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The Handmaids Made Visual: Seen and Unseen

*The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood was given new life this year when it was adapted into a TV series on Hulu's streaming service. The show was received with critical acclaim and accolades, including eight Emmy awards. The themes within the series felt timely as well, having arrived amid a political climate tinged with shades of misogyny all the way to our highest elected office. Women protesting on the local and national level have put on the red habit and white winged cap of the handmaid as a symbol of protest to the perceived chipping away of women's reproductive rights. Protestors carry signs that read "Make Margaret Atwood Fiction Again!" or the popular rallying cry from the book, "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum"<sup>1</sup> (Levine). Given that *The Handmaid's Tale* has become a symbolic touch stone in our feminist lexicon, it is worth-while to critically examine the TV adaptation, or rather, "to read beneath it" (Atwood 82) as Offred does when she is allowed a rare moment to watch television.

In viewing Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale*, one of the things that stands out as being different from its source material is the diverse cast. Offred's best friend Moira, and her husband Luke are cast with black actors, and correspondingly, Offred's daughter is bi-racial. Elsewhere, black and other non-white ethnicities are among the ranks of the handmaids, and even some black commanders can be spotted if you look closely enough. It struck me as curious that the race of these characters didn't affect them in a society that is grossly misogynistic, homophobic,

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<sup>1</sup> A faux mimicry of Latin Offred finds etched into the interior of her closet by a previous handmaid (Atwood 52). In the novel it means "Don't let the bastards grind you down."

and fixated on color coding its women to denote their social rank and function. I wondered: given the lengths the Wives<sup>2</sup> go to enact a fantasy<sup>3</sup> that infants birthed by handmaids are really their own, can we believe they would take no issue with being assigned a black handmaid whose bi-racial baby would disrupt said fantasy? By what logic and under what motivation have the show's creators chosen to disregard that the book paints Gilead as a racist, segregated society? I could argue that the show is moving, compelling—that it affected me personally as a woman raised in a patriarchal religious tradition where I was taught that being a mother was my divine destiny. However, as scholar Rachel Clark Mane advises, when third-wave feminists analyze popular culture, they “need to go beyond the question ‘is this empowering or pleasurable for women?’ to ask, Which women? Under what conditions? With what racial, classed, and national constraints? At whose expense?” (90.) Personal enjoyment of the show aside, my intent is to answer these questions, operating under the belief that feminism should entail the ongoing elevation of critical consciousness. Guided by Mane's critical questions, I will argue that the show fails to make the intersectional interventions that we might expect in third wave or even a fourth wave<sup>4</sup> feminist context. I intend to demonstrate that television adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* shields, and renders invisible, hegemonic structures of whiteness by the inclusion of tokenized race, its appropriation of black resistance narrative, and its privileging of white female narrative. These actions not only have negative repercussions for women of color,

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<sup>2</sup> The Wives as presented in the show are uniformly white despite diverse casting elsewhere.

<sup>3</sup> The Wives pantomime labor pains and breathing techniques simultaneous to their assigned Handmaids actual deliveries, in both book and TV show.

<sup>4</sup> *The Handmaid's Tale* can be situated in second-wave feminism with its realized fears of female loss of bodily autonomy and enforced relegation to the home. The third-wave is believed to have begun in the early 1990s (Evans 420) and turned its focus on individuality and diversity (409). The definitive lines that constitutes each wave are admittedly fuzzy among scholars and activists. The wave metaphor applied to feminism is problematic in that it divides up a theory into easily criticized parts that seem to lack the whole. However, for my purposes in this paper, the wave metaphor functions as a chronological framework by which we can track the evolution of feminist thought from the publication of *The Handmaid's Tale* in 1986 to its adaptation to TV in 2017.

but connote the broader shortcomings of contemporary feminism as a political, transformative force.

My use of the term “whiteness” borrows from the scholar Rebecca L. Clark Mane as she defines it—a “discursive formation, or structuring ideology, and epistemology that produces, secures, and maintains material inequalities” (73). Put in simpler terms, whiteness refers not to a shade of skin color necessarily, but rather to commonly unexamined and unseen methods of maintaining privilege in society based on the social construct of race. Clark Mane further explains whiteness as not consisting of “fixed content,” but rather a “set of strategies for sublimating and containing challenges to racial inequality. This extraordinary ability to deflect scrutiny can trouble its interrogation” (73). Strategies, as opposed to “fixed content,” implies fluidity and adaptability to changing times and circumstances, such that whiteness always stays on top and center stage while simultaneously being difficult to pin down. We can also think of whiteness as a “lens” that “not only produces perceptions...but strategically excludes large amounts of evidence and experience of the world from white consciousness in order to serve white group interests” (Clark Mane 74). The metaphor of the “lens” is especially appropriate in



*Figure 1- A still from episode 2 entitled "Birthday" (Miller). An example of Basti n's "unintentional metaphor for how the series treats race. . . ."*

the visual landscape of television, and a close examination of *The Handmaid's Tale* TV adaptation will illustrate how this lens of whiteness works.

The visual rendering of *The Handmaid's Tale* makes it impossible to ignore the skin color of the characters—something the executive producer Bruce Miller was conscious of when he said in an interview that “seeing an all-white world on your television...has a very different impact. What’s the difference between making a TV show about racists and making a racist TV show where you don’t hire any actors of color?” (Dockterman). Implicit in his words is a desire not to appear racist by not hiring any black actors at all. This desire, however, is at odds with his other admission that the governing powers of a totalitarian Gilead are, in fact, racist<sup>5</sup>. There is an un-stated third choice in this dilemma: the creators could have added storylines that addressed how the newly diverse characters would be impacted in a racist Gilead. Instead the show takes on the modern optics of diversity and side-steps racism altogether. In her review of the show, cultural critic and essayist Angelica Bastián points out that “...people of color...are either out of focus or pushed to the margins of the frame.” This literal and visual marginalization of black and brown bodies can be seen in Figure 1. Bastián goes on to argue that this is “an unintentional metaphor for how the series treats race, as a way to earn kudos in a landscape in which viewers demand inclusivity, but is ultimately not worth direct conversation” (Bastián). This inclusion of black and brown bodies satisfies Miller’s desire for the show not to appear racist, but simultaneously shrinks from making any connections between whiteness and power. Appearance of inclusivity without the content to match it is an example of how, “non-performative rhetoric prevents combatting that which it pretends to abolish” (Dhawan et al. 21). The tokenized race in

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<sup>5</sup> In Margaret Atwood’s novel, we are told there is a “Resettlement of the Children of Ham” (83), which indicates people of African origin were removed from Gilead. In the fictionalized historical notes at the end of the book, “plummeting Caucasian birthrates” (304) are mentioned and it is stated that “racist fears provided some of the emotional fuel that allowed the Gilead takeover to succeed as well as it did” (305).

Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* is the "non-performative rhetoric" that posits a post-race society, while precluding whiteness from critique.

The show's side-stepping of racism is highlighted even more by the stories the creators *did* choose to add that were not previously part of the book. In the episode "Birth Day," Ofglen receives a new back-story in which she is a "gender traitor" who is eventually subjected to female genital mutilation as punishment for her relationship with a Martha (Miller). She is replaced by Ofglen #2, who is also given a story not present in the novel. In a conversation with Offred in the episode entitled "Faithful," Ofglen #2 makes it clear that she doesn't share or appreciate Offred's rebellious streak, and implies this characteristic is a product of class privilege from pre-Gilead.

Ofglen #2: You guys had a first floor walk-up, down Back Bay, with a garden.

Had yourself a Nordstrom's card, right?

Offred: I liked Anthropologie.

Ofglen #2: Yeah? I used to get fucked behind a dumpster just so I could buy a sixth of oxy and a happy meal. I'm clean now. I've got a safe place to sleep every night and I have people who are nice to me...And I want to keep it that way.

(Miller)

The sexuality of Ofglen and class differences of Ofglen #2 underscore the point that not all handmaids experience Gilead the same based on the plurality of their subjectivity. It begs the question of why the creators felt comfortable adding storylines for these social categories, but not for race? My own conclusion is that sexuality and class don't compete with the centrality of Offred's white narrative which is exclusively about gender.

The addition of race complicates the second-wave underpinnings of *The Handmaid's Tale*, which scholars contend, “Even a cursory look at the second-wave feminist movement in the U.S. in the 1970s reveals that with its sole focus on gender, it was already subjected to vehement critique for its racism and class bias” (Dhawan et al. 13). In other words, the show ignores race (including Offred’s whiteness) in order to foreground gender—a perceived unifying point of view despite that it historically has privileged whiteness and ignores difference. For Clark Mane, this impulse to “contain” racial difference is motivated by “fear that a complete racial overhaul, not carefully undertaken, might mean the splintering, displacement, or destruction of the feminist body altogether” (92). This fear seems to at least partially exist within the rhetorical choices made in adapting *The Handmaid's Tale* to television. Fiona Tolan, whose scholarship includes Margaret Atwood’s novel and second-wave feminism, asserts that “When woman is a universal category, feminism can make specific demands for universal equality” (22). A universal category simplifies the narrative for TV writers, explaining the motivation behind the centrality of a white female character. Her presence does not bring issues of race to bear, so gender can be the central issue. The problem is, however, that this focus on gender is not a universal perspective. In seeking to foreground gender at the cost of racial difference, the show unwittingly reproduces the pre-eminence of whiteness.

Executive Producer Bruce Miller justified the dismissal of racism in the show by reasoning, “it just felt like in a world where birth rates have fallen so precipitously, fertility would trump everything” (Dockterman). This seeming logic is easily undercut by one of the consistent themes in *The Handmaid's Tale*: Power is interested in the reproduction of its own power, and population growth is only a means to that end. Both TV show and book portray this in a multitude of examples, but ironically given Miller’s statement, it is in the TV show where it

is made the most explicit. In the episode entitled “Jezebels”, during a conversation between the commander and other high-ranking officials within Gilead’s founding power structure, they discuss how they will deal with the fertility crisis. One man says, “It’s not rocket science. All remaining fertile women should be collected and impregnated. By those of superior status of course” (Miller). The “of course” given at the end of this statement testifies to what these men don’t need to say out loud; population growth not beneath their domination is of no value to the perpetuation of their power. If this were not the case, there wouldn’t be much of a story: Offred would not have been separated from her child, nor her fertile husband, and women wouldn’t be barred from fertile men of low-rank. The problem with positing that “fertility would trump everything” is that it dismisses how power necessitates hierarchy; like building a tiered cake, each supporting tier will need a different subject category to hold up the top that is “superior status.” Race is historically one of those categories denigrated in order to hold up the structures of power—specifically the power of whiteness.

In historical social justice movements that have challenged oppressive power structures, we can see that race was an integral part of those movements—and that also, at times, conflicted with the goals of gender justice. After the Civil War, the 15<sup>th</sup> amendment created a schism among the alliance between suffragists and abolitionists. Frederick Douglass, who had until then supported the women’s vote, backed the passage of the 15<sup>th</sup> amendment even though it only extended suffrage to black men. He argued that “the question of woman suffrage depended upon the preliminary success of Negro suffrage” (Quarles 40). Following this turn-about in Douglass’s position, the “Stantonites”<sup>6</sup> decided “that they could not tie their movement in with Negro suffrage” (Quarles 41). This example points to a historical difficulty in uniting the causes of

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<sup>6</sup> Followers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton who wanted suffragists and abolitionists to take an all or nothing approach to voting rights and reject the 15<sup>th</sup> amendment.

gender and race, and it is repeated<sup>7</sup> in the TV adaptation of *The Handmaids Tale*. The show's reluctance to let these categories mutually exist as subjectivities that are adversely impacted in Gilead betrays the anxiety that they cannot co-exist without one overshadowing the other. Further to that point, in the 1970's and 1980's, bell hooks recounts another instance of this conflict as black females began to join the feminist movement. She recalls, "In those days white women who were unwilling to face the reality of racism and racial difference accused us of being traitors by introducing race. Wrongly they saw us as deflecting focus away from gender" (57). This historical competition between gender and race isn't natural, however, as they are in actuality interwoven. Fiona Tolan quotes Judith Butler who says that it is "impossible to separate 'gender' from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained" (22). In other words, Offred's gender is informed by her whiteness, making her experience of sexism different from that of other non-white handmaids. Integral to "inclusive, intersectional, and antiracist feminism...is the recognition of the importance of race as a historically specific, structural, and relational category that is co-constitutive with gender" (Clark Mane 89). Which is to say, the feminist posturing of the *The Handmaid's Tale* TV show, in so far as it separates race and history from its portrayal of gender, fails to be an inclusive feminism that fully exposes systems of oppression. Perpetuating this division between race and gender serves the purposes of protecting whiteness.

Atwood took care not to divorce her speculative fiction from being founded in historical fact. She tells readers in the prefix of her novel that "If I was to create an imaginary garden, I wanted the toads in it to be real" (XIV). America's history of slavery is certainly one of the

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<sup>7</sup> A TV show's portrayal of race has admittedly lower stakes than voting rights being denied to entire portions of the population.

“toads” that can be identified as informing the Sons of Jacob’s<sup>8</sup> exploitation of theology to justify human enslavement. The TV show draws upon this same historicity, but without the inclusion of racial stories, this move is appropriative. As an example of this, in the finale episode, “Night,” the handmaids refuse to participate in a “salvaging,” a ritual that required them to stone to death one of their fellow handmaids. One by one, they drop their stones before Aunt Lydia who, realizing she cannot punish them all, sends them home. They move down the street in unison (see Figure 2), led by Offred, while Nina Simone’s song “Feeling Good” begins to play.



*Figure 2- A still from episode 10 entitled "Night" (Miller). The handmaids go home after collectively refusing to participate in Janine's stoning. Nina Simone's song "Feeling Good" accompanies the scene.*

The action is captured in slow motion, their steps in time to the beat, evoking a certain swagger of defiance and victory. The scene communicates that they are a force to be reckoned with when they are united. But let's go back to Nina Simone, whose song is used to punctuate this moment. Simone was an African-American singer, whose first-hand experience of racism inspired her to be an outspoken activist in the Civil Rights Movement. Writer Ta-Nehisi Coates

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<sup>8</sup> In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Son's of Jacob use Bible verse to create precedent for the enslavement and ritualistic rape of the handmaids (Atwood 88).

articulates Nina Simone's particular appeal when he argues, "It is not simply the voice: It is the world that made that voice, all the hurt and pain of denigration, forged into something otherworldly" (Coates). The emotional inflection Simone's song adds to the scene is informed by her lived experience with racial oppression, and her will to resist and thrive never-the-less. Transposing that over a group of mostly white women, led by a white woman, in circumstances where race has been rendered a non-issue, absorbs the strength of the song while stripping it of its context. Clark Mane references Delia Aguilar to explain how this appropriation has the "paradoxical effect of ostensibly recognizing the 'other' at the same time that it conceals the material conditions underpinning that marginality" (79). The appropriation of black narratives of survival and resistance without telling black stories is yet another method in which the "lens" of whiteness is served. It need not be, and likely is not, intentional on the part of the creators of the show that this appropriation occurs and systematically protects whiteness.

The appropriation and de-contextualizing of racial experience is key to how contemporary feminism is leeches of political power capable of dismantling systems of oppression. Third-wave feminism, in which we might situate this show, is thought to embrace intersectionality in its conception. Inclusivity and diversity divorced from context as it is in the show, however, is where "difference is included yet contained" (Clark Mane 83). Other scholars describe this as appropriating intersectionality and diversity in service of "neoliberal pluralism and global capitalism that consumes difference as an alibi so that it does not make a difference" (Dhawan et al. 22). A seemingly positive attempt to make feminism open and non-judgmental, paradoxically then, can be construed with the commodification of the movement that serves patriarchal capitalism. In this way, feminism's political power is watered down and reduced to a non-performative identity. This dilution of feminism into an identity rather than a political

intervention can be seen in the emergence of choice<sup>9</sup> feminism, or what bell hooks calls “lifestyle feminism” (5). She explains:

Suddenly the politics was being slowly removed from feminism. And the assumption prevailed that no matter what a woman’s politics, be she conservative or liberal, she too could fit feminism into her existing lifestyle. Obviously this way of thinking has made feminism more acceptable because its underlying assumption is that women can be feminists without fundamentally challenging and changing themselves or the culture. (hooks 6)

When feminism is divested of its radical, political, and historically informed theories, lifestyle feminists can be “feeling good” (like Nina Simone’s song) without being challenged by the context<sup>10</sup> of Simone’s story. In this way, whiteness is maintained and protected, and contemporary feminism fails to disrupt oppressive hierarchies.

The inclusion of tokenized race, the appropriation of de-contextualized black resistance narrative, and the privileging of white female narrative all serve to de-politicize feminism while “holding on to a form of solidarity that reinforces established hierarchies” (Dhawan et al. 33). The established hierarchy favors whiteness, and its reproduction can go unnoticed in the deftly crafted veneer of a popular television show such as *The Handmaid’s Tale*. We can enjoy the show for its challenge to state-mandated control of women’s bodies while being critically conscious of its short comings too. Being a politically active feminist should entail this ongoing critique and raising of questions, because oftentimes the figurative and literal bastards that grind us down aren’t easy to see.

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<sup>9</sup> “Choice feminism is a popular form of contemporary feminism, encouraging women to embrace the opportunities they have in life and to see the choices they make as justified and always politically acceptable” (Thwaites 55).

<sup>10</sup> “Context is all” (Atwood 144).

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