

NONVIOLENT RESISTANCE THROUGH COUNTER-NARRATIVE

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IN
ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* AND LAI'S *SALT FISH GIRL*

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TITLE: Nonviolent resistance through counter-narrative in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Lai's *Salt Fish Girl*

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how patriarchal dystopian societies attempt to control their citizenry through the homogenization of discourse and the employment of Foucauldian panopticons. In the context of these power structures, I argue that nonviolent storytelling and restorative memory are more effective in resisting oppression than violent, openly subversive forms of rebellion. In my discussion of *The Handmaid's Tale*, I examine how Gilead's manipulation of public discourse through religious hegemony and restrictions on literacy suppresses the efficacy of individually heroic acts by characters such as Ofglen and Moira. I assert that Offred's playful deconstruction of language, defiant remembering of her past experiences, and insistence on bearing witness to Gilead's atrocities without the promise of a listener allows her to successfully resist power and maintain a distinct self. In the analysis of *Salt Fish Girl* that follows, I study how the Big Six employ a series of cooperative hegemonies to promote neoliberal policies, dehumanize Othered bodies, and rob people in diaspora of cultural memory. Though protagonist Miranda fails in a conventional sense, I conclude that she succeeds due to her remixing of Western texts, hybridization of histories and values, and role in birthing a new, more hopeful future.

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Nolite te bastardes carborundorum.

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And to Taylor, always.

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Introduction

I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it. Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance.

If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending. Then there will be an ending, to the story, and real life will come after it. I can pick up where I left off.

It isn't a story I'm telling.

It's also a story I'm telling, in my head, as I go along.

(The Handmaid's Tale 44)

In these breathless, fragmented lines early in Margaret Atwood's feminist dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), the narrator, Offred, highlights how questions of narrative, memory, and language will be essential to her survival. Offred is a Handmaid, a woman enslaved as a potential surrogate mother by the highly religious patriarchal society of Gilead. Gilead has taken away her family, her autonomy, her reproductive rights, and her very identity, but she does not openly revolt. Instead, she turns her attention inward, shifting fluidly between her circumstances and the multiple pasts she reconstructs in her memory. In a society where women are no longer allowed to read and write, Offred revels in wordplay (48). Fixed in the gaze of a patriarchal panopticon that attempts to homogenize society and rob her of herself, Offred composes a new self, "as one composes a speech" (75). Though she has been criticized by some scholars as a passive character, I argue that Offred actively and effectively

resists the apparatus of power in her society through a combination of memory, storytelling, and imagination.

I find a striking reoccurrence of Offred's subtle and unusual form of resistance in Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* (2002). This post-colonial, post-humanist novel interweaves the stories of two characters: the ancient Chinese goddess Nu Wa, and her reincarnation Miranda, a poor young girl living in a highly commercialized and patriarchal society in the futuristic Pacific Northwest. Miranda specifically bears a great resemblance to Offred – she is defined in relation to motherhood and fertility, refrains from actively opposing apparatuses of power around her, and dwells often in dreams and memory. Unlike Offred, however, Miranda has “Dreaming Disease,” allowing her to experience the dreams and memories of her Chinese ancestors. Miranda becomes an instrument of both remembering and rebirth, as she applies the wisdom of her Chinese heritage to the oppressive society around her and then gives birth to the incarnation of Nu Wa.

In this project, I read *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Salt Fish Girl* together for the first time, examining how they both depict women responding to patriarchal power not through violence and rebellion but through storytelling. Offred and Miranda compel the reader to reevaluate what it means to resist, and what must be resisted. While *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Salt Fish Girl's* publication contexts, trajectories, and resolutions are ostensibly quite different, I assert that they provide a deeply productive

pairing, ultimately suggesting alternatives to violent resistance based in memory, hybridity, and creation that have evolved along with the political evolution of the feminist movement.

In Chapter One I work to provide a thorough critical framework for the project. I use dystopian literature – specifically George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – to introduce the concept of Michel Foucault’s Panopticon¹, and then explain how panopticons function within totalitarian dystopias. I argue that patriarchy, as a Foucaultian apparatus of power, functions as a panopticon for women in contemporary society. I then examine how diverse narratives, imagination, and counter-memory serve as potent nonviolent forms of resistance against panopticons in general and the patriarchal apparatus specifically. To demonstrate how feminism has already recognized the importance of narrative to resistance, I outline the homogeneity of the so-called Western Canon and then describe feminist efforts to create a more inclusive canon. I turn to feminist speculative fiction as particularly productive for critiquing societal inequalities and imagining better futures, then conclude the chapter by considering differences and similarities between *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Salt Fish Girl* that make them productive for study together.

¹ For the purposes of this project I will refer to Foucault’s original theoretical model with the capitalized term “Panopticon,” and applications of this model as other “panopticons.”

In Chapter Two, I study Offred's resistance through memory and wordplay in *The Handmaid's Tale*, and question whether or not her resistance is ultimately successful. I locate *The Handmaid's Tale* within its contemporary context, including Second Wave feminism, battles over reproductive choice, and the rise of the Religious Right. I then introduce the society of Gilead as an explicitly patriarchal oppressor employing aspects of the Panopticon and homogenizing discourse to maintain power. In the second half of the chapter, I turn to Offred and her rebellious friend Moira, contrasting the two women's articulations of heroism and resistance. I study how Offred employs language, storytelling, and self-narrative as forms of resistance, and then end the chapter with the question of Offred's eventual success or failure in light of the novel's epilogue and literary success.

In Chapter Three, I address *Salt Fish Girl*, focusing my study on Miranda and her experiences with intertext and hybrid creation. Once again, I locate the novel in its contemporary context, noting societal forces of neoliberalism and extreme capitalism, expectations of Asian American literature, and corporate dependence on the commodification of non-white labor. I examine *Salt Fish Girl's* futuristic Pacific Northwest society ruled by the capitalist powerhouse "Big Six," and the patriarchal panopticon and mobile collection of interwoven hegemonies they construct. I then question the meaning of subversion in this environment, comparing Miranda to her friend and lover, the openly antagonist Evie, as well as the escaped-clone

“Sonias.” After examining the novel’s use of intertextuality as diasporic subversion, the connection between the body and text, and the potential interplay of determinism and queer performativity in imagining future-oriented agency, I argue that Miranda resists through the fusion of the past and the future. Like Offred before her, Miranda is simultaneously shaped by the expectations of others while also forging a more optimistic future through narrative.

Chapter One: Theoretical Context

To be seen – to be seen – is to be – her voice trembled – penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable.”

(The Handmaid’s Tale 33)

Introduction

Before I begin my discussion of *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Salt Fish Girl*, I find it necessary to establish a number of contexts, especially regarding Foucault’s Panopticon and my selected texts’ role as feminist dystopias. My entire argument regards the potential of storytelling for nonviolent resistance; the success of this resistance, however, depends on a number of factors: a panopticon-like system of power, an attempt to enforce hegemony by the regime in power, and a situation in which violent resistance is either abhorrent, ineffective, or both for the oppressed. These factors are frequently present in dystopian literature, with its thematic exaggeration of existing conditions, making it ideal to explore the potential of nonviolent resistance. With these prescribed circumstances of power and counter-action in place, I will argue that storytelling succeeds as a form of resistance on two levels: as a means of maintaining individual identity and imagining a freer future in the light of patriarchal control, and as part of the feminist literary project diverging from the phallogentric Western Canon.

The Orwellian Panopticon

While no one can deny its contemporary popularity, scholars disagree in regards to the origin of the dystopian novel as a genre. Some locate the

dystopia as a philosophical inversion to the utopia, or ideal “no place,” thus originating with the publication of Thomas More’s 1516 *Utopia*. Others, such as Tom Moylan, argue that the dystopian novel is a distinctly modern phenomenon, “largely the product of the terrors of the twentieth century...[such as] exploitation, repression, state violence, war, genocide, disease...and the steady depletion of humanity through the buying and selling of everyday life” (4). What most critics agree upon, however, is that the dystopian novel depicts an undesirable, yet not realized state of affairs that in some way reflects contemporary anxieties. This reflection of contemporary anxieties is vital to understanding the genre: the dystopian society is not merely a negative, even nightmarish imagined world, but rather one that either satirizes or exaggerates already existing conditions. As M. Keith Booker notes, the dystopian novel “foreground[s] 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). While Booker specifically typifies the dystopian society as “oppressive,” I assert that this description only applies to a subset of dystopias. For the purposes of this project, I divide dystopian fiction into two sub-genres: the “chaos dystopia” and the “control dystopia.” The chaos dystopia is marked by a breakdown of society as we know it, succeeded not by a dominant regime but by anarchy. Notable examples of the chaos dystopia include Octavia Butler’s *The Parable of the Sower* (1993), Cormac

McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), and Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014). The "control dystopia," on the other hand, requires the establishment of a ruling body that attempts to be all-encompassing in its power and scope. For the remainder of this project, I will focus my attention on the control dystopia.

In *Dystopian Fiction East and West: Universe of Terror and Trial*, Erika Gottlieb asserts that – within the political and ideological scope of the West – George Orwell's 1948 classic *Nineteen Eighty-Four* marks the beginning of what I have dubbed the control dystopia. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, she argues, establishes the benchmarks for the genre: a totalitarian state, the attempted control of citizen thought, continual surveillance, the use of force, and conflict arising from a protagonist's resistance to their society (111-112). Orwell's dystopian society, Oceania, creates a culture of total ideological control and surveillance, in which citizens can be persecuted for "thoughtcrimes" and ubiquitous public slogans intone that "Big Brother is always watching you" (4). Written shortly after World War II, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* reflects suspicions about propaganda, wariness of imminent Communist witch hunts, and an international public recently horrified by the rise of Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini's brutal regimes.

Oceania's control of its citizens succeeds so effectively because it erases the public memory of all prior history, dominates citizens' thoughts and language, and then fixes them within an inescapable and deadly gaze. In

his landmark theoretical work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), French philosopher Michel Foucault outlines his concept of the “Panopticon” as a method of societal control. The Panopticon takes its name from an institutional building design proposed by English philosopher Jeremy Bentham in the late 18th century. This building would feature a series of back-lit cells arcing out from a central tower, in which a guard resides who can potentially see into any cell at any time without himself being seen. Because prisoners cannot tell whether or not they are being watched, they must behave at all times as if they are:

Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers. (Foucault 201)

Foucault argues that eventually surveillance – and with it, societal control – becomes self-inflicted, to the point where authority figures need expend very little effort and resources to control a populace. The illusion of spectatorship is enough. Bentham originally conceived the Panopticon to be a prison, mental asylum, poorhouse, or other institution of literal imprisonment; crucially, Foucault applies the Panopticon to all of society, both physically imprisoned and seemingly free. The Panopticon is not a method of

punishment, but rather of prevention: “it acts directly on individuals; it gives ‘power of mind over mind’” (206). We can see Foucault’s model in subtle, commonplace ways: for example, drivers avoid speeding because they know that a police cruiser might be watching and give them a ticket. More dramatically, Edward Snowden’s 2013 revelation that the National Security Agency is surveilling most Americans without warrant brought the panoptic mechanism temporarily to the forefront of public discourse. Though the NSA is not actually examining every internet user closely at any given point, the fact that they could do so has the potential to have a powerful chilling effect on free speech and subversive behavior (Greenwald).

In *Ninety Eighty-Four* and similar control dystopias, however, Foucault’s Panopticon is writ large. “Always the eyes watching you...” Winston thinks. “Working or eating, indoors or out of doors, in the bath or in bed – no escape. Nothing was your own except the few cubic centimetres inside your skull” (34-35). Even those “few cubic centimetres” are at risk, as the thought police actively work to control citizens’ understandings of the world around them – and the world of the past. The Ministry of Truth claims control over history, deleting ideas and events from the record that conflict with current ideology: “‘Who controls the past,’ ran the Party slogan, ‘controls the future: who controls the present controls the past’” (45). As Foucault notes, surveillance serves not only to monitor but also to enforce dominant ideology; afraid of committing “thoughtcrimes,” citizens of Oceania

reinforce Big Brother's mandates and dare not dissent or seek out alternate narratives. The panopticon homogenizes discourse, enabling governmental hegemony to take hold.

The result of this homogenization of discourse is a vicious cycle. Members of society suppress viewpoints classified as deviant or subversive, allowing those in authority to increase the power and breadth of their surveillance unchecked. As the power of those in authority increases, dissent becomes increasingly dangerous, leading to an even more pervasive chilling effect. This means that the Panopticon can be strengthened both through traditional surveillance and through censorship and ideology. As David Toole notes in *Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo*, "The more our stories are homogenized, the more our memory is programmed, the more our mind is evacuated, and the more we come to live in the clear uncluttered space of the Panopticon" (242). To dictate how someone must act most often extends to dictating how someone must think as well. In the Panopticon, there is no space for freedom of speech.

The Patriarchal Panopticon

For marginalized groups, the power of the panopticon becomes even more prominent and widespread. In a society manifesting dominant, discriminatory ideology, marginalized subjects must always be wary that they are potentially being watched by those who wish to control, diminish, or erase them. With this continual surveillance in mind, individuals work to

minimize their otherness or perform more acceptable identities. W.E.B. Du Bois articulates this concept in *The Souls of Black Folk* with his concept of “double consciousness.” To be a person of color in a white-dominated, often racist, society is to have a sense of “always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s own soul by the tape of a world that looks on in contempt and pity” (11). This definition evokes the internalized power of the panopticon: a disembodying experience in which an individual experiences the self primarily not as a subject but as an object of the gaze, poised for judgment, condemnation, and punishment.

In the context of feminist thought, the panopticon serves as an apt instrument of the patriarchy. Patriarchy, as defined by bell hooks, is “a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence” (1). In her essay “Understanding Patriarchy,” hooks notes the importance of replacing common terms like “male chauvinism” and sexism” with “patriarchy.” Patriarchy does not assert that “all men [are] oppressive and women always and only victims” (3). Nor does it characterize men as individually sexist and power-hungry by default. Rather, patriarchy is a system of power spread throughout society, which has deleterious effects on both men and women. Far from benefiting all men, hooks argues that

patriarchy privileges a select, powerful few while emotionally stunting most men and teaching them to marginalize others instead of questioning the standards imposed upon them. Even so, she cautions, we must recognize patriarchy as far more damaging to women. To recognize that patriarchy is a system of power, not a group of individuals, “does not erase or lessen male responsibility for supporting and perpetuating their power under patriarchy to exploit and oppress women in a manner far more grievous than the serious psychological stress and emotional pain caused by male conformity to rigid sexist role patterns” (4). Because patriarchy is a system of power, not a demographic, it must be resisted and even dismantled in different ways.

In understanding how systems of power function, I turn once again to Foucault. For Foucault, societal power is never held by a handful of individuals or institutions, but rather is spread across society and functions through the relationships between entities. He calls this system of power an apparatus, or *dispositif* – “a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative procedures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions” (26). In the context of patriarchy, this means that there is not one institution – for example, the father-dominated family or the machismo-infused military – to blame. Rather, patriarchy functions through mutual exchange, through the constant strengthening of an ideology as it perpetuates itself through institutions, is passed on from one person to

another, and grows and shifts to accommodate different situations. Thus, while a few entities within society may be especially influential, they rely upon the entire apparatus to maintain the system of power. Apparatuses are not all encompassing in scope, Foucault notes, because power “has the privilege of consolidating everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather, in every relation from one point to another” (93). This relationship makes resistance intensely difficult. If one wishes to combat an apparatus, one must do so from within the system itself: struggles of power become not clear fights between opposing forces on an open field of battle, but rather intense bouts of guerilla civil war conducted at various points throughout the system.

When we place the apparatus of power within the context of the Panopticon, the functions of power and surveillance become even more complex. Before moving forward to my discussion of the patriarchal panopticon, however, I must make one further clarification of the definition of patriarchy with which I will be working in this project: the intersectional patriarchy. This intersectional patriarchy resembles hooks’ interlocking political system of “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy,” in that it privileges not only masculinity but also cisgendered heterosexuality, wealth, ability, and whiteness (1). I take the term “intersectional patriarchy” from intersectional feminism, which in turn draws its defining concept from a 1989 essay by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw. In the essay,

“Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” Crenshaw uses the term “intersectionality” to describe how black women experience more oppression than either white women or black men face, and in a form and magnitude that is more than simply the sum of the two. “This focus on the most privileged group members,” she writes, “marginalizes those who are multiply-burdened and obscures claims that cannot be understood as resulting from discrete sources of discrimination,” (140). Feminist thinkers and activists have extended this definition beyond the intersectionality of blackness and femininity to embrace any situation in which a person experiences more than one form of systemic oppression, whether that be sexism, racism, homophobia, ableism or classism (Vidal). With this in mind, when I discuss patriarchy in this project, I refer to a system of intersectional power that privileges cisgendered heterosexual, able-bodied, wealthy, white men above all other groups.

I am far from the first to suggest that the patriarchy functions as a panopticon; the traces of the idea are already highly visible in popular feminist discourse. In 1975, film critic Laura Mulvey coined the concept of the “male gaze” to describe how the visual arts are structured around men – specifically, heterosexual men. The male gaze entails that the audience for a work, the creator of a work, and the spectator within a work are all assumed to be men. In visual art displaying the male gaze, men exist to see, and

women to be seen. As is the case with intersectionality, feminist discourse has since broadened the concept of the male gaze, now using it to include situations outside of the visual arts in which a male viewer is assumed. In the essay “Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power,” Sandra Lee Bartky combines the concept of the male gaze with the Panopticon to describe how patriarchy affects the way women think and behave. “In contemporary patriarchal culture,” she writes, “a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgment” (101). In accordance with the concept of patriarchy as an apparatus of power, the “panoptical male connoisseur” does not represent one figure in power, but many. Participants in and enforcers of the patriarchy exist wherever a woman goes in society, allowing her no respite. In much the same way that the prisoner of Foucault’s Panopticon can never know whether they are being watched, and thus must always behave as if they are, women often internalize patriarchy. In a predicament similar to Du Bois’s double consciousness, those who do not benefit from patriarchal power face a choice: they can perform in a way that minimizes their otherness and reinforces patriarchal dominance, or they can deviate in full view of the patriarchal panopticon and risk punishment.

Counter-memory and Resistance

How, then, can the Panopticon be resisted? Of course, resistance to power has taken many forms throughout history, both violent and

nonviolent, individual and aggregate. In the context of the homogenizing panopticon, counter-memory and pluralistic storytelling emerge as natural counterpoints. Toole gestures to this when he speaks of the homogenized story, programmed memory, and evacuated mind moving one toward the space of the Panopticon (242). By this assertion, heterogeneous stories, independent memories, and active minds would move one away from the panopticon. To have one's own story and history is to self-determine; to be an observer of the world instead of one who is observed. As Bill Ashcroft, Garrett Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin write, "What it means to have a history is the same as what it means to have a legitimate existence: history and legitimation go hand in hand; history legitimates 'us' and not others" (317). Those who can narrate their own histories can call into question the veracity and authority of official narratives; they can cast doubt on the definitions imposed upon them by systems of power. Recall *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* Party's assertion that "Who controls the past...controls the future: who controls the present controls the past" (45). Questioning and countering dominant narratives weakens oppressors' current hegemony, thus undercutting their ability to define the past. With more than one past available to them – and therefore, a self-narrated identity – individuals can imagine different futures, futures outside those determined by their oppressors.

This link between memory and narrative is crucial. As Sarah K. Foust Vinson explains, “the types of narratives and schemas available to us help to determine our possible memories and the ways we narrate them...put another way, not only does memory shape the narratives we tell, but available narratives also shape the memories we have” (11). Possessing distinct and personal histories is not enough; those who resist must do so in innovative and alternative ways, ways that go beyond traditional constraints to question not only the content of dominant narratives, but also the forms that they take. Doing so questions the very assumptions upon which systems of power are founded, and creates new spaces for individuals to inhabit. Plots, Rita Felski suggests, are “where social norms assert themselves as literary forms...for the world to change, new stories are necessary” (103). This quest for new and innovative forms of storytelling among oppressed groups has been a fruitful one – a movement to which I will return in this chapter.

First, however, I turn to George Lipsitz’s concept of “counter-memory.” Counter-memory is a specific tool of resistance that works to de-homogenize narrative space and refocus conversations on individuals. As Lipsitz describes it:

Unlike historical narratives that begin with the totality of human existence and then locate specific actions and events within that totality...counter-memory focuses on localized experience with oppression, using them to reframe and refocus dominant narratives purporting to represent universal experience. (213).

Within the context of counter-memory, fragmentation becomes an asset, not a liability. The diversity of narratives forces the recognition of power's inadequacy in describing and dictating the experiences of others. Counter-memory undermines assertions from bastions of power that they are all-seeing, all-knowing, and all-understanding – and thus all-controlling. As Gottlieb argues, “the act of memory is an act of resistance against the totalitarian state with its insistence on changing history, on eradicating the very concept of historical records, because knowledge of history would form the basis for a fair comparison between the past and the new regime – a comparison dictatorships cannot afford” (104). This fragmented, polyphonic form of resistance is especially apt to resisting a system of power such as the patriarchy, in which oppression and hegemony are decentralized. Rather than countering one homogenous narrative with another, counter-memory spreads resistance across innumerable points, meeting power at each unique and disparate point where it appears.

The use of counter-memory, imagination, and narrative for resistance has also led some theorists to call for a radical redefinition of successful resistance and revolution. French feminist Luce Irigaray, for example, argues that if resistance against and dismantling of the patriarchy becomes the central goal of feminism, then resisters “aim simply for a change in the distribution of power, leaving intact the power structure itself...resubjecting

themselves, deliberately or not, to a phallographic order” (Irigaray 81). By envisioning the patriarchy as an enemy to be combatted, feminism accepts its authority and claim to definition of the situation at hand. Working outside of the situation dictated by patriarchy, she argues, is far more effective. Others, including ecofeminist Petra Karin Kelly, argue that patriarchy must be the focus of resistance, but that part of a successful revolution will be the telling of more diverse, more peaceful stories. “As women assert ourselves,” Kelly argues, “we face the question of whether we should seek access to every male arena of power, even at the price of giving up feminist principles...As one woman working for peace said, “To establish more equal relations between the sexes, rather than training women to kill, let men learn to nurture life”” (19). Women, by sharing the stories of peace and nurturing they have not been allowed to share in the past, will lead the way to a better future.

This argument for a feminist takeover, however, is perhaps blindly optimistic, and does not take into account the realities of intersectional feminism. As hooks notes, “suggesting as it does that women and men are inherently different in some fixed and absolute way, it implies that women by virtue of our sex have played no crucial role in supporting and upholding imperialism” (60). She asserts that this assumption has two major flaws. First of all, it indulges in gender essentialism, assuming that all men are violent and militant, while all women are faultless, peace-loving, and politically passive (60). Secondly, the assertion that feminism has traditionally been

peace-loving ignores the role that white women have had in oppressing people of color, participating in patriarchal power as they did so. While hooks also calls for peacemaking and new definitions of success, she envisions these ideal circumstances not as the result of women's natural virtues and talents, but rather as a movement determined consciously and innovated by diverse people working together (63). In this sense, she concurs with Felski's call for new stories; to work towards a more fair and beneficial future for all, hooks argues, we will need to imagine new narratives as well as remembering ones that have been lost.

The Feminist Literary Project

A significant aim of the feminist literary project thus far has been to put this model of memory and narrative as resistance into action. Prior to the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s and the "canon wars" of the 1990s, the books included in the so-called Western Canon were almost entirely written by white men. While the canon was never officially set in stone, many literary historians identify the *Great Books of the Western World* program, developed from the University of Chicago's literature curriculum, as one of the most notable attempts at compiling an authoritative list of the several thousand years of fiction, poetry, drama, and prose essential to understand Western history and thought. The Encyclopedia Britannica-produced series has been published twice: once in 1952, with 75 authors in 54 volumes, and then updated in 1990 with 60 volumes. The 1952 set

includes no works by women; of the 130 authors in the 1990 update, six are white women. In his speech introducing the original series, University of Chicago president Robert Hutchins described the series thus: “This is more than a set of books, and more than a liberal education. Great Books of the Western World is an act of piety. Here are the sources of our being. Here is our heritage. This is the West. This is its meaning for mankind” (“Great Books”). The meaning and heritage of the Western World, it would seem, has been defined entirely by white men.² This state of affairs was highlighted by Yale University Professor of the Humanities and prolific literary critic Harold Bloom, whose 1973 book *The Anxiety of Influence* argues that authors write under the influence of those preceding them in the canon and experience a Freudian “literary Oedipus complex” in their desire to surpass previous authors. He frames his argument entirely in terms of male authors; as Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar note, “Bloom’s model of literary history...is not a recommendation for but an analysis of the patriarchal poetics (and attendant anxieties) which underlie our culture’s chief literary movements” (1928). These patriarchal poetics, however, would not remain unquestioned for long.

² While both of the works I study in this project are by Canadian authors, it is worth noting that neither is set within Canada as a nation. Historic efforts to establish a specifically Canadian literary canon, such as the Writers’ Trust of Canada’s 1976 resource guides for teaching Canadian literature, tend to be overwhelmingly white and male. That being said, Margaret Atwood has long been at the forefront of CanLit, together with Margaret Laurence and Alice Munro. In the Trudeau years and following, efforts to diversify CanLit have been increasingly successful; a more pressing challenge is asserting the value to Western thought of CanLit at all! (LaPointe).

While prior critiques of the male domination of literature already existed – Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, for example – the 1970s saw a boom in politically-charged literary criticism that continues to this day. Schools including feminist criticism, Marxist criticism, African-American studies, queer studies, and postcolonial criticism all sought to read the existing canon through their specific ideological lenses, and worked to introduce diverse, new and rediscovered works to academic and general readerships. As Hans Bertens argues, “Literary texts always have a political dimension in the sense that on a closer inspection they can be shown to take specific stances with regards to social issues, either through what they say or what they do *not* say” (97). To insinuate that the texts in the existing canon achieved recognition within entirely objective vacuum, he notes, is to establish white male judgment as a basic standard, as opposed to other groups’ political existence. Put another way, to say that a homogenous collection such as the *Great Books* encapsulates the meaning for Western humanity is to insinuate that those not represented within the canon are not, in fact, fully human – or Western. Within the specific realm of feminist literature, critics and authors alike worked to bring obscured female authors back into the mainstream and demonstrate their merit. Some of these “rediscovered” works, such as Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper,” and Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*, have since become staples of the high school and university classroom (Kolbert).

In the midst of this movement, Harold Bloom pushed back, publishing *The Western Canon: The Books and Schools of the Ages* (1994) in defense of the existence of a specific Western canon. In *The Western Canon* he outlines twenty-six authors who he believes make up an essential Western literary canon; of these, four are women, and two are men of South American descent. While Bloom's oeuvre appears highly inclusive next to that of the *Great Books* collection – and his appendix for further reading lists dozens of women and authors of color among its hundreds of authors – Bloom spends a large portion of the book arguing against these particular literary movements, which he dubs the “School of Resentment.” These he argues, “wish to overthrow the Canon in order to advance their supposed (and nonexistent) programs for social change” (4). Bloom claims that literary criticism should not involve politics, but should concentrate solely on aesthetic value. A feminist or Marxist reading of *Hamlet*, for example, would provide insights into feminism and Marxism, but not into *Hamlet* (25). Philosopher Stephen Hicks concurs, writing that “if one's deepest goals are political, one always has a major obstacle to deal with – the powerful books written by brilliant minds on the other side of the debate. Deconstruction allows you to dismiss whole literary and legal traditions as built upon sexist or racist or otherwise exploitative assumptions. It provides a justification for setting them aside” (190-191). Hicks's argument hinges on the idea that these white male-authored texts within the Western Canon are

unquestionably brilliant, and his defense seems to be against their removal more than the inclusion of others.

Though it predates Bloom's and Hicks's remarks by decades, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's 1979 book *The Madwoman in the Attic* remains one of the most foundational arguments for a specifically feminist literary canon. Gilbert and Gubar argue that – far from being the natural result of recognizing aesthetic quality and talent – the white male dominance of literary history is the direct result of other groups being suppressed. Throughout history, the patriarchy has actively worked to define women as either angels or monsters, suppressing women's sense of self and blocking their avenues to creativity and success. Instead of experiencing an "anxiety of influence," they argue, female writers have historically felt an "anxiety of authorship," a fear that because they cannot become part of the canon – that because they will never be recognized as artists – the very act of writing will isolate or annihilate them (1929). The struggle of the female author, Gilbert and Gubar write, must begin with a search for foremothers, not as competition but as inspiration. The female precursor "far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed, proves by example that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible" (1930). The female precursor acts as a form of memory, physical and literary evidence not only that women have resisted patriarchal authority but also that they *can do so again*. This, Gilbert and Gubar assert, is why the expansion of the canon and

the inclusion of female authors is so important. It allows contemporary creators to remember their “matrilineal heritage of literary strength, their ‘female power’” (1937). The very act of reading and celebrating female authors becomes a form of resistance, a reminder that women have consistently told their own stories, and that the patriarchal apparatus – while always distributed across society – has never been totally dominant in its power.

Years after these disputes, contemporary data still reveal a startling lack of diversity. In 1998, the Modern Library released a “100 Best Novels List,” curated by ten editors (one of whom was a woman). Of the one hundred novels listed, eight are by women, for a total of seven female authors, all of them white (“100 Best”). In 2012, D. G. Myers conducted a study of the twenty-five most studied authors in American Literature using the MLA Bibliography for reference. He discovered that, of the twenty-five, five of them are women, including one woman of color: Toni Morrison (Myers). As Doug Barry notes, despite the fact that women are – and consistently have been – the dominant consumers of fiction, white men continue to produce, define, and critique the vast majority of mainstream literature. With these realities in mind, the second pressing objective of feminist narrative resistance becomes vital: not simply to remember, but to imagine.

Feminist Speculative Fiction

While skillful and insightful writing by women exists across genres, women's production of speculative fiction – a blanket term including utopias and dystopias, science fiction, fantasy, and horror – remains especially fascinating, and ripe for critical inquiry (Barr xxi). In *Alien to Femininity: Speculative Fiction and Feminist Theory* (1987), Maureen S. Barr works to understand how the dominantly masculine genre of speculative fiction intersects with contemporary feminist scholarship. "Because these writers are not hindered by the constraints of patriarchal social reality," she writes, "they can imagine presently impossible possibilities for women. Their genre is ideally suited for exploring the potential of women's changing roles" (xi). Here, Barr gestures to the utopian possibilities of feminist speculative fiction. Because authors can imagine a future or alternate reality in which patriarchy either never existed or has been eradicated, they can predict how society would be different without it. Barr's explanation, however, neglects the inverse ability of feminist speculative fiction to make explicit the often invisible oppression of current circumstances. This dramatization, Natalie M. Rosinsky argues, allows authors to "'defamiliarize' the known towards some overtly polemical ends" (105). By separating readers' circumstances from those circumstances' causes and implications, feminist speculative fiction helps readers understand the nature of patriarchal power. This is especially true of the feminist dystopia; as Moylan notes, dystopia is particularly

perceptive in “its ability to reflect upon the causes of social and ecological evil as systemic” (xii).

While – in light of the preceding discussion – I would certainly not suggest a speculative feminist canon, I will provide a brief overview of the genre so as to contextualize my discussion in the remainder of this project. Many critics identify *Frankenstein* (1818), written by twenty-one-year-old Mary Shelley, as the founding example of the science fiction genre as a whole, due to its emphasis on science and the potential drawbacks of technology, its satire of the current era, and its almost myth-like nature (Booker & Thomas 5). While women wrote science fiction stories throughout the following century, however, the first speculative novels imagining distinctly feminist realities did not emerge until the early twentieth century. Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* (1915) depicts a society entirely peopled by women, in which reproduction occurs via parthenogenesis and there is no war, conflict, and domination (West). Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* (1928), meanwhile, imagines a man who unwittingly becomes a woman and faces vastly different treatment in society as a result. *Orlando* also features explicit lesbian desire – a feature which has led to its embrace by queer theorists in the last several decades (Popova). Feminist speculative fiction blossomed alongside the rise of feminist literary criticism in the 1960s and 1970s. Of this era, three works remain especially prominent: Ursula K. Leguin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), with its single-gender planet; Joanna Russ’s *The Female Man* (1975),

with its four time-traveling incarnations of the author from different eras; and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), with its visions of an egalitarian, sexually-liberated future society (Davis 5). James Tiptree Jr. – later revealed to be Alice Bradley Sheldon writing under a pseudonym to question attitudes towards gender – was prolific during this time as well, writing short stories such as “Houston, Houston, Do You Read?” (1976). Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), meanwhile, emerged as the most successful feminist speculative novel of the 1980s (Thompson 13).

Critics of the genre argued that feminist speculative fiction too often ignored the situation of non-white women, and with these criticisms a new spate of novels arrived. With novels such as *Kindred* (1979) and *Parable of the Sower* (1993), Octavia Butler was at the forefront of Afrofuturism, which focuses on past and present experiences of people of color using a combination of speculative fiction, Afrocentricity, and non-Western cosmologies (Yaszek). Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998) envisions a post-apocalyptic Toronto through the eyes of a Caribbean girl who discovers she possesses obeah powers, and Cynthia Kadohata's *In the Heart of the Valley of Love* (1997) imagines a futuristic Los Angeles in which rich whites have blockaded themselves off from the starving non-white population. Intersections between post-colonial literature and feminist speculative fiction have recently produced works including Hiromi Goto's *Kappa Child* (2001), Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* (2002), and Suzette Mayr's

Venous Hum (2005) (Martín-Lucas 107-125). The twenty-first century has seen an overwhelming renewal in the popularity of speculative fiction, especially among young adults. Though none of them write explicitly feminist novels, the authors of the top three best-selling speculative fiction series of the last twenty years have all been women. J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* (1997-2007) series and its child wizards, Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* (2005-2011) quartet with its lovestruck vampires and werewolves, and Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games* (2008-2010) trilogy featuring adolescents fighting to the death all suggest that female authors will have a strong presence in speculative fiction in the years to come.

The Handmaid's Tale and Salt Fish Girl

I have selected Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* (2002) for study together for two significant reasons. First of all, as Canadian feminist dystopian novels written during the Second and Third Wave of feminism respectively, they are ideally positioned to demonstrate the authors' expressions of similar themes and methods of resistance as filtered through different socio-political lenses. *The Handmaid's Tale* presents women as a homogenous group with similar issues, and specifically frames its dystopian society of Gilead as a backlash against Second Wave feminism (Latimer 33). As a heterosexual white woman, the protagonist Offred frames her struggle in terms of love, reproduction, and the relationship between men and women, which she sees as universal concerns

for women. By contrast, *Salt Fish Girl* presents a protagonist, Miranda, whose plight is shaped not only by being a woman but also by being queer, non-white, and of low socio-economic status. She faces an explicitly intersectional patriarchy, and provides an apt example of how intersectional feminism's goals and understandings have evolved.

Despite their difference, however, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Salt Fish Girl* have a startling number of similarities. Both feature strikingly passive leads – Offred and Miranda, respectively - who are involved in close relationships with unruly, active women. Offred, in particular, has faced critical dismissal as an unsuccessful or weak heroine; Peter Stillman and S. Anne Johnson argue that Offred is partially responsible for her society's downfall, writing that “Offred has betrayed both her mother and her best friend through her complicity...ultimately, of course, Offred betrayed herself” (81). Offred and Miranda also face their own commodification by their respective societies. Offred and the other handmaids are distributed by the state to wealthy men, little more than “two-legged wombs...sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices” (Atwood 157). Miranda, meanwhile, lives in a highly capitalist state driven by shoe production, and she eventually sells her music – and with it, her heritage – for advertising purposes (Lai 198-199). Reproduction is at the heart of *The Handmaid's Tale*, but it also forms a major concern for the characters in *Salt Fish Girl*: through reincarnation, through cloning by greedy patriarchal business tycoons, and through queer

relationships and hopeful rebellion. Finally, and most vitally, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Salt Fish Girl* are both texts that place memory, storytelling, and the fluidity of language at their centers. This centrality of narrative and memory will form the core of my argument in this project.

As Margaret Atwood's arguably most famous work, and a novel that stands at the intersection of Canadian literature, feminist literature, and speculative fiction, *The Handmaid's Tale* has already been subject to more than thirty years of popular and academic scrutiny. As a more recent and less well-known novel, *Salt Fish Girl* has not experienced the same attention. Furthermore, to the best of my knowledge, the two novels have never been written about in conjunction with each other up to this point. Heather Latimer's *Reproductive Acts: Sexual Politics in North American Fiction and Film* (2013) includes chapters discussing each of the novels, but never compares them to each other. As such, I believe that this project will be not only productive but also innovative, filling an academic space that heretofore remained empty.

Chapter Two: *The Handmaid's Tale*

"The body is the language of the Third Testament."

(*Salt Fish Girl* 76)

While a number of scholars have examined storytelling in *The Handmaid's Tale*, and a handful have considered the novel in light of Foucault's theory, to the best of my knowledge no one has specifically addressed how subversive storytelling and counter-discourse function within the space of the patriarchal panopticon.³ It is this "blank white space" that I will attempt to fill in the following pages as I examine how Offred's rhetorical act successfully aids in the dismantling of Gilead's panoptical control. I propose that Offred successfully resists Gilead through her construction of an alternative narrative describing her experience. Gilead seeks to homogenize discourse and control every aspect of both society and the individual's interior life, and so any counter-narrative or deviant action implicitly heralds the failure of Gilead's objectives. Though Offred does not consider herself heroic, her sometimes playful, sometimes despairing witness to Gilead's crimes constitutes a more effective form of resistance than the violent rebellion she admires in Moira. By diversifying available accounts of life under Gilead and remembering the past that Gilead attempts to erase, she provides a striking model of successful resistance through nonviolent storytelling.

³ For a full literature review, see Appendix A.

Locating *The Handmaid's Tale*

When *The Handmaid's Tale* was first published in February of 1985, it met with mixed reviews. As Lee Briscoe Thompson notes, criticisms of the novel were “connected with the perceived credibility of the novel” (19). That the novel appeared a year after the title year of that most famous dystopia, George Orwell’s 1984, only intensified the scrutiny; Orwell’s Big Brother had failed to materialize, and skeptics questioned whether the Republic of Gilead was similarly far-fetched. During her press tour promoting the novel, Atwood addressed skepticism about the plausibility of the novel’s premise: “There is nothing in this book that hasn’t already happened in the past, including the United States or European past, or isn’t already happening somewhere else in the world” (Matheson 20). Atwood took to carrying a folder of news clippings with her as a visual aid. “I was quite careful about [not inventing]...” she told Cathy Davidson in an interview for *Ms.* magazine. “I transposed to a different time and place, but the motifs are all historical” (in Thompson 18).

Atwood’s insistence on basing her novel in history and current events reflects the definition of dystopia set forth by Moylan: one in which the author imagines a society that extends and intensifies the anxieties of the twentieth century. In order to understand Gilead as a feminist dystopia, and Offred’s place within it, we must understand the environment in which Atwood wrote the *Handmaid's Tale* – an environment that remains relevant, even prescient today. In a 2012 retrospective for *The Guardian*, Atwood

reflects that – if anything – she made Gilead too relaxed in its surveillance, not anticipating today’s omniscient technologies. Otherwise, she stands by its anxieties about reproduction, religion, and totalitarianism. “When asked whether *The Handmaid’s Tale* is about to ‘come true,’” she writes, “I remind myself that there are two futures in the book, and that if the first one comes true, the second one may do so also” (“Haunted”). If we take this statement as referring to periods of Offred’s life before the rise of Gilead and during its dominance, then the “coming true” of the first future becomes especially relevant. Atwood avoids precisely dating the novel, leaving critics to locate it anywhere between the mid 1980s and the mid twenty-first century (Thompson 36). Thompson notes, however, that Atwood’s manuscript initially wrote down 1978 as Offred’s birth year: “which, Offred being thirty-three during her tale-telling, would place the Handmaid in the year 2011 and the coup roughly after 2005” (36). Though Atwood eventually decided to delete the birth date from the novel and thus leave its setting ambiguous, she did refer in a 1986 interview to the narrative taking place “twenty years from now,” making her concerns about Gilead imminent (Hancock in Thompson 36).

In the context of the writing of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood exhibits three major points of anxiety: reproduction, religion, and totalitarianism. “In *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” Lucy M. Freibert notes, “the context is essentially political, and, as the protagonist remarks, ‘Context is all’” (280). Atwood

began writing the *Handmaid's Tale* while she was living in West Berlin; during this time, the Berlin Wall still stood and East Berlin was under Communist Rule. The Cold War was ongoing in the 1980s, with the possibility of nuclear warfare and its ensuing devastation looming in the background. World War II was forty years in the past, but the memory of its three major dictatorships – Hitler in Germany, Stalin in the Soviet Union, and Mussolini in Italy – was fresh in Atwood's mind ("Haunted"). The following decades had seen the rise of dictatorships around the world – in Cambodia, Chile, North Korea, and Cuba, to name a few – making the rise of a fascist government recognizable to Atwood's audience, if perhaps not within the context of the United States. Most prominently, two recent regimes were specifically targeting women – those in Iran and Romania. As Shirley Neuman notes, "Ayatolla Kohmeini had forced women out of...universities, out of their jobs, and back into their *burqas* and their homes," while in Romania, "Ceausescu's government monitored women monthly for pregnancy, outlawed birth control, and abortion, and linked women's wages to childbearing" (859). To witness a society like the one Atwood described in her novel, readers had to look no further than the headlines – a statement which is still true today. Since the publication of *The Handmaid's Tale*, regimes specifically targeting women have continued. Between 1996 and 2001, the Islamic fundamentalist Taliban held power in Afghanistan, committing multiple human rights abuses under a strict interpretation of

Sharia law, including denying women literacy, education, and medical care. According to a 1998 Physicians for Human Rights report, “no other regime in the world has methodically and violently forced half of its population into virtual house arrest, prohibiting them on pain of physical punishment” (“Taliban.”). Today, the jihadist militant group ISIS or ISIL is notorious for their brutal violence against women, including systemic rape and sexual slavery. “The Islamic State’s (IS) fighters,” write Aki Peritz and Tara Maller, “are committing horrific sexual violence on a seemingly industrial scale” (“Islamic”). While these regimes are more explicitly violent than Gilead, they reinforce the plausibility of an entire state attempting to control women and their reproductive capacity and agency. While these examples stem from Islam, the fact that Atwood specifically implicates Christianity in *The Handmaid’s Tale* suggests that religious fundamentalism and the corresponding oppression of women is a possibility within many faiths.

To lend plausibility to her vision of totalitarian rule in the United States, Atwood turned to the recent resurgence of the Religious Right, as well as America’s Puritan roots. She writes:

Nations never build apparently radical forms of government on foundations that aren’t there already. The deep foundation of the US – so went my thinking – was not the comparatively recent 18th-century Enlightenment structures of the republic, with their talk of equality and their separation of church and state, but the heavy-handed theocracy of 17th-century Puritan New England, with its marked bias against women, which would need only the opportunity of a period of social chaos to reassert itself. (“Haunted”)

Many elements of the novel find their roots in Puritan practice and ideology: the hanging of suspect women,⁴ somber conservative apparel, and even Offred's surroundings, formerly Harvard University – an institution that, while secularized at the time of writing, was founded in part to train Puritan ministers ("Historical Facts"). Atwood also gestures to these Puritan roots as inspiring the religious fundamentalists that eventually establish Gilead in the novel (35). The Gileadean administration frames their society as a return to strict Christian values; fragmented and misapplied Biblical rhetoric permeates the culture, from the scriptural names of stores and cars and the verses repeated to reinforce ideals to the conceit behind the Handmaids themselves. Gilead began with the Religious Right in America; Offred describes how the Commander's Wife Serena Joy was formerly a television personality and later advocate for Gilead's particular brand of fundamentalist religion. "She wasn't singing any more by then," Offred recalls. "She was making speeches. She was good at it. Her speeches were about the sanctity of the home, about how women should stay home" (50). In her former combination of hyperconservative values and television charisma, Serena Joy resembles prominent religious figures such as Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, and Anita Bryant active at the time of *The Handmaid's Tale's* writing and publication. Christian fundamentalists, many of whom allied with far right

⁴ In fact, Atwood dedicates the novel to Mary Webster, an ancestor who was hanged as a witch during the Puritan witch trials (Dodson 68)

Republicans and called themselves the Moral Majority, “believed a permissive minority was demolishing the rules and customs that had made America great; they saw ‘a society dying,’ as the novel’s Aunt Lydia puts it at the Red Centre, ‘of too much choice’” (Thompson 17). Among the rules and customs that they, like the Gileadeans, wished to reestablish was strict patriarchal hierarchy. As Courtney W. Howland notes, “the contemporary rise of religious fundamentalism in all major religions...has been accompanied by a vigorous promotion and enforcement of gender roles whose explicit intent entails the subordination of women” (xi). While members of the Moral Majority encouraged the subordination of women in various ways through their rhetoric and proposed policies, they were especially strident regarding reproductive rights.

The Handmaid’s Tale centers on reproduction, including questions of how fertility relates to women’s identity, who has a right to regulate reproduction, and what role childbearing and motherhood should have in society. As Howland argues, leaders of fundamentalist religions are “particularly concerned with women’s sexuality – as a danger and a threat to society – and thus are keen to regulate and control women’s sexuality and reproduction through a variety of measures. Controlling women’s sexuality fits neatly into the religious fundamentalist promotion of the patriarchal family” (xii-xiii). Questions of the regulation of women’s sexuality do not only occur in the Gilead sections of the novel, but also serve as the center of

debates occurring before the regime's establishment. Offred recalls watching videos of abortion rights protests that included her mother, where women carried signs with various slogans: "FREEDOM TO CHOOSE. EVERY BABY A WANTED BABY. RECAPTURE OUR BODIES. DO YOU BELIEVE A WOMAN'S PLACE IS ON THE KITCHEN TABLE?" (138). During the time of Gilead, the regime's backlash against abortion supporters is brutal: doctors who performed abortions in the past are executed and their corpses publicly displayed as a warning. "These men, we've been told, are like war criminals," Offred explains. "It's no excuse that what they did was legal at the time: their crimes are retroactive. They have committed atrocities, and must be made into examples for the rest" (37-38). This rhetoric – of choice and bodily autonomy on one side, and of criminality and murder on the other – is ripped from the headlines of the 1980s. After landmark Supreme Court case *Roe vs. Wade* legalized abortion in 1973, conservative pushback was pervasive and fierce (Thompson 17). One of the Moral Majority's specific goals was to prohibit all abortions – even in cases involving incest, rape, or pregnancies where the mother's life was at stake (Falwell 395). Though the Moral Majority's power eventually waned, efforts from the Religious Right to limit or entirely prohibit women's access to birth control and abortion continue; at the time of this writing, new state laws have contributed to the closing of more than 70 abortion clinics since 2010 (Crary), and 2015 saw a massive push by the Republican party to defund Planned Parenthood. ("Republican").

In creating Gilead, Atwood imagines a society in which the Moral Majority and Religious Right's vision of women has been accomplished: abortion is criminalized, women are confined to the home, and reproduction is held above almost all else, even women's humanity. "We are two-legged wombs," Offred muses, "that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (157). The womb is elevated to a position of holiness, leaving women an afterthought, mere vehicles for the potential children of the future.

Under His Eye

In order to understand Gilead and Offred's place within it, we must understand how Gilead functions as a site of power. Gilead is not simply a society where all men are elevated above all women; its organization is more complicated. As the Historical Notes' brief reference to Dr. Pieixoto's paper on sumptuary laws suggests, Gilead enforces hierarchies for all of its citizens, with corresponding standards of dress to easily distinguish them to observers. All women in society are divided into one of eight color-coded categories, including the crimson-robed Handmaids. In short, "a quick colour inventory tells a Gilead male exactly what to expect from the women he encounters," efficiently reducing women to their function (Thompson 33).

As Thompson notes, "While some describe Gilead as a fantasy of male control, the men of Gilead do not escape categorization and strict ranking" (33). Among the men, we encounter Commanders, spying Eyes, soldiers named Angels, menial laborer Guardians, and nameless, faceless workers.

While both men and women exist within hierarchy, however, the nature and structure of those respective hierarchies is deeply revealing, separated most prominently by their expectations regarding agency and literacy. First, women can only remain at a rank of the same status or move downward; an unsuccessful handmaid will be deemed an Unwoman and sent to the colonies, but a successful Handmaid cannot become a Wife. Men, however, can move upward in their hierarchy based on their faithful service; Offred mentions that Guardians dream of being promoted to Angels, and thus being eligible for marriage, or perhaps eventual promotion to Commander with the corresponding gift of a Handmaid (25). The way women correspond to men's status is revealing; no matter the rank of a man, he always relates to women as rewards, symbols of his increased status or his right to reproduce. Even the highest-ranking of women – Aunts and Wives – are still at the mercy of men, forced to propagate their ideologies and fulfill their desires.

The greatest dividing factor between all men and women in Gilead, however, is that of literacy: it is illegal for women, no matter what their status, to read and write. Reading is a serious crime; upon the third offense, the offender's hand is cut off (317), because, as Offred notes early in her training when the Aunts beat Moira's feet with steel cables after an escape attempt, "They didn't care what they did to your feet and hands, even if it was permanent. Remember, said Aunt Lydia, For our purposes your feet and hands are not essential" (104). The state has attempted to remove every

trace of writing from women's lives: shop signs are replaced with pictures (28), money is substituted for tokens (12), and even the credits and placards in archival footage is supposed to be blacked out (138). Men, meanwhile, have exclusive access to the laws and texts that shape Gileadean society: most prominently the Bible. "The Bible is kept locked up," Offred explains, "the way people once kept tea locked up, so the servants wouldn't steal it. It is an incendiary device: who knows what we'd make of it, if we ever got our hands on it. We can be read to from it, by [the Commander], but we cannot read" (99). Because only men have access to the written word, writing becomes precious, even illicit. When the Commander starts meeting with Offred late at night, their Scrabble games are as scandalous as their kisses. Writing becomes a symbol of both power and sexual self-determination, a reality that Offred plays with when she muses during an interlude with the Commander, "The pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost, I can feel its power, the power of the words it contains. Pen Is Envy, Aunt Lydia would say" (214-215). "Pen Is Envy," of course, puns on "penis envy," referring to the Freudian concept of women envying men's phallic power. In this case, gender and literacy are directly linked; men deny women writing even as they also deny them sexual and societal agency.

While many dystopian societies have involved the control of reading and writing, *The Handmaid's Tale* is unique in its divide across gender lines. Klarer demonstrates how the removal of writing forces Offred, and the rest of

the Handmaids, to inhabit a strictly oral culture instead of a literate culture, impeding their ability to unite and revolt. He explains:

Enforced orality is at odds with the kind of historical scope which contains a revolutionary potential and could consequently threaten the inner equilibrium of the state. By thus controlling the very structures of language and thinking, the leading class is able to consolidate the basis of its monolithic state and keep all others in their assigned positions. (Klarer 13)

Because the Handmaids cannot pass information on to each other, they don't have the ability to coordinate action or spread their ideas without fear of punishment and death. As I noted earlier, one of the key strategies that a totalitarian government must enact in order to successfully control its populace is the erasing and rewriting of history. By robbing the Handmaids of the written word, Gilead manages to erase their history – a fact that Offred's narrative reflects, as she struggles with increasingly hazy memories and the difficulty of reconstructing the past without the knowledge that her account will actually reach anyone.

In "An End to Audience," a lecture given five years before the publication of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood articulates how totalitarianism involves the regulation of language: "In any totalitarian take-over, whether from the left or the right, writers, singers, and journalists are the first to be suppressed...the aim of such suppression is to silence *the voice*, abolish the word, so that the only voices and words left are those of the ones in power" (427). Here, Atwood speaks of voices and words together, a combination that

bears weight in light of Offred's relative silence in society. Beyond the loss of writing, she speaks minimally, always in a low voice and using as many government-ordered phrases as possible, never making eye contact. At one point, upon seeing a pregnant Handmaid, Offred notes that "The women in the room are whispering, almost talking, so great is their excitement" – a seemingly mundane occurrence that highlights the Handmaids' radically different world through Offred's inclusion of it as exception. Earlier, during her training, Gileadean authorities use manipulated or fabricated Biblical texts to further enforce and collude patriarchal authority and silencing of women. "They played it from a tape," Offred recalls, "so not even an Aunt would be guilty of the sin of reading...*Blessed are the silent*. I knew they made that up, I knew it was wrong, and they left things out too, but there was no way of checking" (101). Later, while performing a mass wedding, the Commander invokes 1 Timothy 2:11-12 in the least forgiving interpretation possible, reciting, "Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection.' Here he looks us over. 'All,' he repeats. 'But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence'" (256). As Dorota Filipczak notes in her study of the *Handmaid's Tale's* use of the Bible as intertext, Gilead's usage of this passage ignores both its context and specificity. "The Prayvaganza ceremony," she writes, "is based on the paradigm of the church as the patriarchal household of God patterned after the patriarchal household in society" (182-3). As a patriarchal and totalitarian society, the

Gileadean leaders twist the Biblical text to suit their predetermined values, instead of allowing its interpretation to shape their society, as a religious society would purportedly aim to do. Furthermore, Gilead's use of the Bible as a silencing tool demonstrates clearly how control over literacy shapes the capacity of those denied literacy for both agency and expression. Not only are Offred and the other Handmaids not allowed to read; men's domination of reading allows Gilead's patriarchal rulers to steal the Handmaids' voices as well.

Beyond the explicit use of the Bible as a tool of physical silencing, the homogenization of discourse in Gilead leads to a silencing of alternative expressions and narratives. When Offred interacts with other Handmaids, their conversations mainly consist of prescribed phrases. "Blessed be the fruit," Ofglen greets her, instantly defining her by her reproductive capacity, and she replies, "May the Lord open" (21). Later, when they exchange information about the suppression of insurgents by Gilead, she replies with a series of devout expressions: "Praise be," and "Which I receive with joy" (22). Because they are forced to use select religious phrases to communicate or else face punishment, the Handmaids can only tell one story about their thoughts: the official Gileadean one. This singularity of discourse is also reflected in official Gileadean news reports, which serve a double purpose of demonstrating the state's propaganda and its intolerance for groups with other ideologies. News relayed both through conversation with other

Handmaids and through watching television tells of the Gileadean army's successful destruction of sects of Baptists, Quakers, and Catholics – religious denominations that do not agree with the theology and practices of Gilead, and thus must be exterminated (22). Offred pays close attention to these reports, though she does not make any statement to the reader either condemning or supporting the actions they depict. Rather, she looks within the official discourse for some glimpse of other possibilities. "I'm ravenous for news," she says, "any kind of news; even if it's false news, it must mean something" (22). Similarly, when Offred and Ofglen see the bodies of men executed by the state hanging on the Wall, they have no insight into what the men's identity or actions were other than the placards they wear around their necks indicating their crimes. On rare occasions, the Handmaids are called on to join together in savage Particutions, where they release frustration and tension by executing men who have committed crimes against the Handmaids. Near the end of the novel, Offred and Ofglen witness the execution of one such man, a purported rapist whose actions led to a Handmaid's miscarriage (321). "He wasn't a rapist at all," Ofglen insists, "he was a political. He was one of ours [the rebels]" (323). If this is the case, then the Handmaids have just executed a man who was working for their liberation, pawns for a regime that knows how to shape their reality to fit its narrative. While Offred wonders at the thought of the man, a Guardian, being a double agent, she has no way of verifying Ofglen's account or the

accusation. Offred only has access to the official record, and without the possibility of discerning among multiple reports or viewpoints, she has no access to a confirmed reality unshaped by Gilead and its attempt at totalitarian control. As Stillman and Johnson argue, “Gilead’s power reaches into every nook and cranny, every thought and act, of Offred’s existence, taking apparent resistance or transgression and neutralizing it or turning it into a support for the system” (75).

While I will devote greater space to counter-narrative and resistance later on in this chapter, I want to take a moment to examine how one specific piece of writing serves as a site of both homogeneity and control as well as counter-narrative and resistance against power. Offred is a replacement Handmaid for the Commander and Serena Joy; her predecessor, hanged herself rather than face life in Gilead. Offred is deeply curious about this woman, and spends her idle hours going over her bedroom inch by inch, searching for a trace of the room’s history, an echo of this woman’s voice. Inside the closet, she discovers that the previous occupant has scratched a phrase: “Nolite te bastardes carborundorum” (58). Though Offred does not know what this means, she latches on to it as a secret connection to this other woman, a voice that is theirs, not Gilead’s:

It was a message, and it was in writing, forbidden by that very fact, and it hadn’t yet been discovered. Except by me, for whom it was intended. It was intended for whoever came next. It pleases me to ponder this message. It pleases me to think I’m communing with her, this unknown woman...It pleases me to know

that her taboo message made it through, to at least one other person, washed itself up on the wall of my cupboard, was opened and read by me. Sometimes I repeat the words to myself. They give me a small joy. (58)

Offred's appreciation of the phrase's meaning remains limited until further in the novel, but she immediately grasps what the act of writing – of being able to transmit ideas – means. The phrase represents individuality – a message created by a person who understands her situation, meant for her alone. Its existence and secrecy testifies to the fact that Gilead has not been entirely successful in its attempt to control women's minds and rob them of their stories – this secret communication still exists. The metaphor Offred uses to describe the phrase is especially apt: she imagines it as a "message in a bottle," sent either out of curiosity or in hope of rescue, washing up on her desert island as a sign of hope.⁵ The writing signifies to Offred that she is not alone. Later, remembering the day when Moira's feet were beaten, she repeats the phrase, calling it a prayer. "I don't know what it means," she admits again, "but it sounds right, and it will have to do, because I don't know what else I can say to God." Describing the horror of Moira's damaged feet, of how trapped she, and Moira, and her predecessor all were, she repeats: "Oh God, I pray. *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*. Is this what you had in mind?" (105). There's a full line break before Offred's question, making the "you" she addresses ambiguous – is she continuing her prayer, or asking

⁵ Interestingly enough, the phrase's power as a symbol of resistance extends beyond the novel; in a recent interview, Atwood notes that it is the most popular selection for tattoos among fans ("Haunted").

whether Moira succeeded in her plans for rebellion? Regardless, the moment marks Offred's departure from the official discourse of Gilead. Whether she is speaking to Moira or to God, she is still speaking out of turn, in her own words. In "An End to Audience," Atwood articulates how essential the sharing of communication is in resistance, and eventually, democracy: "It could be well argued that the advent of the printed word coincided with the advent of democracy as we know it; that the book is the only form that allows the reader not only to participate to review, to re-view what's being presented...can democracy function at all without a literate public? (432). By writing her cryptic message in the closet, Offred's predecessor inscribes the room with an indelible idea, one that Offred can review. They can preserve their common bond, and keep it stable and separate from the rewriting of history and identity in Gilead.

When Offred discovers the origin and meaning of her treasured phrase, it paradoxically increases and decreases in power. During a moment of boldness in one of her Scrabble sessions with the Commander, she asks him what it means, and is disappointed to find not only is it not real Latin, but it also has its origins as a mere joke among school boys. "It can't be only a joke," Offred thinks in disbelief. "Have I risked this grab at knowledge, for a mere joke?" The Commander locates the phrase in a textbook next to a drawing of the sexually idealized Venus de Milo, clumsily graffitied with a mustache and armpit hair. Here, originating with and claimed by men, Offred

feels the phrase's power diminish; what she thought was a secret message between herself and her predecessor actually emphasizes their subservience, their interchangeability; the only way her predecessor knew the phrase, Offred realizes, is because she also had an affair with the Commander, also spent time poring through his books. At the same time, she understands the significance of the phrase as a "prayer and command" when the Commander tells her what it means: "Don't let the bastards grind you down" (216). In the context of his schoolboy pranks, it is petty, a symptom of classroom rebellion in a site of current privilege and future power. Within Gilead, however, it is a call to resistance, a manifesto of determination and hope.

Speaking of her own life before Gilead, Offred remembers that she "lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print...in the gaps between the stories" (63). At the time, she refers to her innocuous and unexciting life, untroubled by the violence and battles for rights reported in the news. Now she lives in different margins, finding her own words and messages in the literal margins of men's texts. It is this process of salvaging that enables Offred to go on with words of her own to cling to. Stein typifies this as part of the feminist project – "the desire to 'steal the language' of/from patriarchy" (269). James Scott, meanwhile, argues in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* that the reclamation of such a phrase as "nolite te bastardes carborundorum" is the natural result of dominant groups' attempts at hegemony. Using the term "public transcript" to describe the official, state-

mandated discourse, he writes that “every subordinate group creates out of its ordeal, a ‘hidden transcript’ that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant. The powerful, for their part, also develop a hidden transcript representing the practices and claims of their rule that cannot be openly avowed” (xii). With Gilead removing all explicit forms of resistance, whether they are political pamphlets or alternative interpretations of the Bible, all the Handmaids have left is what they can create of their ordeal. “Nolite te bastarades carborundorum” represents one such creation of the hidden, resistant transcript, in which Offred and her predecessor snatch a phrase from its patriarchal origins and make it a subversion of dominant discourse, providing them with pleas to God and commands to endure.

As a Handmaid, Offred faces limitations not only upon her voice but on her eyes as well; the novel is filled with discussions of visibility, seeing, and been seen. The Handmaids’ head-to-toe red garb paradoxically is meant to cover them from male gaze while simultaneously making them inescapably noticeable. Handmaids are already robbed of their old identities, their names replaced with temporary names derived from their assigned Commanders: “Of-Fred,” “Of-Glen,” “Of-Warren,” and so on. The matching garb for all Handmaids further increases their interchangeability and objectification, while also declaring to society their hallowed and despised purpose as the reproductive future of Gilead’s elite. Most interesting is the

Handmaid's headdress – a red veil and white wings framing the face like blinders, to prevent peripheral vision: "The white wings too are prescribed issue;" Offred explains, "they are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen" (9). The benefit of keeping the Handmaids from seeing is obvious; as Offred notes, limited visibility forces her to see the world in "gasps," never able to be completely aware of her surroundings or get a full picture of Gilead's structures and protections (34). The rationale – and legitimacy – of the Handmaids' protection from being seen is more complicated. The wings increase their anonymity and interchangeability; Offred does not realize that a new woman has replaced her walking partner Ofglen until she is quite close to her (21). The Aunts claim that the Handmaids' outfits also increase their modesty, and with it their safety: "Modesty is invisibility, said Aunt Lydia. Never forget it. To be seen – to be *seen* - is to be – her voice trembled – penetrated. What you must be, girls is impenetrable" (33). Aunt Lydia's statement conflates unwanted male sexual contact with visibility; the irony, of course, is that Offred does not avoid either.

While Offred and the other Handmaids' modest garb and wings prevent sexual or eye contact with lower-ranking members of Gilead, such as Guardians and Angels, it does not save them from surveillance or sexual slavery. To be a Handmaid is to be penetrated, routinely and impersonally by a Commander in an attempt to produce children. Offred does occasionally reflect upon how she and the other women of the household watch their

Commander, and here she reverses the rhetoric of penetration and control, imagining how strange it must be for men sexually

To have them [women] putting him on, trying him on, trying him out, while he himself puts them on, like a sock over a foot, onto the stub of himself, his extra, sensitive thumb, his tentacle, his delicate slug's eye...to achieve vision in this way, this journey into a darkness that is composed of women, a woman, who can see in darkness while he himself strains blindly forward. She watches him from within. We're all watching him. (100)

Offred's description of the Commander's penis, deeply unromantic and almost pitying in nature as it is, establishes the tone for all of her sexual encounters with him to follow. Sex, within Gilead, is not about romance, or intimacy, or even lust, but rather about power and duty. In this moment, Offred highlights the pressure to succeed reproductively and places it on the Commander. This rhetorical action, however, goes against the dominant discourse of Gilead: one in which only women are responsible for the success or failure of reproduction, in which women are sexually vulnerable and men-all powerful, and in which women exist to be seen by all-seeing men.

Beyond individual instances of seeing or being seen, Gileadean society itself is an immense panopticon. Gileadean rhetoric frames the entire society as being constantly under the surveillance of an omniscient and omnipotent God; one of the prescribed phrases that Offred exchanges with another handmaid is "Under His Eye" (49). While the phrase is used as a customary farewell, and is meant to convey feelings of protection and benevolence, its effect is quite the opposite. The impression that God is always watching the

citizens of Gilead has a chilling effect on Offred's relationship with others; even though she does not necessarily believe in God – at least, not the God of Gilead – she still acts as if she is always under God's unblinking and unrelenting gaze. Because all members of Gilead must maintain the impression that they believe they are "Under His Eye," they serve as a controlling and homogenizing force for each other's discourse. As Foucault explains in "The Eye of Power," "The new aspect of the problem of justice...was not so much to punish wrongdoers as to prevent even the possibility of wrong-doing, by immersing people in a field of total visibility where the opinion, observation, and discourse of others would restrain them from harmful acts" (153). Gilead does not need to constantly police or constantly punish its citizens because the fear that God is always watching them encourages them to always watch each other. This fact is highlighted when Offred and Ofglen visit Soul Scrolls together, and observe the machines automatically "praying," each decorated with "an eye painted in gold on the side," representing the ever-present gaze of God (193). Here, Offred and Ofglen both put their lives at risk by admitting they do not think God is listening (or by extension, continually watching in judgment), and significantly, it is also here that the two women make direct eye contact for the first time through their reflections in the Soul Scrolls building's window. "There's a shock in this seeing;" Offred says, "it's like seeing somebody naked, for the first time. There is risk, suddenly, in the air between us, where there

was none before” (193). Instead of turning their attention primarily to God’s gaze upon them, and their role in enforcing that gaze, Offred and Ofglen recognize each other as individuals. In doing so, they rob the omnipotent gaze of God of some of its power, while simultaneously endangering themselves. Gilead, after all, is not a purely self-regulating dystopia: the eye of God has assistance.

Gilead’s ubiquitous secret police call themselves “Eyes,” short for “The Eyes of God.” Their logo, a white eye with wings, echoes the golden eye of God at Soul Scrolls; similarly, they serve as physical reminders of the divine gaze, enforcing Gileadean law and monitoring Gileadean citizens for deviance or dissent (24). The Eyes, and their soldier-servants, the Angels, continually patrol the streets and shops of Gilead, on foot and in dark-tinted cars, reminding people that they will always be caught in their errors, in their secrets. Offred demonstrates this constant awareness of the possibility of surveillance in her approach to her bedroom. She describes it as stark, open, impersonal (8), much like the “uncluttered clean space of the Panopticon” of which David Toole speaks (242). Even after she reluctantly refers to the bedroom as “my room” in an effort to claim space as her own (55), she still does not feel safe or private; when the Commander offers her hand cream as a reward for their late-night rendezvous, she explains that she cannot keep it in her room. “They’d find it,” she says, exasperated. “Someone would find it...They look....They look in all our rooms” (183). In Gilead, there is no longer

such thing as personal space; only space within the public gaze of patriarchal control. Reflecting on the intimacy and discretion she used to find with her future husband Luke during their affair, Offred mourns, “How I wasted them, those rooms, that *freedom from being seen* [emphasis mine]. Rented license” (54). Offred’s use of the word “license” here is clever; license can be synonymous with agency, denoting freedom to behave as one wishes, but it can also refer to permission granted by an authority. In the old world, Offred could gain temporary respite from the public eye within the structures of society; now, the public eye follows her wherever she goes.

As I noted in my earlier discussion of the Panopticon and double consciousness, the final sign of the Panopticon’s success is that it becomes internalized; beyond the threat of God or others watching, individuals watch themselves. Offred recognizes this reality when she quotes her training at the Red Center: “The Republic of Gilead, said Aunt Lydia, knows no bounds. Gilead is within you” (26). Gilead and its accompanying control becomes not just external, but internal; conforming to expected standards of behavior is necessary for survival. Offred becomes self-regulating in speech, dress, and action, shaping her self to conform to what her society expects of her.

Atwood subtly reinforces this self-regulation through her comparison of mirrors and eyes through the novel: Offred refers to mirrors as “like the eye of a fish” (9) and “the brief glass eye” (300). By imagining mirrors as eyes, Offred connotes that she is always watching herself carefully, regulating

behavior to conform to the expectations of Gilead. The role of the mirror as regulator becomes clearer when Offred and the chauffeur Nick encounter each other sneaking around in the house at night. “He is too illegal, here, with me,” she breathes, “he can’t give me away. Nor I him; for the moment we’re mirrors” (113). While Offred’s reference to mirrors primarily signifies that she and Nick are in a similar situation, it can also speak to mirrors’ role as eyes of Gilead. As citizens of Gilead, both Nick and Offred must consciously reflect the values of Gilead, internalizing them so as to avoid punishment. As Foucault articulated in his discussion of how the power of the Panopticon works, the guards do not always have to be present: the citizens police each other. Nick and Offred, however unwillingly, contribute to the functioning of Gilead as an enormous patriarchal panopticon stifling free will and homogenizing discourse.

I’m Not Moira

In order to be a dystopic novel, of course, *The Handmaid’s Tale* must feature both a dystopic, totalitarian regime, and a protagonist who opposes that regime. Atwood’s protagonist, Offred, often comes as a surprise for contemporary readers: she is neither especially virtuous, nor especially brave. In fact, even before the establishment of Gilead, she is no ideal feminist hero: she was the “other woman” in an extramarital affair with her husband Luke (56) – which she does not regret (197-8) – and she dismissed and belittled her mother and best friend Moira’s feminist campaigning as

unnecessary and overdramatic (63). “You’re just a backlash,” her mother tells her, half jokingly. “Flash in the pan. History will absolve me...You young people don’t appreciate things...You don’t know what we had to go through, just to get you where you are” (14). Even after Gilead vindicates her mother’s fears, Offred does not regret rejecting them herself so much as she misses her mother.

In addition, at the beginning of the novel Offred is a pragmatist, more concerned with survival than ideals. “Thinking can hurt your chances,” she says wryly, “and I intend to last” (8). Though she resents, criticizes, and undermines Gilead in her tale to the audience, she never uses her position to sabotage the Commander or attempt to find out more about the resistance. While she is usually miserable, even desperate, she also acknowledges that she had other options: her mother, for example, chose to remain faithful to her principles and go to the Colonies as an Unwoman picking up nuclear waste – essentially, a death sentence. “Nothing is going on here that I haven’t signed up for. There wasn’t a lot of choice, but there was some, and this is what I chose,” Offred admits – something that Marthas Clara and Rita judge her for (107). Even within the increasing liberties that Offred is able to take as she gains access to the Commander (162), she never uses her freedom for anything more than personal fulfillment: seeing a picture of her now-resettled daughter. In fact, when Ofglen invites her to help the Mayday Resistance movement, she shrugs it off, focusing her attention and energy

instead on her affair with Nick. Offred is not proud of her behavior throughout the novel – she bluntly calls herself a coward – but she also does not take the actions to change her situation a reader might expect (338).

Because of these actions as well as her general tone, Offred has been admonished by critics as being a passive heroine, a poor role model for feminists, and even complicit in Gilead's rule. The most famous critique of Offred comes from Stillman and Johnson, who argue that “within this vortex of fear and vulnerability, this contrast of ‘blank time’ and intense interactions with powerful, inscrutable individuals, the Handmaid ultimately fails to maintain her identity” (74). They also accuse her of becoming complicit in Gilead as her attempts at resistance are neutralized and her priorities shift to romance and personal gain instead of defiance of patriarchal power. Stillman and Johnson do not, however, condemn Offred – rather, they dismiss her as powerless and ineffective. “Offred has no modes of resistance against Gilead,” they write, “at least none that threaten Gilead in any way – and, equally, they seem not to threaten the smug self-satisfaction, self-aggrandizement, and sexism of the academic conferees in 2196” (75). In addition to these major statements, they direct a number of smaller critiques at Offred as well: that she reduces herself to her body, which is what Gilead has already done to her (76); that she prioritizes romance and intimacy over independence (78); and that she depends on others for direction and identity instead of claiming her own (80). Multiple scholars have addressed these criticisms, and so for the

most part I will not dwell on them. What I do want to study in detail, however, is their claim that Offred has no effective modes of resistance available to her, as well as their assertion that she is ultimately conquered by Gilead. The main thrust of my argument, of course, is that Offred *does* resist Gilead successfully, albeit in a subtle and nonviolent way. Before I can prove this claim, however, it is essential to understand what Offred defines as resistance – and who she sees as heroic.

As Stillman and Johnson note, Offred looks to others for heroism and action, often in its most clichéd and obvious forms. First of all, she expects valor and rescue from the men who love her. Offred's perspective on the actions of her husband, Luke, during Gilead's rise to power is complicated. While Luke is sympathetic and reassuring, he also does not take Offred's loss of her job and autonomy as seriously as she does. Instead, he promises to always take care of her, and dissuades her from protesting the changes so as to protect their family. "He doesn't mind this, I thought," she recollects. "He doesn't mind it at all. Maybe he even likes it. We are not each other's, anymore. Instead, I am his" (210). While Offred recognizes that her judgment is unsupported, she cannot deny Luke's investment in her, and her safety as an individual, instead of his recognition of the politics of her situation as a woman among women. Later, Luke does take heroic action, arranging everything so that their family can flee north to Canada and escape from Gilead (222-23). Though he does not succeed, Offred still romanticizes him in

memory. In her stories about Luke, we encounter Offred spinning multiple stories about an event as a coping mechanism. Two of her imagined scenarios are grim – that Luke’s body rots in a field where he was shot when they were captured, or that he is languishing in a jail cell, filthy and tortured. Offred also imagines, however, that Luke has escaped and will come back soon to liberate her and find their daughter. Here, in her dream of the heroic Luke, we find Offred’s concept of resistance:

He made contact with the others, there must be a resistance, a government in exile. Someone must be out there, taking care of things. I believe in the resistance as I believe there can be no light without shadow; or rather, no shadow unless there is also light. There must be a resistance, or where do all the criminals come from on the television? (120).

Offred’s words here are telling. She has faith that good must resist evil, that freedom must come from oppression, but she distinctly excludes herself from the possibility of being a member of this resistance. Resistance is *out there* – a group of criminal and rebels in hiding – not a web of individuals resisting from inside Gilead. Furthermore, Offred expects someone else to do the job of resistance for her. Someone else – her husband, perhaps, working in tandem with the good government, with freedom fighters, must be “taking care of things” (120). Meanwhile, the only task she sets for herself is to endure, and wait for a message from him. Offred cannot know the truth, and so she distances herself from the likelihood of his death, instead creating the possibility of hope. “The things I believe can’t all be true,” she admits,

“though one of them must be. But I believe in all of them, all three versions of Luke, at one and the same time. This contradictory way of believing seems to me, right now, the only way I can believe anything” (121). While Offred’s isolation and feelings of being helpless evoke the reader’s sympathy, they do appear to reinforce Stillman and Johnson’s assertion that she continually chooses romance and passivity as a damsel-in-distress over independent action.

Perhaps more damning than Offred’s hope that Luke will rescue her is her eventual pursuit of a romantic relationship with Nick, the chauffeur. Though Serena Joy initially compels Offred to have sex with Nick once for procreation, Offred returns to him repeatedly of her own volition, telling him her secrets and even her former name in a desperate bid for the intimacy and companionship she has lost. Critics such as Victoria Glendinning have ennobled these trysts, arguing “what has been overlooked by the regime is the subversive force of love. On this the plot turns, as in all romantic narratives since the world began” (39-41). Seen through this lens, Offred’s relationship with Nick is a triumph, a resolution to love in a society devoid of intimacy and desire. Stillman and Johnson, however, judge Offred and Nick’s affair as her final and most damning failure, writing “instead of fighting [her] dehumanization through active resistance...Offred falls back on her romanticism” (78). Offred agrees, condemning herself for two reasons: she has begun to forget her husband, and she has lost her will to escape. The first

charge, while troubling to Offred, is perhaps excusable: with no guarantee that her husband is alive, Offred's liaison with Nick grants her the physical comfort, safety, and strength that she craves to preserve her sanity (117-8). More damaging to any arguments for Offred's heroism is her own lack of interest in escaping once she is able to find sex, companionship, and the semblance of love in Nick's arms. "The fact is," she says, "that I no longer want to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom. I want to be here, with Nick, where I can get at him. Telling this, I'm ashamed of myself. But there's more to it than that...there's pride in it...I have made a life for myself here, of sorts" (312). Offred appears to be confirming the same sentiments that she angrily suspected of Luke in the past, that her agency and identity as a woman and individual does not matter if she has the love and solace of a man. Even at the end of the novel, when Offred is condemned by her household and appears to be facing arrest and execution by the Secret Police, it is Nick who she turns to for rescue, imagining going to his room, begging for shelter (336). Though she does not ask him for help, his last words to her are a message of hope, the same type of message that she once hoped for from Luke: "'It's all right. It's Mayday. Go with them.' He calls me by my real name... 'Trust me'" (338). While Offred's account ends ambiguously, the fact that it exists at all suggests that Nick may be telling the truth; if so, then Offred has achieved what she dreamed of from the beginning. Though the

identity of the man has changed, Offred's desire for romantic rescue by a member of an outside, organized resistance takes place.

Complicating Offred's conception of men as rescuers is her admiration of other women as heroic. While she was dismissive of her feminist activist mother as a child and young woman, Offred looks back on her mother as a fearless woman of principle who stood for her beliefs. Her conversation with Moira reveals that her mother was last seen in exile in the colonies, an Unwoman sentenced to clean up toxic waste until she dies (291). While the reader cannot ascertain whether Offred's mother was offered a choice to become an Aunt or Martha or otherwise take a place in Gilead, what we can conclude is that she was a woman of consistent and unrelenting principle. Offred's mother represents the exact kind of woman that Gilead is working to eliminate: one who is outspoken and independent (140), protests against sexist and oppressive policies (138), and takes control of her reproduction without the input of a man (139). Stillman and Johnson gesture to Offred's mother and Moira as similarly brave and feminist characters, preferable to Offred herself: "They both possess a rebellious, impertinent, and public humor. They both define themselves, overcoming society's powerful expectations of women like themselves" (80). Before I address Moira's fate and its implications, however, I would like to acknowledge Offred and the other Handmaids' initial beliefs about Moira. As a lesbian, Moira never enjoys the same heterosexual privilege that Offred does in the time before Gilead;

though Atwood does not dwell on her status as a queer woman, the protests that Moira attended undoubtedly included advocacy for queer rights, as did, in all likelihood, her work at a feminist publishing company (205). As such, Moira has never experienced the same complacency and comfort in the arms of a man that Offred did; she always remains adversarial, alert to the fact that she must personally act if she wishes to maintain her rights. After the Gileadean takeover, when Offred encounters Moira at the Red Center, she is overjoyed primarily to be reconnected with her old friend. Secondarily, she and many of the other Handmaids latch on to Moira as a symbol of subversion, bravery, and defiance. “Moira was our fantasy,” she explains. “We hugged her to us, she was with us in secret, a giggle; she was lava beneath the crust of daily life. In the light of Moira, the Aunts were less fearsome and more absurd. Their power had a flaw to it...The audacity was what we liked” (154). Though Moira’s initial effort to escape – faking illness – leads to her being severely beaten, Moira’s spirit is not crushed. Instead, she stages a second escape attempt, holding Aunt Elizabeth hostage and escaping. “Moira had power now,” Offred remembers, “she’d been set loose, she’d set herself loose. She was a loose woman” (154). Long afterward, Offred clings to this image of Moira as a symbol of the fact that individuals can escape, can still resist submission to Gilead and the homogenization of identity. On one occasion, examining an electric fan in her room, she muses that “If I were Moira, I’d know how to take it apart, reduce it to its cutting edges. I have no

screwdriver, but if I were Moira I could do it without a screwdriver. I'm not Moira" (197). Through statements like these, Offred reinforces her admiration for her friend, while simultaneously allaying herself of responsibility.

As such, Offred's discovery that Moira did not escape Gilead at all, but rather voluntarily became a sex worker at Jezebel's is devastating to her image of Moira and her hopes for resistance. As Marie Louise Davis notes, this is typical of the depiction of "Amazonian" women in patriarchal societies: "she is portrayed by Offred as a rebel, and as such must be controlled by the regime and forced into a heterosexual extreme of prostitution before being disappeared from society at Jezebel's, and finally, made invisible within the narrative" (76). Even though Offred is equally captive and dressed in lingerie when she encounters her, the sight of fiery, defiant Moira wearing a Playboy Bunny costume and living in a place that she cannot leave shocks her (281). Moira does provide Offred with crucial information about the world outside – including the fact that a resistance network known colloquially as the "Underground Femaleroad" exists (285). Despite the efforts of the resistance, however, Moira reveals she was captured, tortured, and then given a choice between picking up toxic waste in the Colonies or becoming a prostitute. "Well, shit," she says bluntly, "nobody but a nun would pick the Colonies. I mean, I'm not a martyr" (288). Moira goes on to explain that Jezebel's is a tolerable choice, allowing women three to four years of access to alcohol,

drugs, good food, and even face cream before being sent to “the boneyard” (288). For Offred, Moira’s cynical, resigned statement is not merely an unfortunate fate for her best friend; it represents a fallibility and defeat that Offred had hoped Moira could escape. “She is frightening me,” Offred thinks, “because what I hear in her voice is indifference, a lack of volition. Have they really done it to her then, taken away something – what? – that used to be so central to her? But how can I expect her to go on, with my idea of her courage, live it through, act it out, when I myself do not?” (289). Moira claims to be happy enough – she calls Jezebel’s “butch paradise” – and she maintains that she remains the same woman she always was (289). Stillman and Johnson agree with her, arguing that the crucial difference between Moira and Offred is that while they are both in captivity, Moira maintains her mocking sense of humor. “The last we ever see of Moira,” they write, “she is imprisoned, defeated but still defiant. Gilead is not within her” (288). This claim raises the question of what it means to Stillman and Johnson for Gilead to be within someone. If defiance can entail independent personality, humor, and mockery of the state, then there is a case to be made for Offred’s defiance throughout the novel. By Offred’s definition of resistance, however – the rescue by an outside network that she imagined – Moira failed as soon as she was captured. The truth is that, while Moira insists she is not a martyr, Offred wishes she was. After saying goodbye to Moira for the last time, she writes, “Here is what I’d like to tell. I’d like to tell a story about how Moira

escaped, for good this time. Or if I couldn't tell that, I'd like to say she blew up Jezebel's, with fifty Commanders inside it. I'd like her to end with something daring and spectacular, some outrage, something that would befit her" (289). As an individual perpetually looking to others for strength, guidance, and example, Offred has maintained Moira as a source of hope: while she has not yet found the courage to escape, she knows that she might be able to. "I don't want her to be like me," Offred admits. "Give in, go along, save her skin. That is what it comes down to. I want gallantry from her, swashbuckling, heroism, single-handed combat. Something I lack" (289). After leaving Jezebel's, Offred never fantasizes about Moira as a hero again, though she maintains a view of her as braver, morally superior. "Moira was right about me," she says bitterly upon the threat of torture. "I'll say anything they like, I'll incriminate anyone" (328). Later, in reference to her continued empathy for the Commander, she thinks, "Moira is right, I am a wimp" (338). Whether Offred is using her previous, heroic image of Moira or her friend's reality as a standard against which to measure herself is unclear, but unimportant. Even after Moira demonstrates that she is neither a martyr nor a hero, she has still proven that she has the capacity for heroic resistance – a capacity that Offred maintains she lacks.

Before turning towards my argument in Offred's favor, I must address her interactions with one other woman: Ofglen, the Handmaid she walks with to market. While Offred at first believes that Ofglen is a submissive, devout

true believer in Gilead, she eventually discovers that Ofglen is a member of the Mayday resistance. Ofglen's invitation to Offred to feed Mayday information about the Commander represents the most tangible call to action Offred receives, and her refusal is perhaps her most damnable choice in the novel. "You can join us,' she says. 'Us?' I say. There is an *us* then, there's a *we*" (194). Offred is initially overjoyed at the existence of the resistance she had hoped for, but despite the invitation she still sees them mainly in light of what they can offer her: news of her loved ones (195). Unlike the random acts of violence that women are Salvaged for, or the "Bomb in Gilead" she imagines Moira igniting, Mayday offers Offred the secretive, nonviolent tasks of spying on the Commander – and she brushes them off out of fear. For Offred, survival is more important than political action, especially abstract tasks where she cannot see a direct result of her transgressions. "Ofglen is giving up on me," she informs the reader shortly after she begins her affair with Nick. "She whispers less, talks more about the weather. I do not feel regret about this. I feel relief" (312). When Ofglen is exposed as a spy and hangs herself to avoid interrogation, Offred's first reaction is fear for her own safety, and then relief (330). Her view of the resistance is the same as it has been throughout the novel: something that can help her, not something that she has a responsibility to help.

Stillman and Johnson's objections aside, when we consider Offred's descriptions of heroism and her expectations for the resistance, it becomes

clear that she does not consider herself either. With this in mind, we are faced with two important questions: is the definition of feminism and heroism held by Stillman, Johnson, and Offred too limiting? And can Offred resist Gilead – whether or not she is part of an organized underground political movement – without her own recognition? In asking these questions I must be careful of committing the same error as Pieixoto and “coloniz[ing] Offred’s voice” through a refusal to grant her authority over her own text (Dodson 73). In her discussion of the highly emotional and textually fluid accounts of female medieval mystics, Amy Hollywood questions whether, by countering women authors’ claims about themselves, feminist critics undermine their “agency in ways inimical to the project of feminist historiography? Conversely, what – if anything – are we missing by moving too quickly to claims about agency, legitimation, and authorization, thereby bypassing what [the] text claims about its production?” (516-17). In other words, is it disrespectful to Offred to claim that her actions do constitute a distinct and valid form of resistance against Gilead when she maintains they do not?

On the other hand, because Offred is consciously creating a narrative of her experiences with the purpose of it eventually reaching an audience, it falls within the scope of W. K. Wimsatt Jr. and M. C. Beardsley’s concept of the Intentional Fallacy. In their discussion of poetic analysis, they argue: “The poem is not the critic’s own and not the author’s (it is detached from the

author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it). The poem belongs to the public” (470). If we accept this analysis, then Offred can serve as a heroic figure for readers and listeners regardless of her self-image, in much the same way that her predecessor’s exhortation of “Nolite te bastardes carborundorum” inspires her.

Furthermore, Nelson-Born argues that attributing resistance to Offred even when it does not fall within her own definition is not disrespectful at all, but rather reflects the plurality of every individual’s experience. “Because of the multiple factors that affect any discourse,” she writes, “I would argue that a ‘unified’ voice is not only a false construct but an impossibility. As soon as we give voice to our thoughts, ideas or emotions, we give voice to the power struggle to which language is always subjected” (3). In other words, Offred’s single explicit definition of resistance does not express all of the possibilities of resistance that we can find in her narrative. Because language is a site of power struggle, her statements are complex, shifting, and often contradictory, creating space for a resistance outside of that which she prescribes in the passages I have just examined.

I Tell, Therefore You Are

At this point, I revisit David Toole’s words regarding the Panopticon: “The more our stories are homogenized, the more our memory is programmed, the more our mind is evacuated, and the more we come to live in the clear uncluttered space of the Panopticon” (242). As I have

established, Gilead – with its renaming and labeling of women, erasure of literacy and history, and continual external and internal modes of surveillance – composes a patriarchal, panoptical apparatus of power. Against such an apparatus, overt and active forms of resistance such as the Underground Femaleroad or individual women’s attempts at sabotage and assassination are likely to fail; multiple betrayals of members of the resistance, the repeated recapture and torture of Moira, and the Salvaging executions of defiant Handmaids speaks to this reality. With this in mind, I would suggest that the inverse of Toole’s statement reveals an alternative course of action: the more diverse stories are told, the more memories are rehabilitated, the more independent thought is intentionally maintained, the less power a panopticon can have over those trapped within it. As Klarer notes, by making writing illegal for women, Gilead makes the keeping of records and the establishment of a shared history nearly impossible (141). Ironically, this prohibition intensifies the power of Offred’s narrative. Offred may refer to herself as a “wimp” (338), but in a society that attempts to establish a hegemonic state discourse, the very act of story-telling becomes not merely an accounting of events, but rather a subversive act of counter-discourse. In fact, by insisting upon telling her story, even when it is dangerous or emotionally traumatic, Offred resists Gilead in each of the three ways Toole suggests: by destabilizing official language and storytelling; by remembering not only what the world was like before Gilead was

established, but also witnessing to the horrific present so that future generations can remember as well; and by composing herself as a distinct and noncompliant entity through the telling of her tale.

The Handmaid's Tale can be confusing, even alienating, upon a first reading due to its avoidance of precise and exacting language and lack of linear structure. Offred's account alternates between recollections of everyday life in Gilead and memories of her past and the people she loves. The chapters outlining Offred's activities are named after Gilead-instituted activities and establishments: "Shopping," "Waiting Room," "Household," "Birth Day," "Soul Scrolls," "Jezebel's," and "Salvaging." By contrast, the chapters of memories all have the same title: "Night." This structure creates a rhythmic effect, one in which the reader is continually disoriented by shifts through time and memory, but simultaneously reassured by the return to Offred's room, where she will attempt to make sense and nonsense out of her thoughts and experiences. Here Offred becomes most contemplative, and most desperate, as she wrestles with her current predicament and reaches out to her loved ones in the past, the unseen reader, and God for meaning and reassurance. In addition to the untraditional structure of the novel's sections, the chapters themselves tend to shift abruptly throughout different stages in Offred's past, introducing characters and events without context or exposition, and alluding to policies and events the reader has no knowledge

of. Offred seems embarrassed by her lack of coherence, apologizing to the reader:

I wish this story were different...I wish it had more shape. I wish it were about love, or about sudden realizations important to one's life, or even about sunsets, birds, rainstorms, or snow. Maybe it is about those things, in a sense; but in the meantime there is so much else getting in the way, so much whispering, so much speculation about others, so much gossip that cannot be verified, so many unsaid words, so much creeping about and secrecy...I'm sorry there is so much pain in this story. I'm sorry it's in fragments. (307)

From a discourse perspective, we can read this fragmentation as an intentionally post-modern stylistic choice on the part of Margaret Atwood. French semiotician Julia Kristeva, distinguishes between the dominant discourse of a society and another, transgressive discourse that plies at the boundaries of the dominant system, writing, "The poetic word, polyvalent and multi-determined, adheres to a logic exceeding that of codified discourse and fully comes into being only in the margins of recognized culture" (65). In other words, as a voice on the margins of Gileadean society, Offred's dialogue invokes ambiguity in order to allow room for meanings outside of Gileadean discourse.

Offred's love of wordplay also strengthens this argument for undermining Gilead through language. As Valentine argues, "Language is a form of power, and to attack language is to attack the authority fused to it" (60). As I have noted, Gilead attempts to fix discourse through preventing multiple interpretations of Biblical discourse, prescribing the phrases used

during social interactions, and highly ceremonializing everyday life. On multiple occasions, Offred teases Gilead's seemingly coherent words apart into their multiple threads, exposing their absurdity and lack of substance. For her, this is not only a subversive act, but also one of survival: "I sit in the chair," she relates, "and think about the word *chair*. It can also mean the leader of a meeting. It can also mean the mode of execution. It is the first syllable in *charity*. It is the French word for flesh. None of these facts has any connection with the others. These are the kinds of litanies I use, to compose myself" (126). Offred's game no doubt stems in part from her memory of her husband Luke, who "liked knowing about such details. The derivations of words, curious usages" (12). It also forms a kind of mantra, or stabilizing chant for Offred to help her calm down and focus her attention within herself instead of without. Her choice of the word "litanies," as a trace of religious terminology, forms an illuminating contrast to the heartless and repetitive prayers at Soul Scrolls. While both are sites of repetitive phrases prayed to a likely unhearing God, Offred's are not state-prescribed and conforming, but instead represent a branching out and reversal of meanings. Similar to her repeated chanting of *nolite te bastardes carborundorum*, her polyvalent unraveling of simple words like "chair" connects her to her loved ones in the past as well as the other individuals throughout the nation who are quietly subverting Gilead's patriarchal and unified discourse.

Other moments of linguistic deconstruction enable Offred to simultaneously undermine Gilead while critiquing the discourse of the time before. In the Historical Notes, Pieixoto explains that Gileadean leaders named the Aunts after familiar products marketed to women so as to make them seem more comforting and familiar (354). In the same vein, the Aunts employ a number of clichés, slogans, and fragments of folk wisdom, often with new meanings – such as the rewriting of “penis envy” to “Pen Is Envy” – in an attempt to ease the reshaping of the Handmaids’ discourse (214-15). When Offred dismantles these phrases, then, she excavates meanings that have been buried since their original usage. In the novel’s opening paragraphs, she muses, “Waste not want not. I am not being wasted. Why do I want?” (3). Here, she plays with the alternative meanings of “want” – “to be lacking in” and “to desire” – in order to question societal assumptions about practicality and the objectification of individuals within systems of production. Shortly afterwards, she thinks about the Handmaids’ voluminous, modest dresses: “Some people call them *habits*,” she reflects, “a good word for them. Habits are hard to break” (28). In light of Aunt Lydia’s hysteric warnings against being seen and therefore penetrated, the cliché takes on a new meaning (33). By wearing modest and identical clothes, the Handmaids are shielded from sexually invasive, penetrating gazes, but they are also homogenized. Women dressed in government-prescribed habits are

more likely to acclimatize to government-prescribed habits; they are habituated to Gilead.

Upon completing the novel, however, the reader can see the fragmentation of Offred's language in a new light. As Pieixoto reveals, the text we have just read is a precise transcription of audio recordings spread across thirty unlabeled cassette tapes found in a former Underground Femaleroad station(345-6). "The tapes were arranged in no particular order, being loose at the bottom of the box; nor were they numbered," Pieixoto notes. "Thus it was up to Professor Wade and myself to arrange the blocks of speech in the order in which they appeared to go; but, as I have said elsewhere, all such arrangements are based on some guesswork and are to be regarded as approximate, pending further research" (347). Pieixoto's explanation further destabilizes the text. Seemingly intentional arrangements of memories are now called into question; as Stein argues, "Here again, the words of a woman are subjected to interpretation by a male authority figure, an academician, a master of language. Her desires – for love, for the freedom to choose – are interpreted through the prism of his desires – for status, for knowledge, for achievement" (273). Though Pieixoto claims painstaking attention to detail in his transcription of the text, we are left to wonder how his own expectations and academic agenda influenced his arrangement of the tapes and thus impacted the implied meaning of the narrative. On the other hand, Offred's fragmented, often stream-of-consciousness narration fits more easily into the

framework of oral storytelling. Klarer argues, “Only in a tradition based on literacy, in which the past is archived, is it possible to place the present in relation to the past. Because of the spatial and temporal fixation on the immediate in orality, historical thinking can be hard to develop” (133-34). Klarer’s claim shortsightedly overlooks the rich history of many orality-based cultures, but his claim holds true in Offred’s situation: one which removes the possibility of literacy while isolating her from community, an essential component of oral tradition. Within this context, passages such as Offred’s doctor visit where she slips seemingly unconsciously from the past to the present tense appear less as evidence that her account cannot be trusted, as Stein suggests, and more hallmarks of her particularly isolated oral form (274). As Caminero-Santangelo argues, “We do not discard a particular kind of discourse because it is a reconstruction. Rather, we recognize the constructed nature of reality, and use constructions and reconstructions as provisional systems of understanding while pointing attention to their provisional nature as a strategy for undermining the dangerous claims of any discourse to absolute truth” (12). The revelation that we have been reading a potentially jumbled transcript, not a carefully composed written text, does not compromise the subversive power of Offred’s tale. *The Handmaid’s Tale’s* resistance through language occurs not only in the way Offred tells her story, but in the stories she tells as well.

As multiple scholars have pointed out, Pieixoto comically misses the point by demanding that Offred's narrative be a dry collection of verifiable historical facts instead of a witness to her hopes, fears, and emotions. Pieixoto's Historical Notes are his apology for his failure to "fix meaning and to explain [Offred]": without the inclusion of names, dates, and concrete details, he believes that her testimony has limited value (Stein 274). I would argue, however, that Offred's recalling of her thoughts, hopes, and fears are valid specifically because of their focus on emotion and subjective experience; they form a "hidden transcript" that serves as a "commentary on the public transcript; they may variously confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcripts or dominant discourses both groups construct" (Hansot 56). In Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), she argues that patriarchal culture feminizes emotion and then frames it as being in binary opposition to masculine rationality. "The response to the dismissal of feminists as emotional," she writes, "should not then be to claim that feminism is rational rather than emotional. Such a claim would be misguided as it would accept the very opposition between emotions and rational thought that is crucial to the subordination of femininity as well as feminism" (170). Rather, Offred's emotions of horror, disgust, and grief with which she views Gilead are a reasonable response to its absurdity; conversely, she is able to deconstruct and skewer Gilead's oppressive treatment of herself and others because of her visceral reactions

to it. Within this context, which integrates emotion and reason as two expressions from the same source, Pieixoto's dismissal of Offred's testimony demonstrates his fundamental inability to listen to her feminist witness. As Ahmed explains, "the reading of feminism *as* a form of anger allows the dismissal of feminist claims, even when the anger is a reasonable response to social injustice. Rather than responding by claiming that feminism is not motivated by anger...we can think instead about anger as a speech act, which is addressed to somebody" (177). Offred's stifled existence and anguished memories cause Pieixoto's admonitions to reserve judgment on Gilead to ring false; they bear witness to the lived experience in Gilead that would be missed by attention only to politically significant figures and events (347).

Though Offred maintains at the beginning of the novel that she tries not to think too much, that "thinking can hurt your chances, and I intend to last," the content of her narrative demonstrates otherwise (8). The contents of Offred's stories reflect her litanies of wordplay writ large: endlessly looping in on themselves, looking for histories and origins, and searching for multiple interpretations of events. She reveals how essential memory is to her resistance against Gilead when she recalls the Aunts speaking fondly of how, in future generations of Handmaids, "they will accept their duties with willing hearts" (136). Though Aunt Lydia does not admit it, Offred knows the key to new Handmaids' complicity will be their lack of context. "They will have no memories, of any other way" (136). Offred's recounting of memories

of the time before serves alternatively to torment her and provide her with solace; at one point, when the stains of “old love” on her mattress remind her of her lovemaking with Luke, she speaks of having “attacks of the past, like a faintness, a wave sweeping over her head” (57). Elsewhere, she fantasizes about the arguments she and her husband used to have about menial household tasks. “What a luxury it would be,” she thinks. “Not that we did it much. These days I script whole fights in my head, and the reconciliations afterwards too” (230). While these memories – of Luke, of her pranks and outings in college with Moira, of her conversations with her mother – may seem innocuous, pedestrian, even, they serve to ground Offred in a unique past, to reinforce the identity that Gilead attempts to expunge. As part of her recollections of the past, Offred can repeat her real name to herself: the name that she reveals to the other Handmaids (4) and Nick as part of her sharing her heritage (310). Though Gilead attempts to make Offred’s life bare, flat, one-dimensional, her recalled pleasure and pain allow her richness that she cannot have otherwise.

On a less personal level, Offred’s musings also contain irremovable traces of the world before; she performs the role of a necromancer of sorts, summoning the spirits of the past to haunt the Gileadean panopticon. In the novel’s first lines, as she remembers sleeping in a former high school gymnasium, she describes how she can almost smell, “faintly like an afterimage,” the sweat and perfume of high school dances and games (3). The

gymnasium is a “palimpsest of unheard sound” – a document, erased and rewritten, on which the glimpses of the former writing can still be detected (3). This pattern continues throughout the book, as Offred identifies what buildings in Gilead used to be, often with ironic results: the Soul Scrolls temple, for example, was once a lingerie store, representing the freedom and frank sexuality of the former era that Gilead seeks to erase (193). She also remembers fragments of popular culture that have been obscured because their messages do not fit the hegemonic dictates of Gilead: love songs, for example – “*I feel so lonely, baby, I feel so lonely I could die*”⁶ – as well as the hymn “Amazing Grace,” with theological messages that contradict Gilead’s interpretation of the Bible. “Such songs are not sung any more in public,” she explains, “especially the ones that use words like *free*” (60). Though Gilead’s banning of these songs is partially effective, as Offred cannot remember the exact and complete words to the songs, the trace of their meaning still remains. These ghosts, or “palimpsest of unheard sound” are subtly reinforced by the physical existence of Offred’s entire narrative, which we learn is recorded over old musical tapes such as “Elvis Presley’s Golden Years,” and “Twisted Sister at Carnegie Hall” (347). Offred’s description of the past serves to highlight its disparity with the present in much the same way that her dictated narrative contrasts the medium upon which it is

⁶ Offred’s remembered lyrics are an approximation of “Heartbreak Hotel,” by Elvis Presley – a song that most likely appeared on her “Elvis Presley’s Golden Years” tape

recorded. Finally, as a narrator Offred makes a point of drawing out the ironies of how society evolved in unforeseen ways from the past to the present. Thinking of her mother's feminist ideals, she says bitterly, "You wanted a women's culture. Well, now there is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists. Be thankful for small mercies" (147). She also calls attention to how Serena Joy's televised calls for women to submit to their husbands and keep to the home were finally heeded, leaving the once-famous televangelist with nothing to do but knit and garden and watch her husband have sex with another woman. "She doesn't make speeches anymore," Offred muses. "She has become speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn't seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word" (50). Though Gilead has attempted to split the past and the present into two separate realms, silencing or reprogramming those who would call attention to the absurdities and shortcomings of the new order, Offred remains, learning from the mistakes of yesterday and today.

So far I have only discussed Offred's memories of the past; her recounting of events in the present, however, lends valuable insight to the nature of all memory and storytelling. As Offred emphasizes, "this is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction" (155). The scene where Offred says this as she remembers Moira's actions in the Red Center is itself also a reconstruction, narrated at an ambiguous point after the events of the novel. Though Offred does not always make clear what she has made up, or how

much she is filling in the gaps, she is quick to point out that she cannot report events with complete accuracy. Describing, for example, her liaisons with the Commander, she says that she would fantasize about seducing the Commander and then killing him in various ways. Then she admits, “In fact I don’t think about anything of the kind. I put it in only afterwards. Maybe I should have thought about that, at the time, but I didn’t. As I said, this is a reconstruction” (162). She also acknowledges the way that she embellishes the narrative in her recollection of different people, most notably the Commander, with whom she struggles not to sympathize (166). In a crucial memory of the past, Offred remembers watching an interview with the former mistress of a Nazi commander who supervised a death camp during the Holocaust. “He was not a monster, she said. People say he was a monster, but he was not one...How easy it is to invent a humanity, for anyone at all” (168). Here, Offred illuminates the way in which people adapt to extreme circumstances, telling the stories of what they wish to be true instead of facing discomfiting realities. As Caminero-Santangelo points out in her discussion of Offred’s reporting of Moira’s dialogue, however, by drawing attention to the artifice of her narrative, Offred actually become more believable, more trustworthy. “By calling explicit attention here,” she writes, “to a reconstructive process that has in fact been at work throughout the text, Offred minimizes the degree to which she has re-appropriated Moira’s voice”

(9). Instead of insisting, as Gilead does, that she professes the one infallible account of events, she leaves room for doubt, for a diversity of experience.

Offred makes this inescapably clear on two occasions when she gives the reader several options as to what may have happened. I have already discussed her fantasy of Luke joining the resistance and rescuing her; she imagines two other fates for him as well: death and prison. “I believe Luke is lying face down in a thicket...” she says. “I believe this. I also believe that Luke is sitting up, in a rectangle somewhere, grey cement, on a ledge or the edge of something, a bed or chair...I also believe that they didn’t catch him or catch up with him after all” (118-20). Offred acknowledges that not all of these things can be true, but she refuses to give up her belief in any of them because to do so would be to lose her ability to eventually deal with a revelation as to what happened to her husband. Later, in recounting her trysts with Nick, she takes a different tactic, telling the reader one version of events, and then backtracking and correcting it in favor of another. The first version of the story, as Madonne Miner notes (Bloom 36), is rife with romance novel tropes: Nick is “a man made of darkness,” and Offred speaks in breathless fragments of their dizzying physical connection (301). Then she admits: “I made that up. It didn’t happen that way. Here is what happened” (301). This next version of events construes more awkwardness, as well as a reliance on the artificial language of old romantic movies (302). After this account, however, Offred admits again, “It didn’t happen that way either. I’m

not sure how it happened; not exactly. All I can hope for is a reconstruction: the way love feels is always only approximate” (303). For readers, this inability to access an accurate account of events can be frustrating. In her insistence on telling multiple stories, however, Offred serves a powerful dual purpose: she counters the hegemonic practices of Gilead, and she sustains herself. As Hansot argues, “Offred’s stories, composed as they are out of present necessities, give her perspective, the illusion of depth, multi-dimensional possibilities in a present denuded of them. And, to the extent that *all* versions of her story are at variance with officially sanctioned Gileadean history, they are a potential seed bed of resistance” (61). Not only are these stories evidence of possibilities outside of Gilead’s script, however; as Offred admits, they are crucial to her individuality and survival.

Storytelling allows Offred to reclaim agency over who she is and define herself as more than simply a fertile body waiting for impregnation. In Gilead, Handmaids are defined exclusively by their bodies: “we are two-legged wombs, that’s all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices” (157). At first, Offred acquiesces to this definition of herself, speaking of “the expectations of others, which have become my own” (84). She speaks of feeling bare, insubstantial, blurred, as opposed to the solidity and wholeness she felt before: “I’m a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping” (84). Through the act of remembering, shaping her narrative, and

resolving to tell her story, however, Offred shifts the center of her selfhood from her womb to her imagination, resisting the definition of herself that Gilead attempts to enforce. “I wait,” she says. “I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born” (75). Here, Offred reinforces Judith Butler’s assertion that “language is not an *exterior medium or instrument* into which I pour a self and from which I glean a reflection of that self” (183). Rather, the self is always constituted in relation to language, and regulated by whether or not the subject can intelligibly invoke the standards set by a discursive system. In the face of Gilead’s expectations, Offred’s realization that her self is composed – and that she can compose it differently than as the “sacred vessel” prescribed for her – constitutes a form of agency.⁷

Though Offred imagines her self as something narrated and intentional, she finds it difficult to maintain in the face of the defining gaze of the Gilead panopticon. “I am trying not to tell stories,” she says in frustration, “or at any rate not this one” (55). Occasionally she seeks respite from her reality by telling the stories of others. “I’m too tired to go on with this story,” she says. “I’m too tired to think about where I am. Here is a different story, a better one. This is the story of what happened to Moira” (149). As I noted earlier, when Offred does find the resolve to tell the story of her life in Gilead

⁷ Unfortunately, a full application of Butler’s theory of agency is beyond the scope of this project. For a thorough discussion of the subject, see the chapter “From Parody to Politics” in Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, or Edwina Barvosa-Carter’s “Strange tempest: Agency, poststructuralism, and the shape of feminist politics to come.”

she does so apologetically, wishing for a story in which she appears braver or happier. “These days we are so well behaved,” she admits. “I don’t want to be telling this story” (314). Though Offred occasionally wavers, however, she continues telling the story. This perhaps, is the strongest rejoinder to critics’ accusations of Offred’s complicity and failure: Offred always continues to tell her story, even when it casts her in a negative light, even when she is close to despair. Consider a moment where Offred almost gives up:

I don’t want to be telling this story.
I don’t have to tell it. I don’t have to tell anything, to myself or to anyone else.
I could just sit here, peacefully. I could withdraw. It’s possible to go so far in, so far down and back, they could never get you out.
Nolite te bastardes carborundorum. Fat lot of good it did her.
Why fight?
That will never do. (260)

In the text, “why fight?” is followed by a hard return, then, alone, the phrase “that will never do.” If we accept that Pieixoto has transcribed the tapes accurately, then Offred is implied to pause here at the end of her list of doubts before affirming her resolution to go on. Offred does not tell her story to achieve peace of mind – she admits that descending into placid thoughtlessness or madness would be easier. Nor does she do it to save herself from despair, since the resolution to defy power did not prevent her predecessor from committing suicide.⁸ Rather, Offred continues out of an almost existentialist defiance, a collective mandate not to let the bastards

⁸ Though Offred does not explicitly mention this possibility, the fact that Ofglen hanged herself to avoid arrest and torture by the Eyes suggests that Offred’s predecessor may have been a member of Mayday, not someone who lost the will to live.

grind her down. She feels a responsibility to her predecessor, to the other Handmaids. “I feel her presence...” she muses near the end of the novel, “waiting to be found. By me this time. How could I have believed I was alone in here? There were always two of us. Get it over, she says. I’m tired of this melodrama, *I’m tired of keeping silent* [emphasis mine]. There’s no one you can protect, your life has value to no one. I want it finished” (337). While she reflected earlier that there is no word meaning “to behave like a sister,” Offred nevertheless claims the responsibility she has to tell sisters’ stories from the margins (12).

While Offred has fantasized about acts of violent subversion, she recognizes that such actions are not effective within an apparatus such as Gilead, where power is distributed across the regime and infiltrates every home. Santangelo explains:

Offred notes her own desire to steal a knife, but never actually engages in this form of resistance; there is a sense that even a stolen knife, ultimately, would belong in the same category as a stolen packet of sugar – infinitesimally small against the enormous and diffused power system. Resistance by the sword is not condemned by the text – it is merely seen as useless. (3)

In the face of the ineffectiveness of violent and independent action, then, Offred elects another form of resistance: that in which her very continued existence belies the power of the Gileadean regime. Though she once lived in the “blank white spaces,” in the “gaps between the stories” (63), Offred now chooses to write her story of defiance in society’s margin. In doing so, she

pollutes the “clean uncluttered space” of the panopticon, inscribing within it a counter-narrative composed while under its gaze. As Dodson concludes:

Working in this secret territory free from imperial order, Offred makes a ‘tiny peephole’ in the solid prison of a dominant history and ‘decenters the central image of...the [dominant power’s] eye. Through the Handmaid we learn that the person tale is a political one, that agency can be found, established, and liberated even in the buried structures of historical silence. (84)

Under the gaze of the Gileadean panopticon, Offred refuses to cower, but instead looks back, bearing witness and defying Gilead’s attempt at hegemony. The myth of Gilead, as of any fascist, totalitarian state, is total control over the past, present, and future. By remembering the world before, and creating an alternative record of the present to be found by someone in the future, Offred destroys that aim for total control. Not only does she do so; the Historical Notes reveal that other similar survivors’ records have been found (346). Though Offred has never participated in a coordinated political resistance effort, her tale, along with those of other survivors, still form a polyphonic sorority of resistance, each using their individual agency to subvert Gilead’s attempts at total hegemony and total control.

We are left, however, with one crucial question: who hears Offred’s story – and does that impact the efficacy of her resistance? In her explanation of why she is telling a story, Offred emphasizes the importance of a “listener”:

If it’s a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. You don’t tell a story only to yourself. There’s always someone else. Even when there is no one. A story is like a letter. *Dear You*, I’ll say. Just *you*, without a name. Attaching a name attaches you to the world of fact,

which is riskier, more hazardous: who knows what the chances are out there, of survival, yours? I will say *you, you*, like an old love song. *You* can mean more than one. *You* can mean thousands. (44)

Regardless of whether the mere existence of her story diminishes the effectiveness of Gilead's control, Offred is desperate for a listener. She is desperately lonely, craving sympathy, human touch; if she cannot be held in someone's arms, she at least wants someone to acknowledge what she has to say. She fantasizes about sharing simple aches and pains with the Marthas. "I hear where you're coming from," they would say (11). Faced with the knowledge that as she records her narrative, she has no guaranteed listener, Offred creates one:

I keep going on with this sad and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story, because after all I want you to hear it, as I will hear yours too, if I ever get the chance, if I meet you or if you escape, in the future or in Heaven or in prison or underground, some other place. What they have in common is that they're not here. By telling you anything at all I'm at least believing in you, I believe you're there, I believe you into being. Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are.
So I will go on. So I will myself to go on. (308)

Though she once ignored the stories of others' suffering, Offred now opens herself up to them. She riffs on Renée Descartes' famous dictum, "I think therefore I am": she tells the imagined listener into being, but in doing so she also finds the resolve to continue her existence, unyielding and distinct. Offred's statement not only skewers Descartes's insistence on "rationality" that Pieixoto will criticize her for lacking, but also gestures once more to the power of emotion and belief. As Ahmed explains: "Hope is crucial to the act of

protest: hope is what allows us to feel that what angers us is not inevitable, even if transformation can sometimes feel impossible. Indeed, anger without hope can lead to despair or a sense of tiredness produced by the ‘inevitability’ of the repetition of that which one is against” (184). This moment swells with hope, as Offred believes in a future where people will hear of her experience and listen: a life beyond Gilead.

That the novel ends on ambiguity regarding her escape or imprisonment, followed by the dry and unsympathetic “Historical Notes,” can be dispiriting. Almost 200 years after she tells her tale, the audience Offred dreamed of materializes, but they do not seem to listen or understand the meaning of what she works so hard to communicate. “Thus,” writes Libby Falk Jones, “the handmaid’s voice...has once again been dismissed by the patriarchal academy in favor of the depersonalized view from the top. This has certainly happened in the past...Atwood suggests that 200 years from now, despite all our efforts to break silences, to restore women their voices, it may still be happening” (10-11). Faced with the knowledge that Pieixoto and his fellow members of the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean studies are not the listeners that Offred longed for, *The Handmaid’s Tale* can appear an exercise in futility, a cynical statement on the cyclical nature of history and the inability of people to learn from the mistakes of the past.

We must remember, however, that Offred’s narrative also exists on a metafictional level: *The Handmaid’s Tale*, after all, is a novel, published in

1985 and subsequently studied by hundreds of critics and read by millions of people. The members of the Twelfth symposium on Gileadean studies are not the only ones to hear Offred speak; we do as well. With this in mind, David S. Hogsette asserts, responsibility ultimately falls upon readers as to how they will respond to Offred's narrative. "The epilogue," he writes, "enables Atwood to reinforce a proper reading of her novel, a reading that involves avoiding Pieixoto's blind scholarly reading pattern and extending beyond our subjective frames of reference, thus simultaneously becoming a member of Atwood's and Offred's respective audiences" (275). In "Sexual Surveillance and Medical Authority in Two Versions of *The Handmaid's Tale*," Cooper implicates the audience in the Gileadean panopticon's program of surveillance (57). If readers walk away from *The Handmaid's Tale* scoffing at Offred as weak, romantic, or ignorant, then they have committed the same error as Pieixoto, and perhaps even as the rulers of Gilead themselves. The individual thoughts and actions Offred has within Gilead, while important, are not all that defines her character and her effectiveness. The fact that her record exists at all speaks to her sustained resistance against power. Offred has done her part; the responsibility now falls upon the listener.

In his discussion of records of the Holocaust, David Clark interrogates the question of witnessing: who can bear witness to atrocities, what constitutes witness, and how do we respond to moments of witnessing? The very act of witnessing, he argues, is one always on the brink of catastrophe: it

acknowledges the fact that any situation can fall into catastrophe, and also appeals to the Other in an act of faith. “Nothing guarantees,” he writes, “that that appeal can or will be heard or understood, and yet no appeal could be made without also assuming the risk of its erasure as its very form...[B]earing witness carries the weight of this cataclysm within itself ...[I]t is the mortal horizon before which the testamentary entrusts itself and makes its claim” (167). Offred commits such an act of faith when she chooses to record her narrative and preserve it for an unknown future listener to hear. She bears witness to the suffering of women within Gilead, knowing that her survival as a distinct person depends on the existence of a recipient of her witness while simultaneously refusing to wait for that guarantee. Offred faces the possibility that her tale is “a non-restorative, non-redemptive testimony” – an accusation against the monstrosity of Gilead that will fall upon deaf ears (Guyer 22). Regardless of whether future generations heed Offred’s meaning, however, her testimony exists. In the face of the unflinching gaze of the panopticon, Offred gazes defiantly back, keeping a record of all she sees. The patriarchal regime that attempts to define her and rob her of her memories of the past and her ability to tell her story fails. Gilead is not within her.

Chapter Three: *Salt Fish Girl*

*You fit into me
like a hook into an eye*

*a fish hook
an open eye*

(*Selected Poems* 141)

Introduction

While *The Handmaid's Tale* is undeniably the most famous work of Canadian feminist science fiction, Canada has seen a bounty of innovative feminist science fiction in the wake of its publication. Departing from the more single-minded, second-wave feminist concerns of *The Handmaid's Tale*, authors explore feminist issues in an intersectional context, incorporating questions not only of gender but also of sexuality, race, and class into their speculative fictions. As an American-born Chinese-Canadian raised in Newfoundland and British Columbia, Larissa Lai is well-equipped to explore through fiction the liminal spaces and often fraught identities inherent in being a non-white Canadian feminist. Her second novel, *Salt Fish Girl*, addresses her intersectional and activist concerns head-on while also presenting a richly imagined multi-generational feminist dystopia.⁹ While the novel switches between the perspectives of two doubled women – an incarnation of the Chinese goddess Nu Wa in early 19th century Canton, and her double Miranda, a young woman living in corporate controlled 21st

⁹ For a full literature review of relevant critical study of *Salt Fish Girl*, see Appendix B

Vancouver – for the purposes of this project I will focus primarily on Miranda.¹⁰ Much like *The Handmaid's Tale's* Offred, Miranda lives in a dystopic near-future where an all-seeing totalitarian entity attempts to hegemonically control every aspect of its citizens lives. While Miranda's society is not as explicitly patriarchal as Gilead, it still features dangerous sexism, the regulation of women's reproduction by men, and the exploitation of women for, if I may be allowed the pun, labor. Miranda and Offred are both protagonists concerned with memory and storytelling: as a young woman, Miranda develops the so-called "Dreaming Disease," which gives her and other infected individuals memories of suffering, oppression, and death experienced by their ancestors. On a more personal level, Miranda becomes the bearer of her mother's likeness and her music. When her mother dies and wills her the manuscripts and rights to her famous cabaret songs, Miranda looks through them, hungry for the trace of her mother's life, noting that "there was a story in the papers" (91). Miranda, however, shares a third and less flattering similarity to Offred: her questionable response to power and the corresponding critical disapproval of passivity in the face of injustice. While Miranda often betrays her principles and becomes complicit in the corporations' exploitative regime, I will argue that – much like *The Handmaid's Tale's* Offred – she ultimately resists power both imaginatively

¹⁰ Of course, due to the novel's themes of reincarnation and the cyclical nature of history, Nu Wa and her actions will be unavoidable in my analysis.

and bodily through her cultural memory, assistance in the dissemination of rebellious discourse, and role in creation and rebirth.

Locating *Salt Fish Girl*

Salt Fish Girl fits Moylan's definition of dystopia as a product of the societal anxieties of the author's world (Booker 4). Much like Atwood and her folder of news clippings and historical documents providing precedent and legitimacy to the actions in the book, Lai argues that while *Salt Fish Girl* deals with concepts and movements already in existence, "it seemed that a futuristic idiom could handle it better. I think we're in the middle of massive changes at all levels of life...that we cannot possibly grasp from where we're standing. By extrapolating from things that are happening now and projecting into the future, we get a vantage point of sorts" ("Future" 172).

Salt Fish Girl was published in October of 2002, scarcely a year after 9/11, but Lai wrote the majority of the novel before the attacks. "Before 9/11," she writes, "it seemed to me that the massive corporatization of everything and anything would become the new hegemony and that the nation-state, while continuing to exist, would become so enfeebled...that it would more or less cease to matter. This is the world of *Salt Fish Girl*" ("Future" 169-170). After 9/11, however, she shifted her understanding of the power of nation, seeing it as motivating war and fundamentalism in a way that she believes capitalization and corporatization is less equipped to do (170). As such, *The Handmaid's Tale*, with its fierce loyalty to the state and

its employment of religious imagery to reinforce power, appears a more likely extension of the post-9/11 state despite being written almost two decades before. *Salt Fish Girl*, meanwhile, acknowledges a neo-liberal, mega-corporation environment that originates in the 1990s and carries forward post 9/11, but does not devote much attention to nation and religion's role in reinforcing the regime's power.

In the aforementioned article, Lai outlines the major news items that influenced her writing of the novel, including:

...the cloning of Dolly the sheep, the arrival of three rusty ships from China on the West Coast of British Columbia carrying around 600 Chinese migrant labourers, Monsanto's suing of a farmer whose canola crop, probably through natural pollination, had picked up some of Monsanto's altered DNA, the patenting of slightly modified basmati rice by a large Texas corporation, the construction of Celebration, a fully planned ur-American town, by Disney. ("Future" 171-2)

While I do not have time to contextualize each of these events in detail, they can be split into three general categories: racial politics, corporate control, and technological innovation. All three of these elements have a tremendous effect on the world Lai constructs: a world that is far more complicated, and often more fantastic, than Atwood's Gilead.

Atwood has, famously, protested that *The Handmaid's Tale* is speculative fiction, as opposed to science fiction, because it contains no innovations or technologies not already present in the world. Lai's novel allows no distinctions: it features then-futuristic technologies soon realized, such as the Kindle-like Interactive Electronic Books (24), as well as yet

unrealized human cloning, human-carp hybrids, and cyborgs (158). While the electronic devices are more significant within the text as symbols of the addictive and enslaving nature of corporations, it is worth noting that Lai's interest in virtual reality was well placed: virtual reality technology, which has been developing slowly and in a somewhat clunky fashion since the 1950s, became a marketable reality in 2012 with the announcement of the Oculus Rift virtual reality headset (Kumparak). Far more integral to the text's exploration of identity and the commodification of bodies is contemporary advances in genetics research and cloning. Lai alludes to Dolly the sheep, who became the first mammal successfully cloned from an adult somatic cell using the process of nuclear transfer in 1996 ("Dolly"). When Dolly was born, seeming to usher in the possibility of human clones on the horizon, public debate over cloning's ethics skyrocketed. Even so, at the time of Dolly's birth, Dr. Ian Wilmut, director of the project, described human cloning as both "repugnant" and illegal, and by 2008 both Dolly's creators and the public were losing interest in cloning as a productive or viable technology (Lehrman).

More enduring, however, is the less glamorous issue of genetic engineering to which Lai alludes. In the years following the writing and publication of *Salt Fish Girl*, genetically modified crops have increased 100-fold; in 2010, 10% of the world's arable land was planted with GMO crops. While general public opinion remains mixed on the effects of GMO crops,

conspiracy theories about government control and decreased biodiversity have led to protests, attacks on labs, and the destruction of crop trials (Kuntz 258-264). The intermixing of modified and wild species, or gene flow, has also continued: for example, a 2010 study showed that approximately 83% of wild canola tested contained genetically modified herbicide resistance genes (Black). The company Lai mentions, Monsanto, has also been very prominent in prosecuting apparent “seed pirates” over violation of intellectual property when its genetically modified plants are found growing in farmers’ fields (“Saved Seed”). As of 2011, 73% of the global seed market was controlled by just ten companies (“Who” 22). *Salt Fish Girl* hints at further dominance; a thinly veiled Monsanto successor, “Monsanta,” is mentioned among the major entities that control society (82).

The dominance of the seed industry by a few corporations is just one example of many that illustrates the effects of neoliberalism. As Henry Giroux explains, neoliberalism is an ideology that originated in the 1970s with Milton Bradley and the Chicago school of economists. Neoliberalism emphasizes “the selling off of public goods to private interests,” the prioritizing of self-interest over social needs and provisions, the use of the market as a model for structuring all social relations, and “the utterly reductionist notion that consumption is the only applicable form of citizenship” (with Nevradakis 449). While neoliberalism has recently come under intense scrutiny, with many scholars citing it as primarily responsible

for the global financial crisis of 2008, it still remains a dominant social force, as it was at the time of Lai's writing *Salt Fish Girl*. As Giroux suggests, neoliberal policies lead both to a dominant, homogenizing market force, and to mistreatment of workers and societal setbacks. According to a 2006 study by Dean Baker of the Center for Economic Policy Research, neoliberal policy choices including anti-inflationary bias, anti-unionism, and profiteering in the health industry have been the driving force behind rising inequality in the United States (18). The effects of neoliberalism are also felt in developing countries: as Joseph E. Stiglitz notes, foreign corporations are favored by international lenders over local businesses, giving international actors an unfair competitive advantage (53). Within the context of *Salt Fish Girl*, we see corporations' power and influence in the way that entities like Pallas, Saturna, and Nextcorp are more stable and reliable than former nation-states like the United States and Canada (81-82). Lai also explicitly draws attention to how corporate exploitation of workers evades feeble attempts at human rights protections. For example, Pallas is able to evade regulations against worker abuses by cloning workers called Sonias who are not, in fact, defined as humans due to their constitution consisting of 0.03% carp DNA; furthermore, these cloned workers are themselves illegal, while the companies' actions in cloning them are not (158). By creating a world where corporations supersede nation-states and use their power to exploit non-

white workers, Lai projects the potential outcome of today's neoliberal policies.

While the import of people of color to North America to be laborers in the production of human capital dates back to the Atlantic Slave Trade, the nineteenth century saw the beginning of mass migrations by Chinese workers to North America to aid in the project of westward expansion. During the Industrial Revolution – the late stage of which forms the background to Nu Wa's childhood – a paradoxical situation occurred in which Canadian citizens and the government did not want to see an influx of Asian immigrants, but Canadian industry required cheap unregulated labor. As Monika Kin Gagnon explains, with the contracting of the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1878, the British Columbia legislature voted no Chinese workers were to be employed on any provincial public works. Despite this ruling, over fifteen thousand Chinese immigrated to do the hazardous work of railroad construction. "By the completion of the railroad in 1884," she writes, "more than six hundred Chinese workers had died...equaling approximately four Asian lives for each mile of track" (5). Hee-Jung Serenity Joo writes:

The Asian laborer was perceived and constructed to be naturally better suited than the American body for the demands of industrial capitalism's new mode of production that relied on repetition and redundancy. Moreover, the Asian laborer was willing and able to do this work at a lower cost. The Asian laboring body signaled not only a new mode of production – industrial capitalism – but also the cultural changes it would bring about" (54).

Today, changes to requirements for immigration to Canada have created an underprivileged class of illegal Asian (im)migrants who work in unsafe conditions for low wages on temporary visas and then are refused permanent visas (Wong 1). These workers face a “binary construct of national borders that immobilize laboring bodies while allowing transnational capital to cross with excessive velocity” (5). In addition, East Asian countries are currently the largest producers and exporters in the world; in 2013, Asia accounted for 26.5% of global manufacturing output (Jiaxing). China alone is responsible for 20% of American imports every year (Simoes). In order to drive prices lower and produce goods more cheaply than they could in North America, North American companies often locate their manufacturing centers in Asia – particularly in China – where they can pay workers an average of one-fourth the equivalent U.S. minimum wage (Jiaxing).

A final important context to set for this examination of this novel is to note that *Salt Fish Girl* is usually categorized within the genre of Asian Canadian literature. With the passage of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act in 1988, the nation saw an effort to incorporate more texts by people of color into the Canadian literary canon. Peter Li argues that these texts, including now-classics such as Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* (1981) and Sky Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Café* (1990), served to reinforce a narrow, outsider’s definition of what constitutes Asian American or Canadian Literature (xi). A widespread

reputation of these texts for being overwrought and painful also developed, Kevin Chong claims, with young Asian Canadians dismissing them as “flashbacks to some ignominious event back in China, an arranged marriage or the Cultural revolution, and torturous cross-generational exchanges, in painfully rendered broken English, about being ‘torn between two worlds.’ Boo-hoo” (“Question” H3). Asian American literary critics Sheng-mei Ma and Sau-ling Wong, meanwhile, draw attention to ways in which Asian American writers deploy orientalist rhetoric; they “presuppose an acknowledgment and even internalization” of stereotypes, and in doing so risk legitimizing them (Ma 26). When writing *Salt Fish Girl*, Lai consciously inhabits this context. “I think of my first line of address,” she explains, “as other people like myself; my own generation of younger Asian Canadians, women, maybe lesbian, maybe feminist, maybe not, but those who feel like outsiders for whatever reason...what my project is about is making a narrative mythological landscape for people like myself so we have something to hang our hats on when we come into the world” (*in* Morris 22). At the same time, Lai reaches beyond her own identity and its expression to acknowledge her own place within the complex racial identity politics of Canadian literature. In writing *Salt Fish Girl*, as well as her previous novel *When Fox is a Thousand*, she notes, she worked towards a form of “positive chaos” as an alternative to misery. During the early 1990s, she explains, “the end result of too much critical awareness was to reproduce these dreadful hierarchies of oppression

in the most destructive sorts of ways. You get all these radical people of colour competing for the lowest, most unhappy place in the hierarchy. I can't imagine anything more miserable" (24). With *Salt Fish Girl*, then, she seeks to strike a balance – between individual identity and collective action, between marginalized community and global responsibility.

I Could Not Stop Thinking About Shoes

The main subject of my analysis, Miranda Ching, lives in a dystopian futuristic environment. Her first section of the novel opens with a suggestive descriptor: "Serendipity, a walled city on the west coast of North America, 2044." That Lai immediately establishes the city is walled is significant; the reader's first impression of the city is that it creates or requires a garrison mentality. Garrison mentality is a mindset that Northrop Frye identifies as particularly common in Canadian history and literature of the frontier featuring "Small and isolated communities," he explains, "surrounded with a physical or psychological 'frontier' ...confronted with a huge, unthinking, menacing and formidable physical setting (227). In garrison mentality, members of a society are always focused outward in fear, embracing their commonalities and building walls to separate them either literally or metaphorically from the Other. Critic D. G. Jones expands Frye's concept of garrison mentality from Canada to the entirety of the West, with Western settlers, colonialists, and leaders positioning themselves fearfully against the non-Western other (6). Furthermore, he argues that the frontier that

produces garrison mentality can be a metaphorical frontier – such as a frontier of economic development or scientific innovation.

The existence of defined and fortified borders in Serendipity implies that it is a city of binaries: a place with insiders and outsiders, all defined by those who control the city. In the story of her conception and birth, Miranda alludes to the Big Six: major corporations that have superseded nations in regulating society and controlling its citizens. Miranda's family has a "fortunate installation in Serendipity" by Saturna, a shadowy corporation whose duties include manufacturing gigantic fruit and collecting taxes (14). Those employed by the major corporations can enjoy safety and a measure of happiness within their regulated, walled cities if they conform to their standards and do not cause trouble or dissent. For the people of Miranda's society, this is a welcome alternative to the opposite side of the binary: the Unregulated Zone. Following a number of economic and natural disasters, Lai implies, much of what was likely the city of Vancouver lies half-submerged and in ruins. This area exists in near-anarchy, marked by rampant poverty and crime, without the comforting oversight of corporate control. Miranda's father, who remembers a time before the establishment of Serendipity but welcomes Saturna's protection, speaks fearfully of the Unregulated Zone. Describing a durian he picked illegally, he says, "I should never have brought you that evil fruit...only barbarians eat those kind of things. You know if it doesn't have a Saturna sticker, it isn't safe" (32). As Lai has previously

established, Miranda's mother explicitly links durian to her childhood and Chinese heritage, and even in childhood the smuggling and consuming of durian is illicit and transgressive (14). With this in mind, then, the Unregulated Zone becomes a space of otherness, unruliness, and the alien: a non-Western, threatening, and "barbarian" space that evades Saturna's approval.

The media of Saturna intensifies the Chings' internalized fears about the Unregulated Zone, both through print and visual media. They are more dubious of print media; Miranda's father acknowledges that the *Saturna Telegram* is propaganda, but suggests that "sometimes propaganda contains a grain of truth" – especially in its warnings about the Unregulated Zone (32). Miranda's mother's heritage is also intertwined with a fear of the Unregulated Zone. Recordings of her glamorous performances as a young woman at the beginnings of Serendipity include news broadcasts reminding people of their danger, serving to exacerbate the difference between the corporate-controlled cities and the world outside of them. The contrast could not be clearer: inside the garrison is beauty and happiness; outside is death.

In order to control their dependents, the Big Six exercise power through a three-fold combination of patriarchal panopticon-type surveillance, economic dominance, and hegemonic discourse. During Miranda's time in the city of Saturna, she lives in a space of homogenization and control that mirrors David Toole's "uncluttered clean space of the

Panopticon” (242). Unlike Gilead, the state does not remind its citizens of their subjugated position through shows of military force or explicit surveillance. Rather, ubiquitous advertising and technology combine to continually remind citizens of the expectations the Big Six have for them as both laborers and consumers. Billboards and media outlets proclaim the products and slogans of Pallas shoe company, both inside city walls and in the Unregulated Zone. When Miranda allows Pallas to use her mother’s music in their advertisements, her brother Aaron disgustedly remarks on how inescapable the messages are: “Mom’s face has been on every billboard in the Zone. Every time we turn on the radio ‘Clara Cruise’ is selling Pallas gear. It even comes on some of the pirate TV stations” (215). During her childhood, Miranda faces similarly pervasive advertising while she reads. In the midst of an interactive book about the Snow Princess, her reading is interrupted: “A woman ran down an abandoned road,” she remembers, “past broken shop windows and the bombed-out frames of houses. On her feet she wore a pair of blue and silver running shoes that shone with a dazzling light. ‘Bloody Pallas,’ I muttered” (35). Again, a corporation frames their product as the beautiful and safe alternative to a dark and broken world, while simultaneously intertwining their product with the appreciation of art.

Technology within the city of Saturna mainly exists for entertainment, though always with an undertone of menace. In order to read the Saturna-approved interactive books that her father claims are full of “socially

destructive stereotypes,” Miranda must use a technology known as “Spy Goggles” (34-35). The Spy Goggles immediately evoke the act of surveillance, as well as the relationship between oversight of the story and the ability to control its characters. The relationship between surveillance and technology is further strengthened when Miranda meets her friend Ian Chestnut’s parents and visits his house. Ian’s parents, he informs Miranda, were former corporate spies, and they both possess body modifications that reflect their work in surveillance and control. “Her eyes were both prosthetic,” Miranda notes of Mrs. Chestnut, “and had a terrible piercing intelligence to them” (64). Mr. Chestnut, meanwhile, has muscles that “rippled unnaturally,” suggesting artificially enhanced strength (64). The Chestnuts’ house is also filled with flashy, constantly changing screens and consoles that cover the ceilings, walls, and parts of the floors, and ostensibly serve only as decoration (64-65). In the face of the Chestnuts’ glamorous and technologically advanced house, Miranda finds herself temporarily ashamed of her own simple home and family, “in spite of my mother’s voice at the back of my mind reminding me of the importance of keeping old games, old stories and traditional values alive. Sometimes it was difficult to hang on to that, especially at moments like this when the glittering technologies of the new world beckoned” (65). In this moment, Miranda first articulates a tension that runs throughout the novel, between the homogenized and sanitized discourse of the Big Six and the earthy, unpolished heritage of her family and ancestors.

No element of the novel more literally embodies the surveillance state, however, than that of the Business Suit. As I previously noted, the Business Suit is a full-body virtual reality technology kept within the home that allows individuals to engage in simulations both for pleasure and for work. Ian Chestnut's Business Suits for entertainment purposes, called "Swimming Suits," are notably invisible, allowing the wearer to see without being seen, much like the central observer in the Panopticon. Miranda's father's business suit, meanwhile, is a mechanism of enslavement and hierarchy. As a Tax Collector, he moves through a virtual dystopian world – which is later revealed to mimic the Unregulated Zone – playing a game in which he collects numbers from bird-like flying creatures. While Miranda initially perceives Tax Collecting as glamorous and heroic, her fascination turns to horror when policemen suddenly appear, and proceed to handcuff and beat her father until they have extracted all of the taxes he has collected (28-29). Miranda's exposure to Saturna's abuses of her father serves as an explicit symbol of how the Big Six's power functions: they are always vigilant, and mistreat their citizens while turning them against each other. After Saturna fires him, Miranda's father acknowledges how the Business Suit functioned to entrap him: "He knew the secrets of the Bank. He knew about the Game of tax collecting, how the Receiver General and razor disc birds connected to the more banal accounting softwares. He understood the narrative mechanisms of the Game that kept workers like himself hooked, in

spite of real physical pain and suffering” (95). Through her father, Miranda comes to understand that Saturna’s power is as psychological as it is physical: the Business Suit turns individuals against each other, reminds them that they are always under the gaze and expectations of their corporate overlords, and removes the possibility of private space.

Salt Fish Girl’s relationship with the space of the home and its relationship to commerce and control are especially complex. I turn to Homi Bhabha to explore this blurring of boundaries, which Bhabha terms the unhomely:

In a feverish stillness, the intimate recesses of the domestic space become sites for history’s most intricate invasions. In that displacement, the border between home and world becomes confused; and uncannily the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is divided as it is disorienting (445).

During Miranda’s childhood, her family lives in a safe, comfortable middle-class suburb of Saturna where everyone is expected to conform to standards of propriety, interchangeability, and bland heterosexuality. Her family fails this expectation on two levels. First, from the time she is born, Miranda’s durian odor seeps throughout her house and infuses everything with its distinct, sometimes repulsive scent. Miranda reflects:

How could I have guessed that my birth was the spring of my parents’ love for one another? That foul odour of cat pee and pepper not only infused the external fabric of our house, it seeped into the skin of all my family members. It rushed up their nostrils and in through their ears. It poured down their throats when they opened their mouths to speak. (177)

As Paul Lai explains, “The durian literally becomes a forbidden fruit that is not subject to the regulations and controls of the governing corporations...the association of the durian with Miranda points to the power of corporate and scientific control over humans and the limits of that control” (179). When Miranda is a toddler, the durian scent represents her parents’ love, and is associated with their inattention to the gaze and expectations of the outside world. They allow their house and landscaping to go untended, until a neighbor finally confronts them and demands that they return their house to the standard of the neighborhood. Notably, it is not a company official or enforcer who pressures Miranda’s family to reduce their visible difference and meet the standards of the community. The gaze of the panopticon has been internalized, encouraging its inhabitants to regulate each other. When Miranda’s father agrees to fix his landscaping, Miranda writes, “My parents’ romance was over, but that doesn’t mean that the foul odor that emanated from my pores diminished in the least bit. What it meant was that my durian stink ceased to be a source of sensuality, and became instead an irritant of the worst sort, because it was always present” (21). With their gaze again turned outwards, Miranda’s family no longer appreciates their distinction and otherness. This change marks two further discomforts that enter the Chings’ life: the corporate invasion into privacy

that the Business Suit brings, and Miranda's alienation and suffering in elementary school.

When Miranda steals her father's Business Suit and flagrantly defies the authority of Saturna by returning taxes to the people, her father is fired from his job and her family is banished to the Unregulated Zone (80). Outside of the walls of Serenity, however, the reader discovers that the power of the Big Six continues. As I discussed previously, product advertising permeates the Unregulated Zone. Dr. Rudy Flowers, a doctor from the walled town of Painted Horse, operates his office and laboratory in the Unregulated Zone to capitalize on available land and minimal protections for his patients and subjects (97). Many of the residents of the Unregulated Zone also must sell their labor to corporations like Pallas and Saturna; the difference between them and residents of Serenity is merely the level of protection they receive in exchange for their work. Saturna, we discover, has factories in the Unregulated Zones, and Miranda describes the individuals who work there as "worker-prisoners" (93). These people, together with former residents of Saturna, are treated like waste products, useful only so far as they contribute to production. After massive layoffs, Miranda explains, "the missions were full, and people died in droves beneath the bridges and in the open-air rooms of half-collapsed buildings" (85). Wong argues, "The people dying in the streets are the logical outcome of the ongoing privatization of public spaces,

the corrosion of the social contract, the attrition of diverse communal affiliations” (7).

Furthermore, the threat of surveillance from a panopticon-like apparatus of power continues, both explicitly and as manifested in Miranda’s paranoia. Though corporate security forces do little to protect citizens from theft, rape, and murder, they still maintain a presence to quash resistance or damage of company interests. On one occasion, Miranda accidentally passes through a worker strike at Zodiac Industries and becomes a victim of a chemical weapon that burns her noses and eyes, interferes with her respiratory system, and gives her a brutal nose bleed (149). As Foucault explains when describing the function of the Panopticon, these occasional shows of force occur often enough to maintain control throughout the system. “It acts directly on individuals,” he writes; “it gives ‘power of mind over mind’” (206). By taking no care for bystanders and making punishment of protesters a public act, corporations force citizens to internalize the possibility of punishment and remain conscious of it as they go about their lives. We see this on another occasion. When Miranda and Evie steal Dr. Flowers’ car and joyride to the mountains, Miranda anxiously worries, “for all you know he was leaning out the window taking photographs” (167). Though Evie denies the possibility of such prevalent surveillance, she wears a mask whenever she moves in public, and encourages Miranda to do the same. The girls’ vigilance proves merited: when they pose serious trouble later in the

novel, Pallas security officers working with the police appear quickly and lock them up without warrant or explanation (245).

I have claimed that *Salt Fish Girl* contains not simply a panopticon, however, but a racialized patriarchal panopticon. The patriarchal aspect of the panopticon is subtle. While, in the alternating timeline set in China, Nu Wa and her lover Salt Fish Girl face arranged marriages, blatant homophobia, and assault, Miranda's society's sexism is more carefully concealed. Families within Serendipity are encouraged to conform to a *Stepford Wives*-esque traditional pattern, with working fathers and beautiful, domestic stay-at-home mothers. Miranda reflects this attitude when she attempts to justify selling her mother's song to Pallas: "It would put a bit of real glamour into the lives of the women who bought the shoes – bored suburban housewives for whom an evening aerobics class or morning run through the park was the only time of day they did something for themselves" (202). When Miranda briefly does contract work for an advertising firm, her compositions reflect a similarly sexist set of expectations. She writes a series of verses imagining a transgressive, high-powered executive confessing that her intelligence and ability do not provide her with fulfillment; instead, she motivates herself through the promise of heterosexual romantic love and the ability to use her sexual wiles to leave her partner "trembling." This advertisement, Miranda admits frankly, is "the slow undermining of women's self-worth through the glamour of passivity" (243). While women can achieve power within the Big

Six's system, society continually reminds them that their true value will always come from appearance, romantic titillation, and "the new helplessness for women" (242).

As is continually the case throughout *Salt Fish Girl*, the subtle oppressions found within the shiny world of the walled cities manifests much more harshly in the Unregulated Zone. While riding the bus, Miranda and Evie witness the novel's most prominent case of everyday patriarchal abuse: two boorish students harass a young woman, then follow her home as the bus driver enables them to do so by refusing to let the girls help. "You feminists were just trying to give those boys a hard time," the driver says dismissively (167). His actions make it clear: they live in a society where women must be ever vigilant while men behave threateningly with the knowledge that their actions will likely not have negative consequences.

The most explicit instance of patriarchal control within the novel, however, is kept entirely secret from the ordinary citizens of Lai's futuristic world. Shortly after Miranda meets Evie, Evie explains that factories are inhabited by an enslaved, entirely female work force of genetically modified clones (157). Beyond their economic exploitation, which clearly parallels the factory work that Salt Fish Girls did more than a hundred years before, the Pallas clones, or "Sonias," reveal several sinister realities about their creator, Dr. Flowers. First, the clones are technically not human. "My genes," Evie explains, "are point zero three per cent *Cyprinus carpio* – freshwater carp. I'm

a patented new fucking life form” (158). Because Evie is both a patented product and a hybrid creature, but not biologically human, she is stripped of any human rights she would be privy to as an ordinary worker. To exacerbate the abuse, cloning is not illegal, but being a clone is (157-8). This technicality mirrors not only the dehumanization of women and their treatment as disposable property in Nu Wa’s day, but also contemporary mistreatment of illegal – usually female – workers. As Wong notes, Asian migrant workers commonly work on the West coast of Canada using temporary work permits, and then are denied permanent worker status. Because they do not possess the status markers necessary to be granted permanent worker status, they are defined as “illegal” or alien, and thus are vulnerable to exploitation by manufacturers looking to maximize profits (7).

Crucially, the revelation about the Sonias also makes the racial dynamics of Miranda’s society inescapably clear. Miranda has been vaguely aware of her racial otherness up to this point, as represented not only by her durian stink and alienation at school, but also by the Caucasian heroes of the stories she consumes at home (34). When she and Evie joyride to the mountains, however, Evie challenges her to acknowledge the implications of her identity – both through their sharing of traditional Chinese food like *cha siuw bow* and *gai bow*, and through Evie’s explanation of the clones’ origins. “Some of the others talk about a woman called Ai,” Evie says, “a Chinese woman who married a Japanese man and was interned in the Rockies during

the Second World War” (160). While Evie acknowledges that there is no way of confirming whether or not this account of her ancestry is true, she acknowledges that it holds potent symbolic power (160). As Wong explains, linking the clones to the Canadian state’s history of containment and racism sheds light on the way the novel’s current system exploits racial otherness:

Policies that privilege employer interests at the expense of workers and that operate to implement these increasing income disparities rely in part on a process of racialization to devalue immigrant workers who, although physically within the borders of the nation, are nonetheless framed as the ‘other’ against which norms come to be constructed. (8)

By making the Sonias both clones and genetically modified post-human creatures, Lai fantastically exaggerates the effect that racializing the immigrant other has in contemporary manufacturing and commerce. Furthermore, Evie’s potential link to the interned Chinese woman combines with her narrative link to Salt Fish Girl and her work in the wind-up toy factory, further emphasizing the lineage of racist exploitation in play. As Joo explains, “There exists a long history of Asian Americans accused of being ‘machines,’ whether characterized as threatening, identical-looking hordes, or emotionless robots that are culturally inassimilable” (54).

The final manifestation of racist patriarchy that I wish to examine is the question of Dr. Flowers’ family. Near the end of the novel, Evie reveals that Dr. Flowers made most of his hybrid clones to work in the factories, but selected two to be his wife and daughter: the suicidal Dr. Seto, and Evie

herself. Flowers' artificial creation of his own made-to-order family highlights the interchangeability that he seems to expect from women as well as his inability to treat them as persons. "When the daughter turned out no good," Evie remarks bitterly, "he sent her to the factories and forgot about her" (252). When we combine this detail about Evie's origins with her earlier comparisons to Dr. Frankenstein and his Creature, they create a portrait of a man who treats women as customizable objects instead of persons and seizes the power of reproduction from them. As Latimer notes, Evie is turned on and abandoned by her maker/father and eventually confronts him, demanding to be recognized as his child and also questioning the very idea of what it means to be human (130).

I must pause, however, to note that – so far as there can ever be an all-seeing panopticon – the Big Six never completely achieve their goal of surveillance saturation and the corresponding control. Larissa Lai's world does not fit into the model of the Panopticon as neatly as Atwood's does: there is no central governing body, and no Eyes patrol the streets attempting to force Saturna "within" its citizens. Rather, at the center of the panopticon is a series of values: neoliberal productivity, consumption, and conformity. Because these values are reinforced by several corporations, disseminated through various corporation-sponsored institutions, and reflected back by the citizens of Lai's world, we can also understand power as functioning in an

apparatus. The Big Six create a series of hegemonies that overlap with each other, rather than “a unitary, fixed site of oppression.” Tara Lee explains:

Because these multiple hegemonies are in constant movement, they cannot be located by Serendipity’s residents who have been trained to think of power in terms of an oppressed versus oppressor relationship. Characters like Miranda are reduced to submitting to the local manifestations of this multinational power network, unable to imagine how they can resist the power grid. (95)

Because of the ubiquity of the Big Six’s messages, and the apparent comfort that they offer to their recipients, most characters in the novel find themselves complicit if not active in disseminating these ideas. Before moving on to discuss how they *are* resisted, however, I wish to touch on a few key examples of this “series of hegemonies.”

First, religion and its ties to heritage are limited to those individuals recognized as human by various corporations. While The Big Six purport to offer their citizens freedom of religion, Evie notes that religion is free “only [for] those defined as persons” (156). By regulating who can practice religion, the corporations define religion as a marker of acceptability, not an ideology that can be independently claimed by anyone if it brings them value or comfort. Furthermore, the novel reveals a division between Big Six-accepted Judeo-Christian religion and subversive practices of Eastern mysticism and reincarnation. Evie is banned from being a Catholic – presumably because Catholicism belongs to those in power – and Miranda associates the insertion of unwanted medical technology into her body as

being “as though it were a mouth opening to accept a communion wafer” (113). Conversely, in a show of her acceptance of her heritage and her durian smell, Miranda constructs a traditional shrine to her mother following her death. While she asserts, “I thought it was a load of bull,” she still brings durian slices to her mother’s shrine (94). “When I placed them in front of her photograph,” she says, “my mother’s paper smile seemed to deepen” (94). In the midst of tragedy, an act that resurrects cultural tradition and acknowledges her own distinctly “other” identity brings Miranda comfort and a connection to her past.

Ultimately, however, organized religion plays a minor role in Miranda’s world, with the market replacing the church as the center of society, and consumption standing in for piety. In its most explicitly consumerist gesture, the Big Six’s system of hegemonies fetishizes feet and shoes as the symbols of approval and purity often provided by religion. Used Pallas runners are so valuable as to be accepted as currency (165), and they serve as the coveted item of choice for suburbanites desperate for luxury (202). When Adrian Withers, a rep for one of Pallas’s marketing companies, buys Miranda’s mother’s cabaret songs, he succeeds in incorporating a previously unique and deviant cultural artifact into the dominant narrative of consumption and homogenization. Speaking of how this mechanism works on the level of literary canon, Lee argues, “the inclusion of Other texts into the CanLit body appropriates dissent before it becomes unruly as it encloses

dissonance within a multicultural national space” (14). Similarly, Pallas appropriates Miranda’s mother’s Asian Canadian identity and reminders of mortality and transforms them into an exoticized product that promises buyers immortality through consumption (203). The result of this incessant glamorization of shoes is Miranda’s temporary incorporation into the corporate sphere, where she actively works to appropriate her own art and imagination to sell more products. Even when she is not working, shoes haunt her. “I could not stop thinking about shoes,” she says. “Shoes worn by middle-class, middle-aged suburban women scared of growing old, uninterested in the world they live in...trying to make something they can call their own from what comes in cardboard boxes and plastic wrappers from the megastore strip mall” (226). Marx once called religion the “opiate of the masses,” but in her society, Miranda realizes, the opiate of the masses is shoes. “Shoes these days were like cologne, holding the mysterious promise of life eternal” (226). Shoes represent the dominant narrative enforced by Pallas and its fellow corporations: one in which superficial glamour and conforming consumption trumps individuality or loyalty.

The most powerful act of the Big Six’s hegemonies is in their ability to commodify intangible concepts such as time and history, determining who is allowed a past or a future. Dr. Flowers creates the Sonias as creatures without a knowable past: the absence of identity or heritage. As Larissa Lai explains in an interview, “for the racialized subject of this moment there is no

such thing as a pure language, pure culture, or an ultimate point of origin” (“Future”). While the Sonia’s ambiguity of origin allows them an unanticipated potential for creation, it also leaves them feeling lost and disinherited. As Joo explains, “Late capitalism absorbs this anxiety surrounding the mechanical Asian body by controlling its production and reproduction. Only females are created so that the clones will not be able to reproduce, and they are designed without history so that they remain docile and complacent” (54). These feelings of loss again mirror Nu Wa’s narrative, where Nu Wa loses her language after she is entangled in the City of Hope and becomes an undocumented worker (128). As Phung argues, whether it is the loss of language or the nonexistence of nameable ancestors, “loss sets these diasporic characters adrift, leaving them searching for a sense of cultural rootedness” (3). While *Salt Fish Girl* suggests that such a heritage can be assembled or imagined, Pallas offers two inferior alternatives: complete blankness and compliance, as suggested by Aaron’s clone wife Karen (217), or aspiration towards an idealized Anglocentric heritage. We see this in Miranda’s childhood love of *Forbidden Tales* comic books, with their broadly drawn racial caricatures. “They are socially destructive stereotypes,” Miranda’s father protests, while her mother defends them being “part of our collective unconscious” (34). Mrs. Ching’s defense attests to the effectiveness of the Big Six’s hegemony: rather than acknowledging that an Anglocentric

narrative has been normalized, she accepts it as an expression of universal experience.

When understood in its many interconnected and yet independently functioning parts, the corporate regime depicted in *Salt Fish Girl* is a formidable apparatus of power that fixes its citizens under a panoptical gaze, reinforces consumption and complicity through hegemony, and privileges whiteness and maleness. Perhaps most insidiously, unlike in *The Handmaid's Tale*, most characters in *Salt Fish Girl* do not recognize that they are enslaved. As Lee outlines, “Even as its façade is crumbling, individuals still hold onto the vestiges of a capitalist order to prop up that construction. Self-interest, one of the basic tenets of capitalist logic, leads individuals to contribute to the commodification of bodies even when they are conscious of what they are doing” (103). Because of this instinct for self-preservation, the call to revolution is constantly dulled. The impressive yet distributed power of the Big Six has another, unprecedented consequence, as Miranda and Evie realize through tragedy: traditional forms of resistance are futile.

Not at All the Heroic Figure

In my discussion of *The Handmaid's Tale*, I surveyed debates over whether or not Offred qualifies as a heroic figure. Larissa Lai allows her critics no such point of contention. In an interview with Robyn L. Morris, she outlines her vision for her characters:

LL: You'll notice that things fall apart because of the weakness of my characters: Miranda betrays her father, and Nu Wa can't be there for the Salt Fish Girl in the end. My work is not meant to present heroic figures.

RM: Do your characters' inadequacies, their foibles, make them more human?

LL: I think so – it does make them human, less than heroic. I don't want them to be heroes. I find that those stories of heroic women of colour have a false and irritating ring. They are not about us, how we move through the world, how we get scared, make mistakes or behave selfishly. (26)

Lai's discussion of the heroic suggests that she holds a particular definition of heroism, one that we could perhaps compare to Offred's definition in *The Handmaid's Tale*. By Lai's suggestion, heroes are defined by strength, as opposed to weakness, by competence, and by being super-human. Heroism is a state of being, not an action, and belies the reality of immigrant experience. With this in mind, the question arises as to whether resistance can exist separate from heroism. Does heroism imply a focus on individualism and a clear-cut oppressor-oppressed relationship that *Salt Fish Girl* lacks? Furthermore, do Miranda and Nu Wa's admitted complicity and weakness serve to contrast characters within the novel that they themselves would consider heroic?

Salt Fish Girl often appears to be a deeply pessimistic novel: a nihilistic treatise on the inability of individuals to affect the systems within which they are trapped. Within the Nu Wa portions of the novel, which for the most part extend beyond the reach of this project, we encounter a goddess-figure who is disempowered, easily swayed, and quickly betrays her lover in favor of

glamour and the enticements of capital. Miranda, meanwhile, is deeply complicit with the Big Six's power. Her major self-styled heroic action as a child of putting on her father's Business Suit and attempting to return taxes to the people does not result in any major liberation or change to the system. More damagingly, her father loses his job and pension, he faces the possibility of execution, and her entire family is exiled beyond the walls of Serendipity (80). Later on, faced with civil unrest and the possibility of corporate abuses of power, Miranda attempts to keep to herself, remaining unquestioning of potentially corrupt authority figures in order to maintain her position as a medical aide. As Lee explains, "Miranda willingly resubmits to corporate control because capitalist logic is so entrenched in her that she unwittingly replicates it" (103). Her impulse for self-preservation and the comfort of her family supersedes any political convictions. In a key exchange immediately preceding Evie's revelations about Pallas shoes, Evie tells Miranda, "You have to decide which side you're on, baby girl" (154). Miranda's response reveals how divided her allegiances are: she immediately replies, "I'm on my side. This job is my education. I need it," but then she follows Evie in hotwiring Flowers' car and joyriding into the mountains (154). Even at her most assertive, Miranda tends to quickly renege on her decisions, looking to others for guidance or to deflect from her own guilt.

At her most cowardly, Miranda works directly to strengthen corporate power. In a crucial point of "selling-out," Miranda attends Saturnalia – a pun

on the corporation Saturna that references the ancient Roman festival where society is turned upside down. Though she initially attends simply because the party is being held at her mother's old nightclub, her expectations for the night are soon reversed: she sells the rights to her mother's song – which she had promised not to do – to be used in Pallas's advertising. Furthermore, she refuses to accept her complicity in the suffering of Evie and her sisters. "What the hell, I thought. I didn't personally do anything to those factory women, did I?...My imprisonment, I thought, was a kind of martyrdom" (203).

Miranda frames herself as someone innocently slain for her beliefs, blameless at worst and heroic at best, instead of someone who has betrayed everyone she loves for financial gain. Miranda does experience a brief trial, locked in an underwater box by Dr. Flowers in an attempt to awake her Dreaming Disease, and when she escapes, the money she received from Wither symbolically floats away (212). Miranda does not, however, choose to treat this ordeal as a turning point: when she discovers after emerging from the box that she is now covered in scales, representing Nu Wa-as-fish and her undeniable otherness, she angrily scrapes every scale off of her body (213). That Miranda seeks work in advertising for Pallas shortly after, transforming her painting of mermaids into images designed to sell shoes, confirms her symbolic choice to continue to conform.

While Miranda is quick to admit that she is timid, complicit, and self-centered, she looks to Evie for inspiration and the moral high ground in a

way that Nu Wa never does with Salt Fish Girl. Despite the instant recognition and psychic link she experiences with Evie upon encountering her at the clinic, Miranda's ideological expectations for Evie are unique to their timeline. The second time Miranda encounters Evie is when the strange girl swoops to her rescue at a protest, removing her from the proximity of a chemical weapon and cleaning her up (149-150). While their initial encounters are blunt, even antagonistic in nature, Miranda is intrigued both by the inescapable sense of Evie's familiarity as well as the other girl's apparent fearlessness. Evie sweeps the often-passive Miranda into her subversive world, forces her to confront the harsh underbelly of the Big Six's society, and eventually enlists her to aid in the Sonias' sabotage.

As the closest thing *Salt Fish Girl* has to what Lai might call a traditionally "heroic" character, Evie exhibits an intersection of individual and communal action. Despite how exotic and "alien" Evie may seem to Miranda initially, she soon learns that Evie is a clone, and that she has thousands of "sisters" – Sonias who have escaped and live together, as well as those who are still imprisoned. This fact forces Miranda to reconsider what she believes about identity, personality, and the individual's responsibility and capacity for resistance. She narrates:

Somehow I didn't believe that there could really be thousands, or even hundreds of thousands of women in the world who looked just like her, who were locked up in grey compounds like the one I used to cycle by every day on my way to Flowers' office. I couldn't make sense of Evie's unlimited capacity for resistance and rebellion in the face of

this Karen's docility. I wondered what the other clones were like, if they were as different from one another as Karen was from Evie. (216)

As Sharlee Reimer explains, the fact that Evie's genetic material is identical to thousands of other clones' DNA forces Miranda to confront whether her accepted definition of humanity is sustainable. "Evie," she writes, "embraces monstrosity and demonstrates the slippage between the two orders of being" – that is, unique humanity and interchangeable non-humanity (10). For the purposes of this project, however, I am more interested in Miranda's reference to Evie's "unlimited capacity for resistance and rebellion." By drawing attention to the difference between the women's actions despite their identical origins, Miranda implies that resistance – and perhaps, by extension, heroism – is something intentional and subjective. Earlier in the novel, Evie tells Miranda that she must decide which side she is on, implying that resistance is a choice that every individual can and must make, regardless of circumstance. This assertion of agency and responsibility is complicated, however, by the novel's motifs of reincarnation and its emphasis on chance. When Evie addresses how she seems to be more intelligent and independent than other workers with the same DNA, she says, "I got out the same way I got that car. Because I wanted to. We're not designed for wits or willpower, but I was an early model. They couldn't control for everything. Maybe the fish was the unstable factor" (158-9). Evie's statement paradoxically looks to both personal agency and biological

determinism to explain her resistance. She attributes her distinct acts of rebellion, such as breaking out of the factory or stealing the car, to her agency. On the other hand, she implies that her most embodied rebellion – her flouting of the genetic designers’ attempts to “control for everything” – is the result of a random and unforeseen mutation. As Lai admits in an interview:

In many ways, *Salt Fish Girl* is a much darker book. I’m thinking a lot more in terms of systems and a lot less in terms of individual capability, individual power. Nu Wa and Miranda are both implicated in systems they cannot control. The future is more violent than the past. Hope lies in the random – the idea that even out of the worst situations, sometimes mutations occur in a liberatory direction...It’s not about having learned anything, consciously or subconsciously. It’s about a bit of will and a bit of luck. (Morris 25)

Lai recognizes that her statement is a dark, almost nihilistic one. She suggests that characters can learn nothing, hope for little, and make no individual choice about their reaction to their situation or their complicity versus resistance of the regime. Resistance is a matter of probability; all characters can hope for, seemingly, is to move towards liberation through the luck of the draw. While Lai does not elaborate on this outlook’s negative inversion, it begs the question of how complicity and blame can be assigned if individual actions are mostly determined by random mutation and luck. Once again, Butler’s concept of queer agency proves useful. If we accept her premise that identity is an effect produced by discourse instead of a static reality with an established, preexistent foundation, then Evie and Miranda’s seeming

predestination becomes less limiting. Butler writes: “Paradoxically, the reconceptualization of identity as an *effect*...opens up possibilities of “agency” ...For an identity to be an effect means that it is neither fatally determined nor fully artificial and arbitrary” (187). If identity is continually performed because of and in response to changing events, then the events of Evie and Miranda’s past alone cannot determine their future.

While a nuanced understanding of reincarnation’s role within *Salt Fish Girl* goes beyond the bounds of this project, I cannot fully neglect its implications for assessing Miranda and Evie’s action or inaction. In her early nineteenth-century incarnation, Nu Wa fails entirely at her goals – she abandons Salt Fish Girl, falls willingly into Edwina’s clutches, and gives up her language. As the implied reincarnation of Nu Wa, then, we must question how much agency Miranda has as an individual as she partially mirrors Nu Wa’s betrayal of her lover, seduction by the wealth of white individuals in positions of power, and giving up of her ancestral language (in this case, her mother’s music). When applied to Evie, these questions of agency become even murkier. Miranda feels herself inextricably drawn to Evie because of the connection between their past selves: “It felt,” she narrates, “as though something inside me was stretching, had always stretched to that moment of recognition, in the past, a stretching without knowing, a longing without certainty of the object...I felt a terrible hunger inside, a hunger without name” (106). That Evie and Miranda are drawn together by their shared past

suggests that the past may have other, unstated influences over Evie extending beyond her control.

Finally, Miranda's musings about Evie and her "hundreds of thousands of women in the world who looked just like her" raise the question of the power of the individual versus the group in resistance. Miranda and Evie both frame Evie as a vigilante figure, uniquely destined to lead a revolution. At the same time, the community of Sonias she lives within belies her reliance on community and the power of individuals working together towards a common goal. When Evie tells Miranda about her escape from the Pallas factory, she says that she did not feel merely "free," but also "Alone. It wasn't easy to leave, you know, when you are used to being surrounded all the time by your sisters" (159). Later, when Miranda meets Evie's family for the first time, she is struck by the diversity of languages and the patchwork quality of their home despite the fact that all the family members are technically genetically the same (222). As Phung explains, the women "employ the narrative strategy of nostalgia, reinserting themselves into the familial spaces that have disowned them" (12). Together, they are able to forge a strong and comforting homespace outside of the expectations of the corporate state.

Despite all of my parsing of individuality/collective action and determinism/free will, I have thus far neglected the most important fact of Evie and the Sonias' resistance: it does not succeed. The workers' altered

shoe soles are confiscated, their house is sacked and their durian tree cut down, and all but one of the Sonias is murdered and buried in a field. “Without a legal existence to begin with,” Miranda says, “they could not be reported missing” (250). The Sonias’ acts of resistance through discourse and creation, which I will discuss further at length in the next section, are ultimately unsuccessful. The section title in the chapter discussing the devastation of Evies’ friends is cleverly titled “The Sonias’ Soles,” punning both on the altered shoe parts proclaiming their humanity that they attempt to distribute, as well as their existence as “souls,” with the attendant rights as humans and persons. Earlier in the novel, Evie protests that she wishes she could be a Catholic but she cannot be because her society does not recognize her personhood; the destruction of the Sonias’ attempts at resistance suggests that they cannot save their own soles/souls. Lee argues that the Sonias’ failure – and the larger failure of the factory workers’ protests – lies not in their politics or their methods, but rather in their understanding of the system that they are resisting. “The Sonias fail in their endeavor,” she writes, “not because resistance is always doomed, but because they resort to old tactics of resistance that existed when power functioned in a much more unified and coherent manner” (107). When power is distributed throughout many corporations and institutions, as it is within worldwide neoliberalism, attacking one factory or opposing one policy will never succeed in

dismantling power. When the unblinking gaze of the panopticon seemingly comes from all sides, it becomes nearly impossible to know where to blind it.

Part of Our Collective Unconscious

Salt Fish Girl is consumed by questions about stories: questions of official narratives and counter-narratives, origin stories and imaginings of the future, and fragmentations and mutations of history, memory, and myth. As Joo writes, “As much as *Salt Fish Girl* is about myth, nature, and science, it is also about the writing of mythology, naturalism, and science fiction as well. It is, in this literary sense, a novel of creation” (57). *Salt Fish Girl*’s concern with narrative is not a mere artistic conceit, or a postmodern experiment in textuality and the structure of the novel. Rather, narrative is central to the novel’s arguments about epistemology, identity, and agency.

Salt Fish Girl concerns individuals who exist in a state of diaspora. They are perpetual nomads, distanced from a past that is often permanently lost, while simultaneously kept outside the comfort and acceptance of mainstream society. The fragmentation of diasporic people mirrors the distributed power of the Big Six’s corporate apparatus; both are not organized around a center of action or a singly voiced narrative. While, in the case of the Big Six, this fragmentation widens the extent of their influence, for people in diaspora fragmentation is the result of an unshakeable sense of loss and being lost. This experience of diaspora, Phung argues, “entails an ongoing process of discovering and mending an always tenuous relationship to the

past, past histories that subsequent generations inherit, directly or indirectly, from previous generations, past origins that the postgeneration may repress for most of their lives” (2). Within *Salt Fish Girl*, this process of relating to the past often features intertextuality and remixing of prominent cultural artifacts.

As a text that exists within a post-colonial, global society, and features multiple stories across different times, it should come as no surprise that *Salt Fish Girl* relies heavily upon intertext to relay meaning. In much the same way that the novel’s diasporic characters inhabit the space where Eastern and Western commerce and worldviews intersect, the protagonists also reference and remix stories inhabiting that liminal space. By rewriting popular stories, both Lai and her characters expose uncomfortable realities about the stories that are, to quote Miranda’s mother, “part of our collective unconscious” (34). As Cheung explains, since immigrants’ cultural “shortage of material originates from a diasporan disconnection from history, resulting in the lack of a formative foundation on which to write and create, rewriting reclaims historical and literary materials that engender further creativity” (1). While there are numerous examples of meaningful intertextual references within the novel, I would like to focus on three of them: the Biblical creation account, Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Little Mermaid*, and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.

Salt Fish Girl opens with Chinese goddess Nu Wa narrating her origins and the creation of humanity. “In the beginning, there was just me,” she says (1), riffing on the opening line from the Biblical creation account: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1 NIV). Instead of the God of the Bible who creates in full wisdom and sovereignty according to a plan, Nu Wa creates impulsively, out of playfulness and boredom. She makes her first creation, grows resentful of it, and begins again, adapting to her creation’s sexual urges, inventing heterosexual reproduction as an afterthought (5). In a moment of blatant misandrist humor, Nu Wa mentions that she “made the strong ones into women and the weak ones into men” (5), defying conservative Christian teachings that advocate a patriarchal hierarchy originating in the Genesis account. After Nu Wa’s creation, references to Genesis and Eden become more scattered and muddled, reinterpreting meanings and rearranging cause and effect. Nu Wa becomes human, not in a Christ-like gesture of redemption and sacrifice, but out of playful curiosity (7-9). Centuries later, Miranda’s parents take durian fruit from the forbidden Unregulated Zone, eat it, make love, and conceive Miranda long after it should have been biologically possible (14-15). The scene deliberately plays with Biblical narrative, combining the “immaculate” conception of Miranda, the (re)incarnated goddess, with the eating of forbidden fruit and the fall from grace that led to Adam and Eve’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden (15). The first incarnation of the goddess, then,

happens long before the Fall, and Nu Wa's becoming-human leads her not to the salvation of her people but rather to betrayal, murder, and loss of heritage. "Nu Wa's story," Latimer writes, "offers an alternative to the Christian myth of the Fall and its reliance on pure origins by making creator into the created, past generations into future ones, thereby reminding us that all of our tails, figuratively speaking, are already split" (125). To further complicate the references to Genesis, we encounter Evie, a woman made from and by men much like the Bible's Eve was made from Adam's rib, who grows forbidden, mutated fruit in order to cease the power of creation for herself. Evie and her sisters, writes Villegas-López, "represent the figure of Eve on the run, dispossessed of a place they can call their own, abandoned by the father figure and embracing the maternal" (39). In the community they build together in the ruins of the Unregulated Zone, they hope for redemption, not from a past act of atonement by a heavenly Father, but rather in their own potential for creation and birth. "Lai," Villegas-López writes, "deconstructs Genesis by conceiving a renewed version of beginnings in which the outlaw community of the Sonias has created a Garden of Eden in their backyard" (35). By removing the masculinity and infallibility of the Judeo-Christian God and placing the powers of redemption and creation within the hands of those considered monstrous by society, Lai suggests that Miranda, Evie, and the other outcasts can imagine a future that is not

constrained by The Big Six's cultural prescriptions and their accompanying version of Christianity.

Nu Wa and Miranda not only function as goddess/Christ figures, however; they also reference the titular character in Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*. At the beginning of the novel, Nu Wa looks up into the human world that she has created and longs to be a part of it. Much like the mermaid in Andersen's story, she sees a human man and wishes to become human, undergoing intense pain and bifurcation in order to do so. By emphasizing the physical agony that Nu Wa experiences as her "vertebrae cracked in two and the strands of the spinal cord were wrenched apart" (8), Joo argues that "the novel's attention to bodily pain emphasizes the materiality of historical change, including the consequences for changing the stories we tell about the past" (50). These consequences become apparent in Miranda's timeline, when following her mother's death she begins drawing "pictures of a woman with my mother's face," first with the body of fish, then of a mermaid (186). Miranda explicitly connects these drawings to Andersen's fairy tale; a fact that becomes thematically pertinent when an advertising agency hires her to redraw the images so that the Little Mermaid wants feet so that she can wear Pallas running shoes. "I stayed up through the night reworking the drawings," Miranda says, "re-engaging the Little Mermaid, the agony of her tail's splitting, the pain of giving up one's innocence...Shoes replaced the handsome prince as objects of desire" (236).

Miranda is correct in recognizing the cheap parody of the images; where Andersen's mermaid and Nu Wa alike sought feet out of curiosity and the pursuit of emotional connection, Miranda's mermaid seeks only crass consumerism. At the same time, Miranda replicates the original story: much like Anderson's mermaid gave up her voice, she is exploiting the mermaid with her mother's face just as she earlier sold songs sung by her mother. The difference in Lai and Miranda's rewriting of *The Little Mermaid* demonstrates how rewriting and intertexts can function either as forms of resistance, or as forces of assimilation, depending on context.

The third major intertext in *Salt Fish Girl* is self-identified: when describing her escape from the Pallas factory, Evie says, "I crossed a glacier to throw them off the scent. Just like Frankenstein, you ever read that one?" (159). As Sharlee Reimer points out, Evie makes a common cultural mistake: in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Frankenstein is the creator, and it is his Creature who crosses the glacier (10). Significantly, while resembling the Creature in her monstrous origins, Evie also imagines herself as a creator. Reimer writes, "Evie's messy origins mean that she can never fit comfortably into discrete categories, and it is Evie who renames herself, thereby rejecting the discourse that has been imposed upon her – literally, the name her father has given her – and rewrites her place in it" (11). In a way, the Frankenstein comparison also applies to Miranda and Lai's projects as well. As second- and third-generation Asian immigrants faced with composing identity from

disparate parts, many of them suspect or untraceable, they struggle to find a comfortable place to inhabit in a society that rejects them and their narratives as inherently repulsive and monstrous. Despite *Salt Fish Girl's* thematic similarities to *Frankenstein*, however, with their stories of monstrous creation, the search for knowledge and identity, and the relationship between technology and humanity, Evie faces a more optimistic future than Shelley's Creature. Tortured by his alienation and loneliness, the Creature begs Dr. Frankenstein for a mate and is denied. Evie and Miranda's love story, Latimer argues, "provides a counter-narrative to the original monster's story of isolation and pain, as Miranda and Evie find not only comfort in each other but also a way to reproduce on their own without the assistance of a doctor or a scientist, by discovering the reproductive abilities of a genetically modified durian tree" (130). Where *Frankenstein* concludes that the Creature, alienated and without heritage or community, cannot have a future, *Salt Fish Girl* suggests that individuals can choose to create a future without necessitating an established and traditional past.

The Sonias and the poorer residents of the Unregulated Zone combine this impulse to reimagine and create with the practice of remixing or rewriting dominant narratives to subvert the Big Six's power. Recall James Scott's concept of how, within hegemony, there exists the official state-mandated "public transcript," as well as the "hidden transcript that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant" (xii).

Though Miranda sells her mother's music – and with it her heritage – to Pallas, society's impoverished outcasts use the Pallas billboards and their positions of visibility and power to communicate messages of survival:

On the side of a concrete building some ten blocks from my parents' shop, beneath a billboard of my mother's look-alike dressed in an old fashioned Chinese suit with cloth buttons up the side and a pair of Pallas runners, someone had graffitied step-by-step instructions on how to seal one's feet inside plastic bags effectively, so that no leaking would occur. (231)

In this case, the "hidden transcript" exists out in the open, but as a counter-narrative to the official capitalist message. Miranda cruelly exploits this evident vulnerability in what she calls "my great crime" (243). Thinking of the impoverished and barefoot sufferers of the dreaming disease, with eyes "swimming with grief and history," she suggests that Pallas advertise their running shoes as protection against the dreaming disease. "Memory-proof soles," she says. "I think they would sell really well. And there's this great wall that we could include as part of the ad campaign" (244). As they previously did with Miranda's mother's songs, Pallas is able to assimilate the hidden transcript and make it part of the public transcript, preying on vulnerable outcasts and promising them a protection that it will not provide. Before, Miranda's betrayal resulted in wealthy women being promised immortality in the face of the tedium and inevitability of aging and eventual death. Outside of the cities, the deception and predatory nature of her

complicity in Pallas's actions becomes clearer, as they falsely promise not lofty immortality, but mere survival.

Miranda's suggestion of "memory-proof soles" becomes deeply ironic in light of the subversive rubber soles printed with condemning facts and slogans that the Sonias secretly distribute throughout the Unregulated Zone. Continuing the book's punning on souls and soles, Pallas's strategy of endless dissatisfaction, consumption, and the denial of mortality encourages people to live in an eternal present. An embrace of Pallas' products requires consumers to be "memory-proof," people who do not acknowledge the sordid history of exploitation linked to late capitalism, nor recognize the clones denied both souls and heritage that create the shoes themselves. In a literal example of a hidden transcript, the Sonias' altered shoes compel consumers and readers to acknowledge the shoes' history. They leave footprints in the mud bearing counter-narrative slogans: "*What does it mean to be human? How old is history? The shoemakers have no elves. One set of footprints was just a price list: materials: 10 units; labour: 3 units; retail price: 169 units; profit: 156 units; Do you care?*" The messages compel readers to contemplate the implications of their purchasing decisions, and to consider the human cost of their actions. They also bring together questions of history-making and humanness – a combination central to understanding the potential of successful resistance within the novel.

The Language of the Third Testament

In their allusions to fairy-tale intertexts and their questions about history, the Sonias raise issues about the unavoidable influence that the past – especially instances of trauma and oppression – has on people in diaspora. Lai's clearest symbol of this influence is the mysterious "Dreaming Disease," which blurs lines between science fiction and magical realism as well as between memory and embodiment. While *The Handmaid's Tale's* Offred resists by defining herself through mind instead of through body, *Salt Fish Girl's* characters inhabit a reality where mind and body cannot be separated. Miranda's friend Ian first hints at this connection when he says mysteriously that "The body is the language of the Third Testament" (76). His statement suggests that not only does the body express language, but rather that the flesh itself *is* story, that the body itself is text. Furthermore, in his religious language and mention of testaments, he evokes the words of the Gospel of John, chapter 1: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:1; 14 ESV). When those in diaspora cannot restore a coherent and verifiable narrative of their past sufferings through words alone, their bodies themselves fill the absence.

The Dreaming Disease is a mystery never fully resolved within the text – perhaps the result of genetic engineering gone amok, perhaps a reaction to trauma. Miranda first learns about it as a child by the name of

“The Memory Disease,” as a potential auto immune disease in which sufferers take on an inexplicable and unshakeable smell, as well as remembering some aspect of suffering or oppression from the past. “It seemed the most natural thing in the world that I should remember things that went on before I was born, things that happened in other life times,” Miranda recalls. “I did not realize that other people did not have these memories. I did not think of myself as a child afflicted by history...” (70). Later, Miranda learns that sufferers of the Dreaming Disease often have strange scale-like protrusions on the skin, and struggle with an unshakeable urge to drown themselves, either out of despair or a need to return to the sea. “We heard from our customers,” Miranda says, “of a girl who smelled of cooking oil, who remembered all the wars ever fought. She could recall and recount every death, every rape, every wound, every moment of suffering that had ever been inflicted by a member of her ancestral lineage” (85). The girl can only escape from “the barrage of collective memory” in the bathtub; eventually, she walks into the ocean and drowns herself to escape the pressure of the past. In a gesture that mirrors the false cheerfulness and veneer of perfection shared by the Big Six corporations, the corporations refuse to acknowledge the existence of the dreaming disease, attributing it to “mass hysteria” (100). That the disease sufferers’ memories of the past are accompanied by the smells of foreignness and industry – cooking oil, stainless steel, oranges – is especially significant (101-2). As Phung explains, “Odour and postmemory

work together in the novel to mourn the forgotten and unwritten histories of violence and oppression, affectively reconnecting the postgeneration with the painful experiences of previous generations” (6). The Dreaming Disease sufferers’ pungent odors and public suicides make their memories impossible to ignore or deny; they witness to almost-forgotten tragedies through their existence.

While Miranda is identified early on as a possible sufferer of the Dreaming Disease, she is unique, both through her lack of suicidal urges, and because she seems to have been born with the Dreaming Disease instead of contracting it later in life. Miranda alternates between embracing her memories and durian stink when her family or Evie embraces them, and loathing them when they lead to her alienation or abandonment by her peers. Miranda’s everyday struggle symbolizes a tension common among second- and third-generation immigrants. Larissa Lai explains the phenomenon in an essay written shortly before the publication of *Salt Fish Girl*: “We, as the children of those dreams must eke out an existence in a very peculiar present, in a strange and uncomfortable gap between nostalgic memory and hopeful dream...It is into this bizarre, unhomely space-time that we have the task of writing” (“Corrupted” 46-47). As a child, Miranda embodies this tension, bearing the scent of her parents’ lost love and their homeland, while simultaneously representing their desires for her to assimilate and be more comfortable in their white-dominated society than they could ever be

themselves. As an adult, her situation becomes even more complex, as she must make sense not only of her family history and identity as an Asian immigrant in diaspora, but also her personal hopes for the future and her role in liberating her compatriots. It comes as no surprise that Miranda wants to become a doctor: not only out of a desire to heal the wound of memory within herself, or to atone for her mother's death, but also to make her future safer. In order to save her family and home, she temporarily allies with Dr. Flowers, willing to eradicate her cultural memories in order to preserve her family. When Miranda sells her mother's music and is trapped underwater in an attempt to drive her insane, however, she must confront the inescapable reality of her memories. "The dreams were too much," she protests. "They were more than I wanted....I picked up the razor blade. If memory could not be washed away, perhaps it could be cut" (211-12). Miranda resists the urge to escape from the memories, however, and instead determines to "weather this," using the power of water to escape from her prison (212). Using her mother's music to manipulate the mechanics of her cage, she escapes imprisonment with her mind and body intact. While Miranda continues to fail and aid in corporate exploitation after this scene, it nevertheless marks a turning point for the character, one in which she finally uses her mother's music to counter the desires of the Big Six instead of abetting them.

We see a clear manifestation of the connection between story and embodiment in the Dreaming Disease, but Miranda and Evie also relate it to broader questions of identity and the future. The Big Six are deeply anxious about the body and its connection to identity, as evidenced in their treatment of the clones working in their factories. As Lee explains, “The corporations do not consider these cyborgs to be singular bodies, preferring to see them as interchangeable commodities that can be inexpensively reproduced” (101). By reclaiming their bodies through the removal of the Guardian Angel devices, through sexual intercourse, and through unsupervised reproduction, the Sonias also assert their status as individuals of value. Furthermore, they emphasize that identity is not dependent upon having a defined and recorded history. Kathryn Allan asserts, “Lai advocates the notion of memory over history – it is as if memory is more corporeal and more in keeping with human experience than history” (145). Because they are created within a lab, the Sonias lack an evolutionary history, biological parents, or an empirically provable history. Though they have stories they tell each other about their origins – most popularly that of the interned Chinese woman – Evie admits that these cannot be proven. Instead, as suggested by Evie’s references to Frankenstein, the Sonias’ most powerful resistance rests in their ability to imagine new identities and then embody the stories they choose to tell. Much like characters in diaspora remix the stories around them to express new meanings, the Sonias “remix” their bodies, bringing out new and subversive

meanings about queer desire and family, (re)production, and resistance.

“Paradoxically, capitalism implicates all bodies,” Lee writes, “and yet, Lai suggests, effective resistance must be embodied” (104). No character defines this resistant, embodied memory more clearly than Evie.

As I established earlier, Evie is a fragmented and conflicted figure, simultaneously an individual and a member of a collective, robbed of agency by destiny and by chance but also fiercely independent and devoted to enacting change. By Dr. Flowers’ logic, she should be generic and without trace, but instead she is marked both by her “wits and willpower” and her unmistakable briny scent. Her body odor proclaims the memories of which her creator would rob her: of her spiritual predecessor Salt Fish Girl, of her carp DNA, and of the salt-tears of the suffering of her sisters and her people. As someone who has no proven ancestors and yet potentially shares the Dreaming Disease, and with it the memory of the horror of the past, Evie suggests that memory can be transferred, reconstructed, and continually resurrected beyond the possibility of erasure. By refusing to ever confirm Evie and the Sonias’ origins, Phung contends, “Lai is more concerned with the multiple ways in which historical origins can be represented; she places little stock in neat, linear, and authentic representations of a dispersed community’s past” (4). Truth lies not within finally discovering a concrete origin, but rather within embracing the fluidity and embodied reality of those in diaspora, divided by trauma and geography but united by their desire for a

more hopeful and just future. When Evie and Miranda make love, their odors intermix, representing the fluidity and potential of recombining the stories their bodies tell to create a new narrative: “The stench that poured from our bodies was overwhelming – something between rotting garbage and heavenly stew. We rode the hiss and fizzle of salt fish and durian, minor notes of sour plum, fermented tofu, boiled dong quai – all those things buried and forgotten in the years of corporate homogenization” (225). Their queer sexual union – itself outside of societal norms represented by the nuclear families surrounding Miranda as a child – brings forward the inescapable, often uncomfortable traces of their cultural past. “In this way,” Paul Lai suggests, “Lai’s valorizing of the ‘salt fish’ smell of Nu Wa and Miranda’s lover takes these associations of foul smells with women and women’s sexual organs, giving them a radical charge as markers of resistance” (184). Crucially, in their moments of sexual union and their eating of durian together, they also create life, impregnating Miranda with a child who is simultaneously the vindication of the past and the potential for a better world. Their queer sexual union results in pregnancy, demonstrating that this space of non-heteronormativity and reincorporation of the artifacts of immigrant culture has potential for subversive new creation.

While intertext and origin are important to Lai, neither are the ultimate determiners of characters’ decisions nor guarantors of outcome. Rather, she is more concerned with the future; with how individuals choose

to move forward with the multiple stories told around them and through them. “Cyborgs and clones,” writes Villegas-López, “are not the products of evolutionary history, since they lack recognizable origins. They are conceived as examples of ‘illegitimate offspring,’ of beings who ‘were never in the womb.’ They are Promethean figures who announce the advent of a new mythology for a post-Christian world” (33). This new mythology resists singular statements of truth and strict categorization. It is one that, as Sharlee Reimer explains, recognizes “oppression through common experience, as opposed to through such allegedly coherent categories and shared origins as racialized or nationalized identities” (12). While Lai may argue that her characters possess very little self-determination, and mainly resist through the random, *Salt Fish Girl’s* conclusion suggests that the reality is more nuanced. While Evie and her fellow Sonias had no influence over their birth or treatment, and are pitted against a much stronger foe, they actively choose to create a community where none should exist. The fantastic radishes, cabbages, and durians that allow them to reproduce may be the result of random mutations and genetic experimentation gone awry, but they still make the active choice to cultivate these plants and nurture them. While Miranda and Evie’s attraction to each other is inexplicable and potentially the result of reincarnation and the cyclical nature of history, they at least mirror two women – Nu Wa and the Salt Fish Girl – who independently chose each other. Miranda’s pregnancy is an accident, and yet the tiny girl she gives birth

to at the end of the novel represents the possibility of working together for a world not previously experienced. As Butler suggests, while Evie and Miranda cannot escape the world they inhabit, their inability to conform to society's standards as queer women of color enables them to simultaneously expose the oppressive nature of their society while transforming the discourse surrounding them.

Near the end of the novel, as she and Evie race towards Evie's birth place to write the next chapter together, Miranda summarizes what she has learned regarding the body, memory, and fate: "I thought, we are the new children of the earth, of the earth's revenge. Once we stepped out of mud, now we step out of moist earth, out of DNA both new and old, an imprint of what has gone before, but also a variation. By our difference we mark how ancient the alphabet of our bodies. By our strangeness we write our bodies into the future" (259). Miranda's description recalls several elements from the novel: Nu Wa's creation of humans out of the riverbed, the traces of the Sonias' soles in the mud of the Unregulated Zone, and the toilet-shaped room in which her child will "enter the world from the dirty end" (268).

Furthermore, her metaphor of the body as alphabet serves as a potent metaphor for the intersection between destiny and agency with which the novel struggles. Much like the body and its DNA, which an individual is born with and – Lai suggests – would be wise to accept, the alphabet itself is predetermined and immutable. Within the context of the alphabet, however,

individuals can choose to write whatever they want, as Miranda and Evie do when they write their new strangeness into the future. Even in the face of the Big Six, who attempt to homogenize society beyond all variance and establish a series of seemingly innocuous and bland corporate hegemonies, rewriting breaks through. Far from the fairy tales Miranda read as a child with their focus on the superficial and their veneer of choice, Miranda writes her body into a yet-undefined future. That future is dirty and messy, alien and strange, but it also has the capacity to hold multiple stories.

If I may, I will return once more to David Toole's statement about the Panopticon, with which I opened this project: "The more our stories are homogenized, the more our memory is programmed, the more our mind is evacuated, and the more we come to live in the clear uncluttered space of the Panopticon" (242). While the diffused corporate apparatus of power depicted in *Salt Fish Girl* does not conform to Foucault's original vision of the Panopticon as a central institution fixing all citizens under its penetrating gaze, Lai's novel suggests that the Panopticon's effects of double-consciousness, self-regulation, and the homogenization of discourse can occur even when the panoptical power is distributed across an apparatus. Condemned both by their inability to control for the random power of mutation and their failure to eradicate every trace of a heritage that condemns them both linguistically and bodily, the Big Six ultimately fail in their attempt to homogenize, evacuate, and control society. Wherever there

is a public transcript, there will always be the counter-narrative of the hidden transcript, remixing existing stories, challenging assumptions, speaking truth to power and embodying the possibility of a hybrid, creative future.

Conclusion

“How easily we abandon those who have suffered the same persecutions as we have. How quickly we grow impatient with their inability to transcend the conditions of our lives.”

(Salt Fish Girl 172)

As I have demonstrated in my analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Salt Fish Girl*, storytelling constitutes an effective form of resistance across multiple scenarios in the face of diverse power structures. I initially theorized that contemporary Western society is influenced by a patriarchal panopticon, which forces oppressed groups such as women and racial minorities to live in a state of double consciousness, considering themselves both from their own perspective and that of their oppressors. Because panopticons attempt to create hegemony in order to consolidate and maintain their power, any deviance from the official narrative or diversification of discourse constitutes resistance against the apparatus of power. As a manifestation of patriarchal attempts to control discourse, the traditionally established Western Canon homogenizes the “human experience” as overwhelmingly white and male. The feminist literary project’s response is twofold: resurrecting forgotten texts by women, and expanding the boundaries of women’s writing in the future. As groundbreaking feminist dystopias, then, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Salt Fish Girl* function on both narrative and metafictional levels, depicting female

resistance in patriarchal societies even as they as novels exist in a historically male-dominated sphere.

While *The Handmaid's Tale's* highly regulated society and minimalist narrative may initially seem wildly different from *Salt Fish Girl's* neoliberal social collapse and self-consciously quirky, wide-reaching storytelling, the novels are united by their conclusions regarding the potency and effectiveness of counter-narrative in the face of hegemony and patriarchal control. It can be tempting, when studying texts written during different eras of feminism, to see them as existing in succession. *The Handmaid's Tale*, after all, explicitly responds to a particular regime that failed to successfully seize power. *Salt Fish Girl*, with its intersectional concerns of race, sexuality, class, and gender may appear a more encompassing approach to contemporary society and the social dilemmas readers encounter today. As critics have discussed, Offred benefits from her whiteness and heterosexuality, reflecting on a comfortable past that overlooks the oppression others faced even as she lived freely. Despite the ways in which *Salt Fish Girl*, with its patriarchal panopticon, focus on state-controlled reproduction, and empowerment through memory and storytelling may seem to succeed *The Handmaid's Tale*, I believe that reading the two concurrently reveals their specific strengths and surprising disparities.

Despite Mary McCarthy's 1986 claim that *The Handmaid's Tale* suffers from "writing undistinguished" and a "[lack of] imagination," later critical

response and my analysis alike establish the novel as a masterwork of language and wordplay. With its minimalist focus, purposeful ambiguity, and powerfully depicted society, *The Handmaid's Tale* communicates a warning that remains pertinent thirty years after its publication. Unlike Miranda, Offred is neither unique nor chosen, but instead represents the ordinary predicament and opportunity for resistance that anyone could experience in the face of an oppressive patriarchal regime. The power structure of Gilead – a centralized, massively powerful panopticon – no doubt lends to Offred, and the novel's, clarity of focus. In a society with clear-cut roles and a simple script, Offred's choice to deviate from the official narrative and leave a record when she is denied easy opportunity to do so constitutes a nearly undeniable act of resistance.

By contrast, *Salt Fish Girl's* two-pronged narrative, proliferation of doubling and repeated motifs, and self-confident weirdness suggests a more complex and fraught model of resistance. Unlike Offred, Miranda frequently wavers in both thought and in action as she attempts to navigate the multiple hegemonies of the Big Six. In a society where the apparatus of neoliberal corporate power is decentralized and acts of compliance and rebellion are both easily absorbed by the system, resistance is difficult. Despite this difficulty, however, the novel's explorations of memory, intertextuality, and hopeful creation offers a hybrid solution: one which combines recurrence and diaspora, agency and destiny, individual responsibility and collective

action. Unlike in *The Handmaid's Tale*, where successful resistance requires transcending the body and enduring through narrative alone, in *Salt Fish Girl* language and the body are inseparable. Because The Big Six's power is spread across multiple avenues, resistance must be as well: through embodied memory, queer alternative family structures, hidden transcripts, and the potential for reincarnation through reproduction.

Despite their differences, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Salt Fish Girl* are united in their depiction of storytelling as a valid and potentially effective form of resistance against patriarchal power. Whether power is consolidated or dispersed, hegemonies must always be countered, by women who refuse to have their stories homogenized or eradicated. By insisting upon remembering, remixing the messages around themselves, and daring to imagine a future and an audience better than the one in the world they currently inhabit, Offred and Miranda serve as historians and oracles, resisting dystopian regimes more effectively than their violent counterparts.

Appendix A: *Handmaid's Tale* Literature Review

Margaret Atwood, it would seem, anticipates the overwhelming critical response to her novel when she ends Offred's account with "Historical Notes," a satirical conference presentation discussing the meaning of the *Handmaid's Tale*. The scholars of 2195 Canada find fertile ground for research – and questionable humor – in studying Gilead, with presentations and articles examining Gileadean politics, religious influences, and sumptuary laws (344). As many commentators have noted, Dr. Pieixoto's long-winded oration calling into question the focus and veracity of Offred's account of her experiences tragically misses the point of the entire novel. In ending *The Handmaid's Tale* this way, Freibert argues, Atwood "ridicules the mental gymnastics of academics, specifically those bent on establishing 'the text'" (280). Despite the fact that the novel pokes fun at the mode of its critics before they even arrive, academic attention to the novel has been comprehensive and enthusiastic. An MLA Bibliography search for the novel returns more than 250 articles and chapters in works concerning Atwood, feminism, and science fiction. To date there are two books of scholarly analysis entirely devoted to *The Handmaid's Tale* – the Harold Bloom-edited *Interpretations: Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale* and Lee Briscoe Thompson's *Scarlet Letters* – as well as numerous study guides for teachers and students. As a novel with three epigraphs as well as Biblical texts, popular culture references, and wordplay scattered throughout, it

comes as no surprise that a number of scholars have written on *The Handmaid's Tale's* as intertext. Linda Wagner-Martin addresses the novel's epigraphs; Sharon Rose Wilson compares Offred to Little Red-Cap in her larger work *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-tale Sexual Politics*; and Dorota Filipczak delves deep into Gilead's use of the Bible, arguing that Gilead's failure is directly linked to their fundamental misinterpretation of key Biblical passages (180). In a similar vein, a number of critics have faced the same question of genre Pieixoto does when he argues that Offred's account is not a document due to its original recorded nature and lack of concrete, verifiable details (345). Danita J. Dodson explores questions of privilege and oppression through reading the novel in the context of the early American slave narrative; Merle Elsie Paget reads the novel as an experiment with the postmodern carnival mode, and Tracey Gillespie argues that Atwood imitates the Female Gothic. Responding to *New York Times Book Review* critic Mary McCarthy's allegation that the novel is "insufficiently imagined" and lacks credibility ("Review"), as well as Atwood's own insistence on identifying *The Handmaid's Tale* as speculative fiction as distinct from science fiction (*Other Worlds* 93), a number of scholars examine the book specifically within the larger context of dystopian and speculative fiction. Erika Gottlieb reads it in conjunction with Orwell's *1984*, Vonnegut's *Player Piano*, and Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*; David Ketterer questions how necessary the success of a regime is in judging a dystopian society; and Ildney Cavalcanti argues that

language can create utopia within feminist dystopias. A number of critics have also focused on the novel's specifically feminist agenda: notably Heather Latimer's exploration of bodily autonomy and abortion rights in her book *Reproductive Acts* (2013) and Elaine Tuttle Hansen's analysis of women who have had children taken from them by the state in her book *Mother Without Child* (1997). Finally, there have been a handful of articles studying the novel's dramatic adaptations: Kimberly Fairbrother Canton's analysis of fragmented narrative and counter-memory in the *Handmaid's Tale* opera, and Pamela Cooper studies how the film version of *The Handmaid's Tale* forces the audience to become complicit in Gilead's surveillance.

Especially pertinent to my study of *The Handmaid's Tale*, however, is the existing work regarding how language, power, and subversion function within the novel. Peter G. Stillman and S. Anne Johnson have notoriously accused Offred of being a passive protagonist ultimately complicit in Gilead's actions: "Offred eschews a political interpretation of her life and identity," they conclude, "for a romantic (and traditionally feminine) one, failing to acknowledge the larger forces which dictate the circumstances of her life and shape its possibilities and directions" (83). While I will devote space later in this project to addressing their allegations, a number of scholars have already dissented against their conclusions. In her thesis, "The Protagonist's Response to Power and Language in the Dystopian Novel," Susan Elizabeth Valentine argues that Offred's romantic relationship with Nick is in itself

rebellion against a society that has eliminated romance (64-65). Karen F. Stein, Elizabeth Hansot, Sarah K. Foust Vinson, and Theo Finigan emphasize the importance of reconstructing memory and the personal archive in the face of a regime that seeks to rewrite the past. Mario Klarer, meanwhile, questions the gender-supported division between oral and written record, arguing that forcing women into an oral culture and then devaluing their expressions effectively robs women of both a past and a future. A sizeable cohort uses French feminist theory – most prominent the work of Julia Kristeva – to understand the subversive power of Offred’s discourse as separate from Gilead’s patriarchal, homogenous discourse. Kristy Tenbus, Katherine A. Nelson-Born, and Hilde Staels search for the feminine trace within Offred’s entire tale. Dominick M. Grace and David S. Hogsette focus specifically on the meaning of the book’s “Historical Notes”: Grace argues that they undercut the effectiveness of the entire novel by filtering Offred’s feminine voice through a masculine lens and divesting her of authority, while Hogsette shifts responsibility to the novel’s audience to listen compassionately to Offred and resist Pieixoto’s misinterpretation. Finally, Marta Caminero-Santangelo brilliantly places the novel within the context of the entire postmodern literary project, arguing that its appeal to a general readership is essential to the novel’s feminist message.

In addition to the works listed above examining the role of language, memory, and storytelling in the *Handmaid’s Tale*, a handful of critics have

connected Atwood's novel to the theory of Michel Foucault. Pamela Cooper uses the panopticon to explore specifically sexual surveillance and its relationship to medicine, Katie Prilutski emphasizes Foucault's all-encompassing vision of power as it manifests in Gilead, and Susan Elizabeth Valentine explores the capacity of the individual within systems of power. To the best of my knowledge, however, no one has specifically addressed how subversive storytelling and counter-discourse function within the space of the patriarchal panopticon.

Appendix B: *Salt Fish Girl* Literature Review

Whether because of its more recent publication date, its status as an intersectional minority text, or its often strange and off-putting narrative, *Salt Fish Girl* has not received the same critical attention and popular success as *The Handmaid's Tale* has. Upon its initial publication, the novel received mixed reviews. *The Vancouver Sun* noted the historical importance of the novel, writing that the novel's "pungent smells...[are] something to be savoured, not masked with air freshener" (Wigod). *This* magazine, meanwhile, wrote that *Salt Fish Girl* "indexes our present fears and pushes them forward to their logical conclusion, to a future that's creepy and yet filled with human tenacity," and does so with "wit, poetry, and symbolism" (McCluskey 42). Other reviewers were more critical, with Guy Beauregard writing in *Canadian Literature* that the novel offers a "glimpse of something" important about the connection between past and future while being

hampered by uneven writing. Brendan Richardson of *The Calgary Herald*, meanwhile, appreciated the artistry of the novel but complained that it spoke towards to niche an audience, protesting that “Lai seems to ignore...that all of us – her oppressors included – probably grapple with the same set of questions.” Karen Luscombe of *The Globe and Mail* was most critical, calling the novel “viscerally revolting” and its protagonists alienating, deeply ironic, and smugly patronizing. “As a political catalyst,” she concludes, “it merely chokes on its stench.” Despite mixed reviews, the novel performed well in critical circles, and was a finalist for the City of Calgary/W.o. Mitchell Award, the Sunburst Award, and the James Tiptree Literary Award” (“Salt”).

In the fourteen years since *Salt Fish Girl*'s publication, several dozen scholars have written articles commenting on the complex, often mystifying novel. The majority of these place the novel within the context of Asian-American and Asian-Canadian literature. Robert Zacharias reads *Salt Fish Girl* together with *Obasan*, and Stephen Morton compares it to Roy K. Kiyooka's *Stone Gloves*. Several critics have examined the relationship between Asian and alien identity, with Joanna Mansbridge examining stranger fetishism and the Asian body, and Kate Chiwen Liu examining how the hybrid figures of Miranda and Evie resist orientalist exoticism. In their focus on cyborg theory, Kathryn Allan examines the relationship of the technology with the female body, and Tara Lee explains how science and capital unite to control and exploit the body. Heather Latimer, meanwhile, reads *Salt Fish Girl*

intertextually with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in her study of queer reproduction and the monstrous birth. Stephanie Oliver and Paul Lai focus specifically on the role of smell in the novel, examine how it functions as a metaphor for history, identity, alienation, and sexuality. A few authors turn their attention to queer sexuality and queer reproduction within *Salt Fish Girl*; notably Sonia Villegas-López, who studies the image of the queer, posthuman cyborg. Sharlee Reimer discusses the relationship between cyborg origins and the troubled, hybrid origin of Asian Canadian immigrants; Hee-Jung Serenity Joo, meanwhile, discusses the doubling of human cloning and reincarnation, and their relationship to race and heritage.

Finally, and most interesting to me, are those critics who study how *Salt Fish Girl* addresses storytelling, memory, and counterculture. Stephen Morton poses the concept of the counterpublic, a “site of reading which questions and challenges the social and political grounds upon which diasporic subjects are marginalized in the global economy, as well as the Canadian public sphere” (3). His work seeks to understand how *Salt Fish Girl* offers an alternate narrative to white, heterosexual, corporate-compliant middle-class Canadian identity. Meanwhile, Malissa Phung investigates the relationship between memory and diaspora. She argues that “diasporization entails an ongoing process of discovering and mending an always tenuous relationship to the past, past histories that subsequent generations inherit, directly or indirectly, from previous generations, past origins that the

postgeneration may repress for most of their lives” (2). Nicholas Birns, meanwhile, examines how diaspora and violence against nature seeds its own rebellion, and then links it to transfeminism and the fluidity of gender and identity. Rita Wong takes this concept of memory and diaspora and places it within the context of physical space, exploring how borders, policies of exclusion, and national, racial, and gender binaries are troubled by the polyphonic experience of the Other. “*Salt Fish Girl* is deeply inflected with a sense of history repeating itself, materializing in contemporary forms,” Wong argues. “The mythical, the historical, and the futuristic conjoin in the novel, making home a multiple time zone, that is, a simultaneity of past and present stories as new immigrants experience hardships comparable to those experienced by members of earlier generations” (3). According to Wong, the homespace blurs the boundaries between different spaces and times, calling attention to the exclusion and artificiality of society-imposed definitions and binaries. Finally, Ka Hing Cheung studies crosscultural intertextuality and rewriting, and its relationship to hybrid and minority identities. “The necessity of rewriting,” she writes, “lies in placing readers and writers within a recognizable history of literature, which is significant for those who are perplexed by multiple and contradictory discourses of identity.” Throughout all of these scholars’ work, we see common themes of hybridity, plurality, and the realization that the reclamation of heritage can only ever be partial and fragmented in nature.

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