"Whatever Is Silenced Will Clamor to be Heard": Nurturing Resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale*

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In late 1984, on Galiano Island in British Columbia, Margaret Atwood was writing *The Handmaid's Tale*. In the United States, Ronald Reagan was running for his second term as president. My great-grandmother, Florence Kaputo, was living in the B'Nai B'Rith apartment building on Franklin Street in Reading, Pennsylvania. My aunts Maggie and Darlene visited her there. At this point, she was around 82 years old. My father and his sisters always recall the thick Eastern European accent she spoke with and her remarkable self-assuredness.

Maggie commented to Florence about Mondale and Ferraro, who opposed Reagan and Bush for the 1984 presidential election. Geraldine Ferraro was the first woman nominated for Vice President by a major party. What Maggie commented on, however, was that she liked that they were in favor of a woman's right to an abortion. Surprising both of my aunts, Florence asked if Maggie had ever had an abortion. Though Maggie had not, Florence shared proudly that she had.

Likely sometime in the early 1930s, Florence was living in Reading with her husband Joseph and her children Salvatore and Mariastella, my grandmother. She worked in the Reading Community General Hospital kitchen, bringing snacks to patients and prepping food. She was well-liked there, and one day a doctor came up to her in the cafeteria, noticing something was wrong. At first she did not share, but the doctor kept pressing: "Florence, tell me what is bothering you." She was pregnant again and knew she

could not have the baby. The doctor replied, "Florence, I will help you take care of it. Here is what you need to do." The doctor gave her an address where she would knock on the door in a specific pattern. There, she had an abortion.

My aunt Darlene expresses regret over her shock in this moment, so surprised at her grandmother's response that neither of them pressed for more details. We do not know why she could not have the baby. We do not know what her husband knew or thought of this situation—had he known she was pregnant? Did he agree with her decision to get an abortion? We do not know what the conditions were like. Maybe the very doctor who spoke to her performed the abortion, or maybe not. Maybe she was lying on someone's kitchen table, maybe they monitored her afterwards. Like countless other women with similar stories, Florence's exact details are lost.

In 1984, abortion was, as ever, a taboo topic. Geraldine Ferraro was criticized for supporting the right to an abortion while also being a practicing Catholic. Curiously, Florence's husband, Joseph, was Catholic, furthering my questions about his knowledge of his wife's abortion. Florence herself had been a practicing Lutheran for, at least, most of her adult life, preferring to attend the German service at church. She, however, grew up Jewish, immigrating to Ellis Island from Lithuania with her siblings in the earlier part of the century. She had since become estranged from her family. When asked about her history, she had always replied, "Why do you want to know about that? It's the past, it's over," or would simply say she did not remember. But this story, she told.

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* was published in 1985, followed many years later by a Hulu TV adaptation of the same name in 2017 and the novel's sequel *The Testaments* in 2019. As I write this, the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* nearly three years ago, and Donald Trump has just begun his second term as President. *The Handmaid's Tale*'s iconic red costumes and phrases such as "Blessed be the Fruit" and "Under His Eye" are now widely recognized and used in the United States and abroad as symbols of protest against anti-abortion laws. In *The Handmaid's Tale* and its accompanying media, the totalitarian society of Gilead works hard to diminish women by pitting them against each other and pushing them into extremely uniform boxes. Throughout these texts, plants and gardening serve as an extended metaphor for femininity and how

it is allowed to be expressed, demonstrating the ways in which nurturing in Gilead is used both as a tool for oppression and assimilation as well as one for resistance.

I. Plants as Feminine

Plants, especially flowers, often serve as a metaphor for femininity and virginity. For example, the word "deflowering" refers to the taking away of a woman's virginity. The novel often describes the women and girls in Gilead accordingly. Agnes, a schoolgirl, explains: "we were precious flowers that had to be kept safely inside glass houses, or else we would be ambushed and our petals would be torn off" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 10). The fragility of flower petals is linked explicitly with the apparent fragility of women: their bodies, their brains, their purity. The Aunts function partially as teachers in Gilead, and they make it clear that the fragility of women is to be taken literally. Aunt Estée explains that women are designed to care for others "because of their special brains, which were not hard and focused like the brains of men but soft and damp and warm and enveloping, like…like what? She didn't finish the sentence" (87-88). Aunt Estée's reference to the vagina goes over Agnes's head, so she fills in the blank on her own: "Like mud in the sun, I thought. That's what was inside my head: warmed-up mud" (88). Gilead's tendency to refer to women and girls as "precious flowers" is so pervasive that it is even known to those outside of Gilead. Nicole, around sixteen years old and having lived in Canada since infancy, prepares to enter Gilead with the Pearl Girls, Gilead's missionaries, under the guise of wanting to be "saved." She learns from the Pearl Girls, "Gilead would cherish me too because I was a precious flower, every woman was a precious flower, and especially every girl of my age" (266). As she enters Gilead, she sees that this is true—she is quickly forced to hide her tattoo (although Christian, forming a cross with the words "God" and "love"), cover her "inflammatory" green hair, and don the Pearl Girl uniform (269). All individuality she had in Canada is quickly taken away, ostensibly for her own protection. This restriction is a method of control designed to keep all of Gilead's women as uniform as possible.

While the Aunts feed the girls many floral metaphors, they also teach that gardening is a major component of the "women's sphere" in Gilead; it is one of the few hobbies that Wives are allowed

to engage in and is even taught to young girls in school. School for them, of course, is meant to prepare them to become Wives, not to teach them subjects like math or writing. The emphasis on gardening in school demonstrates how vital gardening is to the role of being a Wife: it is not optional. The only other mentioned hobbies for Wives are knitting and embroidery—no cooking, no listening to music, and certainly no reading (which is illegal for most women).

In the Hulu series, Serena Joy, a Wife, is depicted as genuinely enjoying gardening and taking great pride in it (*The Handmaid's Tale* "First Blood"). In the book, gardening is depicted more clearly as an exercise of control: "A Guardian detailed to the Commander does the heavy digging; the Commander's Wife directs, pointing with her stick. Many of the Wives have such gardens, it's something for them to order and maintain and care for" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 12). In this way, the Wives are given an illusion of control, yet all their "control" is trivial. Serena Joy herself is revealed to have been an influential conservative figure pre-Gilead, even having written a book titled *A Woman's Place* (*The Handmaid's Tale* "A Woman's Place"). Especially in the beginning seasons of the show, her contributions to the foundation of Gilead have become irrelevant: "How furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 46). In Gilead, she, too, is reduced to directing all her power at her garden and away from forbidden activities like writing and politics. When she attempts to return to the foray of politics and lobbies for women to be allowed to read the Bible, even going so far as to read a passage of the Bible out loud, her own husband has her finger cut off as punishment (*The Handmaid's Tale* "The Word"). While gardening is associated so closely with women and femininity in Gilead, many of its women use it as an outlet for their "unfeminine" urges—power, anger, and control.

The connection of gardening and plants with fertility is another aspect of this dynamic which Atwood references often. Near the beginning of *The Handmaid's Tale*, plants are already explicitly connected with humanity and fertility: "I walk along the gravel path that divides the back lawn, neatly, like a hair parting…Here and there are worms, evidence of the fertility of the soil" (17). Later, observing a Guardian walking outside, Offred describes the air "which stinks of flowers, of pulpy growth, of pollen thrown into the wind in

handfuls, like oyster spawn into the sea. All this prodigal breeding" (181). In *The Testaments*, the reader learns that girls who have been deemed "ready for marriage," a relationship that Gilead believes is only valuable for procreation and control, wear spring green dresses representing "fresh leaves" (160). In a society focused on procreation and reversing its fertility crisis, it is not happenstance that the Wives are so involved with gardening. Further than just an outlet for control and a metaphor for fertility, gardening serves as a place where the Wives can nurture, transforming the garden into a replacement for children. At least in Gilead's early stages—the time frame during which Offred is actively living in Gilead—it is a given that the Wives (and/or Commanders, though Gilead will not admit to this publicly) cannot have children. The Handmaids are the fertile, sexual ones, as demonstrated by their uniforms: "the Wives wear the blue of purity, from the Virgin Mary [while] the Handmaids wear red, from the blood of parturition, but also from Mary Magdalene" (van Dam and Polak 179). While the Wives are not virgins, they are meant to be pure, motherly figures, unlike the Handmaids: "It was common knowledge that all the Handmaids had been sluts, once upon a time. And they still were, although in a different way" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 90). The equating of sexuality with the Handmaids in this derogatory way, leading even young children to call them "sluts," serves to present this child-bearing side of femininity as negative and unwanted, even as it remains the literal lifeforce of Gilead.

The Wives' sole mission in life is to obtain children one way or another. As Gilead's teachings put it, "if you weren't an Aunt or a Martha…what earthly use were you if you didn't have a baby?" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 81). In fact, a Wife's whole life surrounds this goal. As previously stated, they neither cook nor clean, are completely ousted from the "men's sphere" of politics and government, and they are essentially confined to knitting and gardening. Creation through their knitting and gardening is the Wives' way of nurturing while they wait for a child to enter their life. The scarves they knit are almost exclusively for children, illustrating another way in which children are the central focus of their lives. Offred describes Serena Joy (who is knitting scarves depicting detailed scenes) as "turning out more and more yards of intricate and useless wool people: her form of procreation, it must be" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 154). In this way, the Wives have no other

purpose in life than to raise, maintain, and create, whether "wool people," flowers, or, if she is lucky, actual children.

Gilead's connection of gardening and flowers to femininity is simultaneously bolstered and juxtaposed by the seeming disconnection between the Aunts and floral affinities. The Aunts teach and enforce the connection, giving girls classes in gardening, Japanese and French floral arrangement, and even floral embroidery—though the teaching of the meanings of flowers was halted as it was "thought to skirt dangerously close to reading" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 210). Some of the Aunts do specialize in gardening and do it for fun, such as Aunt Vidala and Aunt Lise, but Aunt Lydia looks down on them for doing so. She emphasizes that they are weak, saying, "it's good for Aunt Lise to confront reality once in a while. She spends too much time diddling around among the petals" (214). While the Aunts do have much to do with gardening and flowers, the more power they have, the less they have to do with gardening. Aunt Lydia—undeniably the most powerful Aunt of all—is the most distanced from such womanly hobbies. She seems to understand that her authority correlates to her distance from traditional womanhood: "I remain deeply grateful that I have never learned to knit" (391). The correlation of knitting and gardening with weakness, and avoidance of it as powerful, helps to paint a better picture of the Wives—they are powerless, destined only for motherhood, and are absolutely besieged with flowers.

II. Restriction of Femininity

Despite being women, the Aunts are in a category of their own among the women of Gilead. They have power over the other women and—perhaps most telling—are the only women allowed to read and write. Agnes has been taught that "reading was not for girls: only men were strong enough to deal with the force of it; and the Aunts, of course, because they weren't like us" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 156). The power commanded by reading and writing is one that Gilead fears. This fear is instilled in its citizens: "Pen is Envy, Aunt Lydia would say. . . warning us away from such objects" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 186). The play on "penis envy" pulls on the pen as a phallic image: "for [Aunt Lydia] the authority to wield a pen is practically the same as the ability to penetrate" (van Dam and Polak 185). Agnes muses multiple times over whether the Aunts

are actually women. It has been forcefully engrained in her that women are biologically different from men in ways that make them incapable of leading and too delicate for dangerous activities such as reading and writing. Agnes must rationalize what she has been taught—that women are incapable of reading and writing just as cats are incapable of crocheting—with what she is seeing—that the Aunts are women and yet are perfectly capable of fulfilling many "male" roles. When she enters Ardua Hall to begin training to be an Aunt, she learns that her belief in such an unwavering, biological delineation between men and women is false. At first, however, she can only imagine that the Aunts are somehow biologically different from other women because Gilead is ideologically rooted in biology as the main element of gender.

The Aunts are allowed freedom in some ways, such as their ability to read and write, but they are barred from marriage or children. Besides these differences in women's roles, Gilead requires overarching uniformity. The most visually striking element of Gilead's uniformity is, naturally, the uniforms. Gilead assigns each role a color and style of clothing that they are permitted to wear. For the Handmaids, Offred describes, "the skirt is ankle-length, full, gathered to a flat yoke that extends over the breasts, the sleeves are full. The white wings too are prescribed issue: they are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 8). All of the women wear dresses. Both Marthas and Handmaids must cover their hair, though it must be kept long. Parts of the uniforms also serve to delineate power visually, such as the hair covering, which is not required for Wives or Aunts. In the show, the Handmaids living in D.C. must additionally wear cloth masks covering their mouths—this, however, is far more than symbolic: the mask covers metal rings that bind all Handmaids' mouths shut in the capital. Offred's contempt for her uniform is strong—when she escapes for the first time in the show, she wastes no time not only taking her uniform off but burning it (*The Handmaid's Tale* "June"). Offred later contemplates how impersonal their lives are: "All we leave behind is a uniform" (*The Handmaid's Tale* "The Word"). There is nothing in their lives that they have agency over.

Some of the women in Gilead are also stripped of their names, another demand that takes a toll on their grip on their identity and individualism. Women who become Aunts select a new name

from a list containing "the names of products women had liked once and would be reassured by," though the "reassurance" only applies to the early women of Gilead who still remember life before it (Atwood, *The Testaments* 290). For example, Aunts such as Aunt Dove and Aunt Estée have names which will likely sound familiar to audiences. The children stolen when Gilead was formed are also renamed—Offred's child Hannah, for example, is named Agnes Jemima by her new family. The Wives, on the other hand, have total freedom to change their name to whatever they prefer. Serena Joy, originally named Pam, chose her new name during the formation of Gilead (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 45). The Wives have the most agency in this area, as they are able to pick their own names and their children's names. While names relating to the Bible are naturally most common, the Wives have little restriction, unlike other women in Gilead.

The Handmaids receive the worst treatment, having essentially no name at all. All Handmaids are named after their commander, as Offred is named after Commander Fred Waterford. They are property only and thus identified only by the man to whom they belong. When Offred is transferred to Commander Joseph Lawrence in the show, she becomes Ofjoseph. The book never reveals Offred's real name, but she struggles with the loss of it nevertheless: "I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 84). The show reveals Offred's name as June Osborne. As she becomes more rebellious and active in her fight against Gilead, she demands to be called June. While pregnant, she nearly escapes Gilead and is chained up under Aunt Lydia's supervision as punishment. Still, she tells Aunt Lydia to call her June. Aunt Lydia pushes back, saying, "June will be chained in this room until she gives birth. And then June will be executed. Offred has an opportunity" (*The Handmaid's Tale* "Other Women"). Having an individual name is something taken for granted, and the lack of it hits hard. Deprived of their names, the Handmaids disconnect from many aspects of their own self. There is no sense of personality or individualism, and no connection to their previous life.

III. Relationships Between Women

This lack of individualism stretches so far that the Handmaids as individual women essentially cease to exist. When they have no permanent name and no distinguishing features, no one beyond the higher-ups can easily keep track of anyone. People in Gilead and those who escaped to Canada alike are unable to track down their families. Thinking of her loved ones, Offred wonders, "Who knows where they are or what their names are now? They might as well be nowhere, as I am for them. I too am a missing person" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 103). Offred runs into her pre-Gilead friend, Moira, by sheer luck. She sees her daughter, Hannah (also known as Agnes), only because the Waterfords use their knowledge of Hannah's whereabouts as leverage against Offred. When Offred's walking partner, Ofglen, is replaced by a new Handmaid, Offred is confused. The new woman only replies, "'I am Ofglen'…Ofglen, wherever she is, is no longer Ofglen. I never did know her real name. That is how you can get lost, in a sea of names" (283). This un-naming happens many times in the book and the show, where the true name of a Handmaid is never revealed or learned only after her death. Communication and relationships shut down when there is no definitive way to refer to someone. Revealing their true names is not as easy for the Handmaids as it may sound—to do so would likely be seen as treason. If they reveal themselves to the wrong Handmaid, they could face any number of punishments, ranging from having their tongue cut out to public execution.

Although the Handmaids face a significant obstacle from this perspective, Gilead claims to foster relationships between women. Aunt Lydia, one of the earliest and most powerful of the Aunts, is tasked with the creation of Ardua Hall. Lydia and a few others ensure that it is a place completely free of men, though it is telling that Agnes questions, "I might be safe from men…but what about women?" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 239). Regardless, Aunt Lydia claims to aim for "a spirit of camaraderie among women" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 222). Women are trained together, Handmaids always walk in pairs, and schools are separated by gender—at face value, these pairings should allow for the women to get to know each other. Aunt Lydia knows, at least, that she is not on equal footing with the other women: "I control the women's side…with an iron fist in a leather glove in a woollen mitten" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 62). She sees

herself, however, as a sort of mother figure to them. Even though there is a significant power imbalance and her circumstances differ from those of other women in Gilead, including other Aunts, she deeply wants them to regard her as a benevolent leader. Several years into Gilead, with full knowledge of the atrocities taking place, she still "numbered [herself] among the faithful for the same reason that many in Gilead did; because it was less dangerous" (178). Even in the show, where Aunt Lydia is portrayed as a villain bordering on outright unforgivable, she attempts to foster relationships with the Handmaids. Janine is a favorite of hers; even though vanity is looked down upon, Aunt Lydia gives Janine an eyepatch after she loses her eye, feeling that she was at fault for Janine's punishment (*The Handmaid's Tale* "Heroic"). She feels responsible for the Handmaids and perpetuates the narrative that Gilead wants its women to feel connected with one another.

Despite Gilead's claims, forming true community (or any real relationship at all) in Gilead is in fact an act of staunch resistance. Instead of friendship, Gilead fosters extreme antipathy, violence, and competition between the women. This deep wariness of one another serves to keep them in check—they can never be sure that a fellow woman will not turn them in for even a minor slip. Gilead instills this fear in them at a young age. The concept of friendship is explicitly looked down upon in schools:

> best friends led to whispering and plotting and keeping secrets, and plotting and secrets led to disobedience to God, and disobedience led to rebellion, and girls who were rebellious became women who were rebellious, and a rebellious woman was even worse than a rebellious man because rebellious men became traitors, but rebellious women became adulteresses. (Atwood, *The Testaments* 24)

Fear of friendship, however, extends far beyond those who grew up in Gilead. For the Handmaids, it starts in their training at the Red Center. After Janine admits to getting an abortion after being gang raped at age fourteen, they all chant "*Her* fault, *her* fault, *her* fault…*Who* led them on?…*She* did. *She* did. *She did*" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 72). The Aunts require the practice of testifying from all of them and lead these demeaning chants in response. Offred admits the worst part of this—they meant it. The Handmaids are so strongly encouraged to treat each other this way that they begin to

believe what they are saying. Offred quickly goes from being simply annoyed by Janine to enjoying shaming her. When not at the Red Center, each Handmaid has a walking partner with whom she is required to stay when exiting the house, but these relationships do not foster friendship either. Instead of becoming confidants, the women are often suspicious of one another: "The truth is that she is my spy, as I am hers" (19). Even between two like-minded Handmaids, each must keep up a front of piousness, speaking only in Gilead-approved phrases ("May the Lord open," "praise be," "Under His Eye") and keeping one another at the distance of an acquaintance despite spending time together every day. These relationships benefit Gilead, as each Handmaid has automatic and ever-present spies between their walking partners and those in their homes, including Commanders, Wives, Marthas, and, often, Guardians. There is no place where a Handmaid is allowed to let her guard down, making any form of rebellion much more difficult.

While the Handmaids have little sense of competition between one another besides who will get pregnant first, contempt between the Marthas, Wives, and Handmaids runs rampant. Their forced cohabitation only serves to exacerbate this. The Handmaids are seen as having given in; the Marthas refer to them as "choosing" to be Handmaids rather than going to the Colonies—a toxic wasteland where deviants are sent to work until they die. They are viewed, especially by the Wives and children, as sluts, although the Aunts teach the children that "you [aren't] supposed to be rude to the Handmaids or call them sluts…because they [are] performing a service to the community by way of atonement" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 81). This admonishment is not an act of kindness towards Handmaids from the Aunts—the Handmaids are still believed to have sinned in some grievous way despite acting as the sustaining force of Gilead since they are the only women who can give birth.

Although the Aunts act as teachers, and sometimes almost as caregivers, they, too, are quickly corrupted. When Janine asks to be the Putnams' Handmaid again so she can be close to the baby she gave them, Aunt Lydia begins beating her violently with her cane. When she is stopped, she quickly leaves and breaks down in another room (*The Handmaid's Tale* "God Bless the Child"). The Aunts already have cattle prods which they use to discipline the Handmaids, but Aunt Lydia goes far beyond this even when provoked very little.

This behavior exists in the reverse too, such as when Emily, another Handmaid, beats and stabs Aunt Lydia after she makes a comment about how grateful Emily should be for being brought back from the Colonies to be a Handmaid. This incident causes Aunt Lydia to use a cane due to the extent of the injuries Emily inflicted (*The Handmaid's Tale* "The Word"). Emily happens to get help from Commander Lawrence, who smuggles her out of the country to avoid any punishment coming to her. Without his help, she would have faced extreme consequences—her hands could have been cut off. Only her ability to bear children would give her the chance to be saved from death. These acts of violence and animosity are not limited to just a few of the women—all of them remain extremely suspicious of one another, engage in manipulation, and trust virtually no one.

As seen by the violent acts committed by Aunt Lydia and Emily, this animosity easily transitions into violence. Offred, much more so in the show than the book, becomes increasingly murderous. She often thinks of committing violence, especially against the Waterfords. Even in the book, she fantasizes about how she could seduce the Commander, then "put my arms around him and slip the lever out from [my] sleeve and drive the sharp end into him suddenly, between his ribs. I think about the blood coming out of him, hot as soup, sexual, over my hands" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 139-140). She admits that she did not think of this in the moment, only adding it in afterwards. Offred is not so benevolent in the show, as she gathers a group of Handmaids who have also escaped to Canada, lures Fred to No Man's Land between Canada and Gilead, and leads the Handmaids as they chase him through the woods and rip him apart with their bare hands (*The Handmaid's Tale* "The Wilderness"). State-sanctioned violence is abundant between Particicutions (executions completed by the Handmaids, much like Offred's murder of Fred), the Wall (where hanged bodies are displayed), and other forms of execution such as public drowning or stoning. The Handmaids are often simultaneously horrified by these events and entranced by the feeling of power it gives them.

IV. Gardening as Violent

When Offred contemplates violence, she often covets tools from the kitchen or the garden—domestic "women's" tools. She laments: "I should have stolen a knife from the kitchen, found some

way to the sewing scissors. There were the garden shears, the knitting needles; the world is full of weapons if you're looking for them" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 293). Garden shears recur as potential weapons. Offred watches Serena working on her garden, often describing it as a violent act despite the feminine gentleness and nurturing associated with it. As she snips off seedpods, Offred narrates, "she was…cutting with a convulsive jerk of the hands. Was it the arthritis, creeping up? Or some blitzkrieg, some kamikaze, committed on the swelling genitalia of the flower? The fruiting body" (153). Rather than seeing Serena encouraging growth or taking loving care of her plants, she sees the uprooting, the cutting, the sharpness and authority Serena wields over her garden. She even sees the garden as fighting back: "There is something subversive about this garden of Serena's, a sense of buried things bursting upwards, wordlessly, into the light, as if to point, to say: Whatever is silenced will clamor to be heard, though silently" (153). She notes the bleeding hearts, "so female in shape it was a surprise they'd not long since been rooted out" (153). The Handmaids see the Wives as oppressive—the Wives literally hold them down while they are raped for the Ceremony. The Wives take their children away. Gilead's narrative of gardening as loving and feminine quickly wilts.

In addition to the frequency of gardening in Gilead, it appears when Atwood's characters travel outside of Gilead as well. Offred reveals that, before Gilead, she "had plants too; though they always got spider mites or died from being unwatered. I would go off with Luke, and neglect them" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 172). This neglect represents the difference between her sinful, impure pre-Gilead life, where she had an affair with Luke and lived independently, and the devoted, pious life of women in Gilead. In Gilead, the gardens never go unwatered. The Wives, caretakers of the garden, have no opportunity to waver from their duties, much less to have affairs and flings. If they were to attempt any of the freedoms that Offred enjoyed pre-Gilead, they would face severe punishment. Interestingly, Offred picks up gardening after she escapes Gilead and begins living in Canada (*The Handmaid's Tale* "Motherland"). Soon, the audience sees that she, in parallel to her observations of Serena, enacts violence on her garden. When she is told that her daughter, Hannah, will never be in Canada, she begins ripping up her plants, even hacking at them with a hatchet (*The*

Handmaid's Tale "Allegiance"). This subversion of gardening is a manifestation of the anger that Gilead breeds in the women who live there. These women—Wives, Handmaids, and others who garden—have taken a hobby that should represent growth and nurturing and have turned it into a show of authority and an outlet for their violent urges.

The violence projected onto women's gardens in Gilead is deeply personal, but plants and gardening are still broadly viewed as gentle and feminine. The women can hide behind the femininity and gentleness of plants to disguise or ignore the ugliness of their lives. Aunt Lydia, who, admittedly, already dislikes the other Aunts who garden, becomes annoyed when they try to give her mint tea from the herbs they have grown: "Keep your nose out of my indigestion, I want to snap at them; but they mean well, I remind myself. Is that ever a convincing excuse when there's blood on the carpet?" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 111). It seems impossible to her that they can be content gardening and making flower arrangements while she is deeply entrenched in surveillance, political alliances, and manipulation. There *is*, quite literally, blood on the carpet. They may mean well, but they are doing nothing to create change within Gilead, as Aunt Lydia is at this point, more than fifteen years into Gilead's reign. Offred, too, partakes in this avoidance. As she participates in a Salvaging, where the Handmaids collectively pull on a rope to hang that day's victims, she becomes unable to keep truly seeing the violence: "I look at the grass instead. I describe the rope" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 276). She dissociates herself as a coping strategy. She cannot afford to react to these events the way she would have before Gilead.

V. Animal Nature

In contrast to the connection of plants with violence, Gilead's preferred metaphor for undesirable, masculine energy is animals. When the Sons of Jacob (the founders of Gilead) first capture Aunt Lydia, she describes their conditions as animal-like: "They were reducing us to animals—to penned-up animals—to our animal nature. They were rubbing our noses in that nature. We were to consider ourselves subhuman" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 143). All captured women started out in Gilead similarly. When Offred is captured in the show, one of the first things they did was tag her with

a red ear cuff (*The Handmaid's Tale* "Night"). The ear cuff evokes images of tagged animals—for example, cows often have tags on their ears for identification purposes. When they are captured, there is not enough living space, barely any facilities, and often literal cages. Armed guards who are completely unwilling to speak to them herd the women through the buildings they are being held in (*The Handmaid's Tale* "Mayday"). Gilead initially attempts to beat women into submission via this demeaning, animal treatment of them, as the women begin to feel increasingly victimized and in fear for their lives. Anything after this—clean clothes, one's own bedroom, homecooked meals—should surely feel like luxury. Before Aunt Lydia is offered a position as an Aunt, she is put into a cage by herself (the "Thank Tank") and is left alone long enough that she begins to lose her sanity. She is forced to listen to sounds of violence and torture. When she is finally released, she is given a uniform that matches the one worn by the female executioners she has seen: "I felt a chill. I put it on. What else should I have done?" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 150). She learns that Gilead cares nothing for human life—ironic, given their focus on the birthrate—and knows that the only way for her to survive is to submit.

Different stages of womanhood are also related with animal nature based on how impure society views women at that stage. Handmaids—the worst women of all—are viewed as totally inhuman. That is, inhuman except when they are pregnant and therefore useful. When Agnes's Handmaid is pregnant, Agnes can tell even before it has been announced: "instead of treating her as if she were a stray dog they were putting up with out of pity, the Marthas began fussing over her…and placing flowers in little vases on her breakfast tray" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 93). The Handmaid has transitioned from an undesirable, inhuman nuisance into someone once again worthy of nurturing and flowers. The Marthas' sudden doting reflects the love and care for the unborn baby she is carrying rather than the Handmaid herself.

A significant "loss of purity" in any girl's life is the beginning of puberty. Alarmed at the changes that begin to happen to her body, Agnes explains, "Once that happens to a girl, she was no longer a precious flower but a much more dangerous creature" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 82). Women are seen as sources of male desire, and they are taught that it is their responsibility to prevent men from having

impure thoughts about them. As Agnes moves away from pure, unsexual girlhood towards a much more uncertain young adulthood, she feels her impureness creeping in. Similarly, Offred describes wilting flowers as "shedding their petals one by one, like teeth," making aging flowers sound animal-like (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 153). The link of sexuality and "deflowering" with violence and animals teaches that it is something to fear. Later, as Agnes faces marriage to Commander Judd (known for having many young wives who mysteriously pass away), she imagines that she would "go through with the ceremony and then murder Commander Judd on the wedding night…. There would be a lot of blood to get out of the sheets…. I pictured the dismay on [my stepmother's] face when she walked into the slaughter chamber" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 229). Although Agnes's thoughts of murder are literal, she connects this violence with her wedding night. Her presumed loss of virginity comes as a total destruction of purity. There is no going back. Instead of facing this reality, she wants to inflict it back on Commander Judd, leaving *his* blood on the sheets. The bedroom will be *her* slaughter chamber to control.

VI. Nurturing as Resistance

Many forces are working against compassion and nurturing in Gilead; therefore, when women do support and care for each other, it is a decidedly rebellious act. Aunt Lydia, despite her above-described faults, becomes a great example of nurturing as resistance in *The Testaments*. She admits that she believed in Gilead for a long time. Her sense of self-preservation determined many of her choices, and she certainly never felt without fear for her own life: "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and I took the one most travelled by. It was littered with corpses, as such roads are. But as you will have noticed, my own corpse is not among them" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 66). As it happens, her most powerful self-preservation strategy ended up allowing her to take Gilead down: surveillance. The Aunts are often observed to trade in secrets: "This was what the Aunts did…They recorded. They waited" (309). Aunt Lydia has personally filled Ardua Hall with countless surveillance cameras (5). She uses these cameras to collect information on everyone inside Ardua, but her watchful eye goes beyond its walls. Long before she has her change of heart, she blackmails Commander Lawrence, ultimately

keeping his secrets safe and giving him information on the other Commanders in exchange for reinstatement of her position as an Aunt and control over Offred (*The Handmaid's Tale* "Chicago"). Inside Ardua Hall, she often uses her knowledge to exercise power over the other Aunts, delighting when she witnesses them crossing each other and even herself; when she witnesses Aunt Vidala placing evidence against her, she exclaims, "What stellar denunciation! You can imagine my delight" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 210). Aunt Lydia likes it when the Aunts manipulate each other because she wants them to use the power they have; clearly, she has not made a complete moral turnaround, but she does use her position for positive change.

Thriving in this environment of knowledge and power, Aunt Lydia learns to utilize her surveillance skills for good. Using pamphlets distributed by the Pearl Girls, she hides microdot messages inside, smuggling information out to resistance members in Canada. Using this method, she manages to get Nicole (Offred's second child and Gilead's famous stolen baby) back into Gilead. This is not for Gilead's benefit, but to unite Nicole with Offred's first child, Hannah, and to get them both back out to Canada with more information. There is no mistaking Aunt Lydia's motives here. She states that her biggest fear is "that all my efforts will prove futile, and Gilead will last for a thousand years" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 277). Here, she demonstrates nurturing in a larger way—she cares about the future of humanity. In *The Testaments*, Aunt Lydia documents Gilead's beginnings and her efforts to bring it down in order to preserve this history for future readers. She demonstrates nurturing and care towards these hypothetical readers, too, imagining:

> I will lie neglected in some spidery corner…while you go off to picnics and dances…or to trysts with a warm body, so much more attractive than the wad of crumbling paper I will have become…I, too, was once like you: fatally hooked on life. (172)

She no longer cares so much for being remembered forever but simply hopes that future women reading this—she always imagines the reader as a woman—will once again enjoy life. The horrors of Gilead will not be so sharp and consuming anymore. When compared with her character in *The Handmaid's Tale* book or show, it is obvious that her mindset has changed. Before the events of *The*

Testaments, she had little genuine concern for others, first focusing herself solely on survival and then giving in to the allure of power. Previously, she had been one of the greatest female enactors of patriarchy in Gilead, unhesitatingly causing psychological and physical harm to the women beneath her. The contrast makes these acts of nurturing even more significant.

In addition to this overarching concern for the future of humanity, Aunt Lydia also acted in smaller ways. Even before *The Testaments*, Aunt Lydia attempted to position herself as a mother figure for the Handmaids, believing that "she was very good at feeling for other people" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 46). She especially takes an interest in Janine. In addition to giving her an eyepatch, she seems to put Janine's interests over those of other Handmaids. After Janine is poisoned by a fellow Handmaid, Aunt Lydia visits her in the hospital while she is in a coma. Aunt Lydia prays to God, asking for forgiveness—she blames herself for Janine's poisoning (*The Handmaid's Tale* "Border"). In *The Testaments*, she gives similar nurturing attention to some of the Aunts-in-training. After two of them are sexually assaulted by a dentist, one of the girls being the dentist's daughter, she persuades one of the other Aunts to bear false witness against him, protecting the girls from judgment while still punishing the dentist. Her plan works flawlessly: "Innocent men denying their guilt sound exactly like guilty men…Listeners are inclined to believe neither" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 279). She also gives Hannah refuge, allowing her to become an Aunt after she learns of her impending marriage to Commander Judd. Aunt Lydia covertly suggests to Hannah who to talk to about her situation, putting her in the best position to avoid her marriage without facing consequences from her family. Aunt Lydia later allows Hannah to learn about her real family and lets her in on the Aunts' work, leaving folders out for her with evidence containing the crimes of Wives, Commanders, professionals, Econopeople, and Marthas: "There were none containing the crimes of Handmaids, and none for those of Aunts" (307). This practice of excluding the Aunts and the Handmaids from crime documentation reveals one of the ways that the Aunts, despite being great enactors of Gilead's ideals, work to protect (some) women and create resistance of their own.

The resistance of the Aunts is, in several cases, part of a much larger network—Mayday. Mayday is a group of alliances within

Gilead—and eventually outside of it too—working to smuggle people out and eventually bring Gilead down. Given the covert nature of this work, Mayday operatives must speak in code. Mayday itself is used as a password, but it must be used sparingly. As Ofglen introduces Offred to the concept of Mayday, she warns, "'Don't use it unless you have to…It isn't good for us to know about too many of the others'" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 202). Along with Handmaids, there are many Marthas in Mayday. Together with the Aunts and Wives, the Marthas trade in secrets: "despite the fact that they were frequently envious and resentful [of one another]…news flowed among them as if along invisible spiderweb threads" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 232). In fact, when Offred hatches a plan to sneak children out of Gilead on a plane, she receives much of her support from Marthas. After sending out her request for help, she finds dozens of muffin baskets in the kitchen; "Muffins mean yes"—the Marthas will help her (*The Handmaid's Tale* "Witness"). Food is used multiple times throughout the show as a code between women; everyone from Mayday finds ways to speak to each other secretly. At the grocery store—one of the only public places in which Handmaids can meet—Offred mentions the canned tomatoes to Ofrobert, signaling her to meet there (*The Handmaid's Tale* "Witness"). Despite the great challenges that these women face in building relationships, they manage to find a way through this code. They nurture relationships with one another in any way they can.

VII. *The Handmaid's Tale* and Activism

Using code language as a means of communication, and even as a way of community building, is nothing new. I think back to my great-grandmother, learning a secret knocking pattern to access reproductive healthcare and get an abortion. Today, *The Handmaid's Tale* has forged its own place in the world of activist language. The Handmaids' costume is one which has appeared numerous times as a sign of protest; for example, "activists prompted by the #MeToo movement protested sexual harassment and restrictions on women's reproductive rights by donning the distinctive red robes and white bonnets of the Handmaids" (Faurholt 13). The language of Gilead, too, has made an impact. Even those who have not read or watched *The Handmaid's Tale* might recognize "signature expressions, such as 'Blessed be the fruit', 'May the Lord open', and 'Under His Eye'. . .

much in the same way people 'know' Frankenstein without having ever read the novel" (van Dam and Polak 178). In this way, activists have drawn a parallel between the fictional world of Gilead and the real world. Real-life protests use symbols and phrases from Atwood's work to bring people together under a common message.

When Hulu released the TV series, Donald Trump had just been elected for his first term. The series came at a critical moment, boosting its popularity and striking harder as a work of speculative fiction. As speculative fiction, the books and TV series "can be understood either as a nightmare vision of the future or, more subtly, as a dark parable of the present" (Faurholt 14). At this moment in time, *Roe v. Wade* has been overturned for nearly three years, and Donald Trump has been re-elected. Hulu will also release the final season of *The Handmaid's Tale* in the coming days. At such a precarious moment in time for American politics, unity and protest are exceptionally important. Books and shows such as *The Handmaid's Tale* are a vital aspect of this—pop culture should be taken seriously "as a rhetorical vehicle through which gender and racial politics and identities are mediated" (Neville-Shepard 6). The events that take place in Gilead are all pulled from true events, not the least of which being American slavery. Conveying such events through a fictional medium allows audiences to more easily process and imagine such scenarios, informing the responses they make later on when, for example, strict abortion bans occur in their real lives.

While the world of *The Handmaid's Tale* has made an important positive and motivational impact on audiences, it is certainly not without fault. One of the most blatant areas of weakness is its lack of intersectionality, particularly concerning race. In the book, there are no characters of color; one sentence in the book quickly explains that the "leaders of Gilead 'resettle' the 'Children of Ham' in North Dakota" (Neville-Shepard 7). In the Bible, Ham's descendants are African and are sometimes interpreted to be "cursed," which is often referenced in racist ideologies (Kell). Gilead adopts this narrative, forcing all people of color far away from the perfect society the leaders are attempting to create. They are never mentioned again. The show, on the other hand, exists in a racial utopia, utilizing color-blind casting and avoiding the topic of race altogether. Both works leave people behind by refusing to address racism, especially unfortunate in a series which draws so much

material from the experience of enslaved people; "kidnapping into slavery…prohibition of reading and writing…lynched bodies hanging in public," etc. (Neville-Shepard 12). Atwood even goes so far in the book as to name the movement of Handmaids out of Gilead the "Underground Femaleroad." Moving forward, it is important that "the handmaid movement may be regenerated through an intersectional relationality that positions class and race together with gender at the center of its concerns" (Tabuyo-Santaclara 148). That said, the importance of fictional works in creating real-world community and activist movement should not be underestimated.

Atwood's utilization of plants and gardening as an extended metaphor for femininity and the various forms that nurturing takes in Gilead extends to the way that *The Handmaid's Tale* has informed its audience and created communities. Just as language in Gilead brought women together and drove them apart, so too does material from *The Handmaid's Tale* lead to discourse in the real world. As unlikely alliances are made when these women are pushed to the brink, such as that between Aunt Lydia and Offred's children, alliances must be made in the real world too. Aunt Lydia quotes Mary, Queen of Scots: "In the end is my beginning" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 404). I embrace the possibility that, as *The Handmaid's Tale* comes to an end, the change made in America is only beginning.

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