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‘We lived in the blank white spaces’:
Rewriting the Paradigm of Denial
in Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*

DANITA J. DODSON

WHILE MARGARET ATWOOD’S *The Handmaid’s Tale* brandishes partial portraits of human-rights violations around the globe—especially in Iran, India, Germany, South Africa, Guatemala, and the former Soviet Union—it is quite clear that Gilead is most wholly the U.S.A., embodying its past, its present, and its potential future. This novel is Atwood’s first foray into an extended representation of America (Stimpson 764–67). *The Handmaid’s Tale* illuminates the deplorable irony that a nation established upon the utopian principle of “liberty and justice for *all*” has also been a dystopia for those humans sequestered and tortured because of differences from mainstream culture. As casualties of a patriarchal-based empire within the national borders, Native Americans, African-Americans and women are all examples of peoples who have been historically locked away from the utopian American Dream. Amy Kaplan asserts that American history is built upon the huge myth that the U.S.A. is anti-imperialistic because of its documented opposition to the totalitarianism of “evil empires” around the world (12). Such a “paradigm of denial” has caused numerous American citizens to ignore how “imperial relations are enacted and contested within the nation” (13). Atwood shatters this paradigm of denial and forces us to recognize how seriously “American imperialism and nationalism account for the repressive order which becomes the Republic of Gilead” (Hengen 55). Within *The Handmaid’s Tale* lies the powerful suggestion that progress toward global human rights will never be possible until nations of “freedom” face their own incarcerated dystopian realities.

To come to terms with the confusing reality that domestic imperialism and enslavement characterize a nation that pledges “liberty and justice for all,” the first section of my essay briefly discusses America’s foundational dichotomy of utopia/dystopia. The next section surveys the violent legacy of the Puritans’ divine mission; God’s perfect kingdom in the New World was constructed through dystopian methods of capturing, ousting, and silencing apostates against the patriarchal communal vision, especially women dissidents—e.g., Anne Hutchinson, Tituba, and Mary Webster. Within this historical context, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, emphasizing the terror that drives men to subjugate women, illustrates how rescuing the promised land from the subversive Mother/Other becomes the divine mission of Gilead’s conservative reformers. My evolving argument is that Atwood evokes background

memories of this Puritanical exorcistic tendency to accentuate and develop her major American genre reenactment: the narrative of the enslaved black mother. Focusing finally upon a specific comparison/contrast of Offred's tale with the slave narrative of Harriet Ann Jacobs, the paper moves to a discussion of the confessional purposes of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

By understanding how Offred ultimately develops a discourse with slavery, we witness the incredible power behind one individual's confession of her former indifference to the concept of American freedom. The major task of *The Handmaid's Tale* is "to portray convincingly . . . how the abridgement of freedom evolved in the United States" (Woods 134). Atwood suggests that an intimate and painful association with the history of this abridgement will help us attend to current global horrors; a better world that truly recognizes human rights will transpire only when we empathetically descend to the Other's hell and then reawaken to the atrocities of the present. Lest we allow ourselves to be culturally defined by a "paradigm of denial" (Kaplan 13)—like the scholars who meet at the University of Denay (Deny) for the Gileadean Studies Symposium—we must look at the skeletons in the closet of our own national history.

Atwood and the American Dichotomy of Utopia/Dystopia

Any contemplation of our postmodern world must involve an examination of the instability of deconstructive tensions. Thus, current reflection upon such a country as the U.S. must move beyond the stereotypical icon of a free eagle and toward an awareness of how the national symbol has also been fettered and forced into extinction. To understand the dichotomous images of liberty/captivity and justice/inhumanity in our native ideology, we must first recognize how both "utopia" and "dystopia" have been at the heart of the American experience, both in historical events and in literary expression.

Vernon Louis Parrington, Jr., in *American Dreams*, discusses America's characteristic tradition of "planning a new world" based upon the "American dream" of freedom (3). The names of the cities and regions in America suggest recurring ideas of rebirth and hope: New England, New York, New Haven. In a seminal edition of essays on utopian literature, Kenneth Roemer asserts that the word "America" is often synonymous with that of "Utopia"; he states that "to understand . . . to know America, we must have knowledge of America as utopia" (14). The following are examples of the American heritage of idealism: "Winthrop's 'Citty upon a Hill,' Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, the possibilities for rebirth in the 'virgin' West, the idealism of youth and civil rights movements, New Deals, New Frontiers, and Great Societies" (Roemer 14).

However, though Europeans established the land of the free and the home of the brave out of the Renaissance concept of the "good place," the name "America" also conjures up vivid images of dystopia, or the "bad place." While to some Columbia signified heaven, to others it represented

hell; with Columbus's dream of a terrestrial paradise came excruciating horrors of "discovery." Ernest Tuveson and John May both argue that a sense of dystopian apocalypse has always been apparent in America, running as a strong countercurrent to visions of a New Eden. Richard Slotkin has also written that ominous violence is one of the major themes of our national literature (4). Thus to know America, according to the revelations in its literature, is also to have a knowledge of "the dystopian aura of the 'howling wilderness,' the genocide in the name of Manifest Destiny, the horrors of slavery, the nightmares of rampant commercialism, technology, urban squalor, Vietnam" (Roemer 14).

Recognizing the apocalyptic effects of a national history characterized by a failed sense of utopian achievement, Atwood deals with cultural tensions as she defines America as dystopia in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Leslie-Ann Hales has delineated the dystopian elements of Atwood's "darkening vision" (257–262). The novel is a stark caricature of an American Dream gone bad, a vision of hope that has dwindled into "a nightmare of unbridled power and industrial alienation, of moral purposelessness and individual anomie" (Kumar 98). Exposing the rotten rafters that support the house of American ideals, Atwood warns of the maddening consequences of imposed utopianism, as she illustrates the horrors of building a perfect empire from which some will be barred (Dodson 103).

Such historical truth-telling is common in dystopias, which explore historical conflicts (Ruppert 104). Atwood delves more deeply into such conflicts than most fellow dystopianists, for her futuristic tale exceeds a clever prediction. It is a recollection of specific atrocities of the American experience, atrocities that Atwood authenticates by reviewing the imagery of containment evident in Puritan ideology and horribly intensified in the slave accounts of black females. The Handmaid's story about a "Gothic-dystopian land" (Banerjee 88), therefore, works hard to shatter what Kaplan calls "the paradigm of denial" by presenting a once-privileged 20th-century woman's quantum leap through ignored parts of the American experience.

Puritan America: Atwood's Truth about God's Perfect Empire

As she told me in a recent interview, Atwood, a citizen of Canada, has attempted to understand her own heritage in America (Dodson 97). Though Canada has its own background of conservative and intolerant movements, she chooses to focus her attention upon another nation and another history that she also claims as her own; thus, her commentary is offered both as an outsider and as an insider. Having studied for years in New England under Puritan scholar Perry Miller, Atwood has explored the obscure history of her colonial American ancestors—ultimately learning that one of her Puritan forebears, Mary Webster, was sentenced to hang as a witch but curiously survived her execution. *Survival*, Atwood's earliest long work of literary criticism, is the product of her prolonged scholarship on the psychological and social consequences of North-American colonialism.

Atwood's concern about the continual effects of American colonialism is most strongly addressed in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Here she labors to show how the repressive order of Gilead exhibits internal elements of the colonial agenda historically associated with America's numerous policies of domination. According to Atwood, the historical mistreatment of those marginalized in America because of race, religion, or gender is a direct ramification of an unjustified sense of national superiority. Believing that societal institutions are responsible for promulgating ideas of bigotry, she asserts that Americans have been given a false sense of importance by an educational system that breeds attitudes of supremacy and intolerance: "'They' had been taught that they were the centre of the universe, a huge, healthy apple pie, with other countries and cultures sprinkled round the outside, like raisins" (*Second Words* 87–88). The result of such indoctrinated supremacy is a system in which the One is opposed to the Other, with dire consequences played out on the homefront itself. This cultural system is clearly reflected in the national literature; Slotkin states that "at the source of the American myth there lies the fatal opposition, the hostility between two worlds, two races, two realms of thought and feeling" (17). Pitted against each other have been the tensions of civilization and savagery, progress and primitivism, dominant Christianity and alternate Christianities, white and black skin, English and Spanish.

The Handmaid's Tale defines how the false binary system of Gileadean politics is saturated in intolerant beliefs that result in the abuse of "raisins," who are seen as objects that either help or hinder the goal of a New Colony, the "centre of the universe" (Atwood, *Second Words* 87–88). Handmaids are considered the personal property of Commanders who use them to produce progeny. Also, the Children of Ham (African-Americans) and the Sons of Jacob (Jewish-Americans) are regarded as hindrances to the creation of a superior race and a superior religion, so they are sequestered and sent to neo-containment camps.

Eager to illuminate unvoiced truths about the mission of those who sought to build a "Citty upon a Hill," Atwood parodies Puritanism as she delineates Gilead, as Cathy Davidson has noted (24–26). Sandra Tomc argues that the author satirizes not only "the persistence of a puritan strain in modern American culture but a tradition of American studies that celebrates Puritan intransigence as quintessentially representative of the American spirit" (80). In a 1994 interview with me, Atwood emphasized that American legends are based upon a denial of truth, for they have been falsely crafted out of "the fairy tale version" of why the Puritans came to the New World: to establish a democracy, a land of equal opportunity where no voice is considered a dissenting one (Dodson 97). She contends, "They were not interested in democracy. In fact, it wasn't even a notion at that time. They were interested in a theocracy" (Dodson 97). Thus, religion became the utopian basis of the nation's first government, and Protestantism a propelling force behind colonization.

Atwood's attention to the connection between church and state points a bold finger back to the obdurate tenets of the first Protestant movement in

America, tenets that led to the persecution of “basically anybody who didn’t agree with them [the Puritans] religiously” (Dodson 97). As a result of the Puritan policy of persecuting the religious dissenter, many people in 17th-century America, like Atwood’s ancestor, were burned or hanged for purported witchcraft, while others were exiled and locked away from the colony. Puritan settlement was actually based upon an exclusive goal, to set up a New World colony for only the chosen and righteous people of God, as prophesied in the Bible, so that the kingdom of Israel could be theirs.

Of course, this meant the dispossession, eradication, and/or incarceration of those not considered chosen ones by the dominant group. The Puritan missionary spirit ultimately gave way to the military spirit, and the Puritans defined their relationship to the New World in terms of violence and warfare. Donald Pease states that “the vision of the New World as potentially a second Eden will inspire the genocide of its first inhabitants whose difference from the Europeans is noted” (45). The journals of such Puritans as John Winthrop attests God’s Providence in the removal of Others: “[We pray] that the Lord our God may blesse us in the land whether [wherever] wee goe to possesse it” (Winthrop 199). Even Thomas Jefferson’s subsequent document of national unity, “The Declaration of Independence,” associates “the merciless Indian savages” with the enemy who deserves to lose authority in the New World.

Atwood, by highlighting the background of violence in a colonial empire-building culture, forces us into an intertextual rereading of both American history and American literature as we read Offred’s tale. Just as the 17th-century Puritans did, the Protestant reformers who have created Gilead have violently ousted, hanged, or enslaved—and ultimately silenced—those dissenting against their religious and racial ideology. *The Handmaid’s Tale*, thus, challenges any former reading of the Puritan story as a utopian mission dedicated to divine justice for all and exposes the domestic imperialism that has long been denied by such traditional American Studies’ intellectuals as Perry Miller (Kaplan 3–11). Karen Stein asserts that the Gileadean Symposium’s Professor Pieixoto is a caricature of Miller, for both, in “explicating and valorizing the texts they interpret . . . ignore the deeply misogynist strain of Gileadean and Puritan cultures” (61). As Annette Kolodny shows, the European colonizers and the progenitors of American Studies both referred to the New World as a “virgin land” in order to ideologically deny Indian removal, frontier violence, government theft, land devastation, class cruelty, racial brutality, and misogyny (4).

To rewrite the story of Puritanism in the novel, and to tell the truth about its dystopian legacy of intolerance and violence, Atwood focuses upon the stories within the American tradition that emphasize slavery. If we read Offred’s story in conjunction with American literature’s stories of enslavement, as I do in the next section, it becomes evident that Atwood shows, as does Slotkin in his critical study of the American tradition, that the Puritan way of thinking regularly reasserts itself in American thought (564). The original Puritanical fear of the Other, exemplified in recorded

views about the Native American, is responsible for exorcistic tendencies that have occurred periodically in the cultural history of the United States, wherein is enacted “the hunting down and slaying of rabid beasts embodying all qualities of evil” (Slotkin 154).

While men were slaying beasts on the outskirts of the colony, women were encouraged to manufacture tales about savages. The most culturally-sanctioned writing by females during the period was the captivity narrative, which was ultimately used by the dominant culture for the purposes of imperialism. Attempting to document justifiable reasons why the Native Americans should be dispossessed of their territory, captivity narratives show how white Puritan women are pursued and kidnapped by fiends who take them on long journeys into the wilderness. Mary Rowlandson’s tale, for example, is exemplary of colonial texts focusing on the Native Americans as sons of the Devil who remove a daughter of Zion into Satan’s lands. Atwood underlines this political, imperialistic use of language by inverting the Indian captivity narrative; she situates the white neo-Puritan Gileadean males as the true “rabid beasts.”

The Handmaid’s Tale, a tale of a new captivity, presents itself as an interpolation of the untold story about the “beasts” of history, whose imperialistic legacy is reenacted in Gilead, a regime reverting to, and actually exceeding, the prejudice of the original Puritans. Existing as an outgrowth of a utopian attempt to purify American culture and obliterate liberal tendencies identified with the wilderness, the Gileadean regime views females—who are associated with the “Mother” Earth—as “dark” and “native” forces threatening traditional patriarchal rule. As Sherry Ortner notes, women since colonial times have been given a “pan-cultural second class status,” being considered a part of nature and thus identifiable with primitive races (73). Driven by a view that, according to Ortner, is as old as history itself, Protestant reformers of Gilead undertake the divine mission of freeing the land of the dangers of the subversive Mother/Other, and the original utopian “errand into the wilderness” waxes into a dystopian project. Though many men in the regime also lack any real choice, their plight is not as severe as that of women, who are either Handmaids (sexual slaves), Marthas (cleaning slaves), Unwomen (enslaved workers in a toxic-waste camp), Wives and Daughters (properties of Commanders), or Jezebels (underground prostitutes). The Eyes of the regime have tried to eliminate any liberal tendencies in American thought resulting from the 1970s feminist movement, which was identified as a type of witchcraft.

By illustrating how women are primary targets of Gilead’s reform movements, Atwood intimates a historical fact of the Salem witch trials conducted by Puritans in the 1690s: more women than men were tried as witches because “witches were assumed to be lascivious creatures who freely indulged their passions and liked to cavort in the wild country beyond civilization’s pale” (Pike 6). Because women were viewed as wild and libidinous creatures threatening patriarchal control, they were hunted down, caged, then annihilated. According to bell hooks, “Such treatment was a

direct consequence of misogynist attitudes toward women that prevailed in colonial American society” (*Ain’t I a Woman?* 29). Woman, hooks asserts, was portrayed as “an evil sexual temptress, the bringer of sin into the world. [This] led to the development of anti-woman sentiment” (29).

Looking back to the Puritan legacy, Leslie Fiedler writes that beneath American literature’s gothic imagery lies a dominant patriarchal fear of the evil associated with women, which he calls the “maternal blackness” (132). Though Fiedler refers to the extreme trepidation that men had about women in general, his terminology indicates a double marginalization apparent as early as the 1600s, wherein women of color were the first to be equated with witches in Salem. Tituba, a black slave in the household of Reverend Samuel Parris, was one of the earliest accused, setting up an enduring pattern of domination and oppression to be enacted throughout history. Even a study of the label “witch,” generally applied to women in the 17th-century, must not deny the reality that the pioneering patriarchs’ fears were extremely complex, revealing much more than overt misogynist anxieties; their frenzied reactions were also racially motivated.

Understanding that both sexual and racial fears were integral factors contributing to social tensions in America’s first settlements, Atwood alludes to gender and race issues in *Offred*’s story of enslavement. It is true that Offred is a white woman in forced servitude, but her decision to make ongoing references to the black woman’s slave narrative signals her recognition of the double enslavement that women of color have endured for centuries. She reveals the lesson she has learned: subvert the “paradigm of denial” by confessing her own compliant role in a domestic imperialism that ultimately turns women against women.

The Handmaid’s Dialogue with the ‘Black Mother’

Like Atwood’s Puritan ancestor, Mary Webster, who survived her death sentence in spite of the rope placed around her neck, some women have lived to tell the horrors that exposed them to violent ceremonies. The narrator of *The Handmaid’s Tale* is one who survives to speak her “tale.” Although the story we read is language in print, it is crucial to remember that Offred first transmitted her narrative on audiotape, and to her it will always be vocalized. As Mario Klarer shows, “In Gilead, being a woman means to become *pre-literate*” (132). Offred asserts that this “pre-literate” medium is the only viable one for telling her story: “Tell, rather than write, because I have nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden” (52). Offred proceeds to take pride in the power of oral autobiography, her means to a subjective creation of reality: “Because I’m telling you this story I will your existence. I tell therefore you are” (344). By presenting the narrator’s tale in an innovative manner—oral transcription from tapes—Atwood reminds us of the rawness and originality of the slave narrative, a distinctively American form of prose (Dixon 298; Stepto 225–241; Lauter 1201). She also shows orality as a woman-centered means of survival for those not in

possession of the tools of literacy. As hooks argues, "Until masses of women in this society read and write, feminist ideas must also be spread by word of mouth" (*Feminist Theory* 109).

When *The Handmaid's Tale* is explored in terms of its oral history, it becomes evident that Offred's recording reveals a metaphorical discourse with the autobiographical narratives of black female slaves of antebellum America. Examples of such narratives include Harriet Ann Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Kate Drumgoold's *A Slave Girl's Story* (1882), and Lucy Delany's *From the Darkness Cometh the Light* (1892). Linda Kauffman discusses the relationship between Offred's tale and the records of black women's experiences, noting that "The closest corollary to the Gileadean system is slavery in the American South, when black women were similarly prized and priced as breeders" (234). Janet Larson states that by "imaginatively yoking her post-biblical, Caucasian servant-woman with the biblical, Black slave-mother who survives, Atwood meditates on . . . what freedom means when others are in chains" (53). When I asked Atwood whether or not she agrees with such assertions about her intended application of the slave narrative in the novel, she said "Absolutely" (Dodson 101).

Atwood uses an implicit corollary to condemn the evil forces of American imperialism that are responsible for the silencing of marginalized peoples. The Gileadean regime has continued the traditional Puritanical treatment of cultural and racial Others: obliteration of that which is different. People of color in this novel have been deported and colonized, thereby literalizing the nation's segregational politics: "'Resettlement of the Children of Ham is continuing on schedule,' says the reassuring pink face, back on the screen. 'Three thousand have arrived this week in National Homeland One, with another two thousand in transit'" (83). Only Caucasians inhabit Gilead. Those who are not white have their own tales of exile and slavery, but these are tales silenced and unrepresented in the Gileadean Symposium at the novel's end.

Not only have the "Historical Notes" displaced the histories of the people of color, but they further reveal the Gilead period in American history as one of overt white supremacy and bigotry, for the Symposium on Gileadean Studies falls under the isolated rubric of "Caucasian Anthropology" (379). Furthermore, the word "Caucasian" is stressed five times throughout the notes of the authoritative male scholar, who himself colonizes Offred's voice. Discussing the Gileadean epoch as if it were a second antebellum era, Professor Pieixoto purposely employs historical vocabulary that is representative of America's 19th-century racist ideology: "lynchings," "racist politics," "diaries," "Underground [Rail]road" (387). The Puritanical intolerance at the root of American history has helped to sustain the aura of the Gileadean era: "Its racist politics . . . were firmly rooted in the pre-Gilead period, and racist fears provided some of the emotional fuel that allowed the Gilead takeover to succeed as well as it did" (387). This statement, alluding to why the Children of Ham become the victims of a New

Diaspora, provides implicit reminders of American policies that called for the containment of both Native Americans and Japanese Americans.

Though victims of racial differences have been categorized and displaced from Gilead's dominant culture, fertile Caucasian females remain within it, used as objects at the discretion of powerful males. Having been first hunted down as though they were the witches of Old Salem and then governmentally classified as "Handmaids," women with working wombs are branded as different from males and from other females. The surface similarities between the female protagonists of slave narratives and the Handmaids of Gilead are underlined by the legal role of the patriarchal white male in reproduction: "As in slavery, despite the woman's labor, the white slave-holders, like the men in Gilead, retain legal property rights over the product of the woman's body" (Kauffman 234).

This legal control over the woman's body and its offspring can best be explained by the striking resemblance between the tale of the Handmaid and Harriet Ann Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), an autobiographical work that politicizes the physical exploitation of female slaves in the pre-Civil War South. *Incidents* is generally regarded as the best-known and most-discussed female slave narrative, especially because Jacobs was the only African-American writer of the period to explicitly direct her writing to women (Foster 83). Her treatment of conflict, dominion, and power is more complex and varied than that of male slave narrators like Frederick Douglass (Foster 95).

To tell her own story of sexual violation, Jacobs creates Linda Brent, an alter-ego who narrates her history in the first person, as Offred does. Brent's tale is chiefly her own sexual history, as is that of Atwood's narrator, and both storytellers illuminate the plight of being female chattel by confessing their lives as fallen women and by revealing the scarlet "A" written upon their chests by neo-Puritanical communities. Hazel Carby has written that women's slave narratives are commonly associated with illicit sexuality (38–39). When society labels Brent and Offred as sinful because of their involvement in sexual slavery and illicit procreation, it declares them unfit mothers and thereby dispossesses them of their children. Roberta Rubenstein asserts that Offred's name encodes "her indentured sexuality" in that it is akin to "offered" (103). Like Brent, the Handmaid realizes that the next child she bears must be offered to the rich patriarch who impregnates her, her Commander. Commissioned to not only bear a child in captivity, Offred also loses a daughter to slave hunters: "I can see her. . . holding out her arms to me, being carried away" (97). Her story centers on her painful contemplation of an "inability to mother" (Hansen 22).

Offred and other Handmaids are treated as chattel, goaded by the Aunts with "electric cattle prods" (4). The story of the Handmaid's commodification is based upon an awareness that she shares with Brent, who remarks, "I was a piece of merchandise" (*Incidents* 1726). Offred similarly says, "I wait, washed, brushed, fed, like a prize pig" (69). From the beginning of her narrative, the Handmaid asserts that she is literally a prisoner, tattooed with

a chattel number: "Four digits and an eye . . . It's supposed to guarantee that I'll never be able to fade, finally, into another landscape. I am too important, too scarce, for that. I am a national resource" (4–5). She faces deportation to the Colony of the Unwomen if she fails to bear a child on her third try. Similarly, if an African-American slave woman proved infertile she would be sold since her worth as a resource was diminished (Jennings 49–51). Both narrators give eye-witness testimonies about how the concepts of empire and colonization have been applied to woman's body (Kolodny 4–6; Lewes 66–73).

Despite these overt similarities that Atwood wants us to see, it must be noted that nowhere does she claim that Offred as a white indentured servant has an equivalent or identical subject position to the black slave woman, nor does she argue that all women's oppression is the same. Even as her tale employs a metaphorical play on the enslavement trope, Offred's discourse with slavery uncovers major differences that are strongly emphasized throughout the tale. Atwood ultimately reveals that the narrator is not so naive that she believes rapprochement between privileged white women (even if enslaved as walking wombs) and marginalized women of color is readily and wholly possible. The novelist remains conscious of the warning given by black feminists to white women writers: "[T]o gloss over differences, to argue, for example, as did nineteenth-century white feminists that the social situations between themselves and black slaves were parallel, is to grossly distort reality" (Foster 13). Offred's tale observes these differences, admitting that sexual servitude was more physically and psychologically oppressive for a black woman like Brent, for whom the onset of sexual maturity was fraught with danger.

Though Offred periodically refers to her current "reduced circumstances" (10, 141), she realizes that her coming-of-age was not defined by violence and oppression, though other women around her had suffered; her servitude began in her 30s. She further indicates that she will not have to face the maltreatment during pregnancy that black slave women historically suffered. As hooks notes, "Breeding was oppressive to all fertile black slave women. Undernourished, overworked women were rarely in a physical condition that would allow for easy childbirth" (*Ain't I a Woman?* 41). In fact, slave women were kept at fieldwork for up to the last three weeks of pregnancy and were expected to return to work no later than three weeks after delivery (Bush 198). Offred realizes that she, as a Handmaid, has even fewer physical burdens than in her former life, and she discusses how her labors were confined to shopping and the monthly Ceremony, noting with embarrassment how free time, in fact, caused her boredom (89). In her comparative discourse, recognizing that antebellum slave women suffered from many gynecological complaints and received no prenatal care (Bush 148), Offred spends pages emphasizing her privileged trip to the gynecologist during captivity (77–80). She says, "I'm taken to the doctor's once a month, for tests: urine, hormones, cancer smear, blood test" (77). Furthermore, apparently noting that malnutrition was common among slave women of other

times (Steckel 48–51), Offred emphasizes that she was “fed like a prize pig” (90) and given daily vitamins (140–141).

At the center of Offred’s “prize pig” status is Commander Fred, a figure that Atwood relates to the patriarchs of the Old South. Once again by comparing Offred’s discourse to Jacobs’s slave tale, we recognize how the Commanders of Gilead similarly use biblical precedents to justify involvement in the widespread cultural system of chattel slavery. Focusing upon the images of “brushed silver hair” and “sober posture” (86), Atwood fleshes out the Offred’s “Master” as the caricature of the white patriarch of an old aristocratic code, much as Jacobs presents Dr. Flint as the “epitome of corrupt male power” characterizing the domestic imperialism of the antebellum period (Carby 57).

Each man, a bearer of the patriarchal “Word,” undertakes his plan of seduction in a room filled with books, as if to flaunt his power against the indentured female’s prohibition of reading; similar to the Commander’s “command” that Offred illicitly meet him in his library, Brent confesses Dr. Flint’s mandate, “I was ordered to come to his office” (1729). Furthermore, just as Dr. Flint tempts Linda Brent by passing her illicit notes, Commander Fred gives Offred forbidden magazines to read. In the manner of the importunate seducer in sentimental novels, both patriarchs attempt to bribe the heroine into capitulating. According to hooks, “[M]ale slaveowners usually tried to bribe black women as preparation for sexual overtures so as to place them in the role of prostitute. As long as the white slaveowner ‘paid’ for the sexual services of his black female slave, he felt absolved” (*Ain’t I a Woman?* 25). The Commander allows Offred to play the forbidden Scrabble, to read fashion magazines and to use black market lotion, but he later expects her to accompany him to the house of Jezebels, associating her with Gilead’s underground prostitute ring.

However, after Atwood sets up this surface similarity between the Commander and a patriarch like Flint, she shows us that they simply cannot be conflated. The differences are clearly intimated when Offred argues that her Commander has no real evil sexual intentions by inviting her to meet him in the library: “[H]e hasn’t brought me here to touch me in any way, against my will. He smiles. The smile is not sinister or predatory” (178). Offred, thus, recognizes that Commander Fred, even though he may wish her to provide him something like love, does not pose a direct physical threat to her. This is in important contrast to Jacobs’s situation, wherein the slave woman is subjected to terrible violence, potential rape, and constant sexual harassment. As Carolyn Sorioso says, “Flint’s desire to rape Linda is far more sinister than his need to increase his stock in slaves” (6). Claire Robertson states that sexual abuse was “the ultimate oppression” for black slave women (24). Offred discusses how the threat of harassment, rape, and violence toward women are eliminated by the regime, almost in utopian-like form: “[N]o man shouts obscenities at us, speaks to us, touches us. No one whistles” (33).

Though Atwood engages in an important discourse about the various differences of women’s oppression by men, perhaps the most crucial and

most complex point of dialogue that she allows us between *The Handmaid's Tale* and a slave narrative like Jacobs's *Incidents* lies in her representation of the Master's Wife. Like Jacobs's portrayal of Mrs. Flint, Offred's tale places specific attention on the background figure of the patriarch's refined spouse—the genteel Southern belle who envies her Handmaid's relationship with her husband. Serena Joy, the Wife of the Commander to whom Offred is currently assigned, recognizes her helplessness to do anything to stop the sexual “Ceremony” that occurs monthly within her house. Atwood places this act in high relief by having the Commander's Wife, through customs of Gilead, present when the act of procreation transpires. Similarly, the Southern wives of colonial patriarchs were often silent observers of the sexual abuse of enslaved black females.

While everything in her somber world seems void of emotion and romantic attachment, Serena Joy herself exhibits a saddened discomfort with the fact that her husband is having sex with “the outside woman” (210). Love, as in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, is implicitly outlawed in this destitute dehumanizing world, but Serena Joy still attempts to claim her man: “As for my husband, she said, he's just that. My husband. I want that perfectly clear. Till death do us part” (16). Offred notices early the jealousy that Serena Joy has toward her: “She doesn't speak to me, unless she can't avoid it. I am a reproach to her” (13). Brent similarly says, “[E]veryday it became more apparent that my presence was intolerable to Mrs. Flint” (1792).

Because of her recognition that Mrs. Flint has been hurt by Dr. Flint's infidelity, Brent asserts, “I, whom she detested so bitterly, had far more pity for her than he had . . . I never wronged her, or wished to wrong her; and one word of kindness from her would have brought me to her feet” (1729). Offred likewise recognizes how Serena Joy is another woman in pain, and she feels, or would like to feel, some kinship with the Wife, who so obviously detests the sight of her. The Handmaid comes into Serena Joy's house with the dream that sharing their plight might strengthen them: “I wanted, then, to turn her into an older sister, a motherly figure, someone who would understand and protect me . . . I wanted to think I would have liked her, in another time and place, another life” (15–16). However, she is soon discouraged by her recognition of the division between them: “I didn't ask what I was supposed to call her, because I could see that she hoped I would never have the occasion to call her anything at all. I was disappointed” (15).

Perhaps Offred can ultimately feel no real connection to Serena Joy due to the sharp gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots” in Gilead, for a scale of dissonances, with degrees of oppression and liberty, is set up even within the female gender. While the Handmaid longs for the small luxuries of lotion and cigarettes, Serena Joy waves “the large diamonds on the ring finger” (14), a material sign of difference. This delineation of the differences between the elite female and the enslaved one is one of the most apparent statements of Atwood's novel. Offred, looking back at her mother's feminist protests in the 1960s, remarks that at last there is a “women's culture” that the radical feminists had so badly wanted (164). Inherent in this

despairing, sarcastic cry is the implication that the dystopian society of Gilead results, among other things, from women's failure to bond across class and color lines. Evident symbols of this exist in the fact that the Wife (who flaunts her diamonds) wears blue and the Handmaid (so impoverished that she has no personal belongings of her own) wears red.

By creating a symbolic caricature of the external color gaps between women, Atwood, in fact, "offers a cruel refutation of [female] separatism," according to Gayle Greene, who says that *The Handmaid's Tale* "carries the warning that feminists must not lose sight of the larger issues" (14). Larger issues like class and race have not been noticed by feminists of the generation of Offred's mother, and Gilead is, in part, a result of the failure of feminism to effect social change for *all* women. According to black feminist Barbara Smith, feminism "is the political theory and practice that struggles to free *all* women . . . Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement" (49). Some women have been segregated from "mainstream" women's ideology because of race or class, their voices are forced into silence, so the women's movement itself has had totalitarian moments. Gayatri Spivak argues that Western feminism goes to great extremes to disavow the "other woman" (*In Other Worlds* 134–53). The black woman, Atwood implies, is totally disavowed, remaining alien to Gilead—doubly oppressed, remote, silent, and engulfed in the larger phrase "Children of Ham." Though we cannot see her in National Homeland One, we can assume that there she endures abuses inflicted by an openly racist culture of domination. Offred, in her own way, tries to invoke a coded discourse with/about this silent woman of Ham and her maternal forebears.

Since the antebellum period, black women, hooks argues, have been culturally portrayed as the "Other" who embodies the "dark" sexually wanton side of the female persona, and feminism has done very little to address this intensification of black women's oppression (*Ain't I a Woman?* 31–34). Solidarity has not existed, for the most part, between black and white women in the United States due to racial divisions that occurred in the time of slavery, when a longstanding religious conception of women as the source of bodily sin was transformed through the creation of a racial dichotomy between the sexual images of white and black women (36). The white male slaveholder idealized and controlled white women by denying their sexuality, and he rationalized his sexual exploitation of black female slaves by declaring the black woman as the embodiment of primitive, overt sexuality (Carby 27). This contrast between the pure white woman and the licentious black woman still prevails today in America as part of the general devaluation of black women (hooks, *Ain't I a Woman?* 31–34). Once again, U.S. feminism has employed a paradigm of denial centered upon a domestic ideology that continues to enslave black women.

Offred, in her maturing consciousness, slowly opens a "tiny peephole" (31) of resistance to the privileged white women's order, identifying herself with the Other Woman who is posed as antithetical to the dominant image of the True Woman. She says, "I am the outside woman" (210). The "cult of

True Womanhood” was the most popular social convention of female sexuality during the antebellum period (Welter 21–41). By showing us a world where privileged white women suddenly become licensed licentious females, Atwood shatters the racist ideology that historically separates and contrasts white and black females in America. She begins her discourse by addressing the opposing credos of womanhood represented by the dualities of slave woman and mistress that were apparent during the 19th century (Carby 20–39). Atwood works from the understanding that one of the most popular female images in antebellum America was of “a Jezebel character . . . [who] was the counter-image of the mid-nineteenth-century ideal of the Victorian lady” (White 28–29).

The ideal of the True Woman privileged the “pale, delicate, invalid” mistress and promulgated purity, piety, domesticity, and submissiveness (Foster 112). The central axiom of purity denied that True Women had sexual drives: “Love of home, children and domestic duties are the only passions they feel” (Berg 84). Offred quickly recognizes the cultural definition of True Woman placed upon Serena Joy, the angel with a pious and pure voice: “She was ash blond, petite, with a snub nose and huge, blue eyes which she’d turn upwards during hymns” (22). Clearly opposing the sterile and sexless mistress, Offred focuses upon her own absence of the virtue of purity, without which “she was, in fact, no woman at all, but a member of some lower order” (Welter 23). The regime has classified her as unvirginal, and thus of lower status than Serena Joy; the title of Handmaid is given to women who are in their second marriages and who are fertile by proof of previous childbearing.

Like Brent, Offred decides to survive through an act that literalizes her loss of virtue, placing herself outside the parameters of the conventional heroine of sentimental fiction. According to the doctrine of the True Woman, death is preferable to the loss of innocence (Foster 131). Brent chooses to survive in an impure state, entering a voluntary sexual liaison with a white lover named Sands rather than submit to Dr. Flint. Though Offred has the choice to make herself the sexless Unwoman, sent to the Colonies to die a martyr’s death, she confesses how she embodied her subversive association with the Unpure Woman through taboo sexual practices (liaison with Nick, Scrabble games with the Commander, trips to the Jezebel house). Her chosen rebellion against the so-called “women’s culture” lies in her resistance to the stereotypes of the original feminist ideology.

In considering how Atwood discusses the discriminatory ideology of the slave woman and mistress, our dialogue between Offred and Brent must also note her recognition that Jacobs attempted to change women’s stereotypes by using elements of popular fiction. Foster has documented the conventional pressures that shaped the slave narrative to conform to the demands of the reading public (135). The sentimental novel was employed as a typical framework for the black female’s slave narrative (Yellin 1725; Smith, *Self-Discovery*, 212–26). Using the pattern not only of autobiographers like Jacobs, but also of such novelists as Harriet E. Wilson (*Our Nig*,

1859) and Frances Harper (*Iola Leroy*, 1892), Atwood superficially portrays the enslaved Handmaid as the helpless heroine who is abused by a gothic villain. Banerjee has written about the classic seduction element of Atwood's novel: "The basic situation is familiar: a woman, totally helpless in a strange environment, continuously finds herself in a variety of situations where a menacing alien power is spectacularly displayed" (83). Offred's seducer is the governmental machine who represents the misogynist/racist principle that seeks to capture and control the body of the Other.

The historical use of the elements of sentimental fiction within the frame of the slave narrative served a confessional function: "to shock the bourgeoisie into an awareness of what a chamber of horrors its own smugly regarded world really was" (Fiedler 135). The political design of writers such as Jacobs was to teach white women about the horrors of the institution of slavery and the ideology of white racism (Yellin 1725). Valerie Smith notes that Jacobs, as a strategy for educating elite women readers about the historical circumstances of marginalization, "couches her story in the rhetoric and structures of popular fiction" (36). Such narrators as Jacobs affirm and legitimize their psychological autonomy by telling the story of their lives, for "in their manipulation of received literary conventions they also engage with and challenge the dominant ideology" (V. Smith 2). It is appropriate, then, as Sorisio notes, that Jacobs chooses to use the discourse of sentimental fiction (6), for this genre "represents a monumental effort to reorganize culture from the woman's point of view" (Tompkins 83). In *Incidents* the author labors to reorganize the women's culture, attempting "to write across the color line, to mediate between the races" (Foster 96). Offred's tale, like Jacobs's, ultimately becomes a testimony about the need for women to cross borders, to discover each other's voices, and to intersect but not conflate their stories.

Understanding the 'blank white spaces': The Handmaid's Confession

By using the slave-woman trope to tell her story, Offred, at the same time, comments upon and critiques her own rhetorical procedures, offering a silent revolt to the political problems that the rhetoric entails. She warns us of the dangers inherent in the oversight of apparent differences in various women's tales of oppression, as she learns that both her former and current status do not compare to the historical atrocities of many other women. Invoking the sentimental novel frame of black women's slave narratives, the Handmaid ultimately confesses her own contribution to the dystopian situation in Gilead. Jill LeBihan notes that Offred is "a confessional journal-style first person narrator" (106). This narrator is the white, once-privileged, once-complacent woman whose past reveals her numbness to the voice of the marginalized female. Before the revolution she lived comfortably in the midst of the mainstream in Cambridge, never identifying with the cause of feminism, never noticing the struggles of American women who were less fortunate because of income or color, never taking seriously her activist

friend Moira. Peter Stillman and S. Anne Johnson have noted Offred's emblematic complacency throughout her life (70–86). Glenn Deer also argues that the narrator's confessed complacency causes her to become, to some extent, complicit in the violent story she tells (230).

Through an agonizing process of recording details about her own enslavement, Offred discovers that she had, even in her own history, denied that the stories of other women were important. She had segregated their voices from the realm of her own, and nothing inspired her toward a global/multiracial vision of womanhood. Taking her former liberty for granted, Offred had turned a deaf ear toward those enslaved by horrific conditions in American culture. As she makes her confession, she shows that she is beginning to understand the repercussions of her complicit actions. hooks writes about this process: "Women must begin the work of reorganization with the understanding that we have all (irrespective of our race, sex, or class) acted in complicity with the existing oppressive system" (*Feminist Theory* 160).

Stillman and Johnson accuse Offred of being chiefly guilty of "the complicity of ignoring" (77). The narrator acknowledges this shortcoming by delineating numerous past instances in which she had maintained an active negligence toward the plight of other women. Alluding to her dangerous denial of the violence leading up to the coup, Offred confesses how she saw other less-privileged women as "corpses" and "dreams," thereby refusing their reality:

We [the privileged] lived, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it . . . There were stories in the newspapers, of course, corpses in ditches or the woods, bludgeoned to death or mutilated . . . but they were about other women . . . The newspaper stories were like dreams to us, bad dreams dreamt by others . . . We [privileged white women] were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edge of print. It gave us more freedom. (74)

Offred here discloses that her acquiescence to the sexual and racial imperialism of contemporary America was based on a false sense of the freedom that comes from "ignoring." Uncovering the "we"/"they" dichotomy of the American mindset, she makes an extremely crucial admission of her former racism, denoting that the stories of other women were in "black" because they were in "print"—as opposed to her distanced bourgeois position in the "blank white spaces" at the edge of the story (74).

Offred further recalls the former lethargy she once felt as she watched movies about "the rest of the world," wherein Third World women were enslaved as colonial subjects both in reality and on film:

women in long skirts or cheap printed cotton dresses, carrying bundles of sticks, or baskets, or plastic buckets of water, from some river or other, with babies slung on them . . . looking squinteyed or afraid out of the screen at us . . . Those movies were comforting and faintly boring. They made me feel sleepy. (151)

Such confessions of her sleepy indifference to national and international news about other women underline Offred's maturing recognition of her failure to understand the social and political context of America, which she saw "only as a story" (86). Her apathy is implicit of a "paradigm of denial" within which dominant members of her culture hide in comfort.

Now, through the description of her loss of freedom, and thus the privilege of ignoring, the narrator attempts to redress her own contribution to the former conditions of other women around the world and to the current conditions of the Handmaids. She, toward the end, speaks in an embarrassed and reparative tone: "I am coming to a part you will not like at all, because in it I did not behave well, but I will try nonetheless to leave nothing out. After all you've been through, you deserve whatever I have left, which is not much but includes the truth" (344). Here Offred assumes a confessional style remarkably like Brent's: "I come to a period in my unhappy life, which I would forget if I could. The remembrance fills me with sorrow and shame. It pains me to tell you of it; but I have promised to tell you the truth, and I will do it" (*Incidents* 1733). Once again, this allusion to Jacobs's chosen confessional mode indicates Offred's own modest but "monumental effort to reorganize culture" (Tompkins 83).

Once Offred has told the truth about the costs of her lethargy, she endeavors to reorganize the past by summoning a sisterhood with women who have "been through" hell and who, therefore, "deserve . . . the truth." Understanding that women's conditions cannot be conflated, Offred directly promises others that she will no longer ignore stories based on differences: "I will bear yours . . . if I ever get the chance, if I meet you or if you escape, in the future or in heaven or in prison or underground" (344). Within her own space, the room allotted to her by the regime, she discovers a new zeal for history inscribed by the woman before her. "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum"—which means "Don't let the bastards grind you down"—is a sororal encouragement for survival through language (69). Offred accepts the challenge to decipher words communicated by "unknown" women: "It was a message, and it was in writing, forbidden by that very fact, and it hadn't yet been discovered. Except by me, for whom it was intended . . . It pleases me to ponder this message. It pleases me to think I'm communing with her, this unknown woman" (69). In turn, leaving her own message, Offred recognizes that her story is only one in a huge number by women: "*Dear You*, I'll say. Just *you*, without a name . . . *You* can mean more than one. *You* can mean thousands" (53). Although thousands of women of color have been removed to National Homeland One, Offred implies a readiness to exchange tales if she ever gets the chance, if she meets them or they escape (344). As hooks writes, "Women must explore various ways to communicate with one another cross-culturally if we are to develop political solidarity" (*Feminist Theory* 58).

Offred's expression of desired solidarity with other women signals her maturing consciousness about the immense power of language. Admitting her former insouciance with language, she understands that words could

have been her most powerful weapons against the social injustice toward the women who were “in the papers” (74). Offred admits the ridiculousness of her former wordplay, which provided only amusement in her empty time in confinement, and she ultimately confesses her folly, “I’ve been wasting my time” (293). Though her deconstructions occasionally opened up “tiny peepholes” (31) for interpretation, meaning, and critique, the Handmaid soon learns that they have represented no real verbal action. She remembers, with horror, how she played with the phrase “date rape” in college, only to trivialize the horrors of other women (50).

Immediately following Offred’s disclosure of her apathy with words, she begins the mysterious new confinement within which her story is recorded. She never tells us where she is. We learn from the “Historical Notes” that she moves through an Underground Femaleroad, sequestered, as was Brent, in small rooms along the way. Regardless of her final destiny, Offred has arrived at a state of reinscription into a world from which she has been amputated (Lacomb 3–20). Her repossession of language—though “limping and mutilated” because of the challenges posed to literacy—underscores Atwood’s assertion that the most important movement toward achieving decolonization and ending oppression is to give voice to suppressed histories. Offred learns that to suppress her story, and ultimately the stories of others, is to aid the dominant force in the promulgation of its imperialistic cultural myths. As Atwood has said elsewhere, “The aim of all suppression is to silence *the voice*, abolish the word, so that the only voices and words left are those of the ones in power” (*Second Words* 350). That which Gayatri Spivak terms as an “inaccessible blankness” in the dominant text is made accessible by narrators like Offred, who speak the voice that history has eclipsed (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 294). Atwood sees blankness as a territory free of imperial order (Tomc 76). She fills in “the blank white spaces,” making them less obviously white.

It is true that the colonization of Offred’s body can be linked with the colonization of her voice—even in the end another has imperial control of it, has taken it out of its pure oral form and published it in “his” symbols, as both Arnold Davidson (113–121) and Sandra Tomc (82) note. Thus, when we read the “Historical Notes” at the close of the novel, we are reminded that history, in written form, has most frequently censored the experience of the Other for the purposes of the One. We are also left to wonder whether there are other unspeakable horrors “told” by Offred that have been amputated from the manuscript.

Nevertheless, we are able to discern that however distorted the Handmaid’s tale, “her story” has managed to survive even the abuses of history. Overcoming complacency, Offred takes pride in the power of even a “limping and mutilated” narrative, realizing that she speaks a story from which she had distanced herself before the regime colonized her body. By deconstructing Gilead Offred, in turn, constructs her own subjectivity through language as a mode of survival (Russell 143–152). Her “hidden transcript” is a survival technique to resist the “public transcript” of the regime (Hansot

56–69). Working in this secret territory free from imperial order (Tomc 86), Offred makes a “tiny peephole” in the solid prison of a dominant history and “decenters the central image of . . . the [dominant power’s] eye” (Givner 73). Through the Handmaid we learn that the personal tale is a political one, that agency can be found, established, and liberated even in the buried structures of historical silence. Showing us that genuine emancipation occurs only when we open ourselves up to the gaps in the dominant national myths, *The Handmaid’s Tale* helps us to face the truth about the horrid paradox at the heart of the American experience, forcing us to meditate on “what freedom means when others are in chains” (Larson 53). Anything less is denial.

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