protest in the real world.

Ritual in *The Handmaid's Tale*

6 In *Ritual: A Very Short Introduction*, Barry Stephenson describes ritual as "one of the constituent elements in the mix of what it means to be human" (17). When we think about ritual, when we think about nailing it down, we might think of the events that structure our lives like liturgies at church, retirement parties, birthdays, awards ceremonies, or weddings. We experience the world through these moments. Ritual is a way of knowing the world. Stephenson draws our attention to how our definitions of ritual "are shaped not only within ritual itself but also through texts and other media" (18). Media also plays a critical role in recognizing ritual as present, or as actually shaping our lives. Ritual does not necessarily operate on positivity. As Stephenson writes, "Ritual is formative of who we are, and we variously experience the rites and ceremonies that cross our paths as uplifting or boring, exploitative or empowering, creative or moribund. To think about ritual is to explore its place, power, and potential in our lives and our society" (17). In other words, ritual is wrapped up in power structures, and when we take part in ritual we perpetuate these structures of power. A ritual is a repeated act that ascribes to rules, traditions, and objects. Ritual creates entire worlds.

7 The first season of *The Handmaid's Tale* introduces the audience to the ways in which ritual structures the lives of the women in the dystopian story world of Gilead. While the handmaids' days are stylized through repeated acts, the one ritual that exemplifies their role as

fertile women who will repopulate Gilead is the Ceremony—a monthly ritual in which the fertile handmaids submit to ritualized rape with the intention of pregnancy. When the Ceremony is first introduced in *The Handmaid's Tale*, it is performed as a ritual that no one but the Commander, the upper-class male head of the household, seems comfortable with. There are rhetorical choices made in this first performance of the Ceremony that deliver discomfort for the characters and the audience. This is critical as the Ceremony simply becomes a ritual without protest in subsequent episodes of the first season. There are juxtaposing elements to help us understand the Ceremony simultaneously as a religious fertility ritual 'and' a rape. When June kneels on a pillow in the middle of the room, she narrates: "I want to know what I did to deserve this" ("Offred"). Thereafter, the household's Martha remarks "Those eggs you got today were nice and fresh"—a comment about shopping that is also meant to connote fertility and draw attention to the upcoming Ceremony, which occurs every month while the handmaid is ovulating. This is soon juxtaposed with a remark from Rita, the household's "Martha" (a name given to a class of women who serve as domestic help in Gilead) about how she wishes Commander Waterford and his wife, Serena Joy, (as they are known in the adaptation) would hurry up because she has things to do. For Rita, this is a regular part of her month—a ritual she must be present for that gets in the way of her completing other tasks, while for June, and the other handmaids, the ritualized rapes are a constant reminder that their identities have been both reduced to their bodies, but also made possible by their bodies. In Gilead, the position of handmaid is reserved only for fertile women, and it is one preferable to some of the other roles that lower-class or older infertile women play in society.

8 After Serena Joy, the Commander's wife, enters the room, there is a knock on the bedroom door from the Commander. June narrates: "The knock is prescribed because tonight this room is her domain...It's a little thing but in this house little things mean everything" ("Offred"). As June explains how the ritual works and why particular things happen as it progresses, the Commander begins to read from his book of scriptures: "And when Rachel saw that she bared Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, give me children or else I die" ("Offred"). In some editions of the novel, this passage from Genesis serves as one of three epigraphs that appear before chapter one, along with a quote from Jonathan Swift's satire essay "A Modest Proposal," and a Sufi proverb that simply reads "In the desert there is no sign that that says, Thou shalt not eat stones" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 1). Together, the epigraphs present the problem of infertility that the novel deals with, satirize the way in which Gilead resolves that issue, and then

frames our understanding of that resolution: Gilead has done something that should not be done, but which nothing actually prevented. The phrase from Genesis takes on new meaning later in the novel. During one of her mandated trips to the doctor to monitor her fertility, Offred ominously notes, in response to the doctor asking if she wants a baby, “‘Yes,’ I say. It’s true, and I don’t ask why because I know. *Give me children, or else I die*. There’s more than one meaning to it” (61). In Gilead, infertility is a death sentence for all but the social elite.

9 The scriptural narration continues in this scene, but is layered over by scenes of the Ceremony. The words “[a]nd she gave him her handmaid and Jacob went unto her” are spoken overtop of imagery of the ritualized rape. During the Ceremony, June lays on her back on the Commander’s bed while Serena Joy sits behind her and holds June’s arms back as the Commander rapes June. The juxtaposition of this imagery and the narrative voice of scripture helps to enact not just power, but knowing. As Foucault writes, power does not prevent knowledge; rather, power produces knowledge (59). And so, it is not that the leaders of Gilead are keeping the handmaids and other women from knowing their past selves, but that they are enacting power upon them so that they create new knowledge of themselves. Power over the body produces one’s knowledge of the body (Foucault 59). There are many moments during the Ceremony where there is submission and acceptance of the ritual, especially where June stares blankly at the ceiling while the Commander rapes her. Serena Joy is so upset she turns her entire body away from June when the Ceremony is completed and tells June to leave. June remarks that she should continue to lay on the bed for better chances of getting pregnant. This dialectic between fertility and rape help to deliver a powerful message about rape-as-ritual, or rape as something culturally accepted.

10 Rape is a ritual because it is a normalized practice within American culture—so normalized that women in our communities stay silent, blame themselves, and/or do not know who they can go to. Rape is ritualized in that it is a violent assault, an act of power, and so common to women that they may not know how to name their experiences as rape. In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, ritual is defined as “of or relating to the performance of rites,” “of a substance or object, etc.,” habitual, and customary (“Ritual”). Ritual objectifies the material with which it engages and performs socially accepted practices. In foregrounding rape as ritual, *The Handmaid’s Tale* demonstrates the objectification of women, the ways in which women become objects or vessels by which those in power may gain more power. In the Ceremony, the handmaid becomes the object and vessel by which the Commander can ensure the future of Gilead. June’s past, her identity as

June (rather than Offred), and her familial and kinship ties are irrelevant when she becomes an object by ritual. Indeed, the Ceremony is a *performance of rites* and an exercise of power. It is fitting that June calls the knock on the door *prescribed*, as a ritual is also defined as a “prescribed form or order” (“Ritual”). While extremely difficult to watch, from the very first episode of the first season, viewers are forced to accept the rituals of the Ceremony, and its potential results—pregnancy and birth—as integral to their roles as women, fertile or not, in the same way as June, the other handmaids, and the wives of Gilead.

11 The Ceremony is not the only ritualized practice within the TV adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Ritual structures the lives of everyone who lives in Gilead, even down to the verbal exchanges when the people meet each other. For example, the ritualized greeting when handmaids meet each other for daily tasks is often “Blessed be the fruit,” to which the one responds “May the Lord open” (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 19). This exchange, which is used often in both the novel and the adaptation, encourages fertility and is a constant reminder that the handmaids’ role is to produce children. Other ritual-based greetings and farewells that are often used include “Praise be” (19), “Under His Eye” (45), both which remind people in Gilead that they are always being watched. Over time, however, these phrases become pejorative in usage, especially the phrase “Praise be,” which is traditionally understood as praising God. The phrase becomes the major way in which handmaids express their dissent to power and alliance to one another. Verbal exchanges are important means by which ritual is carried out. As June expresses, “Gilead is within you like the spirit of the Lord. Or, the Commander’s cock. Or cancer” (“Unwomen”). Ideology, when ritualized into our lives, becomes a part of our very bodies. Atwood integrated these phrases to demonstrate the ways in which they can reinforce ideology, but they also serve as signals to the audience that our ritualized exchanges with each other may have meaning beyond what the words alone would seem to suggest.

12 Marriage is also a critical underpinning to both seasons of *The Handmaid’s Tale* because it helps demonstrate how power over women is constituted through ritual. The ritual of marriage is enacted in the second season when Commander Waterford assigns Nick, the Waterford household’s lower-class male security guard, a wife; she is a fourteen-year-old girl named Eden (a clearly biblical name), whom he is forced to marry (“Seeds”). The Commander’s choice to assign Nick a wife so suddenly is significant because Nick and June are in a romantic relationship, and the commander has begun to suspect as much, though he can neither prove it nor punish them for

it. In fact, this relationship develops after Serena orchestrates a secret meeting between Nick and June in an effort to get June pregnant, which the Commander has been unable to do (“Faithful”). This effort is ultimately successful, though the pregnancy is the result of sex performed lovingly and consensually after this initial arranged meeting. If discovered, the consequence for all involved would be death—even for Serena, whose actions are driven by failure of the system put in place by Gilead to solve the infertility crisis. Many powerful men are given wives at the same time as Nick in an organized marriage ceremony put on by Gilead’s powerful male leader. Each man is matched with a young woman who is covered by a veil that hides her face, which both conceals their youth from the audience, and communicates to the men, who are being assigned a wife solely for the purpose of reproduction, that their wife’s appearance is unimportant. As the veils are lifted, Nick and the audience alike are shocked to see that the brides-to-be are children who are happily and longingly looking at the faces of the men who reveal them. They are the first fully-indoctrinated generation of Gilead, unfazed by the societal norms of “the time before” (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 9). Throughout this scene, it is easy to miss the flash of differently-colored dresses in the crowd as the women of Gilead observe the marriages taking place. In the stands, the mistresses of Gilead are in the front bottom row and dressed in blue. Above them are the handmaids in red, and at the top are rows of Marthas, dressed in a very light—perhaps intentionally light—shade of green. Together, their dresses look a great deal like a bastardized representation of the American flag, which communicates the oppression of women with the United States. Once home, Nick reads scripture similar to that which the Commander reads before the Ceremony in front of Eden and the rest of the household to symbolize that, once the marriage is consummated, Eden is part of the Waterford family unit, and is equally responsible for the production of a child (“Seeds”). It is assumed that at the end of the night, Nick consummates the marriage through what he knows to be statutory rape. Though he is repulsed by it, his life is at risk if he does not do so, and the show’s signaling of this internal conflict demonstrates how Gilead grooms the next generation by having men (even nonconsenting men) taking power over a generation of women too young to consent.

13 This marriage scene is juxtaposed with scenes from the colonies, a place where infertile women or “Unwomen” (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 7), the elderly, or fertile women deemed to be criminals, are sent to be punished and often worked to death. In the scenes at the colonies, the character of Emily, who is known only as “Ofglen” in the novel, is introduced in the television

adaptation as a married lesbian who is forcibly separated from her wife and her son (“Unwomen”), and is later sent to the colonies. In this episode, Emily is seen taking note of her own declining health and resigning herself to hopelessness. When she is enlisted to help aid in the marriage of two other women at the colonies—Fiona and Kit—before Kit dies, she at first finds the marriage pointless, but eventually sees it as a source of hope, and the scene culminates in the Jewish marriage of the two women, and Kit’s death the next morning. While the marriage between Eden and Nick is the Commander’s way of enacting power on Nick and June’s relationship, the marriage between Fiona and Kit is about love and fulfilling a commitment before one of them dies. Ultimately the two marriages create dissonance to represent how many in the United States perceive what marriage is and what a woman’s role is in that marriage. The Christian marriage between Nick and Eden demonstrates submission, while the marriage between the two colony women represents resistance. By getting married before Kit’s death, both she and Fiona resist Gilead’s ownership of them. Emily is also a source of resistance in the episode titled “Unwomen” earlier in season two when a Commander’s wife arrives at the colonies, and she poisons her with what the wife thinks are antibiotics. As the mistress dies, Emily remarks, “Every month you held a woman down while your husband raped her” (“Unwomen”). This scene represents a shift where, in the words of Adrienne Rich, ritual is interrupted. Rich writes that “this drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society” (270). Emily’s act is one of the first deliberate attempts by a handmaid to push back against ritual—here, quite explicitly.

Ritual and Challenging American Rape Culture through #MeToo

14 The first season of *The Handmaid’s Tale* immerses the audience into the new regime and Gilead culture. Along with major characters like June and Moira, June’s best friend, who is both a lesbian and a woman of color, we understand how rituals structure and drive the lives of Gilead’s inhabitants. However, in season one it is clear that the Ceremony is no longer recognized by handmaids as a ritual. The Ceremony is identified and referred to as rape. The second season coincides with a rise in the #MeToo movement in the United States and abroad. Season one of *The Handmaid’s Tale* uses ritualized rape to challenge the normalization of sexual assault and sexism in American politics, law, education, and family life. It is also important to recognize that season

two engages in a dialectic exchange with fourth-wave feminism as the #MeToo movement that continues these efforts.

15 The #MeToo movement rose prominently in January of 2017. However, it is important to acknowledge that Tarana Burke was the first woman to coin the phrase in 2006; Burke started a nonprofit called Just Be Inc., which helps sexual assault and harassment victims (Garcia). When the phrase that drove her organization was tweeted by Alyssa Milano in the hashtag #MeToo, a new surge in fourth-wave feminism began. A mere 10 days after actress Ashley Judd accused Harvey Weinstein of sexual misconduct, Milano tweeted, “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted, write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet.” October 2017 was also the month athlete McKayla Maroney accused Dr. Lawrence Nassar of sexual assault. It was when Kevin Spacey was also accused of assault. November 2017 saw several more accusations and confirmations of sexual assault and harassment, including Louis C. K.’s admission to sexual misconduct. December 2017 included the resignation of U.S. Senator Al Franken and *Time* magazine named the “Silence Breakers,” the faces of the #MeToo movement, as “Person of the Year.” January 2018 was marked by the Times Up anti-harassment coalition formation, Oprah Winfrey’s Golden Globes Awards speech, and the second Women’s March. The spring of 2018 was characterized by countless moments of sexual assault accusations and stories by prominent actors, actresses, political figures, academics, and students. Indeed, plenty of these spotlight moments appeared in major media, but countless others appeared in social media as a simple tweet that read #MeToo, as Instagram and Facebook post narratives, and as powerful and intimate stories we told to our friends. Amidst this movement in April 2018, the second season of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which picks up where Atwood’s novel left off and is, therefore, a completely new addition to the story, was released on Hulu.

16 If ever there was a response to a feminist movement in media, it is *The Handmaid’s Tale*’s second season. Titled “June,” the opening episode of season two depicts June and the other handmaids at a facility where they are positioned for hanging. The viewer sees each handmaid with her hands bound and her face muzzled. In muzzling the women, the handmaids lose their ability to speak to each other, protest, or bite the men who herd them through a hallway. Ultimately, the women are not hanged with the nooses placed around their necks; however, they spend considerable time with Aunt Lydia who uses a cattle prod on them. In this same episode, Aunt Lydia coaxes and ultimately forces June to both eat and walk, demonstrating that Gilead’s

handmaid ideology has even infiltrated the basic functions of life. In June's flashbacks, which are dispersed throughout the episode, one witnesses both her loss of agency in gaining access to reproductive healthcare (i.e. birth control) and the judgment from the hospital and elementary school for two things: working and sending her daughter to school with a low-grade fever. Positioning the handmaids as livestock throughout the episode, and juxtaposing agricultural imagery with June's flashbacks on being perceived as a bad mother, serves to generate dissonance surrounding women's rights. The audience for *The Handmaid's Tale*, immersed in #MeToo discourse is ultimately positioned pre-movement, back in a world where we pay little attention to the intricacies of sexism and misogyny. Amidst news on Bill Cosby, Tom Brokaw, and months of the #MuteRKelly campaign, when season two's inaugural episode ends with June's escape from a hospital in an attempt to escape Gilead, it is undoubtable that *The Handmaid's Tale* is nodding to the successful deployment of "No More"—a phrase developed as part of the movement to end sexual assault and domestic violence—as a rhetorical strategy of #MeToo. June's escape from the Commander and his wife symbolizes the constant battle of women to remove ourselves from sexism and its resulting violence.

17 June's escape from Commander Waterford and Mrs. Waterford is, in many ways, a failure since she is found within a couple of episodes. However, her break away from ritual and hegemony is pleasing to viewers who have experienced sexual assault, harassment, and misconduct. This is because it recognizes the rituals critical to the culture of Gilead as assault and as violent means of asserting hegemony. It is striking when Commander Waterford remarks that June was kidnapped when she arrives home ("Other Women"). Positioning June's escape as a fictional kidnapping, placing the blame on kidnappers instead of June, dismisses her act as an act of resistance and also asserts power over her. In many ways, it articulates the denial some men have articulated during the #MeToo movement. In denying that June had anything to do with her own escape Commander Waterford denies that she ever had a voice. When "Other Women" ends with June standing in front of the front gate of the Waterford household waiting for her shopping partner—a ritualized act she took part in every day of the week before her escape—she repeatedly utters the phrase "We've been sent good weather" and nothing else. Such performativity simultaneously mocks ritual and enacts June's submission.

18 In the TV adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Mrs. Waterford, or Serena as she's more commonly known, plays an important role in being complicit to rape culture. She, like many of

the wives of Gilead, takes part in the Ceremony by holding down the handmaid's arms as her husband performs the ritualized rape. Serena is often cruel to June, but a stark shift of character occurs in the second season as her character is given more dimension, thus representing a slow but critical interruption of ritual. As many characters' backgrounds are explored throughout the show, Serena's is striking for how it demonstrates complicity and the giving up of one's rights. In a flashback to her life before Gilead, she is seen giving a speech to college students at a university about her beliefs that women should submit to their husbands and the audience's resulting disgust is apparent. Drawing on anti-Trump rhetoric in the real world, after Serena enters the lecture hall, a man of color can be seen holding a "Resist" poster ("First Blood"). Other audience members shout at her to leave and even call her a "Nazi," again reminding the audience of recent real-world events involving the clashes of such views. The scene demonstrates that she is a prolific activist; while conservative, she is an active participant in activist rhetoric in service of women, and this is a rhetoric that clearly held enough power to eventually become one of the guiding principles of Gilead. Serena's beliefs that women should submit to their husbands and take on the role of reproducing and raising children in lieu of pursuing a career make her complicit to the rape culture depicted in Gilead. What makes Serena's role in Gilead even more complicated is that in these flashbacks to her life before, Serena is seen using her beliefs as a basis for helping her husband develop the structure of Gilead that would ultimately be put into law. However, as mentioned, these laws—based on her own belief in women's responsibility to reproduce—ultimately do not produce the desired effect of solving the crisis of infertility, and instead, simply take away all of the agency that Serena and other women enjoyed before the creation of Gilead in addition to the infertility. Over time, through the flashbacks written into the TV adaptation, we witness both Serena's own feminist rhetoric and her submission to the norms and rituals of Gilead. Much of this is because women are ousted from having a voice in how Gilead will proceed as a nation. There are two contrasting storylines that drive the character of Mrs. Waterford: 1) the past where she submits and becomes more complacent to the power being enacted upon women; and 2) the present where she demonstrates trepid moves to protect and advocate for the rights of women.

19 As she has lost much of her agency, Serena exudes more resistance as the second season progresses. For example, when Commander Waterford was injured in a bombing orchestrated as an act of resistance by a group of handmaids, she takes it upon herself to draft new security orders and warrants and she asks June to help her ("After"). Women are not supposed to read or write in

Gilead, so in asking June to participate in drafting documents, this gesture honors that there is more depth to each woman beyond her reproductive capabilities. Later, when Jeanine finds out her baby, who was taken from her and given to her Commander and his wife, is sick, June feels comfortable asking Serena for her help in devising a way for Jeanine see the baby. Serena does so by forging Commander Waterford's signature on papers that allow the baby to see a specialist who is an expert on the baby's condition—a woman currently serving as a Martha because being a doctor, or indeed having any job at all, is forbidden for women in Gilead (“Women's Work”). Serena's gestures in this particular episode demonstrate acts of resistance that she did not exude as a character in season one, which aligned closely with the novel, and was adapted before the #MeToo movement became more prominent in American politics.

20 Serena's awareness of women's rights manifests in her gaze toward Canadians as she makes a visit to Canada with Commander Waterford. When they are driven to their visit with Canadian officials, she watches the women at work in business attire, a couple kissing, and people crying; Canada has not adopted the same societal structure as Gilead, and therefore is unchanged from “the time before” (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 9) Gilead. The culminating act of resistance Serena takes part in is when asks the council for the right to teach their children how to read the Bible (“The Word”). Even though she is silenced once again, and even loses a finger for her request and for reading from the Bible, her actions engage some of the important participation within #MeToo discourse. Because of their circumstances, not all women who have experienced sexual assault have directly participated. It is a deeply personal choice to take part in #MeToo-driven social media, activism, and protest. However, some of the most overlooked participation in contemporary feminism has been in the ways people share, like, retweet, and retell the stories they have come across. Because Serena could not speak out and remains submissive to ritualized rape and hegemony, she is ultimately seen raising the voice of another by letting June take her daughter, born earlier in season two and taken away by the Waterfords, away with her when she escapes in the season two finale. This confirms Serena's newfound resistance to rape culture and its contemporary manifestations (“The Word”). This also positions June as subject, rather than object, which echoes one of the most important ways in which the #MeToo movement has challenged ritualized rape. In #MeToo, sexual assault is foregrounded as a true experience and the person who has experienced it tells their story and takes back power.

Contemporary Protest of Ritualized Rape

21 As *The Handmaid's Tale* television series has responded to the #MeToo movement, so too has the #MeToo movement responded to what occurs in season two. One striking moment in the second season of *The Handmaid's Tale* is at the end of the sixth episode. Several prominent men sit at the newly-built Rachel and Leah Center, where new handmaids are reconditioned, and Commander Waterford is delivering a speech. Handmaids stand both above the men and outside on the ground floor behind glass windows. Commander Waterford remarks:

My brothers, this facility represents a shared vision to restore a moral world in which we can serve God . . . Here, we can continue to show our commitment to Him and his Word and to honor our promise to the people of Gilead that we will replenish this earth with healthy children of faith.” (“First Blood”)

As Commander Waterford tries to finish his remarks, a handmaid named Ofglen (Emily's handmaid replacement) walks into the room from the outside. Ofglen gestures to the handmaids on the first floor and shows them the trigger in her hand for a bomb. As the handmaids run, she pivots and turns toward Commander Waterford. Running toward him, Ofglen triggers the bomb. Pre-bomb, the visual rhetoric of the gaze from the handmaids that are above the commanders is striking; they look down upon the commanders as Commander Waterford remarks that handmaids support their mission. This scene is echoed months later when Dr. Christine Blasey Ford testified before a committee after accusing Supreme Court Justice nominee Brett Kavanaugh of sexual assault. Dressed as handmaids, 15 women lined a balcony in the Hart Senate Office Building and engaged in a silent protest (Haslett). They gazed down upon onlookers and the door to the room where Ford and Kavanaugh give their testimonies, much like in *The Handmaid's Tale* at the opening of the Rachel and Leah Center.

22 Another critical dialectic between the #MeToo movement and *The Handmaid's Tale* occurs with regard to activist protest. In contemporary on-the-ground and digital protest, women and allies speak out against rape by sharing their personal stories and attaching their own names to them. This adds important depth and nuance to the #MeToo hashtag. Similarly, in the middle of the second season, while out shopping, June tells Emily her real name (“After”). June then turns to another handmaid and repeats the same act. This spreads throughout the grocery store and we hear the names of women—Dolores, Alma, Sarah. It is a small moment, but an act of resistance that mimics Milano's request that women who had experienced sexual assault and harassment tweet #MeToo. This performance acknowledges the solidarity and coalition-building in fourth-wave

feminism outside of the text. More visible protests occur when the Waterfords visit Canada in “Smart Power.” In one protest scene, we see Luke, June’s husband who escaped to Canada after her capture in Gilead, and Moira, who escapes to Canada later as well, holding signs with June’s face, and the words “My name is Moira,” respectively, in order to get the Waterfords’ attention. The act of naming or embodying serves to interrupt sex-as-ritual or ritualized rape-culture just as activists do when they say #MeToo. The use of names and faces in signs in *The Handmaid’s Tale* serves to give a platform to the #MeToo movement in these ways. In combining the body with a name, a hashtag, or other visual rhetoric, the person assaulted becomes more than a “sexual assault victim,” but an ally to those who surround her and who are immersed in the same rape culture.

23 Perhaps one of the most visceral moments within the series that is an act of activism comes in the episode titled “The Last Ceremony.” This is the only moment in the second season where the Ceremony is performed, which is a striking difference from the first season, where the Ceremony is featured in many episodes. During the scene, Emily, who has been returned from the colonies to become a handmaid again, can be seen enduring the ritualized rape of her new Commander. In voiceover, we hear June saying:

You treat it like a job. An unpleasant job. To be gotten through as fast as possible. Kissing is forbidden. This makes it bearable. One detaches oneself. One describes an act of copulation, fertilization perhaps. No more to you than a bee is to a flower. You steal yourself. You pretend not to be present. Not in the flesh. You leave your body. (“The Last Ceremony”)

In most film and television, when a sexual assault occurs, it is flashed before the audience in a quick and violent way; we may see pain on the woman’s face afterward, but ultimately we never know it in the way she does. This moment in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is activist because pain and detachment are viscerally showcased to name the act as rape. In one of the scenes that soon follows, the wives prepare the birth ritual for Serena, which attempts to make the birth of a child conceived during rape beautiful, and is meant to make the wife of the household feel as if she conceived the baby instead of the handmaid. When the baby does not come quickly enough for her liking, Serena suggests a “natural way” to induce labor that involves Commander Waterford raping June. This scene further complicates our understanding of rape-as-ritual because we are forced to confront the ways in which this rape, though exactly the same as the Ceremony, happens outside of the ritualized Ceremony, and therefore, is depicted as much more of a violation. This is further complicated by the fact that Serena aids the rape, and is understood as symbolically raping June

because it was not only her idea, but she is also seen to be forcibly holding June down while it happens—an act that is clearly distinguishable from the ritualistic and non-functional holding of hands during the Ceremony. In this moment, Serena’s acts are reminiscent of many men and women who remain in disbelief of the women in the #MeToo movement who have come forward. At the same time, this may be the moment where Serena realizes that what they have been doing all along to June, and that what they have been calling “the Ceremony” is, in fact, rape. Arguably, Serena’s resulting knowledge, and apparent regret, of how her actions subvert the cognitive dissonance that has allowed her, until now, to see the Ceremony as a consensual act, is what leads her to the act of resistance discussed above in the season finale.

24 The representation of ritualized rape in the television adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale* challenges the viewing public and the larger #MeToo movement to think about how rape has become so a part of our culture that it is taken as a given; as ritual, and therefore, as part of what it means to be a woman in the United States. By immersing in Atwood’s dystopian universe, by either reading the novel or watching the television adaptation, the audience is not offered the opportunity to escape their everyday realities, as one might expect a novel or television show to do. Rather, both versions of *The Handmaid’s Tale* were created to offer a discomfiting, if exaggerated, representation of the conditions that audiences deal with in the real world. If the novel’s dystopian representation of women’s rights issues in the midst of second-wave feminism seemed “fairly outrageous” (Atwood, “Age of Trump”) at the time it was released, then it is important to consider how the television adaptation is being received now as the #MeToo movement unfolds concurrently, and the show engages directly with those issues. Now, at another crucial time for women’s rights and as another wave of feminism unfolds, fictional narratives like Hulu’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* have the potential to evocatively represent the real-world conditions that women live with everyday, and for that reason, it is important to consider the ways in which they serve as a reflection of the issues that most urgently need to be addressed in our society.

Incitement to Further Study

25 Scholarship suggests that up to 20% of women in college are raped by the time they finish their degrees (Krebs et al. 643). Contemporary discourse is so critical that many women do not report sexual assault, and therefore, these numbers could be much higher. This occurs is either because women know their perpetrator and feel pressure not to report them or because they do not

know how or where to report their assault safely without risking judgment, condemnation, or her private information being released (Streng and Kamimura 65). This is why assault survivors and their activist allies will continue to protest against moments where women are disbelieved, where reproduction rights are threatened, and where power is being enacted upon women in various institutions—including marriage, the workplace, and media.

26 Recent protests, including the aforementioned protest at the Kavanaugh hearings, have used the visual rhetoric of the handmaid. For example, there have been handmaid protests in Ireland and Argentina for abortion legislation. Atwood explains that the red cloak worn by the handmaids “has been adopted by women in many countries as a symbol of protest about various issues having to do with the requisitioning of women’s bodies by the state” (Beaumont and Holpuch). She believes that the symbolic handmaid costume is effective because “Nobody can accuse [protestors] of dressing immodestly, and [they] can’t be kicked out for causing a disruption because [they’re] not saying anything,” (Beaumont and Holpuch) and, at the same time, “anybody looking at it understands it” (Walsh). When it was discovered that Vice President Mike Pence would be in New York on July 31st, 2018, dozens of women dressed as handmaids with tiny shoes in their hands to call attention to the separation of migrant children from their parents. This work demonstrates the ways in which feminist visual rhetoric is not just concerned for sexual assault victims, but extends its critical political engagement to matters of immigration and citizenship as well.

27 There have also been more localized protests involving imagery and symbolism inspired by *The Handmaid’s Tale*, such as a small protest occurred in Staten Island, New York at a farmers market following the Kavanaugh hearings (Kashiwagi). A small-town protest also occurred in Belgrade, Montana in early November 2018 where a single woman was dressed as a handmaid in a crowd of less than one hundred to protest a Trump rally (Lynes). There was also Roundrock, Texas in October of 2018 where members of the Reproductive Justice Alliance and The Texas Handmaids gathered in handmaid garb to protest the funding of the Pregnancy Help Center of Williamson County (Miller). The Texas Handmaids reportedly have a mission that drives their work: “[T]o use the dramatic red robes and white bonnets from *The Handmaid’s Tale* to call out politicians and businesses that keep women from accessing reproductive justice” (Miller). While regional culture certainly affects the ways in which handmaid rhetoric is used, we must pay considerable attention to how the #MeToo movement and *The Handmaid’s Tale* will continue to

engage in intersectional politics. In response to being asked about how the US informs the novel, Atwood responded, “I probably wasn’t worried enough. Yeah [sic], I think if you look at state by state, some of the laws their putting in right now, you know I probably wasn’t quite worried enough” (Beaumont and Holpuch).

28 On November 28th, 2018 Margaret Atwood announced that she has been writing a sequel to the *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which will be released in September of 2019 and titled *The Testaments*. In her press release announcing the sequel, Atwood wrote: “Dear Readers: Everything you’ve ever asked me about Gilead and its inner workings is the inspiration for this book. Well, almost everything! The other inspiration is the world we’ve been living in” (“Atwood Writing Sequel”). Atwood’s decision to release a sequel to the novel after over thirty years is further proof that the novel, and its television adaptation, engage with issues that are more urgently relevant now than ever before. Much as the TV adaptation has allowed us to do, the ways in which *The Testaments* takes inspiration from contemporary discussions on these issues will offer further opportunity to examine how Atwood uses Gilead as a dystopian mirror to reflect concerns surrounding women’s rights in our own world. The connections we find between the TV adaptation and #MeToo are by no means exhaustive. Further research must pay attention to how silence plays a critical role in contemporary feminist rhetoric. In many handmaid protests, the handmaids remain silent while interrupting the normativity of a political space or moment. Likewise, unpacking the ways in which ritualized acts go unnoticed and unnamed in our culture can aid in interrupting dominant ideologies that enact power upon women. The movement and the series share the explicit act of speaking out, but in what ways is silence also a critical rhetorical strategy? Can silence encourage or *be* a pejorative act that interrupts hegemony? We are motivated to explore this further and conclude by stating that women are beginning to wake up to the ways in which their bodies are objectified and dismissed. Women are also becoming aware of how their bodies have their own story and play an integral role in their survival.

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