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The drip, drip, drip of dystopia: *The Handmaid's Tale*, temporal boundaries, and affective investment

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ABSTRACT

Critical dystopian narratives provide a captivating examination into bleak, futuristic societies, while simultaneously encouraging their audiences to draw comparisons between the fictional dystopian world and the societies in which the audiences live. This essay engages with viewers of the Hulu adaptation of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* to investigate the relationship between feminist dystopian fiction and affect. We posit that negative emotions drive viewer engagement with the text. Reactions of anxiety, fear, and anger ground participants' reading of the series, and encourage them to critically interrogate the contemporary political environment through the lens of *The Handmaid's Tale's* Gilead. While feminist dystopian works are products of a particular political time and space, the ambiguous features of critical feminist dystopias are at once reflections of the specific cultural milieu in which they were originally conceptualized, as well as meditations on societal constructions that come before and after the production of those texts. Ultimately, we argue that feminist dystopian narratives are at once affective and analytical. These texts both necessitate critical engagement of women's lives and transcend temporal boundaries to engage with the anxiety, fear, and anger of marginalized groups as a felt permanent condition.

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Introduction

In 2015, a United Nations report found that workplaces in the United States lack mandatory standards of care for pregnant women and caregivers as required by international human rights law (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner 2015, para. 13). Women's reproductive freedoms face continued assault. As Georgeanne Usova, legislative council for the American Civil Liberties Union, suggests, recently proposed legislation from the Department of Health and Human Services "could push abortion care out of reach for many of the 1.3 million people who purchase plans through the government marketplaces" (2018). The battle over immigration into the United States from Latin American countries has become increasingly politically divisive and has had serious implications for immigrant women and mothers. Immigrant children who were separated from their parents at the United States/Mexico border dominated much of the news cycle

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in 2019, and the psychological trauma on these families promises to be long-lasting (Patricia Alvarez 2019). The current cultural milieu is bleak for women, and as these issues continue to progress, the future seems dystopian.

Written by Margaret Atwood in 1985, *The Handmaid's Tale* chronicles a dystopian world in which cultural and environmental factors have led to a fertility crisis. To facilitate population growth, the Sons of Jacob overthrow the United States government and establish Gilead, a society structured by religious fundamentalism that places the onus of reproductive responsibility on women, in its place. Women are forbidden from participating in public life, and fertile women are forced to serve as childbearing handmaids for powerful men and their wives. Handmaids are stripped of the identities they had in their pre-Gilead lives. Upon assignment to the home of a government official, women are given new names to indicate they are the property of their commander; narrator June, for instance, becomes Offred, or "Of Fred." Life in Gilead is highly regulated, with language use, attire, and hierarchical systems of power tightly controlled by the architects of Gilead's regime. The story ends ambiguously with a pregnant June/Offred driven away in a van, yet the novel's epilogue insinuates the Gilead has fallen in favor of a more optimistic future.

Although the novel was first adapted to screen in 1990, the film version of *The Handmaid's Tale* did not resonate with audiences and was a box office failure (Sara Gilbert 2015). However, The Hulu-adapted television series has been a breakout success for the streaming service; *The Handmaid's Tale* was nominated for thirteen Emmys for its first season, and became the first series developed by a streaming service to win the Outstanding Drama Series award (Patrick Hipes and Amanda N'Duka 2017). The adaptation was also met with wide critical acclaim, both for its exemplary technical execution and timely subject matter. Jen Chaney (2017) remarks that the series is "gripping, well-acted, photographed with an appropriate mix of precision and sumptuousness." Moira Weigel (2017) details the ways that the novel, written in the wake of the feminist backlash of the conservative 1980s and Reagan presidency, has become "more, not less, relevant in the three decades since the novel was published," pointing to the renewed fervor of Republican politicians to restrict women's rights.

Analysis of televisual texts is predicated on the assumption that as an object of everyday, lived experience, television is "a repository for meanings and a site where cultural values are articulated . . . it is one of our society's prime storytellers, a resource and a tool for learning, deliberation, debate, and persuasion, and a site wherein power and ideology operate" (Jonathan Gray and Amanda Lotz 2012, 22). Media audience research is central to these ideological underpinnings. As Janice Radway writes, "In depth, qualitative analysis of the way an audience encounters, interprets, and uses mass media should be included as a necessary part of a larger investigation into the manner of its production and distribution" (1986, 99) because "the content of any message, whether textual or behavioral, is not simply found in that message, but is constructed by an audience interacting with that message" (96). As such, we move beyond textual analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale* to consider how audiences of the Hulu adaptation situate the narrative within both historical and contemporary political and social milieus, as well as within their own personal experiences of marginalization. We posit that negative emotions drive viewer engagement with the text. Specifically, reactions of anxiety, fear, and anger ground participants' reading of the series, and encourage them to critically interrogate the contemporary political environment through the lens of *The Handmaid's Tale's* Gilead.

While feminist dystopian works are products of a particular political time and space, the ambiguous features of critical feminist dystopias are at once reflections of the specific cultural milieu in which they were originally conceptualized, as well as meditations on the spaces that come before and after the production of those texts. Ultimately, we argue that feminist dystopian narratives are at once affective and analytical. They both necessitate critical engagement of women's lives and transcend temporal boundaries to engage with the anxiety, fear, and anger of marginalized groups as a felt permanent condition.

Feminist affect

The affective turn in feminist scholarship provides a central framework through which to understand the relationship between dystopian narrative and the felt permanence of marginalized groups' negative emotions. Feminist affect theorists point out the natural relationship between feminist and affect scholarships, given that feminist theorists have "long been concerned with the relationships between affect, knowledge and power" (Carolyn Pedwell and Anne Whitehead 2012, 119) through the disruption of the gendered reason/emotion binary (Sara Ahmed 2004, 3). Although feminist affective analyses draw from a range of theoretical perspectives, Pedwell and Whitehead contend that they are held together through their "concern with how power circulates through feeling and how politically salient ways of being and knowing are produced through affective relations and discourses" (116). Further, Sara Ahmed (2010) recognizes affect as an evaluation "expressed in how bodies turn toward things" (31). Affective investments are created through contact with both the object and what is near or around the object. Affective scholarship explores the possibility of groups' investment in objects; the circulation of affective objects, then, influences the ways that individuals come to objects, as well as the assumptions they make about potential affective relationships.

Proposing "intimate public" as a site that "foregrounds affective and emotional attachments located in fantasies of the common, the everyday, and a sense of ordinariness" (2008, 10), Lauren Berlant turns specifically toward "women's culture" as a space through which to examine collective affect. The forms and genres of women's popular media, Berlant argues, are constructed vis-à-vis the existence of this intimate public; prior to the production of mass-marketed texts exists an assumption of "a world of strangers who would be emotionally literate in each other's experience of power, intimacy, desire, and discontent, with all that entails" (5). Although Berlant concludes that "the female complaint is a discourse of disappointment" (13) and thus a general state of being, she also suggests more optimistic possibilities in which "women generate an affective and intimate public sphere that seeks to harness the power of emotion to change what is structural in the world" (12). In other words, intimate publics organized around media culture, including dystopian series like *The Handmaid's Tale*, have the possibility to move beyond the ambivalence of ordinariness and discontent and imagine an alternative way of being.

In contrast to Berlant, Ahmed engages with the sociality of emotion through her critique of the "inside out" model of emotion. She instead advocates for emotions as a cultural practice in which "emotions are assumed to *come from without and move inward*" (2004, 9, emphasis in original). Instead of conceptualizing emotions as something "'we have' ... feelings become a form of social presence rather than self-presence. ... it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries

are made" (10). Because we are *made* to feel through the culture around us, it is paramount to investigate those sites that are "sticky, or saturated with affect" (11), and how affect comes into being through the interaction between individual subjects and affective objects. However, Ahmed is careful to point out that feelings "not only *heighten tension*," but that they are also "*in tension* . . . even when we feel the same feeling, we don't necessarily have the same relationship to the feeling" (10, emphasis in original). Thus, Ahmed's work points to the necessity of exploring individual response to objects of affect.

Television operates as one such "intimate public" through the way it facilitates emotional and affective investment of its audiences. Lawrence Grossberg (1987) argues that television's affective economy is marked by its features of irony, repetition, and excess, and it is within these excesses that television becomes emotionally salient. Calling emotionalism television's "most powerful annunciation," he suggests that "in various ways, viewers get to live out the emotional highs and lows of their lives on TV" (43). Kristyn Gorton (2009) further contends that this affective investment of television viewers is driven in particular by elements of programs themselves, including "characterisation, narrative, editing, music and acting" (125). Her analysis of *ER*, *State of Play*, and *The Sopranos* reveals the "importance of strong, contradictory characters to an emotional engagement with their audiences" (126). While Gorton's work describes the relationship between affect and television audiences, we elucidate this connection further by engaging directly with viewers of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Misha Kavka (2008) similarly writes about reality television's ability to foster intimacy with its viewers. Engaging with the distinction between reality and mediated representations, Kavka argues that reality television's proliferation is structured in part by the way that it capitalizes on television as a technology of intimacy. Given its "ability to bring others emotionally near, its dependence on everyday detail, and its effect of liveness that coalesces the time of action with the time of viewing," Kavka maintains that "reality TV expands on the technologies of intimacy in relation to actuality as developed by earlier periods of television" (22). This point is particularly salient for our investigation of *The Handmaid's Tale*. While the series is not a reality program, we ground our argument of viewer affective response in its emotional resonance, similarity with the contemporary political and cultural landscape, and temporal ambiguity. Literature of critical feminist dystopian narratives further grounds this interpretation.

Critical feminist dystopia

Generally conceived, dystopian narratives wrestle with anxieties borne from the changing social and structural conditions of modernity, such as oppression, war, exploitation, and the consumer society (Tom Moylan 2013). While "dystopia" is a label applied widely to a number of stories featuring grim outlooks of futuristic societies, M. Keith Booker (2013) argues that true dystopian work "needs to foreground the oppressive society in which it is set, using that setting as an opportunity to comment in a critical way on some other society, typically that of the author or the audience" (5). Lyman Tower Sargent offers a taxonomy for utopic and dystopic societies, positing that negative utopias depict "a non-existent society . . . that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived" (1994, 9). Negative utopias, or dystopias, allow readers to draw comparisons between their own lived

experiences and the dystopic world, and to postulate about the conditions in the society in which they live that might lead to the future represented in the dystopian narrative. Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan (2003) argue that the portrayal of dystopian worlds fosters a sense of “immediacy and normalcy of the location” (5); it is at once both familiar and “nightmarish.” Because readers begin the narrative within the context of the dystopian world, the protagonist with whom audiences are meant to view as a guide through the narrative is “unreflectively immersed in the society” (5) as the text opens. However, narrative development throughout the story allows the protagonist to move from “apparent contentment into an experience of alienation and resistance” (5). Audiences, then, use the protagonist’s evolvment from contentment, or resignation in the case of *The Handmaid’s Tale’s* Offred, as a lens through which to critically question the ideological underpinnings of the dystopian society.

Dystopian scholars have more recently advanced the notion of critical dystopias, in which “the possibility of eutopia exists within some dystopias, but the problem is how to actualise the eutopia and get rid of the dystopia” (Lyman Tower Sargent 2013, 11). Vita Fortunati (2013) concludes that dystopian fiction took a distinctly critical turn in the 1980s; these works emphasize a sense of hopefulness, while foregrounding the most pressing social and political issues of a given cultural moment. This ability of critical dystopias to foster the potential for more positive possibilities relies on the way in which dystopian narratives generally require active engagement from their readers. Moylan summarizes the subject position of the dystopian story’s audience:

Our only chance of transforming this world lies in becoming the protagonists in a new narrative and acting accordingly. We are not outsiders on a tour of eu-topia. We are already subjects in dys-topia; and our only emancipatory alternative is to get going on this new trajectory (2013, 42).

Reader involvement with critical dystopias is thus two-fold; readers are first encouraged to make connections between the narrative world and one’s own social world, and then, secondly, are invited to imagine ways to rectify or avoid the parallels between those worlds.

Emerging from critical dystopian work is the feminist critical dystopia; like critical dystopias generally, they are narratively ambiguous in that they leave open the possibility of resistance. However, Raffaella Baccolini (2013) maintains that their “practice of genre blurring” (40) makes them a distinct subcategory of critical dystopian work. She specifies that “by drawing on the feminist critique of universalist assumptions and borrowing specific conventions from other genres ... the critical [feminist] dystopias resist the discourse of genre purity” (40–41). Ildney Cavalcanti (2003) argues that feminist dystopia is an inherently critical genre that “paint[s] an exaggerated picture of the existing power relations between the sexes, as if they were placed under a magnifying glass” (53). Put differently, these works not only eschew structural mandates of the dystopian genre, but also foreground the experience of women *as* women through their female protagonists.

Thematically, gendered oppression is centered in feminist dystopias; while matriarchal dystopian works certainly figure into the breadth of the dystopian genre (*A Door into Ocean, Heroes and Villains*), critical feminist dystopian works rely on historical precedents of patriarchal misogyny as their subject matter. Judith A Little (2007) concludes that feminist dystopias “mirror actual abominable treatment of women in the past and

present: for example, institutionalized maiming, torture, rape, and execution for infidelity" (16). The incorporation of violent historical practices thus moves these works from purely science-fiction into the realm of possibility. The futuristic dystopian societies may seem different in many ways than the past or present, but the treatment of women is not a far reach from the actual lived experiences of many women. Ildney Cavalcanti (2000) further emphasizes the role linguistic modalities play in critical feminist dystopias, arguing that language is not used simply to negotiate power, but that "in the feminist dystopias, dystopic and utopic dispositions (represented by male and female principles) confront each other, and that this confrontation is often enacted by means of linguistic struggle" (153). Language, then, acts as a space for resistance as women grapple with their place in the dystopian society and attempt to escape its confines.

It is perhaps unsurprising that *The Handmaid's Tale*, often identified as one of the first significant critically feminist dystopian texts (Baccolini 2013), has been the subject of much literary analysis. For example, Shirley Neuman (2006) draws connections between the political environment when Atwood wrote *The Handmaid's Tale* and the narrative of the work. She concludes that, "Offred, in short, is a fictional product of 1970s feminism, and she finds herself in a situation that is a fictional realization of the backlash against women's rights that gathered force during the early 1980s" (858). That is, the novel's narrator serves as a proxy for the advancements women gained during second-wave feminism, and Gilead points to the logical conclusion to "correct" what religious, conservative politicians perceived as an imbalance in the gendered order. Adelina Catalado (2013) argues that genre blurring also figures significantly in the novel in that it "intentionally blends different genres into the dystopian skeleton, such as the fairy tale—as is clearly detectable even in the title—the history, the autobiography, the realistic narrative and even the epistolary novel" (158). To this end, Atwood plays with the concepts of boundaries, both through the narrative of the novel and through the concept of genre.

Further, the possibility of resistance is underscored through the open-ended nature of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Raffaella Baccolini (2000) concludes that the novel, like other critical feminist dystopian texts, "reject[s] the traditional subjugation of the individual at the end of the novel" and "opens a space for contestation and opposition for those groups ... for whom subjectivity has yet to be obtained" (18). Yet, *The Handmaid's Tale* does not end with Offred's story; instead, the novel's epilogue reveals that Professor James Darcy Pieixoto has discovered Offred's audio-taped recounting of Gilead long after the collapse of the society, which he has been presenting at an academic conference. Karen F Stein [1991] 1992) argues for the way that this necessarily impacts the meaning of the text: "In retelling Offred's tale, Professor Pieixoto both resurrects and reinterprets it—as do all readers ... Without the reader the text is dead, but each new reading creates a new tale" (273). Stein's claim points to the necessity of engaging with those readers/viewers; in what ways do the "new tales" of *The Handmaid's Tale's* viewers collude, and what do these readings suggest about the contemporary political and cultural environment? How do affective responses to the series foreground *The Handmaid's Tale* viewership as an "intimate public" through which to interrogate the modern condition of women?

Taken together, feminist affect scholarship and literature exploring critical feminist dystopias ground viewer reception of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Given dystopian narratives' incisive political commentary and the ways they demand active audience participation,

they offer a fruitful avenue through which to conduct media audience studies. This is particularly apt given the open-ended nature of critical dystopian texts; while Atwood's novel offers the reader a finite, albeit ambiguous, conclusion, the televisual adaptation promises viewers more to come after season one resolves with the end of the original source material. In doing so, audiences are given a greater sense of latitude to speculate about the resistive opportunities for Offred/June and the other handmaids. Finally, positioning *The Handmaid's Tale* as a critical feminist dystopia in which women's oppression is foregrounded offers a space to explore how negative emotional reactions drive viewer engagement with the series.

Method

To understand the way audiences articulated their understanding of *The Handmaid's Tale*, we interviewed 34 viewers of the series. Participants were recruited by posting a research call on Facebook discussion forums, such as "*The Handmaid's Tale*: Thoughtful Discussion" and "*The Handmaid's Tale*—Real Life Parallels Discussion Group" with permission of forum moderators. We conducted interviews in March and April of 2018 leading up to the April 25th, 2018 premiere of the series' second season. Interviews ranged in length from 12 to 60 minutes, and lasted an average of 36 minutes. Interviews included questions about participants' favorite characters, their understanding of the role of men and women in Gilead, their emotional reactions to the series, and who they perceived to be the "typical" viewer of the series. We also asked participants to speculate about *The Handmaid's Tale*'s popularity with both critics and audiences, and to comment on the connections they perceived between the series, the contemporary political environment, and their own lives.

After the completion of data collection, we transcribed the interviews, which resulted in 304 pages of verbatim transcripts. Participants were primarily white (26), female, (27), and American (28), and ranged in age from 18 to 60; the average age was 40 years old. Individuals self-selected to be interviewed for this project and were recruited from active fan pages on social media; consequently, the sample size was small, participants were uniformly positive about their valuation of the series, and they were relatively homogenous in their demographic profiles. Importantly, as Audre Lorde discusses in her foundational work *Sister Outsider* (1984), Black women's anger is a product of intersectional axes of marginalization, and thus the homogeneity of our participants precludes a more robust portrait of the affective responses of our participants. Our analysis is therefore reflective of a particular subset of the series' viewers rather than a definitive reading of viewers writ large. Following John W. Creswell (2007) constant comparative method, we coded transcripts by identifying emergent themes from the participants' comments about the series. In what follows, we delineate the most salient discussions about *The Handmaid's Tale*, turning first to the way participants contextualized the series as a dystopian narrative.

Gilead and temporal dystopia

Participants described *The Handmaid's Tale* as a dystopian narrative; twenty-four interviewees used the specific nomenclature of "dystopia," and in their descriptions of the series, identified Gilead as a society that was oppressive to women in particular. Winona (39, clerical) noted that the series depicted "a dystopian society and how women's rights

have been severely infringed upon.” Mateo (25, ESL teacher) offered more specific examples regarding the subjugation of women: “[Gilead] removes the rights of women in an attempt to promote the birth rate again ... this new government permits all kinds of crimes and horrible actions just to get to this final objective.” Joe (40, information technology) further observed that “life has been up-ended for half the world ... one day life is normal for everyone and the next, for every female person at least, life has been turned upside down. They have no rights, they have nothing.” The acknowledgement that *The Handmaid’s Tale* positions women as its subject of oppression is significant for contextualizing the series as a feminist dystopia (Cavalcanti 2003). In doing so, participants’ evaluations of Gilead have the ability to move beyond a general comparison to contemporary society, and instead are specifically grounded in the ways that restrictive measures impact women.

Twenty-two participants suggested that language operated as one key way of establishing control within Gilead, a feature common to dystopian works. Connie (48, educator) pointed out that “part of changing the culture is changing the language.” She went on to note that the regular use of prescriptive phrases such as “under his eye,” “blessed be the fruit,” and “may the Lord open” signified a way to “infiltrate people’s minds ... making [those phrases] part of the culture is very, very important ... it’s the gateway to indoctrination.” For Amber (35, stay at home mother), language was a tool of “obedience” and “brainwashing”; she compared the religiously-inspired phrases used repeatedly throughout the series to Pavlov’s classical conditioning experiment, and argued that “they’re trained to say [the phrases]. They don’t even know they’re doing it anymore.” Petra (34, contracting) maintained that restrictive language and the regulation against women reading would have been difficult for Offred in particular, who served as an editor at a publishing house before Gilead: “If you identify so much with your ability to express yourself through words and then somebody takes that away from you, I think that’s just terrifying.” Coupled with the identification of *The Handmaid’s Tale* as a dystopian series that depicts the oppression of women generally, Gilead’s focus on prescriptive language further highlights the control exercised by men over women in the series. That is, although language use was highly regulated for all of Gilead’s residents, oft-repeated phrases (“blessed be the fruit,” “may the Lord open”) underscore the handmaids’ role as simply vessels for childbearing. Participants’ suggestion that language is a tool of “propaganda” and “brainwashing” further solidifies how women are coerced into participating in a dystopian world that strips them of their agency.

Beyond linguistic features, eight participants identified aesthetic elements of the series that grounded the series as dystopian and highlighted the ambiguous temporal boundaries of the dystopian society. Although the series begins *in media res*, Lisa (50, historian) indicated that flashback scenes pointed to Gilead’s departure from the pre-dystopian society: “they have the flashbacks and all the flashbacks were of them at the beach, at the carnival. And they’re having all these great family moments.” These shifts in time helped underscore the juxtaposition between *The Handmaid’s Tale’s* temporal spaces. After watching flashback scenes in the trailer for the first season, Sophie (18, student) observed that the characters were “wearing 2017 clothes, they’re doing 2017 things. They’ve got phones. It’s our world and that world.” Sophie’s comment that *The Handmaid’s Tale* is at once “our world and that world” illustrates the fluid temporality of the dystopian narrative. While flashbacks work to indicate a shift in time, the way in which they are

interwoven into Gilead's diegesis serves as a reminder that the pre-Gilead and Gilead societies are inextricably linked.

When scenes shifted to Gilead, the stark difference in aesthetics marked a tonal change meant to reflect the severity of the dystopian world. Winona, for instance, suggested that the women in Gilead "all have a job that is determined, easily viewable by the clothing that they wear," stressing the hierarchical roles assigned to women in the dystopian society visually marked by the costuming (i.e., wives of commanders in blue, Marthas in tan, and handmaids in red) and different from their previous lives. Moreover, Erica (38, teacher) identified the extreme close-up shots and voiceover narration of Offred's character as a way to emphasize the character's ambivalence to her new position and Gilead generally. She shared, "I like to hear what she's thinking. I like how the series tunes into here's what her actions are, but in her head, she is, you know, so different." That is, although Offred outwardly performed her role as a handmaid, the editorial choice to include her thoughts through voiceover troubled the assumption that she was altogether subservient. Indeed, this further blurs the temporal boundaries of the dystopian narrative. That Offred's pre-Gilead personality is still presented, if only through the voiceover expression of her thoughts, belies a clear time demarcation; she is at once the woman she was before Gilead, a participant in the current dystopian society, and as exemplified through her narration, imagining a future life after her escape from the oppressive regime.

Imagining the trickle toward Gilead

Little's (2007) assertion that feminist dystopias rely on past and present maltreatment of women indicates that viewers need not suspend disbelief to make connections between the diegetic world and their own body of knowledge and experiences. Thus, participants relied heavily on contextualizing their experience with *The Handmaid's Tale* through sentiments about their fears of political backlash against women and other minorities. Twenty-five interviewees mentioned connections between the series' depictions and the contemporary political and cultural environment. This immediacy was facilitated by the timing of the series' premiere following the election of Donald Trump, and served as an especially prescient reason for *The Handmaid's Tale's* relevance. David (51, clerk), for instance, concluded the series resonated after "the election of Trump and the right wing and how crazy they are. I think we are in uncharted waters." Other participants specifically noted the relationship between Vice President Mike Pence and religious fundamentalism as a threatening concern to the rights of women and other minorities. Crystal (41, parent caregiver) shared that "if for some reason Pence moved into a higher position that we would be another large step closer to Gilead" given his record of anti-abortion and anti-LGBT policies (Terry Gross 2018). Mark (57, software engineer), who identified as gay, elaborated on this idea by connecting the series' depiction of hanging LGBT characters with Pence's religious beliefs: "Especially with someone like Mike Pence who probably does want to hang gay men and women in the public square, it hits home for me."

Although respondents of color represented only eight of our participants in total, five offered particularly harrowing examples of how the Gilead's regressive society mirrored discrimination in their own lives. Kia (40, sales manager) observed that the "vitriolic rhetoric" regarding race after the presidential election sparked her interest in the series, maintaining, "I saw myself in the character because my son is half-white [and half-black].

So, I could see me and my son trying to cross the border to Canada.” Anjali (60, physician), an Indian immigrant, suggested that the flashback scenes in which June, her husband, and her daughter attempted to escape Gilead were reflective of the safety measures she encouraged her daughters to take in light of anti-immigration sentiments: “When they’re running away in those flashbacks? Well, that was our reality. My daughters had to travel with their birth certificates there for a while. When they were traveling they had to be really careful.” Skye (40, homemaker) noted that *The Handmaid’s Tale* presented a grim future that would have profound implications for her family:

To see a bunch of alt-right Nazi guys parading down the street, to me, is a scary thing that I never thought I would see in my lifetime. And to make the joke to my son who is mixed race, and say, well, do you want to get shipped back to Nicaragua with your father or go to the camps with me? The people in the show aren’t that far off from that.

Although the television adaptation of the series features characters of color in a variety of roles, these participants relied on their experiences of how racial minorities are regarded in contemporary society to inform their place in Gilead. Scholars contend that audiences compare the dystopic society to that of their own (see Sargent 1994), with “dystopic” connoting a more horrific version of actual life. However, by extrapolating beyond the diegetic world of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, respondents were able to meld the most abhorrent aspects of both the fictional narrative and lived experiences to create a distinctive space in the dystopian society.

Viewers of the series are continually reminded of the implications of a fundamentalist society like Gilead, while simultaneously experiencing regressive legislation in their own lives. Susan (60, legal assistant) provided a metaphor for how Gilead paralleled the changes she has seen in American society throughout her life:

I’ve just watched abortion laws change. I’ve watched the country as a whole get more religious, get more dogmatic. And it’s drip, drip, drip. And that’s one of the things that June says in the series, the whole frog in the boiling water story. That if you don’t see it, it’s almost like you don’t see it coming and people aren’t watching. People aren’t watching.

Lisa further shared that “seeing the real-life parallels, socially and politically” drew in audiences, while Winona similarly pointed that “people are likening it to what could be going on in American society right now. They’re trying to pass stricter and stricter abortion laws, or stricter and stricter rules against what women can and can’t do.” Others viewed the narrative’s content as more relevant in the current socio-political climate than when the novel was initially released. Madison (26, student), for example, noted that she found “it really interesting that although [Atwood] wrote it thirty odd years ago . . . it’s right at the forefront of the world today.” Coupled with Madison’s nod to the original publication date of Atwood’s novel and perceived relevance in 1985, references to the present day political climate disrupt the notion that dystopian narratives are simply a comparative reflection of the contemporaneous society in which they are produced (Sargent 1994). The political implications that participants mentioned, both in *The Handmaid’s Tale* narrative and their lived experiences, do not happen all at once; rather, because they are simultaneously incremental and constantly in flux, temporal distinctions give way a felt permanence of negative affect experience for women and other marginalized groups.

The felt permanence of anxiety, fear, and anger

Respondents articulated a range of negative emotions that resulted from general viewership of the series; twenty-eight participants described their emotions in terms like “terrified,” “anxious,” or “sad.” For instance, David expressed the overall discomfort he felt while watching the show: “It makes you full of anxiety and makes you wonder what’s going to happen in real life.” Jennifer (32, librarian) similarly shared that she “had nightmares the first couple nights after watching the first couple episodes just ‘cause there was so much anxiety.” Others were more specific in identifying the emotions they felt while watching the show. Sophie mentioned fear as undergirding her viewing experience: “I found it frightening. . . . I was continually shocked. I felt like it was, when you thought that it couldn’t get any worse and they’d kick them down again.” Importantly, this fear was often discussed in relationship to their experiences as women, and how that might translate in Gilead. Madison explained that *The Handmaid’s Tale* “discussed things in a setting that would terrify a woman.” Further, Anjali concluded

As a woman, [*The Handmaid’s Tale*] gets to my deepest fears and relays them in the context of modern America. There was this tremendous sadness when something bad happened, because it was more than just feeling sad. It was actually like almost like a remembering what it might mean to be a woman in the culture.

The Handmaid’s Tale served as a fearful reminder of what women in particular stand to lose in a society like Gilead. While fear is often thought of as a debilitating emotion, Katerina Bantinaki (2012) argues that fear experienced in a fictional context, like through horror films, has the capacity to be a positive experience in that “affords us a chance to understand and learn to master our responses to fear . . . it can thus alter or reinforce our perception of self-efficacy and make us more fit in coping with fear in real-life risky situations” (390). In this instance, the fear evoked potentially provided a navigation tool for the fear they felt in regard to their own political anxieties.

Nine participants also indicated that anger structured the emotional resonance of the series. Michelle (53, marketing, for instance, said her anger was driven by the feeling that “things are not very just . . . it doesn’t seem like there’s any boundaries to what you can do to a person.” Although participants spoke about anxiety and fear in a relatively general way, they provided more specific examples from the series of instances that incited their anger. Erica remembered an episode in which a female ambassador from Mexico visited Gilead to seek guidance about their own fertility crisis: “When I’m watching and she’s begging for this [ambassador] from Mexico to save her, and she’s like, well, we’re in the same boat, so sorry. That makes me angry.” Similarly, Crystal recalled an episode that focused on Serena Joy Waterford’s backstory, which revealed that she was instrumental in the creation of Gilead:

I was so angry at that episode. She was so in love with the creation of this world . . . and then she was expelled. . . . But she made this world. And she hates having a handmaid, her third miserable handmaid situation. But she wrote the book!

Finally, Susan discussed a moment in which Serena Joy took Offred to see her daughter, Hannah, as a way to exert control over Offred:

The Hannah episode. There was, the disbelief that that’s where she was. That she had her daughter sitting on the stoop. I just kept looking at the screen saying, “I can’t believe this. I cannot believe this.” I was incredulous. And then I found my emotions matching [Offred’s]

emotions. When she was calling [Serena] those names and, you know, spittle was coming out of her mouth. I found myself like, yeah. I'm right with you there, honey.

These specific moments point to a particularly troubling notion for the participants who discussed them. Although it is difficult for them to imagine a society in which women are subjugated to the degree that they are in *The Handmaid's Tale*, it is even more troublesome and anger-inducing to acknowledge that other women play a role in maintaining that oppression. Although participants did not explicitly mention the class hierarchy as a structuring component of women's subjugation of other women, their comments represent a long-standing fissure in women's politics. Bonnie Thornton Dill writes that within the women's movement, "Black, Hispanic, Native American, and Asian American women of all classes, as well as many working-class women, have not readily identified themselves as sisters of the white, middle-class women who have been in the forefront of the movement" (1983, 131). Taken in conjunction with the contemporary reactionary rhetoric of many affluent, white women in positions of mediated power, like Tomi Lahren and Ann Coulter, the division of women in *The Handmaid's Tale* illustrates the continued presence of class-based politics in women's struggle for equality.

Despite articulating that *The Handmaid's Tale* evoked a nearly universal negative affective response, respondents nevertheless felt compelled to continue watching the series. Petra shared that while she was "terrified," she was also "intrigued and wanted to know what's going to come next." Kia echoed this sentiment, indicating that "the more I watch it, the more horrified I was, but I couldn't look away." Indeed, several elements of the series offered viewers a sense of optimism regarding the characters' eventual fates. Specifically, the strength required of the handmaids to transcend horrific circumstances, often exemplified through acts of defiance or disobedience, were powerful moments. Offred's character evolution sparked inspiration for Mark, who shared, "I feel inspired by her, especially having watched the series several times and seeing more clearly how she moved from being very timid and afraid to make a move to saying, like, fuck this." Similarly, Ashley (32, stay at home mother) remembered a moment when a defeated Offred notices the mock-Latin phrase *nolite te bastardes carborundorum* inscribed in her bedroom closet by a former handmaid: "It means 'don't let the bastards grind you down.' It's this intimate moment with herself. I have to be strong and that's so hard. ... But it's important to fight back even if everyone tells you it's not worth it."

Because critical feminist dystopias inherently encourage a comparison to the world in which audiences live, negative emotions regarding *The Handmaid's Tale's* diegetic dystopia, and women's rage in particular, seamlessly transfer to injustices they perceived in contemporary America. As Liz (34, management consultant) summarized:

If the election of Donald Trump did nothing else in this world, it woke up a lot of women who were apathetic and it really woke up the rage of women. It woke up, you know, we're tired of this. We don't have to live like this anymore. We're done with this. It's not okay to be sexually harassed at work. Date rape shouldn't be a thing. It's not okay to not test rape kits. It's not okay to regulate our uteruses and not involve women in the decision. It pissed us off.

Twenty-six participants suggested that the takeaway message of the series involved "waking up and paying attention" to the incremental recension of human rights. Skye, for example, said that the lesson she learned from the series was to "not to take anything in our lives for granted. To get out and vote. To run these crazies out of office that try and

take away abortion providers, take away access to Planned Parenthood. We can't have access taken away." Anjali aptly addressed how her viewership of *The Handmaid's Tale* transformed negative emotion into positive action:

It inspired me to get involved and wake up to what is happening in the political reality of my country. So, what was just anxiety in the pit of my stomach became like this raging commitment to do something about it because it takes good people to do nothing, you know? So, I was inspired before seeing this, but as a result of seeing this I was inspired even more.

Thus, viewing the struggle of the handmaids was not limited to imaging justice within Gilead, but it also caused these participants to consider how watching *The Handmaid's Tale* provoked a desire to right perceived wrongs in their own cultural contexts.

Participants' claims that they "couldn't look away" or needed to "know what's going to come next" point to a future-oriented mode of thinking. Understanding of the story need not be contained within the narrative's present, but speculation about the story's forward trajectory proved to be a transcendent moment. Moreover, these claims foreground the connection between emotional response and the contemporary political landscape. The inability to "look away" suggests an immediacy of attention and investment; otherwise, the slow "drip" of injustice continues. When contextualized within the frame of critical dystopias that suggest utopian possibilities through their ambiguity, the negative emotions elicited from the series become facilitative ways to imagine a better life for the women in Gilead. In many moments, negative emotions elicited by dire circumstances gave way to hopefulness and calls to political action. Thus, despite the felt permanence of negative affect for many women and marginalized people, driven by a seemingly endless cycle of societal oppression, critical engagement with feminist dystopian fiction has the potential to mobilize negative feelings. Though these negative emotions may not necessarily become positive ones, as Megan Boler argues, emotions employed as a means of control may also manifest as "site(s) of political resistance" (1999, xiii).

Conclusion

Drawing from Ahmed's understanding of emotions as an "outside in" phenomenon (9) and dystopian literature, we argue that *The Handmaid's Tale* is a cultural object that not only causes viewers to feel, but also to think. Importantly, we reject the binary that places thinking and feeling at odds with one another. Rather, we contend that reception of mediated dystopian texts eludes these boundaries, and thinking and feeling are collapsed into a simultaneous practice. Although conceptualizing negative emotion as a felt permanence may seem antithetical to Ahmed's "outside in" position by placing emotions within individuals, we argue that the collective nature of this felt permanence reflects the sociality of emotion that is borne from an outside in response to cultural conditions. Dystopian fiction like *The Handmaid's Tale* is one such cultural condition; reception of the series in relationship to the contemporary political milieu gives way to the emotional reactions of which Ahmed speaks.

Participants were drawn from social media fan pages, and thus the positive valuation of *The Handmaid's Tale* based on their active participation in these groups resulted in near consensus in their understanding of many aspects of the series. It is not unlikely

that the individuals we interviewed had previously engaged with other viewers regarding many of the topics we discussed, if only through reading social media content passively. The polysemic nature of media texts (John Fiske 2011) leaves open the possibility for alternative readings of the series. An anti-fandom approach (Jonathan Gray 2003) to the series' viewership would be a fruitful avenue through which to explore these alternative positions. It is also paramount to acknowledge that the majority of our participants were white women, and this is a limitation to our work. Atwood's novel depicted a far more overtly racist Gilead, in which people of color were banished altogether. The television series depicts a colorblind dystopia, and has faced significant criticism for glossing over the ways that many of the hypothetical injustices experienced by the women of Gilead have been realities for women of color throughout history (see Angelica Jade Bastien 2017). As several of our participants of color indicated, it is impossible for them to separate their racial and gendered identities from how they affectively conceptualize both *The Handmaid's Tale* and the current cultural milieu. Indeed, while reception to the series is reflective of Berlant's (2008) "intimate public," it is simultaneously structured by Ahmed's (2004) assertion that relationship to feeling is not universal. It is thus important for future work to explore these racial intersections, along with class intersections, more closely.

Since the Hulu adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* premiered in April 2017, women have traveled to statehouses across the country donning the red capes and white bonnets of the series' handmaids to protest legislation aimed at restricting access to abortion providers and eliminating funding to Planned Parenthood. This symbolic action exemplifies the significance of investigating the relationship between entertainment media and political action. Previous work on literature (Henry Jenkins 2012), television (Bethan Jones 2012), and celebrity (Melissa A Click, Hyunji Lee and Holly Willson Holladay 2017) suggests that media audiences not only draw prosocial values from the texts they enjoy, but extrapolate those values to political engagement in their own lives. We extend that body of work to include a dystopian text which, on its face, does not promote prosocial messages. Contrarily, viewers may be prompted to transform what they perceive as a negative value orientation into political commitments that prevent a "cautionary tale" from becoming reality.

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