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The Female Body in Atwood's Gilead:

*A Material Feminist Reading of the Female Body in
The Handmaid's Tale, The Handmaid's Tale TV Show
and The Testaments*

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Abstract

In this thesis I will explore the female body presented in Margaret Atwood's fictional world of Gilead in the context of material feminism. Through the mediums of two novels and one TV show I will use material feminist theories to analyse the modes in which different configurations of the female body and lived experience is presented as and worked with. I posit that there is a need to incorporate a more holistic and complicated model of how interconnected the body is to environmental issues, to its lived aspect and to social issues. The goal is to look beyond the symbolic and discourse alone and realise the impact material feminism has on the feminist project of equality.

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Introduction

In this thesis I will explore the female body and lived experience presented in Margaret Atwood's fictional world of Gilead in the context of material feminism. Through the mediums of two novels and one TV show I will use material feminist theories to analyse the modes in which different configurations of the female body and lived experience is presented as and worked with. I posit that there is a need to incorporate a more holistic and complicated model of how interconnected the body is to environmental issues, to its lived aspects and to social issues. The goal is to look beyond the symbolic and discourse alone and realise the impact material feminism has on the feminist project of equality. Atwood manages to 'float' in a postmodern setting and world of her own creation where language and meaning is fluid. Where ideology and its effects are explored at the same time as she also acknowledge lived experiences in the form of a narrative where material aspects surrounding the body and the physical sensations of the body is in focus. By engaging with both discourse and the material aspects of the female body, Atwood's fictional world is an excellent study in the blending of discourse and material matter.

Atwood is an award winning and world-famous author with over 50 books, essays, poetry and graphic novels to her name, and her works have been translated in over 45 languages ("*Biography*"). As one of the world's greatest authors coming from Canada, her name can often be found on the syllabus in different universities, as one of few female authors with that honour. The relevancy of her work crosses boundaries of genres, themes and styles. With the release of her second novel in the Gilead verse over thirty years after the first novel, Atwood shows that her works are timeless in its relevancy and popularity. *The Testaments* (2019) opens up new perspectives on the regime of Gilead and new modes in which to analyse her works. With the popularisation of the Hulu TV show adaption of her best-selling novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1987)¹, the author's fictional world of Gilead has become increasingly popular in mass media and the general population in its relevancy to the recent #metoo movement and current feminist issues in regards to reproductive rights (Gilbert, 2019).

Used as a political tool for the fight for reproductive rights, the show's timely release reignited interests in Atwood's novel *THT*. The acclaimed Hulu series' popularisation found interest in a new generation whose political landscape put the female body at a risk that resonated with the show. With its release at the height of the feminist #metoo movement, the

¹ Hereby abbreviated to *THT* for convenience

show gained traction in its efficient portrayal in a ‘what if’ scenario of women losing rights and agency over their own bodies. The first season of the show mirror the novel, however, future seasons have diverged from this. As we will touch upon in chapter two, the show’s creator and showrunner Bruce Miller, remains in dialogue with Atwood during the creation of the next seasons and she is listed as co-producer of the show.

As an author often labelled as feminist, Atwood’s relation to the term has not been without its turbulence. Despite her novels being lauded with the feminist stamp of female empowerment, it is only in the last years that Atwood has identified with the term itself. Her ambiguity to the term feminist derives from its changeability and the wish of not belonging to any specific school of thought. For her “everything is relative to its place in history; where there is explanation and context, Atwood wants them” (Conroy, 2018). Some does not see this perspective as unproblematic, and her defence of an author after allegations of sexual assault caused great controversy among many feminists, especially for with those involved in the me-too movement. The op-ed she later posted in answer to this further emphasised for some, her lack of support, and caused backlash. In the op-ed, *Am I a Bad Feminist?* Atwood criticises the me-too movement’s attack on the situation she was involved in, and warns them of “vigilant justice taking the place of a broken legal system” (Grady, 2018). Her warning against vigilant justice leads into her aversion for extreme ideology, and suggests this goes in both directions.

Atwood’s refusal of the extremes should not surprise many, and is at times reflected in her characters. Offred, for one, is not the ideal typical strong empowered woman and compared to both her mother and her friend Moira, she is portrayed as ambivalent to feminism. Aunt Lydia and the Aunts in general are perhaps the best example of Atwood’s standpoint on feminism; “what is actually detrimental to women is to take the stand that they’re angels of perfection because that is not going to stand up to any sort of scrutiny in real life” (Conroy, 2018). And this is perhaps where the crux of the matter is; “[s]ome women lie... They’re human beings” (Conroy, 2018). Real life is not black and white and women are all shades of grey, like all humans. In reality women may hurt other women; they lie, steal, and they kill. In Atwood’s fictional world of Gilead, all suppression and pain that the women experiences is not solely caused by men, but by other women. Women solidarity and sisterhood is far away from the ruthless control of the Aunts seen in the novels. Female empowerment is not clear-cut. This is reflected in the novels, where Atwood is the sole creator. In the show, she has had less of an impact, and so the empowerment is more in line with the one popularised by the mass media, a more overt ‘girl-power’ feminism.

Often categorised as a dystopia, and by definition distanced from the real world in a ‘what-if’ sense, what is fascinating is how closely related events and framework of Gilead is to historical events. In her creation of the world of Gilead and what happens there, Atwood draws her inspiration from the real material world. She states that for *THH* she scrapbooked information of real events of atrocities against humanity and nature from all over the world, which she also did in online format for *The Testaments*. Through historical sources, ideas and materials Atwood has repurposed the atrocities she found to suit her own narrative.

When Atwood first started thinking about *THH* in 1981, she asked herself the question of what flags one could wave and rally under in order to successfully take over America (Penguin, 2019). When faced with ‘it cant happen here’ in regards to her work Atwood counters with the fact that it has already happened elsewhere, shown by her collection of these sorts of events all around the world. The world of Gilead is influenced by real events with real material consequences.

Real world consequences and Atwood’s insistence on mirroring the real world in all its shades connects to this: “The writer is both an eye-witness and an I-witness, the one to whom personal experience happens and the one who makes experience personal for others” (qtd. in Gilbert, 2019). In her younger years Atwood meant that art should exist without political responsibilities, yet changed her mind some years before the publication of one of her best-selling novels, *THH*. Her emphasis on the importance of the artist in engaging with political issues by their status as observers, of bearing witness, have coloured the two novels of the Gilead. The witnesses Atwood portrays here are survivors, and so compromised and constricted by their environment. To her witness-bearers are not heroes nor should others see them in such a light, yet they are crucial in steps towards liberation (Gilbert, 2019). By harnessing the literature of witness for herself, Atwood invites an intimacy and a need for the reader to identify with what is happening. This happens through embodiment of the main character through Atwood’s writing style of focusing on material aspects of the body.

The female body has always been contested, controlled, and bartered with; be it in politics, or through mass media or in the home. Equal rights for all is important not only for women but for everyone, and an intersectional perspective is crucial when theorising and exploring from a feminist perspective. Atwood uses the female body as a vessel for her story telling in very visceral and interesting ways to highlight women’s treatments in conservative environments; from not only the perspective of the mind but also from the body. It is precisely the relevancy of these issues to the female body and the world of Gilead that makes it important to continue to explore, analyse and discuss Atwood’s works.

Theories

Words matter; they carry meaning into the world, which is indubitably the case with Atwood's novels. Yet the material aspects of lived life is not neglected, and should not be underestimated. Lived experience is vividly described in her works and something that very particular to her style of writing in the novels. Atwood puts the female body at the foreground of her novel, with its attention to detail pertaining material life, and this is very relevant to this day where the female biological body is used as justification for the repression the female gender. By delving into material matter, Atwood inspires in where not to go, and what are at stake in regards to the fight for equality. The freedom of autonomy of the female body, especially the fight for reproductive rights is something that needs to continue. In a manner, the lived experiences that Atwood details in her novels have material consequences out in the real world, outside of literature. Matter matters.

There is a tendency to connect the masculine with reason and feminine with nature, one subordinate to the other. This means that by extension that materiality and the body is more often connected to the feminine. The large focus on nature and the female body in Atwood's works may suggest that her works in this thesis draws on essentialist discourse in its presentation of gender and the body. However, by looking at this focus in a material feminist context instead, it shed light on a clearer, more correct view of the works and of the role of the body. During this thesis I will mainly use material feminist theories and theorists that arguably have material perspectives. By first outlining my understanding of material feminism, these perspectives will help when describing the way the female body is treated in the three works. The body in a material feminist perspective is important to explore, as this will help when analysing the representation of the body.

Material Feminism

Stacy Alaimo and Susan J. Hekman state that materiality is lacking within current feminisms of today due to the focus on mind over matter. They want to reintegrate specifically the material body and the natural world into feminist discourse/theory and practice. As the editors of the book *Material Feminisms* (2008) they explain that its collection of essays sets the goal of defining new ways of seeing the relationship and interconnectedness between discourse and matter that equals them; "[t]he theorists assembled here have been working to revise the paradigms of poststructuralism, postmodernism, and cultural studies in ways that can more productively

account for the agency, semiotic force, and dy[-]namics of bodies and natures”(7). By seeking new ways and configurations of looking at texts where mind and matter stands equal to one another it sheds light on new dynamics and ways of looking at the world.

In feminism today there is a lack of focus on material aspects. According to the editors, current feminism lacks this material perspective because it requires a distance to said materiality in order to focus on culture, discourse and language. They claim that postmodernists “argue that the real/material is entirely constituted by language; what we call real is a product of language and has its reality only in language” (3). Contemporary feminism is at an impasse in newer theories due to this distance and while postmodern feminists have deconstructed dichotomies, they have yet to touch upon the dichotomy of culture/nature. As a result, this strain of feminism has embraced culture and in part rejected nature by emphasising rather than blending or erasing the language/nature dichotomy in their discourse.

In the last 20 years there has been produced a tremendous amount of work regarding the body in literature and theories according to the editors, yet these have confined the analysis to *discourse* about the body and not its lived experience. By focusing solely on representations, discourse and ideology while avoiding lived experience, biological substance and corporeal practice, it makes it difficult or impossible for feminisms to engage with medicine or science in innovative, productive and affirmative ways:

Feminist theorists of the body want definitions of human corporeality that can account for how the discursive and the material interact in the constitution of bodies. They explore the question of nonhuman and post-human nature and its relationship to the human (Alaimo and Hekman, 7).

In this sense material feminism seeks to remove the dominant discourse within feminist theory of mind over matter, of discourse over materiality. Material feminist theorists seek to reverse the distance towards materiality and to find new avenues or configurations where the two are sidelined rather than in a subordinate relationship.

My focus in this thesis is mainly the material body in such a complex context. Elizabeth Grosz theorises around the body and the production of knowledge. She is concerned with the production of knowledge and seeks to open up a new more material avenue to challenge its methodology and principles. By focusing on the body as “surface of social inscription and as the locus of lived experience” (Grosz, 188), she emphasises the importance of “acknowledging the body in the production and evaluation of knowledge” (187), which has relevancy for my exploration of the material body.

Grosz describes the criticism against those theorising the female body within feminist theory as “charges of biologism, essentialism, ahistoricism, and naturalism” (195) and thus there is reluctance within feminism to include the female body’s role when talking about women’s oppression. The female body is reduced to biological matter in a patriarchal framework (of natural passivity, maternity and dependency), but she points out another understanding of the female body through a “sociocultural conception of the body”. The biological body is important in the material discourse, and Grosz states that “[a]s pliable flesh, the body is the unspecified raw matter of social inscription” (196), and through including the biological female body and lived experience can feminists meaningfully resist and talk about the group as oppressed. She describes the body as a surface of inscriptions and splits this into two ways of configuring the body; the inscribed body and the body’s lived experience. These two configurations are, though not directly addressed, relevant to the form of my analysis in my thesis.

The inscribed body that Grosz describes is the body as “a surface on which social law, morality, and values are inscribed” (196). This inscriptive model analyses the body as a social, public body and the processes in which the body is marked by powers such as “various regimes of institutional, discursive and non-discursive power as a particular kind of body” (197). The body is inscribed through impressions from external factors, such as culture, that marks its social integration.

In the Gilead Verse, this social integration starts with the colours of the clothes the body is forced to wear to denominate its class. Other facets to the inscriptions that marks the surface body is how “the body’s boundaries and zones are constituted in conjunctions and through linkages with other surface and planes” (198). I take this to mean physical sensations, given to us through our senses. As you will see in the thesis, senses is part of what I consider tools of embodiment for many of the characters. Outside influences on the body such as medical interventions, the food consumed, clothes, values, norms, are what the body ingests in “incorporating social categories into the physiological interior” (199). The body is a locus point for power, meanings, and knowledge. By being infused and affected by these, it can be read by its environment. In Gilead, clothes, the food, medicine, technology, morals and values are inscribed onto the body both physically and mentally. The body is also a place of active resistance to these social practices, as we will see with characters such as Offred and Daisy.

Grosz explains that lived body stems from Freud’s term of the ego as bodily tracing, and states that it is an “internal screen onto which the illuminated images of the body’s outer surfaces are projected” (200) and concludes that it is the body’s significance, its meaning, to the subject that describes the ego. In the works of this thesis the body’s significance to its female characters

is of importance to their material existence, to their lived experience. The body image of Offred and Agnes are especially important to explore in the light of this material context.

Both the body as inscription and as lived experiences are explored in my thesis about the presentation of the female body in the Gilead verse and through the context of material feminism. My focus on environmental factors and its influence on the narrative and the body, the consummation of food and its representation, the senses and embodiment, the body as vulnerable through its intimate relations, bodily identity, agency and motherhood is themes that I consider important for analysing the body in a material feminist context.

Ecofeminism

Theorists that also delves into or seek to incorporate the material spheres/dimensions, and which are closely related to material feminist theory is that of ecocriticism, or ecofeminism. With references such as ‘mother nature’, ‘raping the land’ throughout the materials I have chosen to research, there is connections that could be drawn to nature and the female body in an ecocriticism sense, and I could also have touched upon agency in that context; men getting to decide what to do with the land while women are relegated as closer to nature by reproduction. There are many avenues in which I could explore the Gilead verse in the context of ecocriticism, gender and the body. This is but one avenue/dimension I could have researched when exploring the material body, yet I chose to omit this due to my focus on the body.

Chapter Summaries

In chapter one of this thesis I will focus on Atwood’s first novel *THT*, and examine the presentation of the female body through the main protagonist Offred. I will here take a closer look at the material aspects such as the senses, external forces and the embodiment found in Offred’s narrative, and how her body is presented in the novel. In the second chapter I will look at the TV show, and here I intend to map the main differences between the two mediums in the context of material aspects pertaining to the female body. I aim to illustrate the change in material expression and the use of the agency of the female body on-screen and how this affects Offred’s lived experience. The third chapter will explore new aspects of material perspectives in *The Testaments* due to its recent publication. The main focus of my enquires will be to show new ways that the technological material aspects in the novel accounts for lived experience, and I will explore its connection with the body.

Lastly, will emphasise my knowledge of Margaret Atwood's works previous to writing this thesis. Despite their popularity, both *THT* novel and TV show was unfamiliar to me, and it was not until *The Testaments* got published in 2019 that I considered delving into Atwood's fictional world of Gilead. Atwood as an author was only familiar in that I had read and enjoyed *Oryx and Crake* (2003) so much so that I wrote paper on it. My first impression of her work was in a sci-fi setting, of which is a genre I greatly enjoy. I would also like to warn the reader that I will only take into account the first season of the TV show during this thesis, as I have yet to watch any other season. My analysis is therefore of the first season as standalone and divorced from the narrative of the other seasons. I have greatly enjoyed my introduction to more of Atwood's literary works and my esteem for her authorship has only grown higher. In the future I will indubitably read, and enjoy, more of her works.

1 *The Handmaid's Tale*

In the introduction to this thesis I mentioned how there is importance in exploring issues from a more material context. My interest in this perspective is due to the prevalence of the body in *THT*, specifically. There is a vast body of work that have analysed the novel in the context of the role of the body, however there exists a lack of analysis from a material perspective. It is undeniable that the body, specifically the female body, is very important in *THT*. Atwood writes a visceral and intimate portrayal of the body in a setting that merits an investigation into a more material approach. Additional avenues to approach are to what degree the novel might reinforce the dogma it seeks to reject in the form of essential perspectives on gender.

The world of Gilead represents a totalitarian regime with rigid roles based on gender and class where its population is controlled through doctrine and fear of brutal punishments and death. The novel offers a vivid look into the mind of the main character Offred and her struggles of both surviving and inhabiting her own body in the totalitarian regime of Gilead. *THT* is an excellent study to explore in what way the loss of autonomy of the body and voice affects one's relation with their own body. Through Offred's narrative one can experience the presence and distance she has to her own body as a result of the repressive society she now inhabits. As a character Offred is hyper focused on her body, a body that determines all that she supposedly is, yet in a paradox of the passiveness of her situation her inner world is vivid with memories and thoughts on her own situation and is something worth taking a closer look at. *THT* is an important reminder that women's rights continually need to improve and be fought for or else conservative powers might restrict them and bring about a society much like that of Gilead.

1.1 Subversive Intimacy and Touch

Intimacy in the novel is often connected to the female gender and is primarily shown to be between women. By focusing on the female experience in close connection with intimacy and touch, Atwood might come across as presenting intimacy as something that especially pertains to women. With this portrayal, many feminist poststructuralists might posit that there is an essential notion of gender to Atwood's focus on intimacy between women.

One such famous poststructuralist, and whose work often have been criticised by material feminists is Judith Butler. A big influence within the feminist and queer fields, she is a theorist and philosopher that oppose essentialist perspectives with her theories on performativity. In his book, *How to Interpret Literature; Critical Theory for Literary and Cultural Studies* (2015), Robert Dale Parker describes how according to Butler discourse produces gender, “and we build models of gender through repetition” (191). Due to the repetition or performance of gender not being the exact same each time, the conclusion is that the notion of gender as essential is faulty; “[t]hus, even as repetition irons in the model of an essentialized notion of gender, it also undermines that model, proliferating what it repeats into a series of variations" (191).

Butler uses drag as illustrating the constructedness but also of reproducing these notions. There are arguments whether drag challenges norms of gender or reinforces them. People might see a drag performer, knowing she is a man and intensify their belief in that there are essential differences between genders, corresponding to femininity and masculinity. A drag performer “mimics repeated patterns of dress, gesture and speech that a traditional model of gender associates with femininity” (192) and as a result can be seen as either mocking them but also of proving to others that those patterns are femininity when seen in a woman. Atwood, by presenting Offred as wanting to or needing to connect with others in order to create intimacy, whether emotional or physical, might be seen as reproducing this model of gender as essential. There is a pattern here; of needing intimacy that can be seen as feminine that Atwood reproduces. For Butler there is no core gender identity, no pre-existing self, but “the performance of identity constructs the self” (Parker, 192). In Atwood’s case, by focusing on and presenting several women in the story as reaching out, needing intimacy and emotional comfort, touch, she can be seen as reproducing a pattern of femininity in connection to the female gender. Thus, the presentation of Offred as well as the other women in the novel in connection to intimacy can be interpreted as Atwood prescribing to the essential notion that this is something that is mainly important to women.

Though I initially presented as essential, there is subversiveness to the intimacy found in Gilead. In a totalitarian regime where strict roles are imposed on its inhabitants based on class and gender, there is little to no room for intimacy. Suspicion and mistrust permeates the regime, and the potential for creating intimate relations to others are risky. Lois Feuer, in his article “The Calculus of Love and Nightmare: The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition” describes Gilead as a society “purged of diversity and individuality, based on sexism, racism and elitism, in which private relationships between friends and lovers become—or become seen as—subversive acts” (Feuer, 84). Despite Gilead being a society built on the absence and restriction

of intimacy, the need to touch another body and mind in some way is permeated throughout the novel. Feuer states that there exists a subversity in creating intimate relationships to one another in the regime. According to him,

[t]he regime works in a variety of ways to sever these ties; "love is not the point," says Handmaid trainer Aunt Lydia (285), aware of the subversion inherent in private relationships. But love is indeed the point for Offred as it was for Winston. It is through Offred's affair with Nick, as through her friendships with other Handmaids, that her re-created self desires and rebels. (Feuer, 86)

Intimacy and the creation of emotional and physical intimacy can be seen as a way through which one fights the regime. Above I have now discussed how intimacy could be seen as essential in regards to the female gender through its presentation in the novel yet also how intimacy is a tool to be used in working against a regime that suppresses it. I have discussed subversive touch, leading me to the next issue of the material aspects of intimacy. By focusing on its material dimension, perhaps then one can look away from the essential presentation of intimacy and instead look at the importance of intimacy from a material standpoint, in the form of touch.

In her writing Atwood insists on materiality and the bodily focus of touch, especially. With that, one can discuss types of touch, and Offred wants and describes herself often as needing physical touch. I will argue this is in reality the need for a specific type of touch; of intimate touch. The type of touch to create intimacy between two people, both physical and emotional, "[y]ou die from lack of love, not from lack of sex" (Atwood, 132) is the view Offred has of physical closeness or intimacy. Her isolation in a distinct unfriendly environment makes Offred crave intimacy, a survival instinct that makes her carefully reach out again and again, in a bid to take a hold of her own identity/subjectivity. Her isolation as a Handmaid affects her greatly and Offred often vividly describes her need for physical touch and closeness to other characters in spite of them not being close to her.

To the Marthas Offred feels like a chore and bridging that gap into something more emotionally connected is something she longs for. The dynamic between them is such that Offred is considered a vessel to be taken care of by the Marthas, justifying her keep with a baby, but nothing more than that. She is starkly aware of this yet still makes an effort albeit small, to connect with them. When talking of the birthing ceremony she went to, Offred describes the smile Cora gives her as 'smile that includes' and it highlights her own feelings of isolation and longing to be part of something, of being considered 'someone' rather than 'something'. Another

example of this is Offred emphasising in her retelling that she wanted to make Rita, the older Martha, happy with the news of a certain food being available in order to be better liked. With Cora especially, the youngest Martha, Offred wishes for a connection. When Cora agrees to keep a secret of the real reason she screamed at finding Offred in the closet, Offred is unusually pleased; “[i]t pleased me that she was willing to lie for me, even in such a small thing” (195). To her, it was proof of the beginning of intimacy or something similar to it: “It was a link between us” (195). Offred's isolation causes an intense need for positive contact in her that she needs to suppress for her own survival. Yet humans are not made for isolation. This is especially felt in her relations with both Nick and the Commander. Offred's connection with each of them are different in nature, yet the similarity is how both of them make her ‘seen’ and touched in a different way than the rest of her surroundings.

Offred's affair with Nick is one such instance in which she seems aware of her need for connection and of physical intimacy. She describes how, when being caught out at night by the driver Nick in page 127, their immediate reaction is to kiss. No flirting, no stating of intentions beforehand, simply straight to the physical act of kissing. At the beginning she attempts to use him as a replacement for her husband Luke, but she calls herself out in her recounting of the events. She asks Luke for understanding in her retelling of the events, thus implying that there is something more there other than physical attraction; intimacy. Starved from physical touch they reach out to each other in physical terms to create the illusion of intimacy. There is a need to ‘see’ each other, and Offred refers to this when speaking of her first secret meeting with Nick: “Possibly he wants something from me, some emotion, some acknowledgement that he too is human, is more than just a seedpod ” (Atwood, 339). She is echoing her own sentiments with Nick and we clearly see her wishing an intimate connection with him in the continuing pages when she tells him her name and of her past. Offred describes him looking at her looking at him, as if acknowledging each others’ humanity. In opposition to this she is very clear in how she refuses to watch the Commander, even while just kissing, “With the Commander I close my eyes, even when I am only kissing him good-night. I do not want to see him up close. But now, here, each time, I keep my eyes open” (346). She juxtaposes her very present presence in her sexual intercourse with Nick to her refusal of forging a connection with the Commander, and her description of refusal to look, to forge a connection that way is very apt.

Her relation to the Commander is complicated to Offred. I have talked about her wanting or needing connection and intimacy with others in her isolation, and yet here is someone who arguably wants the same but is rejected by her as much as she is able to in the situation. Or seemingly denied. It is clear to me and Offred to a certain degree that the Commander wants

something different than casual sex when Offred describes her first 'date' with the Commander. The idea that he might want intimacy is pointed out to us through his request to "kissed like she meant it" (180) at the end of their date. Further interaction with Offred shows us a man that is isolated at the top, seeking connection and intimacy with someone. He insinuates to Offred how he is distant from his wife when denying being able to scrabble with her (202). To Offred this is tinged with disbelief. That what he wants is simply companionship, intimacy, someone to 'understand him'. At one point she admonishes herself that she needs to take his desire for close intimacy seriously (186). After intimacy both emotional and physical has happened with the Commander and Offred, they are unable to not see each other on an intimate level during the ceremony in page 207, and she describes him as actually looking at her as opposed to before when the ceremony was impersonal. The aforementioned intimacy has created a 'knowing of one another', and Offred starts to feel conscious of her body. It is my belief that through being seen, of having been intimate with another, she is inhabiting her body more, she is tangible to him now; "[t]o him I'm no longer merely a usable body" (211). She is no longer seen as an object, but a person by the other, and so she feels her body more acutely. The same happens in reverse too; her view of the Commander is changed and she describes it as him no longer being a thing to her. The started intimacy between them is also what makes the Commander reach for her face during the ceremony (209), risking their 'affair' being revealed. When questioned about the action on a later date he reveals how the ceremony is too impersonal for him despite it being set up like that on purpose in yet another proof of his desire for some sort of intimacy.

However, despite the Commander's want for this intimacy with her, Offred chooses someone else instead to forge a connection with. Most likely due to their power-imbalance she describes herself as being unable to fulfil that desire for him, at least mentally: "What he wants intimacy, but I can't give him that" (273). Her awareness of the power imbalance is after all such that "[w]hat I think doesn't matter. Which is the only reason he can tell me these things" (273). What is interesting here is how Offred makes sure to point out to us her own unreliability as a narrator several times in her recounting of her times with the Commander. Is it guilt from enjoying her time with her oppressor, of the 'evil, bad guy, the villain of the movie' that she somehow forges an intimate connection to despite her will? When you 'see' someone, they become personable to you and less likely to remain a character like mentioned. Her ambiguity can be seen in how she tells the story of a woman who loved a Nazi with "[h]ow easy it is to invent a humanity for anyone at all" (188), clearly alluding to her relation to the Commander. A complicated relation where they have laughed together over Scrabble, formed a bond, yet the power imbalance is very uneven. If she sees humanity in him or if it is something she is saying to

justify herself and any choices/actions she might have made, is unknown to us. On the one hand she craves an intimate connection with Nick, disguising it as a craving for physical touch in the form of sex, on the other hand she needs intimate connection yet supposedly denies the Commander when he seeks an intimate connection to her. All the characters are isolated in different ways yet crave intimacy, be it emotional or physical.

Aunt Lydia attempts to incite intimacy between the Handmaids by insisting holding hands with all of them at the end of some sessions (62). Perhaps she seeks to make them supporters of each other, a security when faced with the harsh realities of the outside world, perhaps she seeks to legitimate the need for Handmaids as a 'all women for each other' despite the obvious power imbalance between the Wives and the Handmaids. She paints a picture of how "The women will live in harmony together, all in one family; you will be like daughters to them" (209), and describes them all as women united for a common goal or end. Some of this speech is affecting Offred, evidenced by how when she first got sent to the Wife Serena and the Commander Fred, she hoped for an intimate relation to Serena. In the end she justified her reactions of disappointment with the contemplation of how they most likely would not have liked each other out in a 'normal' world either.

The sisterhood the Aunts speak of do function in the way that there is some form of rapport and shared connection between the fellow Handmaids at the least. At the Reform Centre, the Handmaids receive physical comfort from each other by touching fingers to fingers while lying in beds side by side. There is also joy in a fellow Handmaid's pregnancy. The Birthmobile and the emotions and reactions inside it, are a good example of the connectedness between them. Offred is welcomed with physical touch immediately; "[i]mpulsively she grabs my hand, squeezes it" and "she throws her arms around me, I've never seen her before, she hugs me"(142). Touch is again highlighted, by her emphasising the hug not once, but twice in the same sentence. She is both surprised at the outward expression of emotion, yet not averse to the hug from a stranger, indicating she feels a sort of kinship? But this intimacy is, as with Aunt Lydia, only superficial. Offred ponders how Gilead in a twisted way have formed a women's society in a parody what her feminist mother wanted. There exists a strange sort of intimacy between the Handmaids, a shadow of a sisterhood some of the Aunts were trying to inspire mentioned previously. In page 366, when realising that the new Handmaid taking over for the Ofglen that was secretly with Mayday is not part of the same group, and Offred has said too much and is going in crisis mode, the Handmaid reveals, almost to reassure her, that Ofglen hanged herself before they could get her, and so has not revealed whatever incriminating thing

on whatever she believes Offred was part of. That speaks of compassion, if not empathy. However, the distrust is such that Offred believes vaguely that she might be lying.

Offred's body is something physical and tangible yet isolated. Her need for physical intimacy stems from living and being seen as something intangible or at best an object. Touch grounds her in her physical body, “can I be blamed for wanting a real body, to put my arms around? Without it I am disembodied” (132). Through this perspective and focus on intimacy in connection with touch, the presence of and the distance to her own body and the bodies around her is felt by the reader.

1.2 Embodying Through Senses

The senses connect us to our body, enabling us to feel present in our own bodies. The senses are important in how Offred relates to her own physical body. It is my theory that hyperfocusing on her senses is Offred unconsciously attempting to reclaim or inhabit her own body. By focusing on the material aspects around her such as physical touch or smell she is fighting against her own feeling of disembodiment.

In the novel, through Offred’s hyperfocus on her bodily senses in the narration, the reader is invited ‘into’ her body in a very intimate manner. Already in the first page there is a huge emphasis on various senses. Firstly, describing the place in detail before relaying an imaginary sensing of smell, “I thought I could smell, faintly like an afterimage, the pungent scent of sweat, shot through with the sweet taint of chewing gum and perfume” (3). Closely linked to memories, her senses play tricks on her. The sentence emphasises the sensory perceptions of her body and they are vivid in both her mind and as a result, the readers’.

The second chapter starts the same way, first with a detailed description of her surroundings and then with smell. Offred describes in meticulous detail how, when sitting in her chair in the room given to her, she can see the way the wind and the sun hits parts of the room and furniture, where she is. She can also seemingly smell the polish from the floor of the room she is in (9). By describing how she is sitting still in the room designated for her, focusing on her body’s other sensory perceptions, the reader is given the impression of being ‘stuck in her body with her’. By focusing on only sight and smell, both senses experienced from a distance, it gives a feeling of being trapped in one place, only able to rely on these other senses to her surroundings.

Offred is at once deeply affected by her body yet also disconnected to it. Living in a state of being caught between denying her body's reality and living in her head with memories of her past going on repeat, Offred's senses are what grounds her to her own body at the same time as it instigates these same flashbacks. In her article, Cooper notes that although the Handmaids are defined and confided by their bodies, there is an inability there to fully inhabit them. She points out how, by the society of Gilead denying and the 'depersonalization' of intimate experiences such as sex and childbirth, the Handmaids lack a relationship with their physical body. Offred attempts to inhabit her own body by hyperfocusing on her senses, and especially her lack of touch. The paradox here is that these senses also detach her from her own body in that they induce flashbacks to certain strong memories. Cooper describes the paradox of Offred's relation to her own body "as both present and absent, attractive and repellent" (101), and that it "complicates profoundly the heroine's struggle for control of her life" (101). Offred both relishes her body at the same time as she hates it. She is trapped by it yet seeks freedom in her memories. With her way of writing Cooper also insinuates that Offred is not alone in her experience of this failure to inhabit her body, and describes the Handmaids to be "at once involved and evacuated from their own experience" (Atwood, 100). The Handmaids are both engulfed by and alienated from their bodies.

Different senses seem to incite different reactions in Offred and her reliance on especially those of touch, sight and smell are significant. Especially the sensory perception of smell gives way to memories, to those of family and her motherhood. When Offred smells yeast, she declares the smells of mothers, and it brings her memories of her own motherhood and her own kitchen in the past "It smells of me, in former times, when I was a mother" (62). She then describes it as a treacherous smell, most likely as it brings back memories that are debilitating to her survival, such as memories of her child.

Often when Offred enters a room or a situation, the reader is introduced to the room in the form of several senses, not only sight. She gives detailed info on the layout of the room, the items there, but also what it smells like. From there she will often go on a tangent in her head, and recall memories' past. One such example is when Offred enters the sitting room; her description of the room is followed by the description of the smells: "The room smells of lemon oil, heavy cloth, fading daffodils, the leftover smells of cooking that have made their way from the kitchen or the dining room, and of Serena Joy's perfume..." (103). The smell of the perfume makes her think of prepubescent girls, pre-Gilead, of gifts given by girls to their mothers. The smell makes her nauseous when she thinks of their bodies not yet 'marred' by blood or hair, something that so defines them in this society.

Offred's perceptions are often mixed. She regularly uses the wrong senses in connection with others or when describing situations. When Janine cries at the Centre, Offred believes she can smell her tears, "the smell of her crying spreads over us and we pretend to ignore it" (117). Interesting and initially an odd word-choice of Atwood, yet it brings the scenes described to the reader in more clarity, a more grounded scene, more visceral. It gives the reader an almost material aspect to it. The words 'smelling tears' reminded me of what tears taste like, and that salty tangy taste is what I could 'smell' when reading the paragraph. In that way the reader's sense is also mixed up alongside Offred. Another interpretation with a material perspective is of Offred's relation to her own body. In an effort to emphasise Offred alienation to her own body, Atwood deliberately makes Offred mix her senses up, as if she is so alienated as to imagine what is not there. She is often not present, living in - *through* her past, yet the reality she is living in is also not really 'real' to her, seen by the unreliability of her senses.

One of the main senses Offred utilises is sight. Often seemingly stuck in one position, her senses most often used are those of sight and smell. She often gets lost in her own head and memories through these two senses. How situations are perceived are often important in the current society she lives in, and it also translates to what is implied, but also to how you are literally seen. For the Commander, Offred notes how he has most likely deliberately posed his own body before she enters his study, when they first begin having an affair. She clearly 'sees' how he wishes to be seen a very specific way. On his side, from his point of view, Offred is confident he enjoys watching her break the law, either through playing scrabble or going to the club. Moira, Offred's friend from pre-Gilead and a fellow Handmaid, puts it very aptly when she notes how the men get off of prancing the holy vessels around in illicit garbs (316). How one is perceived and seen seem very important, and to be seen a certain way is part of power-play in remaining in control. By focusing on sight and her lack of touch, Offred's powerlessness in her situation is highlighted.

Sight is also a point of intimacy when eyes meet. Her interest in Nick first starts with eye contact "He looks at me, and sees me looking" (24). On intimacy through eye contact, of being seen, the aunts at the centre describes it as 'being penetrated', something that should not be done, and is a major reason why the Handmaids wear the garb that they do. The Frock stops them from being seen and in turn limits their view in a literal sense. When Offred meets the eye of Offglen through the reflection in the window glass for the first time, she compares it to seeing someone naked, "There's a shock in this seeing; it's like seeing somebody naked, for the first time" (217). She describes being acutely aware of the dangers and vulnerability in the moment, yet finds it is also strangely intimate, as implied by the nakedness. They are both crossing a line together,

creating a connection. As we saw previously in the subject of clothes and materiality, by donning the frock and the red garb, Offred and the other Handmaids identities are erased in yet another way for Atwood to highlight their powerlessness and loss of identity. The garment and frock are symbols of their social identity and the loss of their individual identity. To Cooper the significance of the red garments and the hood the Handmaids are forced to wear is how they are “weighted with the contested meanings of the flesh and its fluids” (Cooper, 96). The colour red as symbol for red blood, for period blood, the sign of fertility.

Huang stresses that Atwood through *THT* rejects the notion of disembodiment and transcendence through her insisting on and focusing on the importance of embodiment and physical touch. “For Atwood, to be human is to recognize and accept our identity as material and physical things as well as immaterial constructed identities” (Huang, 92). The sense of touch often emphasises Offred's isolation and struggle. The lack of touch, both negative and positive, strongly affects Offred and frequently preoccupies her mind. The need to touch seems all-encompassing, brought on by the novel highlighting most if not all touch Offred receives and gives in the novel. Every gesture to touch is to her poignant and seems burned into Offred's mind, emphasising her touch-starved body. Touch is denied her yet it is also often the main sense she uses to inhabit and embody her own body. Through touch she notices her body and is grounded in it, almost as if reattaching herself to it.

Touch seems to be the main sense that ground Offred to her body and she is never more present when she touches either things or people. Offred describes how she would walk around the house touching things and hugging the cat after her traumatising experience of being let go and forcibly removed from her job. This signifies that touch gives her reassurance and comfort as well as being a grounding force, a self-soothing type of touch. In a situation that seems unreal Offred attempts to ground herself in reality through her physicality to her environment. Another such example is when she meets Moira again at the Jeezebel Club; “I touch her arm again. Then I begin to cry” (Atwood, 315). It is as if she needs the physical affirmation, the grounding that it is Moira before her in the living flesh before she can let go and give into a physical reaction. At the Centre, the Handmaids would touch each other from bed to bed in a chain at night. The need for some form of comfort in the way of touch is obvious to us. Perhaps it is an instinctive reaction after each day of mental torture through being forced to watch videos of torture to conditioning by shaming sessions at the hands of the Aunts, an effort to feel real and alive and comfort each other and to create a togetherness. In direct opposition to this is the Ceremony, where Offred is treated as an object to be used; every touch impersonal and the physical contact is minimal, a ritual rape designed specifically not to be intimate. Sometimes touch is used to

encourage intimacy, such as when Aunt Lydia at the centre gathers the Handmaids-in-training's hands together in a simulacra of friendship and sisterhood (62). Forging and feeling connection through touch is often to create the feeling of intimacy. When Offred first secretly meets with Moira at the Centre, the first thing they do is touch each other through the peephole in the stalls they are in, needing to reassure each other and to feel connection (116). Touch is the way for Offred to allow herself to feel, to inhabit her body, to establish connection, intimacy or other. A hug, a caress, a kiss are all something that belongs in the past, for Offred. The lack of touch is isolating and she fights this in subversive acts of touching.

1.3 Material Aspects: Clothes, Food, Nature and Environmental Issues

Margaret Atwood's works are characterised by a very present materiality. In vivid details she describes the body through her main character. In *THT* we meet Offred and through the narrative and focus on her inner world, we are introduced to her body and thoughts on its presence in the heavily constricted world of Gilead. Offred's lived reality is visceral in which her fixation with her body and what she puts in her mouth and her need for touch is juxtaposed with her preoccupation with her past in the form of flashbacks and of her inner monologue playing with language and its uses. In the introduction to this thesis I stated how Atwood melds discourse and material aspects, and Offred's fixation with her body and language is a great example of this. Discourse is explored through a focus on language as bearers of meaning while awareness of her body and her physical environment in the form of clothes and nature ties the novel to lived, actual experience. The material elements of *THT* can arguably be said to be both Offred's focus on her own body, her senses, what she puts in her mouth and what she wears on her body. The fixation on these elements by the character enhances our perception of her lived material body.

The material aspects of Atwood's novel augment and intensify the lived experience felt while reading, and the very texture is vivid in the description of everyday literal material items such as clothes and food. The colour-coded clothing found in the society of Gilead denotes both class and type of work. In her clothing, Offred often describes feeling constrained. The symbol of her isolation, the frock, is described by her as white wings and as "white tunnels of cloths that enclose us" (Atwood, 25). The role the clothes denotes her is one that is heavily constrained and so her clothes are the same. The dress and frock the Handmaids are forced to wear seems uncomfortable to the reader and this allows us to get a sense of her body condition. One example

of this is when Offred describes how herself and Offglen are sweating in the long dresses, “we are hot in our long dresses, wet under the arms, tired” (Atwood, 213). The Handmaids’ suffering is emphasised by the clothes they are forced to wear. In her article, “A Body Story with a Vengeance”: Anatomy and Struggle in *The Bell Jar* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1997), Pamela Cooper focuses on clothes in the context of materiality and symbolism. She argues that the clothes very visibly points out the female body in that it denotes a potential fertile body, yet at the same time it also makes the individuality of the bearer invisible. Cooper links the colour red of the dress the Handmaids are forced to wear with something material such as period blood. As we can see in the opening of the novel, Offred describes seeing herself in the window, as “a Sister, dipped in blood” (Atwood, 11) in a visceral description of her suffering and a symbol of her fertility.

The entirety of *THT* and Atwood’s world of Gilead tightly connects women with nature. “All flesh is weak. All flesh is grass, I corrected her in my head” (Atwood, 60). It is clear what role the natural environment has in the creation of Gilead with declining births, deformity amongst children and toxic waste loose in the surroundings. By presenting Gilead as a product of what happens when Christian conservative forces combined with natural disasters/environmental issues in rise gains traction is a deadly combination.

In his article “Ethics of Materiality and Commitment in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*” (2010) Peter I-min Huang posits that the novel “speaks for an ethics of materiality that recognizes the corporeal grounding of consciousness, commitment to kinship and communication with nature even as it refuses to see nature and culture as independent entities” (Huang, 88). He is of the opinion that the novel puts emphasis on the importance of kinship and communication with nature as well as the interconnectedness between nature and culture. According to Huang, *THT* represents a dystopia where society represses and eradicates both the human and nature by replacing it with something else in a simulated experience, a simulacrum. By creating the Handmaids, inventing rituals such as the ceremony and treating them like ‘two-legged wombs’, the society of Gilead is replacing real with copies.

Stacy Alaimo discusses in her intro to the book *Material Feminisms* (2008) how materiality forges new paths of looking at the environment not in opposition to the human (e.g. owls vs. loggers in a nature/human dichotomy), but places it in the ‘home’ of humans and reveals how certain groups of people such as lower class people, indigenous people and people of color carry a higher toxic load (Alaimo, 9). In Gilead those groups of minorities are in viscerally punished by having to clean toxic waste that has permeated the entire world. Atwood’s Gilead in many ways points out the close relation between the underprivileged and toxins in the

environment by clearly using humanity's destruction of nature and its result to punish the less privileged in Gilead, much the same way that underprivileged suffer from toxins and lack of medical access today. The scenario we see is a society where the nature, suffering from human pollution, is used as a punishment for the human bodies that opposes Gilead. Several times in the novel Offred describes the punishment for outliers in the society in the form of cleaning up 'toxic wastes' from areas where pollution is extreme; "[t]he other Colonies are worse, though, the toxic dumps and the radiation spills. They figure you've got three years maximum, at those, before your nose falls off and your skin pulls away like rubber gloves" (Atwood, 323). The regime of Gilead and its population is in a sort of symbiosis with the environmental ramifications of its abuse pre-Gilead. In an effort to repair said damages, certain powers have been allowed to come into play, thus an imbrication of nature and culture where the consequences of having ignored nature have had real consequences on the population. Here, the materiality of nature has been taken seriously and allowed to take up space in the novel.

There is a focus on nature and the environment in the novel, and it often originated as the cause and creation of the restricted regime of Gilead according to Offred. She describes how "the air got too full, once, of chemicals, rays, radiation, the water swarmed with toxic molecules, all of that takes years to clean up, and meanwhile they creep into your body, camp out in your fatty cells" (Atwood, 143). And on the reasons for the declining birth-rate: "Who knows, your flesh may be polluted, dirty as an oil beach, sure to death to shore birds and unborn babies" (143). One of the Aunts, Lydia, at the Reformation Centre also describes some of the environmental issues/challenges the American society dealt with before the creation of Gilead; "the exploding atomic power plants, along the San Andreas fault, nobody's fault, during the earthquakes, and the mutant strain of syphilis no mould could touch" (144). She explains, and shows graphs of declining birth-rates citing no one reason for it. Interestingly, the researchers showing off Offred's tapes several decades later can also not accurately point out the reason for the infertility and decline in birth-rates but points to several issues the society were battling, such as the R-strain Syphilis, the AIDS epidemic, and stillbirths, miscarriages and genetic deformities increasing as a result of "various nuclear-plant accidents, shutdowns and incidents of sabotage that characterized the pe-riod, as well as leakages from chemical and biological-warfare stockpiles and toxic-waste disposal sites... and to the controlled use of chemical insecticides, herbicides, and other sprays" (386). The heavy focus on the declining birth rate by both Aunt Lydia, representing the current regime and the researchers points to that the human fertile body was a rarity in a future (past) that was greatly affected by their environment, to such a degree that political takeover was made possible.

There are traces of nature's importance in the day-to-day lives of the characters and their relations to each other. The meticulous details of her daily intake of food and the space Offred offers it in her retelling of events means that food has a special significance in the novel. Her preoccupation with food reveals a focus on vital parts of keeping her body alive, but also the state of her environment: the food-shortage and importance of clean food in the world. It also points out environmental issues such as issues of the past with over processed food and fruits/veggies with toxic pesticide artificially enhanced that worried many at the time. This blend of bodily focus in the form of food intake and insight into environmental factor due to the types of food and access is in line with material thought in removing the human/nature binary.

In her article Cooper also discusses the embodiment of Offred and her fixation of her own body and what goes in and out of it. She terms *THT* as a 'body story' where biology-as-destiny functions as the root for an anorexic fantasy, one of disembodiment, at the same time as it provides resistance through bodily openness. Food and blood, their functions and symbolisms to the characters are both under her microscope. The body in *THT* is for Cooper, a "highly contested site of entrap[-]ment — a sort of bloody gilded cage" (Cooper, 94). According to Cooper, Atwood 'writes the body' by interrogating the binary of the spirit and the flesh in a feminised version. There is language in *THT* that reinforce and question the parallels between the stomach and the uterus. The uterus is vulnerable and open to invasion by 'the other', and because of this, resistance can be found in the stomach. This is the site of resistance, where female self-identity can be explored, "as instrument and symbol of women's seizure of power" (Cooper, 114). Materiality of language and language as food is the way for female subjecthood and empowerment in which the female body through its orifices ingest and discards language. In *THT*, emotions such as deprivation and loss are both experienced as hunger to Offred. Throughout the novel Offred lists in detail the meals she has as a Handmaid. According to Cooper, Atwood explores the female body in connection with gender and consumption. In this context, Cooper reads Offred's fascination with her own body and food as her wishing herself disembodied through a fantasy that is anorexic in nature, "an anorexic fantasy of self-sufficient, desexualised being: emancipation as emaciation" (Cooper, 105). Cooper links Offred's obsession and fantasies with food as a wish to be disembodied. Lacking in the material aspect of the meaning of the food itself in the bigger narrative and its connection to the body, she overlooks the material ramifications of the food itself. By focusing on language as food and not the actual food the body ingests, she misses the imbrication of nature and our bodies. Tasting words, feeling hunger in connection with emotions are material only in the sense that they connect to the bodies' senses. The connection of food to other material aspects such as resources available,

environmental issues, higher structures is lacking in this analysis. However, Cooper's article is important in its focus on Offred's body as material with focus on the stomach and uterus as a site of resistance. The implication of food is also important to discuss. Through Offred's focus on the sort of foods she eats, how she obtains it, what kind, and her thoughts surrounding it, we get an idea of the world around her and its state. It is telling how environmental issues are mentioned in the novel, often in connection with motherhood but also food. Food shortage, aspersions on unnatural additives and the focus on 'clean' non-polluted food and its importance is highlighted in the novel through Offred. The wish to be disembodied and resistant to her environment/the current regime is only part of a whole that material feminism seeks to explain.

Atwood partly addresses a critique of lack of material feminism in its lack of focus of real ramifications of the natural world. Nature, toxins and food are very much important material factors that are considered in the novel. They have been given significant space and through the material body of Offred and its placement in the society of Gilead we are given a warning and an emphasis on the importance of the material focus in the world. Through practices seen in Gilead we can spot how nature has affected the society found there. According to Alaimo, practices are embodied situated actions (Alaimo, 7) and phrases such as 'Blessed be the fruit' used in Gilead indicates the focus on nature as being part of a whole bigger part of the world. This is also where one can criticize the essentialist aspects found in *THT*, for women are intrinsically linked to nature in the novel. Technology advantages are clearly stopped and they have gone 'back in time' in such a way that many of those are deemed as against nature such as ultrasounds.

Environmental issues have an impact on women's rights and goal of equality. The novel can be deemed as a warning story on what could happen if one does not take environmental issues seriously. What will our society look like if these problems are not dealt with? Perhaps something like Gilead, where the female body and autonomy has been sacrificed for the 'greater good'.

1.4 Bodies as Objects and Animals

Bodily identity is very important in the world Atwood has created. To Offred it is very much rooted in the imagery of both objects and animals and she often compares herself and others around her to that of animals and objects. To the reader it emphasises her helplessness in her situation and her own distance to her own body. The lack of intimacy and closeness to others makes her compare everyone around her, not only the repressed but also the repressors, to

objects and animals. The humanity of not only herself, but also of those around her is reduced to objects, as if they all are helpless to the machinery of the ideology that Gilead produces. Offred's objectifying of her surroundings and herself blurs the line of what is real, copied and constructed. In his article, mentioned in the beginning of the thesis, Huang also posits that the novel refuses the concept of replacing reality with simulation (the real by the simulacrum). What is real, what is copied and what is constructed is confused, yet we the reader are invited into Offred's inner world and through it are made to sympathise with a material body that has been denied its reality (89); a reality emphasised by Offred's thoughts on her own body and her longing for touch and intimacy. As a result, the reader is forced to rely on the reality of her body in any given situation. Much the way her anchor is her body; it is also the reader's anchor in the narrative. We experience Offred's anguish of her material body and its rejection as real with her, and empathise with her need to redefine herself in terms and symbols that mirrors her situation more closely than her identity as something human.

The Handmaids are indoctrinated at the centre in such a way that they are supposed to see themselves as objects, as vessels and as breeding machines. At the centre, Aunt Lydia compares the Handmaids to valuable things (Atwood, 145) and tells them that they have "Gilead within themselves", possibly referring to the next generation they will bear (31). Their bodies are completely owned by the regime and they are controlled by the Aunts to such a degree that they are denied touch and denied basic rights. Offred describes one of the Handmaids wetting the floor when denied the right to go to the toilet and being punished for it (93). Another way of reducing the identities of the Handmaids as from humans to objects to be used is the allowance of physical harm as long as the uterus is still functional. When another Handmaid gets punished, Offred mentions how physical injury enough to permanently damage is allowed, as long as the uterus is intact and functional (118); they are reduced to mere wombs while the rest is expendable. Though the Aunts the regime seeks to control them, despite that there will always be acts of rebellion, best exemplified by Moira escaping. Yet there are also smaller, more subversive acts that the Handmaids display, such as comfort through touch and creating intimacy through this. Another subversive act connected to rejecting the notion of being treated as an object is the Handmaid-ritual of smearing their hands and face with butter to soften and take care of themselves and their appearance. Denied the use of hand-and face lotion by the Wives as a no-need item, the act of taking care of themselves is made with the belief that they will be worthy of touch again in the future; "[a]s long as we do this, butter our skin to keep it soft, we can believe that we will some day get out, that we will be touched again, in love or desire" (125). Through

taking care of their bodies, the Handmaids use this as a subversive act by still hoping for and working towards the idea of being loved again.

Bodily identity for the Handmaids is also very much influenced by their environment. Objectifying themselves is both a coping method for the Handmaids but also how the surrounding sees them, how they're *supposed* to see them. They are to be seen as vessels not used for anything other than giving birth to healthy children, as we see with the refusal of hand/face lotion, "We are containers, it's only the insides of our bodies that are important. The outside can be-come hard and wrinkled, for all they care, like the shell of a nut" (125). Another example of the environment seeing them as simply a body, is how their faces and that of their doctors' is hidden during the entirety of an appointment. Standard practice is that their faces will be hidden and only the nether parts will be shown (78). As discussed previously the clothing also denotes the Handmaids to objects in their functions of erasing their identities but also in how the garment hides their person completely. When the Handmaids go outside, most of their face will be hidden from sight, and eye contact should not and is not easily made. The Handmaids are disconnected from themselves but also from the outside world in a very literal way; shrouded from the world in a constricted symbol of clothing they are forbidden from speaking, looking at and touching most people. Even in the more personal relations, the Handmaids are treated as objects. In her preparation for the ceremony, Offred emphasises how she is to present as something rather than someone, to "present a made thing, not something born" (86). It is important to those around her not to be remembered of her humanity, as what they are doing to her can be considered 'inhumane' by their own actions. Offred's mindset before the ceremony is for their sake yet also for herself. In her description of the rituals before the rape itself, Offred describes herself as being treated like furniture by the Wife, Joy when she supports herself on Offred as she goes to sit down (101).

Offred's view of herself as an object is influenced from the outside, but also used as a coping mechanism. In a sort of self-defence Offred replaces herself with an object as if to illustrate her helplessness in the situation as well as her isolation. By presenting herself as an object, she gains emotional distance to her own body and what is happening to it. Through disconnecting to her own body her lack of intimacy and connection is also easier to bear. Being cut off from all she holds dear, her mental health is suffering and her view of her own body is tainted by bitterness. When Offred is taking a bath: "I don't want to look at something that determines me" (82). Offred describes pointedly how her view of her own body has changed with the creation of Gilead, and thinks back on how she used to think of her body as 'an instrument of pleasure, transportation etc.', and how it now has now narrowed down to the view

of her body as ‘a cloud with a uterus at its centre’ (95). Her importance in the world of Gilead is her ability to give birth, and so through indoctrination by the Aunts at the Centre her mind-set is slightly changed. Her body’s ability to give birth is now at the centre of her identity, and the rest of what constitutes self is erased. The image she presents of herself, as a uterus surrounded by a cloud, is very much how the society of Gilead sees her and the Handmaids, as objects with the ability to give life. Everything outside of that needs to and has to be diffuse, affecting how she views herself and her bodily identity. We especially see this in her preparations for the Ceremony by comparing herself to a moon and a national resource, which is, after all, how she is to be presented as and seen as by the Aunts at the Centre. Offred does not only objectify herself and her fellow Handmaids, but everyone in the world of Gilead. She is also under the impression that everyone else does the same as her. Her description of how the Commander surely took ‘inventory’ of the room during bible-reading, when looking around at the different people in the room points to this. Both the suppressed and the suppressors are compared to objects. In one instance we see Offred comparing him to a piece of clothing one can try on to see if they fit (113).

To emphasise their helplessness in an oppressive environment and ideology that shuns certain group’s autonomy, Offred often compares herself and her surroundings to imagery of animals reflective of their situations and her feelings in them. Her fellow Handmaids are often compared to animals that reflect their situation and feelings of helplessness and entrapment. Offred imagines the Handmaids as prized pigs when imagining the conversations between the wives, to illustrate their status as lesser than human, in many ways. Janine, “was paraded in front of her...so they could feel her belly” (147) and talk of her as if she is not present, describing her muscles and of her strength as one would an animal, and talking of each Handmaids' cleanliness and docility as if they were unruly pets. Offred clearly believes, and it is not unfounded, that the Wives view the Handmaids as something lesser than human. The Aunts also have this view of the Handmaids; in her retelling of a flashback, Aunt Lydia clearly compares the them to ‘greedy pigs’ when she warns them of demanding too much in their roles as Handmaids (210).

Offred herself compares Handmaids to animals. When she enters the room where Janine is giving birth surrounded by her fellow Handmaids, she describes the smell of Janine as that of smells of animals and associations to cats giving birth (158). Offred also often likens herself to an animal; in her boredom Offred illustrates her isolation by comparing herself to a pig in a pen and emphasising how they, at least, have entertainment in the form of a pig ball unlike herself. The ending of the thought on this is the wish to have one such pig ball, signifying that she terms herself similar to the pig, “I wish I had a pig ball” (90). Another example is comparing women in

general to that of animals, to emphasise their new status of restricted autonomy, much the same as animals'. In one of her flashbacks, during the time the takeover happened, and measures were taken to deprive women of their jobs, she describes herself and her fellow female co-workers as wild animals when being collectively fired from their jobs: "He said this almost gently, as if we were wild animals, frogs he'd caught, in a jar, as if he were being humane" (228). Perhaps the usage of the animal imagery is to emphasise that women's status is comparable to an animal in the society of Gilead.

Many of the oppressors are also relegated to animals. She compares Aunt Lydia to a rodent during a speech of hers. Comparing Lydia to a dead rodent, "her front teeth, teeth that stuck out a little and were long and yellowish, and I thought about the dead mice we would find on the doorstep... Aunt Lydia pressed her hand over her mouth of a dead rodent" (73). In the same way she often compares her surroundings to objects, she also compares them to animals. What, then, is the status of an animal to her? Often they too, are viewed as things. This tendency to compare herself and other humans to objects and animals reflects Offred's mental state of helplessness and especially the disembodiment previously discussed in this chapter.

By comparing herself and those around her to objects and animals, the reader embodies Offred, and the reality of her trapped situation is more visceral. At the same time it forces the reader to rely on the body for what is real or not. What I have described is Offred being victim to and of producing a discourse of objectification and categorising of the self and the bodies around her as objects/animals in order to survive a heavily repressed and brutal regime that controls on a very intimate level. That leaves the reader to rely on the body; on her body to know what is real.

1.5 Motherhood

"We are two-legged wombs" (Atwood, 176).

As mentioned in previously in this chapter, there can be read an essentialist notion to Atwood's writing, which is especially important to consider when discussing the theme of motherhood in the novel. The narrative emphasises motherhood in its portrayal of Gilead and the female characters; Offred's fixation with motherhood and her own past longing for her child is an example of this, and positions motherhood at the centre of the novel.

Children and motherhood is very much at the centre of Offred's thoughts. Reoccurring themes of running through her thoughts are ruminations of the importance of her conceiving a child, and avoidance of or not-thinking of her lost child and memories of herself as a mother and

memories of her own mother. One of many examples of this is when Offred smells yeast, she declares the smells of mothers and it brings her memories of her own motherhood and herself in her kitchen in the past, “[i]t smells of me, in former times, when I was a mother” (62).

Motherhood is also presented as a source of strength. It is only when the Wife Serena reveals she knows where Offred’s child is that Offred starts revealing agency and starts moving towards freedom with a purpose; reuniting with her child. After Serena reveals knowledge of her child, Offred almost ‘wakes’ up a little and realises now that her child can be used against her. When worried of being revealed as a member of the underground resistance group Mayday, the most prevalent thought is “[t]hey know where my child is” (366). Her motherhood is presented as mostly a source of strength but also a weakness. What can be analysed as essential here is that most of Offred’s thoughts revolve around motherhood. Thoughts of her child haunt her at the same time as she needs to be with child in order to survive, to ‘earn her keep’ so to speak. When Offred moves in the world she is also thinking not only of herself but also of her child.

Not only does Offred’s focus on motherhood foreground the theme in the novel, but the premises of Gilead itself is based on the idea of reproduction. The function of women in the regime is to reproduce and take care of the home. The Handmaids are an aide in this, and their entire existence is tied to their reproduction system, and only that. And so the goal for Handmaids, and something they are in many ways brainwashed into wanting at the Centre, is to have healthy children. For the Aunts at the Centre, it is to further their society and to replenish the decreasing number of children born; for the Handmaids it is their ticket to freedom, to be immune to being branded an ‘unwoman’ and sent to the colonies full of toxic waste.

The theme of motherhood also exists in the relations between the women in Gilead. In the chapter on intimacy I mentioned the idea of sisterhood the Aunts wish to project to the Handmaids, but this also relates to motherhood. There is an ideal of motherhood taught by the Aunts in Gilead, of a mother-daughter relation between the Wives and the Handmaids where the latter is seen as a beloved daughter of the family. When Offred first meets her current Wife and Commander, she too, wished for such a relationship; “I was disappointed. I wanted, then, to turn her into an older motherly figure, someone who would understand and protect me” (21). Offred wished for a relation much like or similar to the sisterhood the Aunts wished them to inspire to.

The foundation of the Handmaids is built on the premises of children and by extension, motherhood. The ultimate goal and key to freedom is bearing a child. Children means freedom from, at the same time as it chains, in a dichotomy witnessed by Offred’s pining for the child taken from her pre-Gilead while at the same time attempting to conceive another. The focus of motherhood is very easily interpreted as being at the foreground of the novel and thus could be seen

as Atwood insinuating or projecting that motherhood and having children is the most important role a woman. Here is where materialist feminism might change this focus, to the actual female biological body instead. A materialist feminist might say that the female biological body is capable of having children and so a natural extension of that is motherhood, hence this focus in the novel. Thus, that is something one has to take into consideration, a lived experience that is indubitably connected to matter and to an extent divorced from discourse. It is a purely biological function that has happened as long as mankind has been alive. The view of it has differed through the time, but not the material function/process itself. Pregnancy is perhaps the key as to why bodily matter matters.

1.6 Black History; Only It Happens to White People

The white female body is prevalent in *THT*. One aspect that stood out while reading in the novel is the absence of the presence of the black female body in the novel. The space put aside for the black female body is one single mention in the beginning of the novel, where it is mentioned as a side note that Rita's arm is brown during a long and detailed description of the garb the Marthas use; "[h]er sleeves are rolled to the elbow, showing her brown arms" (12). While there are mentions of minorities such as sexual minorities represented through the character of Moira and the struggles they face in society, there is no mention of the struggle of the black body in the novel. Clarkisha Kent points out something very poignant and important in her article "The Black Woman's Tale: Why Margaret Atwood's Espousal of White Feminist Beliefs Shouldn't Surprise You" (2018), and that is that *THT* is not really a feminist novel. According to her novel is a *white* feminist novel, in which there is no room for women of colour's experiences. Kent critiques Atwood's stance on the recent #metoo-movement and is of the opinion that she upholds white supremacy in her defence of white males of power coming under scrutiny for sexual misconduct. Kent points out how white women often defend white patriarchy and uses Atwood as an example of a prominent figure within feminism that upholds toxic white feminism. Kent also accuses Atwood of stealing both terminology and history from black female voices. In the case of *THT* she refers to an article by Ana Cottle on how Atwood has used the historically enslavement of black women's bodies as a pattern for her own narrative. The novel "imagines a white-woman dystopia by stealing and re-appropriating the historical injustices done to black women in America by way of slavery" (Kent). According to Kent, the core of novel is a world where women are treated as cattle where their autonomy and especially of their bodies are non-

existent. It is a replica, or to draw lines to Huang, a simulacra where the patterns are the same as those seen in history, where Atwood has replaced the black female body with a white female body.

Cottle takes a closer look at this pattern in her article “The Handmaid’s Tale’: A White Feminist’s Dystopia” (2018). Here she traces the ways in which Atwood treats the white female body in both the novel and the series, and problematises how Atwood appropriates a narrative taken/copied from how women of colour have been treated throughout history, and specifically mentions the female African-American body when drawing these parallels. She acknowledges that the novel was meant to be a commentary on slavery, colonialism and white supremacy but is of the opinion that the erasing of African-American bodies while focusing on white women’s plight is problematic. Forced domestic work, names signifying ownership, and forced sexual relations, power imbalance and more seen in the series are taken from the non-white slave experiences throughout history. The series have taken steps to combat this, which will be explored further in chapter two of this thesis.

1.7 Summary

In this chapter I have established the material dimensions of the feminist aspects in Atwood’s *THT* by presenting theories of materiality through the lived experience of the main character, Offred. In my reading of lived experience I start with mapping how the material body in *THT* is a site of resistance in the form of subversive touch and Offred’s longing for intimacy. By emphasising her disconnect and subsequent yearning to embody herself, I examine how this affects the presentation of her lived experience. I then include outside factors that affect the women of Gilead, such as clothes, food and nature. In doing so, factors that might otherwise be dismissed or erased in favour of language or culture is included in a material reading takes into account both discourse and matter. I then present the way the use of language affects the women of Gilead through their objectification and comparison to animals. The bodies of these women are both treated and spoken of in animalistic terms. In the language used and through their treatment, the women are debased to their biological function. This idea of female bodies being tools for procreation is also being internalised, as I demonstrate through examples from Aunt Lydia, who presents the Handmaids as prized objects rather than people. Whereas Aunt Lydia represents one of the outside voices in the perspective on the Handmaids’ bodies, Offred offers another perspective through her lived experience; she internalises the perspective of others so

much that it functions as a coping mechanism, allowing herself to be separated from her own body, as opposed to intimacy which tethers her to it.

Next in the chapter I describe how motherhood is a key aspect of Gilead. The rulers have reduced the term through its focus on the biological parts of motherhood. In many ways reproduction is backbone of Gilead's and its function and overarching purpose, and motherhood has become industrialized through the use of Handmaids. I then point out how putting motherhood at the forefront of the novel can be seen as Atwood imbuing an essential notion motherhood being the most important role for a woman. This I then explain away through material feminism focus on lived experience by pointing out that pregnancy is a purely biological function divorced from discourse.

Lastly in this chapter I have explained how *THT* is to be considered a white feminist story due in part to its erasure of race. While Atwood's dystopian Gilead depicts a horrendous future for the autonomy of the white female body, it erases the experience of female black lived body and experience by superimposing a white female body in its stead. I then present how Atwood may be seen as appropriating the history of the actual lived experiences of black women in her narrative. This is important to take into consideration, as material feminisms seek to represent a fuller picture of lived experiences.

2 *The Handmaid's Tale* TV Show

The goal for this chapter is to discover how the presentation of the female body and material aspects of *THT* novel differs when translated into another medium such as film. I will use the Hulu TV show *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017) created by Bruce Miller to analyse the different configurations of the female body and especially that of the main character in a material feminist context. Season one is the only season that correlates to the *THT* novel, and so that is the one I will focus on. Through the main focus and themes such as the senses, the environment, bodily identity, and motherhood, the presentation of the female body will be discussed as well as critiqued. The novel and the show does not only differ in medium, however, as they are also produced at different times, hence there is a different focus on the body and take on the problems of their time that these mediums channel. Are these changing criterion affecting the material aspects found? And how does what I have discussed in chapter one of use of the senses, intimacy, especially, translate to the screen? Referring back to my understanding of material feminism in the introduction to this thesis I will explore these factors and more in this chapter.

First I will analyse the medium of film from a material perspective. When I first approached this chapter's subject matter, I first had to try to delineate exactly what constitutes material matter within film. Is it sound or sight? Furthermore, does it take into account the body of the actor/actress? What about the bodies of the audience? These questions are however difficult to answer, and I must admit that I am still unsure if they can be called material. Visual media such as film and series automatically has to take the visible into account and yet where these elements fit within material feminism is hard to decide.

While exploring the presentation of the female body in the show and comparing them to the novel in this chapter I will attempt to include and answer some of these questions.

In the context of visual media and the female body, the portrayal of the female body has been particularly in focus with the introduction of feminist theory to the screen, but especially in the later years where feminism has become part of mainstream media. The *THT* show, with its the female protagonists and focus on her experience is very much a part of this discourse. When discussing the medium of film in a feminist context, one text that has been important in regards to this topic is Laura Mulvey's article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). According to Parker, one of the most influential articles within feminist film criticism is Mulvey's article about Hollywood cinema where the masculine subject, the spectator is gazing at

the feminine object who is being gazed at (Parker, 169). In her article, Mulvey uses psychoanalysis based on Freud and Lacan, and uses narrative theory to explain how women in film are reduced to objects of the male gaze. They

stand[s] in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies...by imposing them on the silent image of a woman still tied to her place as a bearer, not maker, of meaning (Mulvey, 232).

Through the lens of feminism she argues that certain camera-work etc. positions the audience as that of the male voyeur that views the women as erotic objects. This gaze is a male heterosexual gaze, and what is being viewed is made for only their pleasure, thus losing agency. The female-led show that is *THT* circumvents this passiveness by changing the character found in the show versus the novel and by incorporating certain effects to combat this gaze. In chapter one I explained how the *THT* novel can come off as essential in some parts of my analysis. The outwardly passive Offred presented by the novel can quickly become very much aligned with the description of the docile passive female character being gazed at if one were to translate her character to the screen, and something to take into consideration when exploring the presentation of her body in the show. I posit that the show attempts to combat this gaze by presenting Offred's character as more active than her novel counterpart.

2.1 Differences and Agency

To those who have read the novel and watched the show, there is one noticeable difference in temperament between the main characters. The experiences of (novel) Offred in Gilead is introduced to us through her inner monologue and frequent flashbacks, and to translate this to a physical visual media must then result in a more action-driven Offred rather than the outwardly docile Offred presented to us in the novel. The increase in agency seen in the show can be due to the need of holding the audience's interest. In the novel, Offred rouses from her self-imposed apathy in spurts through the news of her daughter's whereabouts and through her law-breaking affair with Nick, yet she continues to be contained and, perhaps no longer apathetic, but hidden in her subversiveness. Compared to her, the portrayal of Offred in the show is openly defiant and in possession of an agency that far surpasses that of her counterpart. Unlike the one found in the novel, the Offred in the show introduces herself to us as June in the first episode, clearly stating

her separate identity of that of the Offred found in the novel. This statement is also an indication of her larger agency and clearly stating her separate identity to that of a Handmaid to the audience. This assertiveness, and at times open defiance of the regime, is seen continuously through the show.

In episode one of the show we are introduced to our first Salvaging, where Offred discards the fearful passiveness of the Offred presented in the novel and openly glares at Aunt Lydia during her speech (42:46-51) in direct contrast to the carefulness that Offred should exhibit. This physical manifestation of her defiance is something that might seem jarring to someone that has read the novel, as it cements that this Offred is different from her novel counterpart, more unafraid and assertive than her counterpart. In the *THT* novel, Offred is described as being shocked at her fellow Handmaid's Ofglen's brutality when she starts kicking the man being put to death by the Handmaids (Atwood, 350). This is changed in the show where Offred is the first to incite the assault during the execution and she gets in several physical attacks in before the rest joins her (Miller, "Offred" 44:30-41). The brutality she exhibits is startling, and starkly different from her counterparts shock at the violence exhibited. The Offred in the show uses her grief at the news of Moira's supposed death and has the courage to change it into rage, while the Offred in the novel does not have this incentive due to the plot difference (in the novel, Moira's whereabouts are unknown).

In "Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum" in the show Offred is presented with much more agency in a plot divergence from the novel. During a flashback to her time at the Rachel and Lea Centre, where the fertile women were conditioned into the service of Handmaids, Offred and Moira makes an escape attempt. Only, in the novel Moira is the only one to attempt and eventually succeed in escaping; Offred does not dare. In the show Offred is not only part of the escape she is just as active as Moira. During their capture of one of the Aunts she is the more vindictive of the two, and tases the Aunt after she takes too long to obey (Miller, 23:50-58). The larger agency and empowerment that Offred inhabits in the show changes the dynamic between her and Moira, as well as that of the reader and audience. The passiveness of the Offred found in the novel is contrasted with the active and 'strong' Moira, making Offred's apathy and fear more clearly to us.

Due to the difference in when the novel and the show is produced, this is also something that is reflected in the difference in agency seen in the main character. The show is produced in the present time where the trope of the kick-ass heroine is popular within mainstream media, which certainly have an affect on the portrayal of Offred's. The active heroine's rejection of the regime is how Offred is portrayed in the show. In being presented to us as a 'go-get-it' type of

empowered woman, it relies on her status as a saviour, which might be seen as problematic and is something that will be explored in detail later in this chapter.

In one memorable scene in the show that is created entirely for the show, Offred is presented as the only one capable of “saving” her fellow Handmaid Janine when she threatens to jump off it with her baby in a desperate bid to not be separated. “Make her listen. Save that child” (Miller, “The Bridge” 35:41-45), Aunt Lydia tells Offred, as if she is the only one capable of stopping her, thus positioning Offred as an authority and saviour of Janine. This scene clearly shows the difference in the Offred of the novel versus the one portrayed in the show. In the show we see that there is a little more leeway in her actions and what she is allowed to act out on. In conclusion Offred – and her body – has been given a much larger agency in the light of the type of feminism popular today, compared to the Offred of the novel whose agency is much less noticeable.

One big difference between the show is the different settings in that their flashbacks are set to different times. The producers have chosen the flashbacks to our time rather than to follow the novel’s flashbacks to the 80’s. This change of the flashbacks in the show to our time also changes the prevalent issues being discussed and upholding the younger generation. The current discourse of the female body and empowerment are a notable difference from the novel, but also the attitude towards certain themes such as homosexuality and race are notable in the show. In “Offred” themes such as homosexuality is treated as less of a problematic subject than in the novel. In the episode, during a flashback to her college-days, Offred remembers being amused at and talking in public to Moira about her friend not knowing her female flirt’s name (Miller, 16:30-42). In the *THT* novel, Offred describes herself as struggling with the revelation of Moira’s sexuality, yet in the show this is presented as a non-issue. Present day issues such as campus sexual assault is incorporated into the show through mention of Offred’s assignment on campus sexual assault during said flashback.

Certain bodies and how we talk about them are treated differently in different time periods and this reflects the way the female body is treated and represented both in the novel and the show. However, questions I am left with are: Why rebel and be noticed in a society Offred in the novel describes as dangerous to be noticed in? In addition to this the producers have sacrificed Offred’s attitude change in the novel and imposed this as being static. Simply put, there is no noticeable shift in pushback in the manner described in the novel. The Offred presented in the novel is so relatable precisely because of her apathy and fear in such a dangerous regime - not despite it, and that the show erases that is unfortunate. The novel presents covert bravery; the show presents an overt bravery. The two main characters presented in the

novel and the film demonstrates and inhabits their lived bodies differently. This dynamic versus static agency they present might affect a material feminist reading and is important to note.

The representation of certain bodies face similar problems of representation even if they are produced in different time periods. In chapter one I discussed how Atwood has received criticism for erasing the issue of race in her novel and as we will later discuss, the show makes a similar mistake by, ironically, including race in the show in a manner that can be seen as problematic. By depoliticising race in the show in an effort to solve the problem of Atwood's criticism, the producers of the show have in some ways enhanced the issue, something which will be discussed later in this chapter. I will also touch upon the representation of queer bodies in the show compared to the novel as this also important to discuss in terms of the material body.

Offred confirms her unreliability as a narrator in the novel, which is a fact that is not showcased or at all acknowledged in the show. Instead there is a clear narrator, Offred herself, who although cryptic, does not proclaim herself unreliable in her retelling of events. Earlier I have talked about the differences between the novel and the show in terms of representation of the body and agency, but it can be said that the main difference between the novel and show is the introduction of new people whose stories are being told. Through others' stories being told by focalising certain episodes through other people's bodies there are drastic changes in perspectives and information being conveyed compared to the novel where we only see one perspective. This will also have an impact on the material feminist reading, as the bodies shown are not Offred's and so they live another bodily reality.

In her article "The truth is we're watching each other: Voiceover narration as 'split self' presentation in *The Handmaid's Tale* TV Series" (2020), Chloe Harrison details and analyses the choices the director has made both when it comes to the aesthetic visual of the show and its narration. She "examines the cognitive stylistic features of the voiceover narration in the first TV series adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* to explore the representation of June/Offred's 'split selves'" (Harrison, 22). Harrison notes that perhaps the biggest difference between the novel and the TV adaptation is that the narration in the novels and show differs greatly. Harrison points out that:

In contrast to the sustained first-person narrative in the text, the series adaptation focalises the narrative through multiple characters – such as her friends, Ofglen and Moira; her husband, Luke; and the Commander's Wife, Serena (Harrison, 23).

Despite this Offred's character is still the only voice given an interior monologue. Throughout the story of each character's plot, due to her voice-overs in these episodes, Offred still owns the story despite its focus on the other characters.

Having established that Offred's feelings and thoughts are still heard despite the situation and environment of Gilead being focalized through other bodies than her own, how does this, then, affect the way her story is being told? By focalising the story through other bodies than Offred's body, a white female body, there are interesting dimensions of Gilead that the show has opened up to explore more in-depth than in the novel. Through their stories, their material bodies, of how they move through the world differently, Ofglen, Luke and Serena open up space for themes such as queerness, the black male body, disability and conservative religious right-wing populism in Gilead. The experience of Gilead differs between them, not only because of class but also their material body they inhabit. In an attempt to diversify the experiences on the material body in Gilead, the show succeeds and fails at different points. Important questions to ask are whose voices do we hear and how are their bodies treated? The choice of which characters get their space in the show is also interesting and will be explored later in this chapter.

2.2 Technologies, Food and Language

A large part of material feminism is to recognise the nonhuman as having their own agency and connecting the material body to the environment in a manner that is not oppositional in nature. In chapter one I pointed out how closely the creation of Gilead is linked to the issues of the environment and its population living with the consequences. The strict and oppressing regime revealed a close relation to nature, or the appearance of it, with an emphasis on co-existing with nature than the previous society had. This was seen in the focus on food, the emphasis on nature in the expressions and greetings used, and the minimal use of technology. In the show, this connection is present as well, though slightly changed to accommodate the present audience and discourse on the subject. The prevalent issues of the modern time of today that the show is produced in, can be seen in the increased focus on food-shortage, of ecological and sustainable ways of growing food, declining birth rates, environmental issues such as changes of weather patterns and minimizing humanity's footprint on nature and the world. These are issues the real world is concerned with, and which is reflected in the show.

One of the bigger differences between the novel and the show when looking at the relation between human and nature that is presented in each is the presence of technology. In the

novel there seems to exist scepticism towards technology, with Gilead forbidding technology such as ultrasounds. In contrast the stance on technology in the show is more liberal, and the technology presented is usually looking very sleek and frequently used. This suggests a change in attitude in the real world towards technology – it is no longer quite as scary. An answer to why that is, is most likely due to the people producing the show; they have grown up with technology and the discourse of the time in regards to technology is not that of scepticism. Another facet is that it looks good on the screen, with the opposition of light and dark, future and tradition, and something that will be explored more in depth further in this sub-chapter.

In the version of Gilead presented to us in the show, the focus is on nature and technology as co-existing is taken to a further degree than in the novel. The technology showcased in the show is more modern than in the one in the novel and plants figures heavily in the homes. The natural co-exists with technology in a binary, and this can be seen in how certain spaces are set up in the show. One example of this is in “Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum” during Offred’s check-ins with the doctor. In the waiting room there exist an aquarium, using lights and electricity, frivolously (Miller, 15:14-25). Everything at the place is presented in opposition to the natural; it is white and sterile, giving the impression of a high technology present, unlike what you see in the homes where we see earthy dark tones (Miller, “Faithful” 43:38-40), dark green and sunlight (Miller, “Late” 30:26-30) and an abundance of plants in certain areas of the house such as in the kitchen (Miller, “Late” 11:00-20). The juxtaposition of these images and colour palettes brings to mind that of the culture/nature binary that material feminists criticise, yet it also emphasises the hypocrisy of the regime though the unnaturalness of both places; on one hand people are hanged and stoned, on the other some have access to high levels of technology.

The high tech we start wondering about can be seen in action in “Night” where the Commander Warren is being punished for having an extramarital affair with having his arm surgically removed (Miller, 28:51-29:35). In the scene, Warren is under heavy anaesthesia while what is assumed to be medical personnel removes his arm with an electrical saw. The instruments used are highly technological, with white sterile surroundings. The hypocrisy is further emphasised here due to the privilege shown: The people sentenced to death are being put to death in inhumane ways such as through stoning, beating or hanging, while the privileged few, like a Commander is afforded anaesthesia while his arm is being surgically removed. The material lived experiences are different depending on class in Gilead; human bodies are treated differently depending on their class. The privileged few with powers, have access to technology

and the right to humane treatment if they cannot avoid punishment, witnessed by the case of Commander Warren.

The space set aside for the focus on food and nature in relation to humans is perhaps seen best in “A Woman’s Place”. In this episode the struggles of the world in terms of access to material goods is presented in the form of negotiations for a trade agreement between Gilead and Mexico. The delegation from Mexico, the conversations they have and the points they bring up reveals the state of Gilead and most of the world in regards to issues such as environmental problems, food shortage, climate changes and declining birth rates. This is perhaps a great example of how nature has acted upon the material bodies of Gilead in the TV series, and thus affected the lived experiences of the women there. With lower quality of living and dropping birth rates, children have become a commodity to strive for due to the ‘need’ of more bodies in the world. This need has brought forth the society of Gilead in a way, and these issues are very much part of the on-going conversations of contemporary society and the types of challenges future generations will have to face. While toxic waste is a threatening deterrent to oppose the regime and figures very much in the novel, in the show this is not as prevalent and space has been set to more current issues such as environmental changes and food shortages, seen today.

Food, important in both the novel and the show, are viewed slightly differently in the focus on the types of food. One such example is how in the novel the food is described as simple and clean in many ways, yet there is no emphasis on it being free of pesticides. It is important to note that there is a strong emphasis on the food being sustainable and ecological/free from pesticides in the show. In “A Woman’s Place”, Commander Fred tells the Mexican delegation of how Gilead has “transitioned to a completely organic agricultural model” (Miller, 12:54-58). This emphasis on the food source being free of pesticides indicates this as a bigger issue in the past of Gilead. The importance of food being natural and ecological can also be seen in how there exists an abundance of plants in the kitchen, and the aesthetic of wood work everywhere. This presence of the natural and nature in connection to the inside of the home, puts forth the idea of humans and nature in closer relation with each other, and that what is put inside both the home and the body affects it. In another episode, Offred is attending a doctor's appointment and his attempts at making small talk with her include a mention of growing heirloom tomatoes. The specificity of what tomatoes he is attempting to grow, even contributing to the type of heirloom tomatoes (Yellow Valencia) is oddly specific and indicates a point to pay attention to (Miller, “Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum” 15:53-58). The implication of there being heirloom tomatoes he is growing is there perhaps to emphasis on the natural. Heirloom tomatoes are special tomatoes in the sense that they are not genetically bred to look appealing, they are instead

quite deformed and mixed looking in colour, among other features identifying them as heirloom tomatoes.

The lack of food and Offred's frequent reminders of being grateful for the food she is provided insinuates the lack of food that exists in the world of Gilead in the novel, and in the show this is just as prevalent. The show has clearly noted the frequency in which food is mentioned in the novel, and in the show Offred is often seen eating food or talking about it. The show is much more overt in discussing the issue, however. In "A Woman's Place", one of the high-ranking commanders clearly states the current world issues of food shortage and harvest when trying to showcase Gilead's wealth in a conversation with the Mexican ambassador. She is to be presented with oranges from Citrus Orchards in Florida, in an attempt to cement a trade deal between them. Of course, it is revealed later that the real resource the Mexicans want is access to the Handmaids. This is indicated throughout the whole episode with continued mentions of "other valuable resources to share with you as well" (Miller, 13:03-24) by the representatives of Gilead.

The lack of food is mostly owed the environmental changes according to those in the show. At 13:08 in the same episode, during a social gathering of the Mexican delegation and the leaders of Gilead with their wives, there is mention of how the Mexican "staples are not adjusting to the new weather patterns", indicating challenges with agriculture in connection to rapidly changing weather patterns. This is hinting at global warming in that this is something seen in our world today, of an influx of changes in weather patterns due to the changes brought on by global warming. Rising sea levels, decline of species and other issues are some of the challenges we face. Carbon emission is also a problem, something that is also touched upon in the show unlike in the novel. In one scene, Serena counters with the decrease of carbon emission by 78% in three years as a defence when confronted with the shape of her society and lack of freedom for women by the Mexican ambassador (Miller, "A Woman's Place" 14:45-15:05). In Gilead, due to humanity's exploitation of nature, Christian conservative values have gained traction in part due to the massive environmental issues by offering a solution to through their ideology of women as closer to nature. The irony of religious conservatives believing in global warming/climate change is not lost on the viewer, but the creation of Gilead built on the fears of environmental challenges should not be taken lightly. As mentioned above, environmental challenges are used as justification for the heavy restrictions in Gilead. In the same episode Commander Fred is later seen ranting to Offred about the meeting with the Mexican delegation, bringing up their malnutrition and justifying the state of Gilead with their impact on the world; "[w]hat are they doing to save the planet?" (Miller, 20:52-21:09) to the perceived

judgement from the Mexican delegation regarding their constraints of the female body. It is slightly ironic that the facts of the material world and nature's 'push-back' if you will, have lost the material female body the rights to their own body and autonomy. As a result the female body loses rights in a society fighting for the planet on Christian conservative values.

In the intro to this thesis I explained how material feminism seeks to combat the poststructuralist feminist view of nature and culture as a dichotomy. In the focus on language and culture they have according to material feminists lost sight of the material aspects such as nature and the role of the body. I translate a material feminist reading to include a balanced representation of nature and language/culture which can be translated to acknowledging the agency of nature, its affect on the material body while taking into account the importance of language and culture as bearers of meaning.

The society of Gilead is in many ways read as prescribing to this idea in the way nature and religion (culture) is interwoven with each other through language. By mixing the language with nature, however, an essentialist notion is created. This is especially seen in the view of gender exhibited, where the female body is reduced to one function; whether it is fertile or not. Through prescribing to a conservative religious view of gender, Gilead emphasises this with language interspersed with references to nature, something which creates a restrictive and essential view of what is spoken about. This language interspersed with elements from nature is used in both the show and the novel. For instance, the description of the female body bears essential signifiers mixed in with nature: Describing the body in terms that alludes to nature. One example of this is how instead of using the word fertile and infertile, the words "barren" or "fruitful" is used by the doctor during Offred's doctor's appointment in "Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum". These are words one would use in connection to the earth or the trees and so the female body is reduced to nature yet again. The description of the ceremony is also linked to nature in the language used to describe it: In the same episode, when Aunt Lydia is teaching the Handmaids about the Ceremony at the Centre, she describes it as how, "[t]he two of you will become one flesh, one flower, waiting to be seeded" (Miller, 12:50-13:04). By describing the process through metaphors linked to nature she might be seen as prescribing to an essentialist notion of the body and gender linked to nature that is often critiqued by poststructural feminists. Nature is also very present in the daily scripture people are forced to say to each other such as 'blessed be the fruit'. In this regard the concept of Gilead has failed in taking a material standpoint that can be read as feminist in the sense that they prescribe to essential notions of gender.

The show is moving away from the ideology of being one with the nature or going back to less technology such as in the novel, but there is more an emphasis on the power structures found in relation to the female body (e.g. the focus on different repressed bodies rather than just the one). Instead, we see that in the Gilead of the show they have sophisticated surgical tools such as anaesthesia, electricity, and modern amenities.

2.3 Film Theory and the Senses

In the novel Offred has a rich inner life where most of what is happening to her is the movement in her inner landscape changing. Her different senses guide her us through her story and her reactions to them. In that sense, as discussed in chapter one, we are embodying Offred as we read. In translating this to film there are bound to be different solutions to the conveying different senses to another medium such as film. What I discuss here is what the directors have done to convey the heavy reliance of the senses in Atwood's style of writing and translated that to the screen. Some questions asked are what the filmatic effects used to convey different types of senses are and how the audience versus the reader can embody Offred in such a setting. Some key differences to note between the novel and show when it comes to the senses, are that there are different triggers for Offred in the show.

There is a clear aspect of difference to a novel and a film when it comes to sight, and that is the visual aspect of film versus the non-existent one in a novel. Therefore it is important to talk about the visual aesthetic and the choices that lead there. What is also important to discuss is both the role of the audience, the spectator and how the actors themselves see each other, as well as techniques belonging to the visual medium. In "How Reed Morano Created the Emmy-Winning Look for The Handmaid's Tale" (2017) Reed Morano, the director of the show's first three episodes, explains how she prepared a 120 page lookbook in order to show her team her vision of how the pilot for the show should be shot. This emphasises the importance of the look of the show is to the creators. The overall emotions Morano wanted to convey with her filming was to make the audience feel the tension, to never feel fully comfortable. By making the audience uncomfortable it triggers empathy with the one being focalised on the screen.

This brings us to the watcher, the audience, and the importance of taking the audience into account when exploring the show through the sense of sight. Earlier I introduced Mulvey and her article about the female body in film. In the same text she also speaks of what she calls the symbolic order. This theory is relevant here in the sense that the symbolic order she

describes, of the voyeur, the ego, and the subject/woman is especially important to discuss in a show often labelled feminist by mainstream media.

Mulvey created the theory that there is a tendency in Hollywood to make movies, or visual media with the notion of what a male gaze would appreciate the most, thus the objectification of the females found in it. She draws on psychoanalysis where the woman is the other to the man at the centre, where the “man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning” (Mulvey, 232). In her theory, the woman is passive without agency on the screen and made with the position of the male gaze in mind. The problem here, of which Mulvey has been criticized for, is how both the woman who is being looked at and the audience lack any form of agency; they are both static. According to Parker, critics read Mulvey as saying “this is what men do: they look, and they look in abusive ways; and this is what women do: they are looked at, and they remain passive” (Parker, 173). There is also the issue of her having essential notions of gender in this view of the static male observer and female passiveness, though Parker defends this with how what Mulvey is doing is describing a sexist pattern that can change these positions; they are not static according to her.

Mulvey describes how cinema can give birth to a cinema that is both political and aesthetically radical that challenges these notions, yet also how these can only exist as counterpoint to the mainstream. She further states that “[h]owever self-conscious and ironic Hollywood managed to be, it always restricted itself to a formal *mis en scène* reflect[-]ing the dominant ideological concept of the cinema” (Mulvey, 233). What then, when feminist media has become mainstream? “Unchallenged, mainstream film coded the erotic into language of the dominant patriarchal order” (Mulvey, 233). Where does the show fit into this? Dubbed by mainstream media as feminist, and all the more popular for it, can the show be considered radical in how it treats the female body? What are the problems/pitfalls of the mainstream feminism we see in today's media? This is important to discuss because the show as mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, prescribes to a certain type of feminism when it deals with the female body. One practical and obvious effect that is fighting against this notion is the decision is the use of minimal makeup for the Handmaids in the show. Too often visual media produced in or by or on a Hollywood scale in size give the female lead unrealistic costume choices such as full-on makeup while surviving day 450 in the woods, or running from something horrible in high heels.

The colour-palette and film techniques for why certain colours were used in the show were very meticulous in the choice and the thoughts behind them. Morano is quoted to have

sections in her lookbook called ‘colour control’ in which there would be one prominent colour that would stick out while leaving the rest de-saturated in the frame. This choice was defended with how Atwood herself has strict restrictions on colours and colour codes in her novel, e.g. The red uniform of the Handmaids, (Yuan, 2017) something discussed in chapter one of this thesis. The costume choices are all in primary colours, and the different social roles are signified through the different coloured uniforms:

[C]olours are manipulated in other mise-en-scène choices such as costume. The different social roles of the characters are represented through different uniforms, mostly set through primary colours, with the deep red of the Handmaids’ clothes in particular often foregrounded in otherwise colourless scenes (Harrison, 24).

I have discussed the significance of the red of the Handmaids’ uniforms in chapter one, and as we can see in the show, the red of the uniform is slightly more pronounced on purpose to highlight this significance. According to Harrison the lighting in the show is split into two styles that indicate the past or present. The Gilead scenes are filmed with a filter that lends a sepia/yellow tone to the scenes, while the past pre-Gilead tones used are much colder and brighter. She suggests that the different tones “are filtered through contrastingly more ‘realist’ as compared to more ‘romanticised’ lenses” (Harrison, 24). They might also be indicative of the more naturalist approach of the present Gilead society of gender and environment seen in the stylistic choices of the rooms in the regime.

How something is seen or perceived, however, is also important in the novel and taken to the literal in film. An example of this is how Offred in the *THT* novel notes how the Commander most likely has placed himself a certain way before she enters his office, so he is seen by her in a certain way (Atwood, 177). In the show this plays out differently, but placement is just as important here, if not more so. The angle of how things are filmed and the placement of key persons in position towards each other plays a story in itself, a story of power, of submissiveness and dominating in the picture represented to us. In one memorable scene in the show, Offred is seen kneeling in the dining room, waiting for the rest of the household to come in to commence the ritual before the Ceremony. Suddenly, her Commander, Fred, walks into the room despite him not being allowed in there yet. This stresses Offred, and there is a marked tension in the room during their conversation. The power imbalance between them is highlighted by the angles this is filmed in; to show her entrapment and her sense of helplessness and powerlessness in the situation, only her face and position is shown. By removing the Commander's face from the shot

and focusing on the kneeling Offred, we get the impression of the nameless power of the oppressor and in turn sympathise and identifies with the in-our-face oppressed victim (Miller, “Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum” 26:10-50).

In chapter one we have discussed the feeling Offred has of entrapment, likening her situation to that of animals and objects to convey her loss of freedom and distance to her own body as a result. The sense of entrapment is an important theme in the novel, and reflected in the show through on-screen techniques that mimic the entrapment. In the show it is shown with certain visual effects such as close-ups of Offred’s face and intimate voiceovers. Harrison describes the voiceovers as “often accompanied by ‘lingering close ups’ which create a strong sense of ‘claustrophobia’ for viewers” (Harrison 23). Instead of her senses being described, to fully realise Offred’s entrapment to the viewer, symmetrical composition shots is used to draw the viewer’s attention to a specific focal point in the scene. Harrison describes it as a staging to create a sense of uneasiness in the viewers, when they have to wait for the focal point to be revealed; “[d]oors and windows also frequently form the centre point of a scene, which helps foreground the central themes of imprisonment and surveillance that run throughout the series” (Harrison, 28).

Unlike in the novel, where smell often leads to flashbacks to pre-Gilead, in the show this flashback is often triggered by her conversations to those around her. Perhaps due to the visual aspect of the medium, this is an easier transition, as it would be difficult having to explain the smell leading up to the transition. Smell is after all, not an important detail to the plot itself. Instead, her sense of smell often leads her to action. Smell naturally has less space in the show, unless the voiceover specifically mentions it. Unlike in the novel where Offred’s sense of smell often resulted in her flashbacks, in the show, this sense often lead to some sort of action for Offred. In “Offred” the voiceover comments on the scent leading to her action of going outside the confines of her room illegally, as if illustrating how fully she is immersing/inhabiting her own body in these instances of action and agency (Miller, 32:51-33:03).

2.4 The Material Body and Identity

I mentioned previously in this chapter of how Offred clearly states her real name in the first episode of the show unlike in the novel where she remains nameless, and discussed this in terms of her different agencies (Miller, “Offred” 53:29-31). This scene is also important in establishing a bodily identity. In separating herself from her status as a Handmaid, she also attempts to

reclaim a bodily identity of her own. The Offred of the show is presented as much less disembodied than her novel-self. She positions her identity in terms of her role as a mother for Hanna and wife of Luke in how she introduces her relation to them before introducing her own name, establishing her identity. What this means, exactly, will be explored later in this chapter. As previously discussed in the beginning of the chapter, the Offred of the show is more active than her novel counterpart and often reaches out to others both verbal and bodily. She often looks and makes eye contact with people she shouldn't, such as the driver Nick, but also to Wife Serena and Offred's fellow Handmaids.

Similarly to the novel, the Handmaids in the show are also likened to animals and objects by the world around them. The show is more visceral in the brutality it shows compared to the description in the novel. Examples of this are Janine's eye being plucked from her socket versus the soles of her feet being injured in the novel as punishment and an example to the others. In an especially visceral scene in "Night", during a flashback especially created for the show, Offred is branded with a tracker like one would with cattle. In the scene, Offred is lit up amid darkness in the room, and two Aunt hold her still while a third marks her. The camera zooms in on her expression to encapsulate her terror in the moment before the pain hits (Miller, 04:53-05:14). It is very obvious that the show intends to present her as someone viewed as less than human; the scene mirrors that of farmers holding down a cow to mark its ear. This is an effect often used in the show, where the Handmaids are either seen treated or referred to as animals.

In the first episode of the show Wife Serena complains of having to train the former Handmaid like a dog (Miller, "Offred" 06:02-03), and later a close-up of the tracker on Offred's ear is shown (Miller, 26:04- 06) in a sort of foreshadowing to the reveal of her marking in episode ten and to cement the idea of her treated as an animal. In another scene Offred herself compares models in a magazine to zoo animals (Miller, "Faithful" 03:25-27). A notable difference between the novel and the show is that there is that although she compares her surroundings and is shown to be treated as an animal, there is a lessening of Offred's need to identify herself with animal imagery. As discussed earlier in the chapter, Offred is less disembodied and this shows in this instance as well. Her body is more present, more material to her than to her novel counterpart.

The material body is treated as an object and its value determined upon several factors. One of them is beauty. The manner in which this comes to light in the show is in the way the Handmaids are treated as objects of value dependent on their wholeness or beauty. When the Wife Serena inspects the Handmaids before their banquet with the Mexican delegation in "A Woman's Place", she asks Aunt Lydia to "please remove the damaged ones" when the Aunt is

hesitant to do so, Serena defends her order by making metaphors to not putting bruised apples at the top of the crate, likening the Handmaids to objects to be shown off (Miller, 26:15-53).

This is also seen in the western beauty standards that are prevalent in the show despite efforts to mitigate this. One example of mitigating is the use of minimal makeup on the women seen in the show, previously mentioned, a conscious choice by the producers. However, they have failed in terms of ageism; discrimination based on age. There are barely any aged women represented in the show's first season. Where the producers have failed the most, is in the representation of the character of the Wife Serena. In the novel she is implied to be quite a bit older than Offred yet in the show she is clearly the same age, if younger. Apart from some of the Aunts, most of the women seen in the show are young. Perhaps this is due to ageism that is rampant in the film industry. It might also be another layer to the idea of the emphasis on fertility and motherhood put forth by the show. The bodies that matter are the young bodies in fertile age, so that is what we are mostly shown. On the other hand, it is strange that the Aunts are young in that Aunts are often consisted of those who are too old to reproduce. Other bodies that have less value than the fertile body is shown less, such as the black body or the queer body.

The lack of space for especially the black material body will be discussed in the at the end of this chapter, but it is worth mentioning how there is no space set aside for the black queer body, for Moira, in the first season. There are episodes that are focalised through a queer body such as Offglen and through the black male body via Luke, yet not through Moira. The black female material body moves differently around in the world than the material black male body or white female body. They experience the world differently, depending on the factors of gender, race, age and beauty.

The consequences and the emotions that they convey to the audience also differs due to this. In the instance of the queer material body, it is important to discuss why they are showing the female queer body as opposed to the male one. Female queerness or lesbianism is often seen as unthreatening to the patriarchy, seen in how homosexuality was considered mostly illegal in the past when it came to two men yet not two women. One might say that the show has been strategic in showing female queerness and no male queerness, yet this choice can also be due to its marketing as a female-centric feminist show, showing the female experience in a dystopia. The queer body is treated as abomination in the nation of Gilead, with fatal consequences for those that are found out, and as we see in "Late" with Offglen and her lover, the only thing that saves Offglen and not her lover is her fertile body (Miller, 48:03-25).

The idea of motherhood is as previously discussed, very pronounced in the show, and this is seen in the change of disability of the character Serena. In the novel, her leg impedes her in

daily life making her use a cane to move about. This is making her seem bitter yet apathetic to her surroundings, seen in her attitude towards Offred and overlooking her husband's transgressions. In the show they have changed this disability to the struggle with infertility, possible her own or her husbands, and made her much younger partly to emphasise the pain of her childless state. This emphasis on motherhood can be seen as essential in thought. By pitting Offred, the bereaved mother longing for her child and identifying as a mother before herself, with the Wife Serena that has been given space so that we can identify and empathise with the pain of her childless state, motherhood is implied to be what gives women strength and an ideal to long for. The idea of happiness and a sense of fulfilment being brought on by motherhood is perpetuated by the show.

2.5 Important Bodies and Racial Utopia

“If you listen to the words, it is a feminist dystopia, but if you look at the images, it is a racial utopia.” (Crawley, 345)

In chapter one I outlined the criticism Atwood received for her lack of representation in the novel and criticism for writing a “white feminist” story. The show faces similar problems in its attempt to counter said criticism. By vying for diversity through including people of colour in the cast, the show make an effort into having an intersectional perspective baked into the show. When asked in an interview if she felt the show had “violated the rules” of the world she built, Atwood revealed that she considered the *THT* novel to “go full white supremacy” yet cited how this is not reflected in the show due to Hulu's diversity clause and its present setting in 2017 (Alter, 2019). The confirmation of the white supremacy in Gilead, however, does not mitigate the lack of representation of race in the novel, and the show could have handled the inclusion of race in a different manner. The main problem with the show is the lack of impact that such an inclusion have had on the narrative. This is problematic in that it suggests that the material lived black body moves and is received the same as a white body as it moves in the world, which is not the case. By not acknowledging the differences in lived experiences of said material bodies and through omission of discussing or conversing around race and erasing history, the show employs a colour-blindness that erases its presence.

In her article “Reproducing Whiteness: Feminist Genres, Legal Subjectivity and the Post-racial Dystopia of *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017-)” (2018), Karen Crawley criticises the show's lack of interdisciplinary feminism and how whiteness is being reproduced in the show despite a

diverse cast. She states that *THT* is a “post-racial aesthetic means that its thematic engagement with gender, sexuality and resistance actively disavows national and international histories of racist state violence and white supremacy” (Crawley, 333) and points out how it was a conscious choice to include people of colour in the cast of the show, confirmed by the showrunner Bruce Miller, to get away from the critique of the novel of telling a “white-girl” story. The lack of addressing race history in the show’s theme and narration while at the same time including race is according to Crawley a failure by the creators in solving the issue of representation; “[b]y triangulating slavery through the white body of Offred, the show thus reproduces exactly what in dystopic terms it might otherwise be critiquing”(Crawley, 339). Crawley describes the show as erasing colour and presents a racial utopia, and in doing so reproduces the whiteness that it sought to avoid by including people of colour. At worst the show could almost be read as a caricature of black women’s lived body and experiences presented through a white female body in Offred.

Another aspect Crawley points out as problematic, is in regards to agency and how the liberal feminism seen today is focused on rights opposite to difference; “[t]he issue is that the benchmark via which we are invited to critique Gilead is the ‘autonomous, empathetic self-possessed subject’”(Crawley, 339). Earlier in this chapter I explored how the Offred seen on-screen inhabits a larger agency than the Offred found in the novel, in part due to the popular trope of the kick-ass heroine. Crawley describes this type as problematic in the sense that it relies entirely on the subject’s own individual resistance in order to free themselves rather than changing the system. The focus on Offred’s resistance and go-girl attitude assumes that we need a heroine to save us rather than reflect on our own complicity and responsibility.

In the introduction to this thesis I talked of how Atwood relies on historical events in order to inspire the narrative in her novels. Crawley also points this out, but in the context of appropriating a slave-narrative of the black female enslaved body. In chapter one I discussed how Atwood had received criticism for this, and so this is relevant to explore in the medium of film. Crawley is of the opinion that the show doubles upon the slave-narrative found in *THT* in that it adopts the narrative in addition to also completely removing its history from American history by creating a dystopia where there exists no colour. Crawley states that “[i]f Atwood’s text itself enacts a kind of appropriation or exclusion of race, the show doubles down on this: its entire conceit relies on the displacement and brack[-]jeting of America’s racial past” (Crawley, 343). Atwood’s incorporation of events from history in her works might come across as problematic and insensitive in the face of accusations of appropriating black history such as the black female slave narrative without acknowledging this.

Crawley points out that the show differs the most from the novel in its inclusion of people of colour in something she defines as a “post-racial aesthetic, which invites the audience to enter into a way of seeing that is ‘colourblind’” (Crawley, 342). She uses one particular scene from the show to exemplify this issue and which I too will talk about. In the scene, Offred, Moira, and Luke are in their house after Offred and Moira have been sent away from their jobs and have had their bank accounts frozen (Miller, “Late” 22:44-24:16). In the conversations happening there, they touch upon and highlight overarching issues such as fragile masculinity, ownership of their own body, physical weakness of gender, yet there is no mention or implications of race. Luke needs to be reassured in his masculinity and is corrected in the use of his language when talking to Offred while Moira draws attention to awareness of physical weakness in allowing Luke to follow her to the station, yet there is no mention of race or the risk for the both of them in being outside after the dark. There is no mention of how Luke, as a black man, is equally at risk in a regime-change after dark, or the lack of solidarity between Luke and Moira in being black. Instead they have been placed as opposites, with white June as their only common denominator. Crawley points some of this out and concludes that the show is focused on sisterhood at the expense of race in a manner that neutralises it.

[T]he show’s explicit focus on gender, sexuality and resistance at the expense of race, politics and history invites its viewers to keep our eyes shut to the ongoing reproduction of whiteness in contemporary (neo)liberal configurations of legal subjectivity and state authority (Crawley, 336).

The impression one sits with at the end is that the show has had to include race to earn kudos in a time that preaches the discourse of inclusivity. As I previously mentioned, this has been confirmed by Atwood’s mention of Hulu’s clause of diversity. The solution the show has employed in incorporating people of colour in their cast without letting it impact the narrative is what could be seen as problematic. By perpetuating colour-blindness in not addressing the race history of America, the show reproduces whiteness by erasing the presence of race. There is an implication of fertility triumphing race in the narrative, seen in the regime’s sudden acceptance of people of colour, yet this is never directly addressed in season one. The show and its representation and treatment of material black bodies say something about which bodies are important or not. It is clear to me that the representation of the black material body is of no importance compared to the fertile body and the white female body with its message of female empowerment in the show.

2.6 Summary

In this chapter I have built on the similarities and differences between the novel and the TV show. I started with defining formats and what consequences this might have in relation to a material feminist reading. The main differences between the two mediums are pointed out, and the most important of them I define as agency in the presentation of each main protagonist, which then ties into lived experience and bodily expressions. I then explain how Offred's character is very much changed from passive to an active participant in her own narrative in the show. The type of feminism favoured by mainstream media is the active heroine, and the introspective Offred of the novel does not align well with this perspective. I point out how this difference might be due to the time periods in which these were made or how the different format of the show would struggle to translate the introspective Offred onto the screen. Next I pinpoint another main difference between the novel and the show, which is the focalization of the narrative through several different bodies in the show as opposed to the one in the novel. The series present a greater variety of material bodies which impacts a material reading, as they have different lived experiences and invites a broader perspective on lived life.

When exploring the matters not directly pertaining to bodies, such as food, technology and language, I once more emphasise difference. Through being products of different time periods, the issues highlighted are changed. In the show, Gilead is a much more technologically advanced place, and the coexistence between nature and tech is therefore more prevalent. I continue to focus on food as a material aspect closely aligned with the material body. Following this, the idea of language is just as important in the show as in the novel. The idea of language very much shapes culture, and natural words are used to describe biological states, such as "fruitful" and "barren".

After creating a fuller picture of the Gilead presented in the TV show, I move on to senses in connection to film theory. The presentation of Offred in the novel that is removed from her own body and use her senses to reconnect to said body, is not apparent in the series, however the usage of camera angles and film techniques is very relevant to the sense of sight. Visuals can emphasise and subdue elements through angles and colour, and with this I focus on how it can invoke emotional responses in the viewer in new ways, both in being aware of the male gaze, but also through the distinct colour palettes. Through certain camera angles, power disparities between bodies are highlighted in the frame, such as with Offred and the Commander.

I then move to describe how Offred clearly diverges from the novel in establishing her own bodily identity separate from her role as a Handmaid. This is important to comment on, as Offred's strong identity reflect in her lived experience. We see this in her more overt attempts at forging bonds to others for example. As a result of a more embodied state than her counterpart, Offred also has less of a need to identify with other animals. However, her surroundings are in return more brutal in their imagery of Handmaids as lesser-than-human, evidenced by her brutal marking. I also comment upon the material body in terms of beauty, and describe how this new facet is important in the film industry. The visual body is vulnerable to ageism, which is something the show fails to combat.

The show's focus on motherhood suggests that certain bodies are more valued than others, and I claim that it purport the fertile body as more valued body than the queer and black bodies for example, and I explain why these are important to include in terms of lived experience. I draw up Moira as an example of how the black female material body moves differently around in the world than the material black male body or white female body. I also briefly touch upon the change of Wife Serena's change of disability in the show, from having a knee injury to being infertile to further emphasise the idea of the show emphasising the idea of motherhood as important.

At the end I revisit the criticism that pertains to erasure of black lived experience, and how this criticism is valid in stating that the show is a white feminist product despite the diversity of the cast. I point out the implication of how some bodies' matters more than others in the show's failure to address the historicity of the material black female body, thus falling into the same pitfalls as the novel.

3 *The Testaments*

The material aspects in *The Testaments* will be explored and defined in a similar fashion to the previous novel and the series adaption, with special focus on the nature and the environment, bodily identity, the senses and notable critique. Differences in how the female body is treated in the novel compared to the previous two will be explored in the context of the previous themes mentioned. I will also explore the degree of agency found in the protagonists, as this is relevant for the autonomy of the material body. Issues of representation is pertinent to explore in light of the previous criticism Atwood's received on the lack of inclusion and acknowledgement of race in *THT* and problematic elements in the series. The criticism she received implies that her narrative erases black lived experience, and is counteractive in light of material feminism, which focuses on lived experience (while not forgoing discourse/culture). On the basis of this, I will take a closer look at any steps Atwood might have made to set aside space for the black material body and acknowledge black lived experience.

The Testaments was published over 30 years after *THT*. The novel is set 15 years after the events of the first, and reveals a very different perspective on Gilead. Through the narratives of the three main protagonists, the reader is invited into the machinations of the beginning of the regime's downfall, and give insight into the political machinery behind it. In exploring the political dimensions of Gilead, the narratives reveal systemic oppression, and what the ramifications are for the female body in all stages of the system.

The novel follows Lydia, Agnes and Daisy as they navigate the world of Gilead: Firstly there is Agnes, the child of a Commander and Offred and in training to become a future Wife, for later to present as Aunt Victoria. Following this is Daisy, a Canadian girl that turns out to be the abducted baby Nicole, the second child of Offred. Lastly, the reader is re-acquainted with Aunt Lydia, introduced to us in *THT*. Through each of their witness testimonies, that were found in the aftermath of the fall of Gilead, their lived experience of Gilead is viscerally felt in the detailed descriptions of the food consumed, the intimate relations found, and the political machinations behind living in and navigating the treacherous regime of Gilead. Its start is presented to us through Aunt Lydia's flashback to her initiation as a founding Aunt, and the conditions for women there is presented through Agnes' thoughts on her upbringing while Daisy introduces us to Gilead from the outside perspective. At the end of the novel, all three women come together to describe the events leading to the start of the totalitarian regime's fall.

3.1 Discourses, Agency and Indoctrination

The main differences between *The Testaments* and the show and *THT* is its overt political dimension. Through the narrative of Aunt Lydia, both the overt and more covert powers that move Gilead is revealed. The political factions within and the power dynamics between the Aunts and the Commanders are some of the factors she touches upon. Agnes' narrative highlights the indoctrination of the regimes population and the impact that this has of the subjects bodily identity, the self and lived experience. Daisy, on the other hand, represents the outside perspective of Gilead, and how the view of one's identity and body is affected through the knowledge of what happens in Gilead. Through Aunt Lydia, and to a degree Daisy, the diplomatic relations of Gilead is presented.

By comparing the lived experiences of both Daisy and Agnes it highlights Agnes' indoctrination and how this has damaged her view of her own body, of gender, sex and sexuality. Daisy is put in juxtaposition to this and presents the perspectives that Canada, a democracy with freedom of speech, has on the same topics. In emphasising the cruelties of Gilead to students such as Daisy; "[w]e'd had three modules in school on Gilead: it was a terrible, terrible place, where women couldn't have jobs or drive cars, and where the Handmaids were forced to get pregnant like cows, except that cows had a better deal"(Atwood, 46), it acts as a reminder of the importance of freedom in body and mind. The consequences of having a neighbouring country so overtly repressing women changes the discourse of the body to an emphasis on the body's freedom in an effort and need to subvert young impressionable girls from converting through the missionaries, the Pearl Girls, whose mission is to convert and bring women to Gilead. In the process of Daisy's introduction to the culture and discourse of Gilead, the differences between the two lived experiences are highlighted.

Theories of power and knowledge come to mind when reading the novel. Parker succinctly explains some of Foucault's most important and influential theories on this subject. According to Parker, Foucault purports that in contrast to the belief that knowledge produces power, it is in fact the opposite; "knowledge construct what it purports to know" (Parker, 270), and he calls this knowledge for discourse. Through examining the lived experiences of the women in the novel we will see how discourse function to define and redefine the female body.

Foucault argue that "we internalize patterns of expectation from the surrounding culture, absorbing the culture's expectation so much that we take them for granted and suppose that they

come from our own thinking” (Parker, 270). Through the narrative of Agnes’ it is clear that she is very much a product of the dominant power’s discourse in her thinking of her body and the self. However, Agnes seems to be slightly aware of the difference of her generation compared to the older one in Gilead. She describes the older generation as being sharper than her own;

[t]he Founders and the older Aunts had edges to them.

They’d been moulded in the age before Gilead, they’d had struggles we had been spared, and these struggles had ground off the softness that might once have been there

(Atwood, 287).

What is interesting here is how Agnes conscribes this behaviour to pre-Gilead and not to this attitude possibly stemming from the harsh environment of Gilead or the trauma of the creation of the Aunt’s that Aunt Lydia describes. In many ways, the girls of Lydia’s generation are exactly what Offred speaks of in *THT*, of a new generation that does not know what it has lost. This view is further emphasised with Agnes’ phrase of “[b]ut we’d been protected, we hadn’t needed to deal with the harshness of the world at large” (Atwood, *The Testaments*, 287)”, not knowing the freedom she and her fellow women have lost and despite now knowing of the regime’s corruption and lies told to her in her education, she still believes their protection is something positive. But as we see in the Gilead presented by *The Testaments*, the female body is not as protected against physical harm as it first seems like. This illusion of safety is something that the young women brought up in Gilead has internalised, which is seen by Agnes’ view of them as a protected generation despite her friend Becka’s and her own history of sexual assault.

Foucault uses the idea of the Panopticon to describe this type of internalised thinking and explains that it is a model of modern society. The Panopticon is a type of prison where the cells are circling a guard tower. The inmates cannot tell when a guard is watching them, thus they internalise the guard’s rules by self-policing to protect themselves. It is easy here to prescribe the guards onto those of the Eyes - Gilead’s spies - and the Aunts here in this scenario, and the inmates as the regular population, but especially the girls in this case. All the inhabitants in Gilead watch each other and police each other due to the secret the Eyes that could be anyone and anywhere, yet it is mainly the girls’ education that indoctrinates them to internalise certain ideas of their body as a commodity and of their gender as something essential.

The only exception to this is the Aunts, who inhabit greater agency than all other women in Gilead. They are the ones who deal out judgement over the domestic sphere in Gilead and use their Handmaids as tools for this. Transgressions such as rape, reading and writing for women, and even death by stoning for loss of virginity (Atwood, 153) are all dealt with by the Aunts.

With such harsh rules, inhabiting larger agency is a risk to the physical body and the self. The Aunts stand above this, allowed to both read and write, and hoard their power through information to use in manipulating to gain power. Their position is precarious, and as Agnes' confusion of their status witnesses; "I had begun to wonder how a woman changed into an Aunt... Did they have special brains, neither female nor male? Were they even women at all under their uniforms?" (156). Her doubts on their status as women witnesses a discourse that does not allow for strong women, and so she is forced to find other explanations, "[c]ould they possibly be men in disguise?" (156). The Aunt exists outside Gilead's strict enforcement and discourse on gender, neither easily classified as women nor men in its framework. In Gilead, they do not embody the female lived experience, and in many ways, have transcended this; they exist in a neutral, genderless position as a result.

3.2 Intimacies and Strength

In "Disempowerment and Bodily Agency in Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* and *The Handmaid's Tale* TV Series" (2021) Julia Kuznetski discusses Butler's theory of the vulnerable body in the meeting with the other. Butler posits that "we are constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies; we are constituted as fields of desire and physical vulnerability, at once publicly assertive and vulnerable" (qtd. in Kuznetski, 288). According to Kuznetski, Butler describes the body as having a corporeal vulnerability in that it is not fully ours, but is exposed to outside elements such as cultural norms, social processes and other people in a more physical sense. Therefore the relational aspect is important to acknowledge when discussing intimacy and intimate relations in Gilead in terms of the body. Much like in *THT*, with Offred's struggle to connect to those around her, the distrust and the fear of the regime of Gilead hinders its people from establishing intimate relations in the second novel too.

During her isolation in captivity by the Eyes, Aunt Lydia states that "[o]ne person alone is not a full person: we exist in relation to others" (Atwood, 148). Judith Butler speaks of the body in relational terms and describes the body as both performative and relational in her essay "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance" (2014). Here she explores the vulnerability of the body in relation to each other, but also in a broader sense. Butler constitutes the body as more based on relational terms rather than as an entity; "the body is less an entity than a relation, and it cannot be fully dissociated from the infrastructural and environmental conditions of its living" (Butler, 8). In *The Testaments*, Gilead presents as a hostile environment towards women where

their bodily vulnerability is so close to the surface of their reality. The fight for survival is channelled through competitiveness and rivalry, on who is on top above the others. This can especially be seen when reading of Aunt Lydia's experiences with her fellow Aunts and between Agnes' schoolmates. Their relations of distrust highlight this vulnerability.

The politics of divide and conquer rather than togetherness and cooperation results in an environment that breeds competition between the girls at Agnes' school, which she describes as "a place for snakes and ladders" (Atwood, 86). Even if you are high up the ladder, which I translate to status, you become a snake, someone low, if you slide down. The incentive to marriage above your station is big due to the high stakes; whom you marry is whom you belong to and affects both freedom but more importantly, your level of affluence. Agnes' classmate, Shunammite, represents the need or want for riches and security in marriage and the treacherous relations between girls in order to get up the ladder; "[m]y father was more important than hers. I realize now that this was why she wanted me as her best friend" (Atwood, 25). Bodily safety is reliant on a good standing in society, and relation to others are affected by the social manoeuvring needed to stay on top. In Gilead intimate relations to others lead directly to bodily vulnerability rather than only against mental ones.

When it is revealed that Agnes' biological mother is a Handmaid, she feels the backlash from her classmates and faces betrayal from one of her closest friends Shunammite: "[i]t was dawning on me that she must have betrayed me: before telling me, she'd already told the other girls. That's why they'd become so cool: I was tainted" (85.) The meaning here could be interpreted in a double sense; her blood is tainted due to her heritage or those who do not avoid her becomes tainted by associating with her presence.

The climb in status over another is compelling, and one Agnes is aware of; "[n]o wonder Shunammite could not resist spreading such baleful and pleasing news. Already I could hear the snickering behind my back: *Slut, slut, daughter of a slut*" (86). Her fall in status is upsetting to Agnes, as her relation to others is dependent on her value as high in status. She is only redeemed through the news of a new baby in her family, as "a coming baby shed lustre on everyone connected with it" (94). Further proof of the importance of status is the fact that her friend Becka hid the same heritage, of her birth mother also being a Handmaid, which she reveals later to Agnes in a show of trust.

The politics of Gilead is mostly explained by Aunt Lydia and reveals fierce competition between the original Aunts. In much a similar vein as with the girls in Agnes' class, the fight is fought for the most power and staying on top through rumours and slander in subtle and not so subtle ways. During the creation of the Aunts, Aunt Lydia takes measures of each woman;

“[d]uring these initial sessions, I took stock of my fellow Founders” (176), to decide what angle to use when manipulating them in terms of angling her position to the top of power, as she “intend to be the alpha hen” (177). Her analysis of the three Aunts is thorough and she quickly pinpoints her fiercest competition, how to steer and how to manipulate each and every one of them; “[d]ivide and conquer would be my motto” (177). Aunt Lydia compares the environment during this fight for power as that of the fitting description of “school playgrounds of the rougher sorts, or indeed any situation in which the rewards are small but competition for them fierce” (176). The toxic environment that has been created by the pressing situation, the presence of a loyal follower in Aunt Vidala, and the fight for the most influence and power create relations that may be harmful to a vulnerable body, “[d]espite our pretense of amity, indeed of collegiality, the underlying currents of hostility were already building”(177). The relationship between the Aunts culminates in the murder of one of them by another. By playing on the distrust between them and vulnerability of the body, Aunt Lydia manipulates Aunt Elizabeth in such a way that she kills Aunt Vidala in mistaken self defence against accusations of treason (392).

In contrast to this, positive relations are also found in Gilead and for the protagonists of the novel. In the beginning we are introduced to Agnes and her mother Tabitha that turns out to be her adoptive mother/kidnapper and not her biological mother. The mutual love and adoration for each other that Agnes and Tabitha have is clear to see, and when faced with doubt regarding her mother’s love with the revelation of her kidnapping, Agnes stays true to her memory; “[s]he chose and she cherished me. She loved me. That part was real” (85). This is significant, when we see the relations that some Wives had to their adopted or stepdaughter. By juxtaposing the loving relation between Agnes and Tabitha to the cold and dismissive one of Agnes and her stepmother Paula, or that of Becka and her own adoptive mother, one realises through the mother-daughter relations presented in the novel that the children produced in Gilead, through the rape of a Handmaid often does not hold as much value as society purports.

The sisterhood between the three Aunts Immortelle, Victoria and Jade (Becka, Agnes and Daisy) is a spot of positive relations between the women in Gilead. First we are introduced to the evolving relationship between Becka and Agnes, which slowly turns into a sort of sisterhood that extends to Daisy at the revelation of her blood relation to Agnes. Their appreciation for each other and intimacy begets vulnerable bodies. The sisterhood between the girls is what keeps them strong in the hostile environment of Gilead and in taking action against the regime, yet it is also what allows for the possibility of exploitation. It is not coincidental that Aunt Lydia uses Agnes’ blood relation to Daisy to push them into aiding in the smuggling of information out of

Gilead. Daisy sees what the girls don't, that it is "not fair, it's emotional blackmail!" (337). By pointing out their blood relation, Daisy's role as undercover agent and then explaining the risks to her body, Aunt Lydia exploits their relation to each other. Agnes is compelled by their shared blood to help Daisy, as much as Becka is compelled to help Agnes due to their close sisterly relation.

Aunt Lydia also uses her own relationship to the girls in order to facilitate this manoeuvre. When discussing whether to help out or not, Becka points out how Aunt Lydia helped both her and Agnes escape marriage when they were younger; "[r]emember how she rescued us – both of us? We have to say yes" (338). Later on, when ruminating on her motherless status, Agnes refers to Aunt Lydia as "a mother of sorts, although a harsh one" (366), indicating that her relation to her fit into that category. Aunt Lydia seems to view them in a positive manner in return, and seem to consider them her tools but also wish for their safety; "[f]ly well, my messengers, my silver doves, my destroying angels. Land safely" (392) she wishes after having facilitated Agnes and Daisy's escape.

The relations created in Gilead are opening women's bodies to hurt, in that they become more vulnerable than already in the regime. The status of a female body is constantly under scrutiny, and it is physically vulnerable. Furthermore, the intimate relations leave the body vulnerable. However, there is also strength in the bond between women, through the familial bonds created in such harsh environment. During the operation of smuggling information out of Gilead, Becka's sacrifice was crucial to it. By hiding herself, and eventually sacrificing her body to the cause, Agnes and Daisy manage to safely leave Gilead. Had she not had the bond to them as she had, she would not have gone to the lengths she did. It is clear during the escape, that the sisters are strength to each other, but also meaningful is how the image of Becka is following them along as they escape, if not in body. Agnes dreams of Becka at one point; "I dreamed of Becka. She was there beside me in the front of the truck" (366), and during the final stretch of their escape, Daisy hears Becka encouraging her when she wants to give up; "I'm going to lose it and fall and brain myself. Becka said, [*i*]t's not much farther" (397). Despite not being there in the flesh, she is with them in spirit. Their relation is what keeps them strong in body and mind.

3.3 The Vulnerable Female Body as Commodity

The discourse of female bodies as commodities and expendable are a common theme amongst all the mediums presenting Gilead in this thesis. Previously I have discussed how the Handmaids

are viewed as objects or animals, but as we see in *The Testaments*, several places in the novel women are also referred or implied to as something to be traded or bought. Ownership over one's own body is not a right that the general population is privileged to have, and rings especially true for the female body. Unlike in the novel and in the series where Gilead is viewed through an isolated Handmaid's experience, this novel presents the inner working and social structures of Gilead more openly. What it reveals is that much like with what is seen through the Handmaids' perspective, the female body in general no matter status, is also seen as an object to be owned, something that undoubtedly affects their material lived experiences.

In the previous sub-chapter 'Intimacy and Strength', I referenced Kuznetski's explanation of how Butler purports that our bodies never are our own and how there is a field that is constantly subjected to the world around us, always exposed to 'the other' and to violence. She further states that our bodies have fields of desire and physical vulnerability around them that translates to a social vulnerability. This vulnerability of the body is especially felt in the case of Agnes during her childhood in Gilead. She presents how girls in the regime are considered as commodity, and begets the question if they are considered human at all.

Agnes' experience of the indoctrination of Gilead shows clearly how little say the girls of the regime have in the decisions over their own bodies and that they are actively being taught to accept this. Through insidious indoctrination by the Aunts that is clearly designed as to not make them question their lack of choice in terms of bodily agency and identity, girls are being taught faulty ideas of gender and to accept objectification. By using problematic language, the Aunts produce and convey a discourse of the female body as an object or an animal. In one such instance, Aunt Estée, one of Agnes' teachers compares the girls to cats when explaining why women did not do important things such as the men; "[i]t would be like trying to teach a cat to crochet" (Atwood, 15). In using the example of a cat crocheting, Aunt Estée is making a comparison of the girls to a cat at the same time as she is trying to impart the idea that women are biologically unfit to make important decisions much in the same way that cats are biologically unable to crochet.

Children's bodies are especially vulnerable in Gilead. This literal way of seeing people as objects or property, is pervasive and children have no form of or limited agency. The lack of agency and ownership of their body may lead to drastic consequences. The story of Becka, especially, highlights this. Having to suffer the abuse of her father in silence due to fear of being shamed and labelled as a slut by her peers, she sees no other alternative than to harm her own body in an attempt to escape her situation; "Becka slashed her left wrist with the secateurs and had to be taken to the hospital" (166), witnessing this, Agnes cannot forget her face and

describes it as one would describe a trapped animal; as a wild person. Similar to Offred, Agnes also often connects the people around her with animal imagery.

Becka's autonomy is taken from her because her life only matters in the sense of giving life to another, much the same one can see more to the extreme with the Handmaids. Female children are part of a meat market, they are meat designed to produce more 'meat', evidenced by the function of the body deciding at what age the girls should marry rather than maturity; "[g]irls and marriageable young women – such as I'd just become by having my period" (101). The biological functions of the body, rather than age or maturity is the deciding factor, and despite Agnes young age, she is already being considered for marriage. Agnes and Becka both have their boundaries violated by those around them; proof that their status as humans can be put into question.

Ownership of other people's bodies signifies promotion in Gilead, and the number of help you have in your household signifies your status while children means automatic promotion. This is revealed with Agnes talking of promotion as signified with being given more Marthas or being given a promotion through the birth of a baby in the household. In describing how a girl at her school had become more popular, Agnes explains the reason for this with that "her father had been promoted to three Marthas" (87). When you are promoted, you are given people as one would give gifts, further reinforcing the idea of people as objects. The language she uses to describe his promotion is revealing in the way the children of Gilead is being taught to also view other people as objects.

The imagery of humans as animals is just as prevalent in *The Testaments* as in *THT*. The Aunts reinforce the idea of being less than humans, or infantilising the girls by often comparing them to animals. Kuznetski draws a link to the meaning of Agnes' name as that of "lamb", and how it both "suggests the Christian virtue of meekness, but given the Biblical references in Gilead, may also connote the notion of "lamb to the slaughter"" (Kuznetski, 294). She describes this as an apt description for the process in which Agnes' marriage to Judd, a Commander whose Wives all have bad habit of dying, is prepared. I took a closer look at the page of Agnes' evaluation: In one especially memorable page of the novel, Agnes is inspected by her family and Aunts Vidala and Gabbana before being 'put up for marriage'. Beyond greeting her, she is not acknowledged in any way or form, and they talk about her as if she is not in the room. They talk of her body as they would an animal for sale; "She has nice wide hips, none of these narrow pelvises" (Atwood, 154). They comment on her manner, her breasts and hips and her teeth, in much the same way one could imagine one would inspect cattle being put up for sale and for being bred. It is demeaning, and talk of how the girls "settle right down" once they marry further

reinforces this. The allusion of the girls being seen as animals to be sold and bred is further reinforced by Aunt Lydia's comment on Commander Judd's being "on the market" (137) for a child bride soon, in an earlier page in the novel.

In the novel, the Handmaids are presented to us from an outsider perspective and we realise that Offred's thoughts on herself and her fellow Handmaids as similar to animals in treatment is a perspective shared by her surroundings. We finally get a confirmation from an outsider source on how the Handmaids are perceived. While they evoke pity and the animal imagery of 'feral' in Daisy, Agnes' perspective is the most revealing. In it, the prevalent discourse on the subject of the Handmaids are of them as "tainted" and as of "something bad". The girls are raised to come to this conclusion in the importance of chasteness, and the Handmaids does not fit into this image of women; they "must be double sluts, said Shunammite, because they didn't even have husbands" (81). The incompatibility of what a good woman is and the presence of the Handmaids lead to an idea of them as something unnatural, of the 'other', and therefore something less than human.

This 'othering' of other female bodies is a survival mechanism; women and girls in Gilead all live under great pressure against bodily harm and death by not only men, but by each other. The Aunts metes out punishments and deaths to women and men alike, enforcing their rule and cementing their power. By forcing the Handmaids to participate in executions, they reinforce the Handmaids as 'the other'. This is perhaps the clue to the amount of objectification that is present in both novels; by 'othering' and removing themselves from identifying with each other and by labelling the other as sluts, or traitors, or sinful, the women of Gilead justify the physical harm that befalls other female bodies' in the regime.

The revelation of her own birth mother having been a Handmaid causes Agnes to gain heightened awareness of the Handmaid living in her own house. What she sees of Ofkyle's treatment reminds her of the treatment of an animal. It is only during pregnancy that she notes that Ofkyle is "no longer treated like a dog" (92). It is telling how Agnes describes herself as watching Ofkyle's face while the Wives watched her body; to them she is just a vessel, something akin to an animal at best, but for Agnes she sees the humanity in Ofkyle, to her she is a grievable life; "none of them were interested in what was going on in her head, they were only interested in her belly" (100). During the birth of her little sister, Agnes describes hearing groaning animal sounds coming from the birth room as if to highlight the rawness and terror of the moment. The sounds bear a foreshadowing of what is to come when Ofkyle ends up dead due to complications with the birth. Agnes is the only one to acknowledge her as a person and to care about her death. In an act of care she kisses Ofkyle's head and promises to never forget her,

something she informs the reader she never did. To confirm the existence of Ofkyle to her self, to again acknowledge her as a person, Agnes searches for and finds her name in the archives. In these acts of care, Agnes assures that Ofkyle, or the person named Crystal, is never forgotten.

The creation of the Aunts is another example of women losing status as humans in the novel. The traumatic process incorporated inhuman treatment and was a brutal one. In her recollection of the beginning of the Aunts, Aunt Lydia describes the way all professional working women of certain professions were all gathered in a Stadium in animal terms: “we joined a herd of other women: I described it as a herd because we were being herded” (115). This can be interpreted as a sort of foreshadowing to their coming treatment in captivity. Aunt Lydia describes her time there very viscerally and describes in detail their inhuman treatment, being denied basic human necessities among others. In one such description of their lack of access to clean water and the resulting stink of their bodies after a while, she explains how “[t]hey were reducing us to animals – penned-up animals – to our animal nature. They were rubbing our noses in that nature. We were to consider ourselves subhuman” (143). Their inhuman treatment was used to soften them up for torture and conversion to the new regime. By treating them as animals, tortured while in total isolation, for then to be offered luxury amenities in a hotel, there was added incentive for the women to convert. The animal imagery Aunt Lydia invokes in her retelling of the events signifies her feelings of helplessness in the situation and especially the helplessness of her body.

After the trauma to her body after her torture, Aunt Lydia revels in her own body; “during my legal career my body had been merely a vehicle for propelling from one achievement to the next, but now I had a newfound tenderness for it” (150). The thought on her material body is ironically in a similar fashion to that of Offred in *THT*, where I mention how she reflects on how she used to think of her body as an instrument of movement and pleasure pre-Gilead.

Another kind of vulnerable body in the novel is that of refugees. Atwood touches upon this theme several places in the novel. When Mayday talks of the whereabouts of Daisy’s mother and of helping their unknown spy in Gilead, it is revealed that many girls escaping from there ends up sex-trafficked; “some of them say they welcome women fugitives from Gilead, but you wouldn’t last a day in most of them, you’ be sex-trafficked” (196) is what Mayday operative Elijah claims of countries accepting refugees. New converts going to Gilead are also considered trafficked, evidenced by when Daisy is preparing to cross the border with the help of the Pearl Girls. In the passage of the novel, it is mentioned that Canada considers the girls moved across the border over to Gilead by the Pearl Girls as human trafficking; “the Canadian authorities were clamping down on the export of underage converts. They were viewing it as human trafficking”

(268). These are all vulnerable female bodies and examples of the value of such bodies as commodities.

3.4 Senses and Embodying the Self

In chapter one I described how the different senses were very present in *THT*. The focus on Offred's touch, sense of smell and sight were important tools for her to attempt to inhabit her own body, after being divorced from it through the trauma of her role as Handmaid. The prevalence of senses in the novel helped the reader embody Offred's body and situation in a more visceral manner. In the second novel, *The Testaments*, this is less so. There are two notable instances where Daisy uses the sense of smell in feelings of connection to motherhood. When she introduces her foster mother Melanie, to the reader, she describes her as having a "distant smell" (46). When it is later revealed that Melanie is not her biological mother, it is poignant that as soon as she meets her biological mother, she describes how "she smelled right" (399). Other than these instances, the sense of smell is not very prevalent in the novel.

With the introduction of Aunt Lydia as one of the main characters, it is quickly realised that this will be a very different story from *THT*. Her focus on the political trappings and interpersonal relations in Gilead is very much different than the encapsulated inward mode Offred operated in, reliving in her past. The breadth of information that Aunt Lydia inhabits is vast, and although she too has flashbacks to the past at times, she is also very present and focused on the future. Aunt Lydia does not need to use senses in order to embody her own body, as this is not something she struggle with due to her elevated autonomy. Thus the more outward focus; she is very aware of political processes and the creation of discourse in Gilead.

The perspectives of both Agnes and Daisy are also more outwards, despite the similar restrictions to Offred. Earlier in this chapter I explained the perspectives of girls' lived experience regarding the view of Gilead from the outside and inside. An added factor to this is the limited agency that they both inhabit. Daisy, who is first limited through her parents who restricts her, and then later with Mayday treating her like a package to be bartered with, and Agnes whose body and future is decided by others, but whose life is later saved by the Aunts in return for her loyalty.

Daisy, although with limited agency, represents the child growing up free and liberal, with an environment that encourages her self-expression and embodiment. Through her the lived experience of Gilead and its effect on women's embodiment is shown by her reactions to threats

and the way she so easily inhabits her body. Daisy fully embodies her own body, and during her stay in Gilead, rooming with Agnes and Becka, this embodiment is a shock to them.

Daisy, who has been raised with an autonomy and agency over her own body that far surpasses Agnes', comes to the logical conclusion of training her own body in the face of the perceived threat from the men she faces when she first comes to Gilead. When asked by the others why she exercises, she answers, "in case some guy aggresses you" (327) and shows them how to hit correctly. In the face of their shock at this display it is revealed that they think "[m]en are strong in body...And in mind. Women are strong in spirit" (327), it displays a difference in thought of the material female body. Daisy exerts control of her body in response to outside threats rather than internalise self-hatred and rejecting her own body. Due to her embodiment, Daisy operates in the physical realm, and through talking of wanting to shave her hair (324) and exercising her body in the face of fear of physical harm, she shows an agency and control of her own body unlike anything the other girls have seen.

Agnes and the other girls of Gilead on the other hand, have been indoctrinated into thinking of their bodies as commodities. Through phrases such as the one above, speaking of how men are supposed to be strong in body and mind while women possess such in spirit, the discourse of their gender as essential actively hinders their embodiment through relegating them to the mental realm. In contrast to Daisy's embodiment, Agnes' rejection of her own body is painfully clear; "[t]here were so many things that could be done to it or go wrong with it...that I was left feeling I would be better off without it" (82). She has not been brought up to think of her body as her own, and therefore her sense of self is damaged. Kuznetski states that;

Agnes does not perceive her body in a Cartesian dualist sense, as something unimportant and discardable, while the spirit is immortal and beyond earthy concerns. On the contrary, she is aware of her bodily vulnerability and that of her mind, because they are truly one (Kuznetski, 294).

I disagree slightly with this and posit that Agnes never had a relation to her body in the first place. Unlike Offred, who struggles to embody herself through her senses, and especially that of touch, Agnes is more focused on sight and hearing in order to position herself in the safest manner for her body. She is aware of her body's vulnerability but not connected to it. She rejects her body; "[t]he adult female body was one big booby trap as far as I could tell" (Atwood, 83), and seeks to escape it through her imagination. And this is where the crux of the matter is; due to the strain of expectations in regards to their own bodies, Agnes and the other future Wives live very much in their minds in the same manner as Offred. But unlike her, the girls do not long

back to a time where they had control of their own body, of autonomy. Instead the absence of allowance in expressing themselves, verbally or physically through their body, springs out into a vivid imagination.

It is debatable whether or not the imagination can be considered a sense such as sight, yet I find it fits the best in this part of the chapter. Visualisation in the mind is strongly seen in Agnes during her preparation for marriage. Several times she imagines what it will be like on her wedding night, someone “trying to shove his loathsome appendage into my stone-cold body” (223). The lack of sex education in Gilead forms a veil of obscurity over what will happen on their wedding night, and this causes fear. The trauma of her sexual assault and fear of what will happen to her body causes great anguish to Agnes. This fear, of having to take in the reality of her vulnerable body, leads her to consider multiple ways of avoiding the situation, often through imagining scenarios of how to end her own life.

Many of the girls of ‘marriageable age’ in Gilead seem to escape the reality of their body and lack of agency through their imagination, if Agnes is an indication for all girls. Their denial of the lived experience of their body halts in the face of marriage and duty, resulting in a massive problem with suicide. In a conversation between Aunt Lydia and Aunt Lise regarding Becka’s fear of penises, it is made clear that suicide is prevalent both before and after the girls wed; “[i]t’s no use forcing them: they can’t accept bodily reality. Even if the wedding night is accomplished, they will soon be found swinging from a light fixture or in a coma under a rose bush, having swallowed every pill in the house” (215). Aunt Lydia comments on the lack of presence in their bodies of the girls such as Becka and Agnes, and when faced with the reality of their lived experience they therefore seek to end it due to the trauma of it all. The girls in Gilead have not ‘lost’ the privilege of autonomy of their own body such as Offred and her fellow Handmaids have, simply due to them having been born into such a situation, yet they suffer in the same manner, with the same need to escape. Interestingly, where Offred seeks back to embodiment through senses such as touch, they lack the ability to do so in many ways, and so escape to imagination.

3.5 Material Matter and Technology

Karen Barad states that “[n]ature is neither a passive surface awaiting the mark of culture nor the end product of cultural performances” (Barad, 145). With this she points out a big part of material feminism; that nature is changeable and agential, that culture is not alone in “prospects

for significance and change” (Barad, 145). What is seen in both novels and the series’ is a world where its population sees nature for having a certain type of agency, and so they have to a certain degree had to accommodate it. The solution they have come up with is to relegate the human body to nature, which results in that an essentialist notion of gender has been allowed to come into play and the female body repressed as a result. The nature aspect of the body, the biological determinism, can be seen in the focus on the biological functions of the body in the novel. I define biological determinism as the idea that men the dominant gender by virtue of biology (Oxford Reference).

Bodily fluids, and especially blood belongs to the women’s sphere; “[c]leaning up things such as blood and other substances that came out of bodies was part of women’s duty” (Atwood, 87). Especially blood in connection with female reproduction is seen as having significance and is often referenced. In many ways blood is what drives Gilead. Blood in females often equals fertility and so the emphasis on blood in the novel can be linked to this. Agnes describing her puberty is proof of this. She describes the changes to her body in detail, “I had begun to sprout hair on areas of my body” (82) but lingers on the concept of blood; “[s]oon I could expect blood to come out from between my legs”. She asks God why it had to be so and counters herself with his preoccupation with blood, in having it spilled in purification, how “[b]lood was polluting, especially when it came out of girls” (83). Agnes does as she is taught, and relegates her gender and body to only its biological function at the same time as she connects it religion, in what her God thinks of such a thing. Her body is changed and blood makes girls like her ‘unclean’. As a biological material matter, blood is therefore vital for Gilead.

Another important aspect of blood in Gilead is its link to genes, to bloodlines. Quite early on in the novel Aunt Lydia introduces the Bloodlines Genealogical Archives to the reader, an archive with classified files that traces blood relations. She reveals its importance in order to avoid incest, by the information of both official and unofficial blood relations listed there; ”a couple’s child may not be bio[-]logically related to the elite mother or even the official father” due to affairs and desperate Handmaids that might go to others in order to get pregnant. The presence of the archives, then, links blood to bonds between parents and children. The lack of protection for both Daisy and Becka are in part a lack of protection from their mothers. The stepmother Paula, who wishes to marry Daisy away as soon as possible, and Becka’s mother who view her as the biological daughter of a Handmaid.

Food is an essential and important matter of lived experience. *The Testaments* is similar to both the first novel and the series in its hyperfocus on food. Food is meticulously and

frequently described and its political dimensions, impact on the environment and its relation to the body are all themes of scrutiny in the novel.

In her article, “Testimonies in *The Testaments* by Margaret Atwood: Images of Food in Gilead”(2020), Katarina Labudová speaks of food as expression in repressive regimes and describes how “cooking metaphors and images of food to underline how women are deprived of their human rights” (98) often is used in both *THT* and *The Testaments*. These novels have a certain format, and Labudová further states that “food and lack of food often occur in testimonies”(99) and describes how these often is seen witness testimonies form both Holocaust and in Communist regimes. She also points out how change in eating patterns and emergence of eating disorders often can happen after trauma and concludes with how witness narratives including food often lends a materiality when transferring the horror of an experience/trauma. Gilead certainly fits a lot of the criteria Labudová mentions, and the form of address seen in *The Testaments* certainly view food as an important material matter to take into account when describing the experiences of the main protagonists.

One such example is Aunt Lydia’s experience during Son’s of Jacob’s takeover. When she describes her captivity at the Stadium along with other professional working women, she describes the food and its consumption in detail; “[b]read and water for breakfast. How superlatively good that bread tasted! Some wolfed and guzzled, but I made my portion last as long as possible” (Atwood, 142). The attention Aunt Lydia pays to what kind of food, the manner and speed of its consumption, making it obvious that these are details Atwood deems important.

Aunt Lydia also pays special attention to the bodily state and functions of her and the other women; on the topic of being denied basic necessities such as no toilet paper or clean water, she describes in detail how you had to “[u]se your hand, attempt to clean your sullied fingers under the dribble of water” (142), and of the diarrhea from drinking the tap-water. There is also space made for the state of what else the body may release; “[n]aturally we began to stink...the smell of clotting blood was added to the sweat and tears and shit and puke. To breathe was to be nauseated” (143). Her level of details regarding the body in the process of captivity lends a visceral and almost embodied sensation of having been there with her. The amount of space set aside for these description indicates Atwood’s focus on material aspects such as the body and its importance. The visceral presence of Aunt Lydia’s body is highlighted by the detailed description of what it takes in and expunges. While the main focus of *THT* in material aspects seemed to be connected to the senses, in *The Testaments*, this focus is moved to the health of the body.

This importance of food to point out certain bodily functions can also be seen in other passages in the novel. It is especially interesting that after detailing to the reader the first time the captive women in the Stadium witness executions of some of them, the next paragraph and also the last of that chapter is used to explain the amenities, starting with the food. The first paragraph ends with; “if they were going to kill us all, why this display?” for then the next paragraph to start with “[s]undown brought sandwiches, one each. Mine was egg salad” (Atwood, 118). The page reads like death and life. There is contemplation to be made there, from Aunt Lydia’s thought of death to then evolve in the next chapter to that of life; of food.

There is a very material sense in the section I just described. Her captivity at the Stadium that details her need to survive and the transformation to the Aunt she is today, is speckled with material aspects. Questions of survival, of life and death have an added sense of a material reality through the very meticulous details of her body’s intake and outtake. Aunt Lydia’s hunger, the food she consumed, the state of the facilities, the smell of bodies, all the bodily functions that are needed to survive gives it a reality to the reader, of lived experience. The choice of Atwood to include this, witnesses the importance of having a material perspective taken into account when writing.

Food is also used as social commentary in the novel. Through the focus on food, its political aspects reveal the state of the nation and possibly the world. In chapter one of this thesis I discussed how the food in *THT* often revealed political manoeuvring, unrest and fights over food, and are frequently mentioned. This is also holds true for *The Testaments*. In one instance, the lack of food is commented upon in Agnes’ observation of classes she had to take in preparation of her marriage; “[i]n these times of national scarcity it was important not to waste food or to spoil its full potential” (164). The source of food is important factor in Gilead, one that ascertains the state of it. We can also infer this from the offhand comment from Aunt Lydia on saving her surveillance photo of Aunt Vidala’s deed; “it is always desirable to save whatever scraps may come to hand, in the kitchen and elsewhere” (211). Even as an offhand comment, it has importance in commenting on the food shortage in Gilead.

The lack of food supplies is also indicated through the focus on nutrition that sometimes comes up in the novel. The restrictions of certain fruits such as oranges that are offered up to Aunt Lydia’s statue, points to this. Aunt Lydia also comments on her “strict rules concerning nutrient intake” (179) when confronted with what a waste of food the offerings to her statue is. However, the theme of nutrition also existed pre-Gilead, albeit with the shadow of captivity hanging over it; during her time in captivity at the Stadium, nutrition is mentioned in the form of sarcastic commentary on the carrot they received one day; “[I]unch was sandwiches again, and

on one day – the drizzle day – some carrot sticks” (143). The practice of no-waste in regards to food in Gilead, and nutritional theme that sometimes pop up in the novel is interesting due to it each time pointing out lack of food for the body to consume. Food has importance in the novel, not only as a side note but as focal point where the abstract and material meets; “In Gilead, everything is political: bodies, intimate thoughts and food” (Labudová, 105). The importance of the healthy body, the political ramifications of food shortage and focus on supply of it reveals intimate thoughts on lived experience in Gilead.

Unlike the first novel and the series, the technology introduced in the second novel is more advanced. Set fifteen years after *THT*, it is natural that the technology seen in *The Testaments* is more advanced; yet it is also fact that a much larger space has been set aside for its presence in the novel. The increased use of advanced technology in Gilead is revealed through the reference to the use of the older technology. Microdots are images or texts that have been reduced to very small sizes for easy smuggling, and is an old technology no longer in use in Gilead. During her stay with some members from Mayday, they tell Daisy of the technology used by their source to smuggle information out of Gilead; “the source used microdots, which were an old technology – so old that Gilead hadn’t thought of looking for them” (Atwood, 196). The advancement of technology in Gilead is further confirmed by Commander Judd explaining microdots to a seemingly confused Aunt Lydia during a meeting; “[a]n old technology that has fallen into disuse, but that is still per[-]fectly viable” (140). The mention of this type of technology being old, not once, but twice is significant in pointing out the technological advances of Gilead, despite its essentialist and ‘naturalist’ take on gender, the body and nature, and of these as being dichotomies.

The blend of nature and human is important in material feminism, and the blend of the human with technology is also part of this. The use of technology and its connection to the body is especially important in *The Testaments*. In fact, I argue that the plot is dependent on technology; the blend of the material body and technology is imperative to the fall of Gilead and a symbol of the failure of its essentialist view of the world. The blend of the material body and technology is often referred to as the cyborg, a term coined by Donna Haraway. She defends her concept of humans as cyborgs with the example of how advancement of technology in the past decades has evolved, amongst others. In “[c]ontrast the TV sets of the 1950s or the news cameras of the 1970s with the TV wristbands or hand-sized video cameras now advertised” (Haraway, 13) is what she wrote in essay “A Cyborg Manifesto” that was published in the year 1985, making the relevancy of the statement yet more significant with the technological advances seen since then. She goes on to write that the “[c]yborgs are ether, quintessence” (13)

due to their materiality and opaqueness; material and portable yet comprised of electromagnetic waves and signals. This blend of the material human with technology changes relations and power, in that “[c]ommunications technologies and biotechnologies are the crucial tools recrafting our bodies. These tools embody and en[-]force new social relations for women worldwide” (33). It is through technology and the body that the protagonists of the novel manages to topple Gilead.

Aunt Lydia uses both hidden audio and video surveillance in Ardura Hall to increase her power and secretly smuggle info to the underground resistance group, Mayday, via technology. One example is in the struggle for power between the Aunts. Here, she makes the use of cameras to discover an attack on her reputation from Aunt Vidala, her strongest opponent; “what should loom into the camera’s field of vision ... but the large red nose of Aunt Vidala” (Atwood, 211). Physical evidence of wrong-doings in Gilead is a source of power to Aunt Lydia, who according to herself, has “always been good with tools”, (209) during her installation of the secret cameras to get the perpetrator intending to smear her reputation. The manner in which she both talks about, and uses technology in her retelling of events, show that the use of technology is integral to Aunt Lydia’s hold over her position in Gilead. However, there is a more obvious connection to the cyborg that Haraway speaks of, in the novel.

Previously in this thesis I have spoken about resistance to the regime via the body and intimate relations, but in *The Testaments*, technology is an added component to this type of bodily resistance. Haraway asserts that “[t]he machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment... We are responsible for boundaries; we are they” (Haraway, 65), and points out how technology is part the human body. In the novel, I see two of the main protagonists each uses technology to embody themselves. In a bid to topple the regime by smuggling out sensitive information revealing the level of Gilead’s corruption, Aunt Lydia surgically inserts a microdot under the tattoo in Lydia’s arm during her stay in Gilead, “[s]he took a thin blade and made a nick in my tattoo, at the base of the *O*. Then, using a magnifying glass and a minute pair of tweezers, she slid something very small into my arm” (Atwood, 333). Despite how the insertion of technology into herself feels dangerous to her; “[n]ow I had a lethal weapon in my arm” (333), Daisy becomes a literal cyborg in blending her own body with technology. Aunt Lydia on the other hand, uses bodies the way humans use technology; in order to reach her goals she uses them as tools. Through Daisy and the missionaries and spies, her Pearl Girls, she uses microdot technology to smuggle information to Mayday. She is also reliant on the use of cameras and audio to spy on those that might seek to oppose her and take away her power. In that manner Aunt Lydia can ironically be seen as a cyborg existing in a world that purports an essentialist

view of the human and nature, that is controlled by biological determinism rather than technology. Kuznetski also links Daisy's insertion of a microdot to Haraway's cyborg; by having her arm implanted with technology, Daisy "carries the message in her body, under a tattoo on her skin, blending corporeality and technology, and thus becoming a cyborg" (Kuznetski, 297). She further points out how the 'cyborg' Daisy has become, is referred to as a "carries pigeon", a term closely related to nature and thus combining the human with technology and nature. Aunt Lydia and Daisy are two ways that could be read as being a cyborg; Aunt Lydia's reliance on technology versus the implanted Daisy. By blurring the lines between the human and nature and human and machine, both of them succeeds in resisting the current regime and inhabit broader agency.

Haraway also speaks of a cyborg world, a world of reliance on technology, where "lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial iden[-]tities and contradictory standpoints" (Haraway, 15). One such failed world is perhaps Gilead, in that the regime suppresses one sex on the basis of biological determinism yet uses advanced technology. It is perhaps fitting that the right wing religious conservative regime of Gilead is defeated by the fusing of the human and technology into the cyborg through the bodies of women, the intimate relations between them.

3.6 Black Lived Experience and Missed Opportunities

In the previous chapter of this thesis it has been pointed out that both the first novel and the series have received criticism in regards to the lack of an intersectional feminist perspective and of proper representation of people of colour. With the novel *THT*, Atwood was criticised for writing a white feminist book in part due to the lack of space given to people of colour. Atwood emphasises the historical precedents of the events of both of her novels. The main issue however, is how she implements these. As mentioned in the last two chapters, her appropriation of the history and experiences of the American female black slaves in her narrative is seen as problematic due to how she seems to have rewritten this in a white format, essentially whitewashing said history.

In chapter two I point out how the series accounted for part of this criticism by opening up space for people of colour in its cast and thus covering the representation issues of the first novel. This, however, became problematic in the manner in which they attempted to do this by including people of colour without acknowledging their history or letting of black material

bodies and lived experiences impact the narrative. As a result, the show presented a racial utopia that reproduced whiteness and erased black history and lived experience. In not letting the space opening up for the black body having any impact on the narrative of the series, their history of suppression is erased which is problematic. The series and novel both have faced criticism in regards to its lack of proper space of people of colour, and so to see if Atwood had taken into account some of that criticism when writing *The Testaments* is now pertinent to take a closer look at.

Atwood herself has confirmed that Gilead was built on white supremacy. During an interview she clearly states that “in the book they go full white supremacy” (Alter, 2019) compared to the series. Several places in the novel indicate the same. Initially the attack on Congress by the Sons of Jacob was blamed on Islamic terrorism. Through Aunt Lydia’s commentary on the failed political scheme of Commander Judd’s “Certificate of Whiteness” and its consequences of charges of genocide and “flow of refugee Homelanders...across the Canadian border” (64) as a result, this is further confirmed, and cements this ideology as part of Gilead. There is notably no direct statement of these refugees being people of colour, yet the charges of genocide and name of Homelanders indicates this. Despite all these nods and acknowledgements of Gilead being a racial oppressive society, Atwood’s refusal to engage directly with racial issues in *The Testaments* can be seen as problematic.

An issue particularly relevant today is the treatment of refugees, with “children ripped from the arms of their parents, flights across borders, inhumane detention centers” (Feldman, 2019), and in the novel there are clear parallels to this. In a previous sub-chapter of this chapter I describe Atwood’s mentions of refugees in the context of vulnerable bodies. However, on questioned whether her newest novel takes inspiration from present events, Atwood points out how these can be found several places historically (Feldman 2019). In the novel, Ada describes a people-smuggling route used during the 1740s, when explaining to Daisy how Offred managed to smuggle her across the border and out of Gilead as a baby. She details how “[t]hey used to catch girls from New England, hold them hostage, trade them for money, or else marry them off” (Atwood, 191) and reveals how that is where she got her mixed heritage from. One can infer from this that the kidnappers are most likely Native Americans. The reason for Ada suddenly offering up the information on her own heritage might be from a need to explain her appearance. Thus, the only indication that Ada is other than white is this side note in a larger conversation. In the first introduction to the character, Daisy describes Ada’s age, the clothes she is wearing, her hair and even her makeup less state is noted yet makes no notion of her skin colour. Atwood

avoids engaging with race, even though we in the previous passage have indication of Ada's non-whiteness.

It is interesting that Atwood pays such vivid attention to material aspects such as what lived experience consists of: smells, touch, matter such as clothes, colours and embodiment, yet there is no point of attention a person's skin colour and their lived experiences in connection to that. She describes in detail everything but a person's skin colour. In *The Testaments*, she had a chance to explore something she avoided with *THT*; the lived experience of a person of colour in the regime of Gilead. In the series, the character of Agnes is presented as bi-racial, and Atwood could have emphasised this in the new novel and used her narrative to describe how a black female body would have had to navigate Gilead. This missed opportunity suggests that rather than saying the presence of race is erased in Gilead, it is more accurate to say that black body, the people, do not exist.

3.7 Summary

In this chapter I have examined Atwood's newest novel to see how the subject matter and her treatment of the body have changed since the release of her first novel in the Gilead verse.

What is first apparent in *The Testaments* is the strong political aspect permeating it, and I point out how the power struggles in Gilead is at the forefront of the narrative. The three protagonists embodies different aspects of the struggle; Aunt Lydia as one of few women in position of power, Agnes as a girl born and raised in Gilead, and finally Daisy, who is for all intents and purposes an outsider, and someone who can better address the flaws in the system that cannot be seen from the point of view of the indoctrinated women inside the system. When comparing Daisy and Agnes' lived experiences, the gruesome realities of the bodies of the women of Gilead are emphasised.

I then present the vulnerable body that is present in Gilead through intimacy and indoctrination. I here look into the interpersonal relations that exist for the three women, and how political aspects of Gilead shape the women's experiences due to their vulnerabilities. I point out how bodily safety is reliant on its relations to other, and how fierce competitiveness and harsh political landscapes causes risks if intimacy is forged. Despite this, strength can be found in other women; intimacy and familial relationships can be and are still forged, and the stronger for it.

Furthermore I highlight the view of the female body as a commodity in Gilead, and how this affects the girls growing up there. As children, their bodies are especially vulnerable, both in the relations they form, to predators in the form of physical harm and in their sense of self, which is harmed by their indoctrination and constant objectification. I note the survival tool of ‘othering’ that the women of Gilead use, especially in regards to the Handmaids, and comments on other vulnerable bodies in the novel.

Moving on, I point out what is paramount in *THT* but not as prevalent in *The Testaments*, which is the use of senses in embodying the self. I point out how Atwood frequently used senses in order to demonstrate Offred’s disconnect to her own body, while the characters in *The Testaments* have no need for this. They live in a different lived reality; Aunt Lydia and Daisy both fully inhabit their bodies due to their larger autonomy, but I state that the girls brought up in Gilead are fully disconnected, exemplified with Agnes and Becka. Instead of using senses to ground themselves, they use their imagination as an escape from their lived reality.

Material matter outside the body is also an important aspect in the novel. Nature is agential, and in Gilead the human body is relegated to nature in an essentialist notion of gender, which furthers a patriarchal suppression. I use the novel’s focus on the imagery of blood to explain the importance of biological functions in Gilead. Food is also an aspect of biological functions that I explore through various characters, and as material aspect it comments upon bodily states as well as social commentary in the novel. What I consider most important, however, is the space set aside for technology. The fusion of technology and the body is very important in a material feminist sense, and creates cyborgs, which alters the bodies and thus the lived experiences. However, the technology allows for a different reach and potential for the women in the narrative. I here posit that the technology allows for a furthering of the resistance possible through bodies and intimate relations.

In the realm of criticism I once again emphasises how Atwood fails to address black lived experiences in her narratives. Despite what I point out to be a weak attempt at addressing it in the TV show, *The Testaments* makes no move to do the same. While Atwood confirms the presence of white supremacy in Gilead, and may have taken inspiration from real life experiences of black women, she once more erases race by not allowing space for the black lived body in Gilead. Lastly, I state that Atwood has an eye for detail regarding the material aspects and the idea of lived experiences, yet lost an opportunity in exploring the lived reality of the black body in failing to address them in *The Testaments*.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have so far not directly engaged with the epilogues in the novels, due to the not directly pertaining the to the lived lives of the women in Gilead, and I also thought it fitting to address them here. Each of the women's stories are told in a similar to fashion to Offred's; witness testimonies that are discussed at two Symposium's around 300 years after Gilead's fall. Offred with her cassette tapes, Aunt Lydia with her manuscript and Lydia and Agnes with their witness transcripts, are all testimonies to lived experiences in Gilead. They are also relevant in that they signify a change in Atwood between writing the novels. In *THT* At the 12th Symposium, professor Pieixoto presents the historical findings of Offred's cassettes. During the presentation, he makes sexist remarks in a joking fashion about Handmaid's Tale referencing the word tail, which is a sexist expression used for a female's ass or dubbing The Underground Femaleroad for The Underground Frailroad (Atwood, 1986, 313). These remarks are, however, referenced in *The Testaments*, where Aunt Lydia's, Agnes' and Daisy's witness testimonies are presented at the 13th Symposium, and the reader is reintroduced to the professor. He starts his presentation by congratulation the new female president of the association, and apologising for his remarks at the previous Symposium and "admit[s] some of them were not in the best of taste"(408). He reveals that he had received comments on his behaviour and would "attempt not reoffend"(408). By having the professor be held accountable, she mirrors our society today, where this situation is more likely to happen. The revelation of a female president and the professor's change of tone reveal an increased optimism to Atwood's writing. *The Testaments* are most likely her last novel regarding Gilead, and it is significant that she ends it with a more hopeful outlook on the future of equality.

In *THT* have I explored the material aspects of Offred in particular, and through her I emphasised the importance of embodying the self through senses in the affect it has on lived experience. By focusing on the body rather than her language, I demonstrated how the material body existed outside its boundaries in terms of intimate relations, and how this became a site of resistance for Offred. The body is not separate from its surroundings, and by focusing on material aspects such as nature and the environments impact it on the female body, I emphasise their imbrication. As I have shown, lived experience is of special importance from a material feminist standpoint, and Atwood's use of senses in particular is what makes this novel stand out in regards to a material feminist perspective.

When exploring the material aspects of the female body presented in the TV show, I have commented upon the increase in agency and autonomy of Offred's body and how this affect her lived experience and identity. By focalising the narrative through several bodies, the show invites a broader perspective on lived life yet fails to delve deeper into this. When mapping out material aspects not directly related to the body, I found technology to be much more prevalent in the show. Through film theory I outline ways in which camera techniques were used to make the audience empathise with Offred and to highlight the power dynamics. I also found the show to invite a different perspective on the female body in its form of visual media. Beauty and ageism are new facets of the material body that this new visual medium brought to light. I further stated that bodily identity was a the main difference of this chapter, details how Offred's larger agency translated to more overt attempts at forging bonds but also resulted in more brutal imagery of her body being treated as less-than-human. I then illustrate how the show values certain bodies above others, such as the fertile body above that of the queer and black bodies, and illustrates the way the show fails to take into account black history, thereby creation a racial utopia at the expense of black lived experience.

I have in *The Testaments* sought to outline differences in material aspects and treatment of the female body in light of the large gap of publication between it and *THT*. I also stated that what makes the novel stand out from the other works is the political overview of Gilead, which I found relevant for a material reading on its affect on the lived experiences of the female bodies of the regime. I then illustrate how intimacy opens up the body to harm and points out how women may hurt other women, especially in Gilead. I found Butler's theory on the vulnerable body especially apt in this context, as bodies are affected by our lived experiences, and relations are a part of that. Therefore, I consider this another aspect of a material feminist reading. On the subject of women as commodities, in the novel this is explored from a child's perspective, and reveals a larger degree of vulnerability brought on by the harmful indoctrination in Gilead. Girls' bodies are attacked from multiple sources, such as through their relations, physical assault, and a harmful sense of self as a thing, which leads me to embodying the self. I use Offred, Agnes and Daisy as examples of different degrees of embodiment. In the section on material aspects not directly related to the body I illustrate blood and food as important symbols of the body's biological function in Gilead, and a tool in the view of gender as essential. The most important aspect of the third chapter, however, is the new material aspect of the body's fusion with technology, in what Haraway terms the cyborg. This is relevant when looking at lived experience, and opens up new avenues of using the body as site of resistance. In the end I lament

on the missed opportunity of Atwood to engage with the lived experience of the black body in her newest novel.

Atwood's works all have material aspects or facets that are similar. What the characters have in common are the internalisation of the body as something non-human, and material aspects not directly related to the body yet influencing it, is heavily emphasised and a clear indication of the material influence on the style of writing of the author. By making space for lived experience such as food and bodily sensations, the outside of the internal body is acknowledged as an influence. These outside influences also function as social and bodily commentary in all the works, seen through food often being connected to environment and politics. Lastly, I previously stated the importance of using an intersectional perspective when doing feminist analysis. What I found when employing a material feminist reading on the works was a failure of taking into account other bodily experiences than the white one. In not engaging with, or making space for lived experiences of the black body, it suggests that some bodies have more importance or value than others. The show does a good job of including the queer bodily experience in Gilead, but fails to address the black lived experience despite inclusion of people of colour. The importance of intimate relations is prevalent in both novels, but the show differs in its presentation of the self-possessed heroine, that carries the message of not needing anyone.

What I have found is that each of the works introduces different material aspects through their presentations of the female body and lived experience that I take into consideration in my feminist material reading. Through a material feminist reading of Offred's lived reality in *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* I point out senses as an important tool in embodying one's body/self and a material aspect. I also introduce aspects not directly related to the body, but that is imbricated to it in a sort of connection. In the TV show I posit that it invites a broader perspective on the female body and lived experiences. Beauty, ageism and the queer body are new facets of this that I explore. In *The Testaments* the terms discourse and vulnerable bodies are defined and added to the current tools/repertoire to use when doing a material feminist reading. The novel also broaches the technological aspects of materiality. By melding the material body with technology, the cyborg is created. Through the works just mentioned, I introduced progressively more aspects to use as tools in the next chapter until I reached the aspect of technology. By introducing a more intersectional perspective as well, these aspects should give a fuller, more accurate material feminist reading, and so give a more correct representation that reflects all facets of real lived life, both physical and mental matters.

As I have shown, in this thesis I have through the lens of feminism explored the presentations of the female body and its material aspects in Atwood's fictional world of Gilead

through different mediums. By focusing on senses, embodiment, identity, I have mapped the different lived experiences as well as the internal dimensions of the body. I have looked at both internal and external factors through the subject matter of food, intimate relations and vulnerable bodies. External factors that I consider relevant to a material feminist reading of the body are the perspectives on environment, nature and technology, as they affect the material aspects of the body. My aim was to show the material aspects of female bodies in Gilead, and the different lived experiences presented in each medium. With my explorations of these themes, I have outlined what I consider important when employing a feminist material reading of Atwood's works.

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