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**Nostalgia and the Dialectics of Contemporary Feminisms in  
*The Handmaid's Tale***

When Hulu's television series *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017-2019), adapted from Margaret Atwood's eponymous novel (1985), premiered, it became an instant hit. More than thirty years separates the two works, and previous adaptations failed to materialize or flopped. So, why now? Adaptations, in general, respond to a belief that the original can offer insight to or commentary on current events or values. For an adaptation to be successful, it must have certain sociocultural and political conditions that favor a reading of the original work as a useful tool for present circumstances. The success is heightened if the adaptation also touches people emotionally, if it provides meaning to viewers' personal experience of the present. Under that premise, we contend that the show constitutes a significant but problematic revival of female-body-centered conceptualization of gender oppression prior to current debates on the political subject of feminism. To develop our hypothesis, we examine different reflective and critical aspects of nostalgia in relation to contemporary and previous feminist waves.

Although present-day feminism's vitality and diversity (institutional feminism, material feminism, queer feminism, etc.) favors approaches distinct from those of previous feminisms, some of the most popular expressions are ambivalent about recognizing their legacy. For example, neoliberal feminism (identifiable in celebrity feminism and feminism in popular culture) coexists with transfeminism, characterized by a polyphony of voices that give rise to post-identity politics; for different reasons, both fail to pay due attention to previous feminist movements. The adaptation of Atwood's novel into a successful series demonstrates not just a retrieval and critical reexamination of previous iterations of feminism, but a complex nostalgic turn. Before exploring how and why in more detail, we will first briefly provide an overview of the series and how it differs from the novel.

The first season follows the vicissitudes of Handmaid June/Offred in the dystopic and totalitarian Republic of Gilead (formerly the US). She belongs to the caste of women able to conceive who are to be forcibly impregnated through rape by the Commanders of the households where they are posted. Gilead is governed by fundamentalist values that divide women among fertile Handmaids, domestic Marthas, ruthlessly indoctrinating Aunts, and privileged but barren Wives. Season one generally follows Atwood's plot, ending before the pregnant Offred (whose original name is never given in the novel) gives birth. Season two goes beyond this narrative and opens with a scene of visceral punishment of the Handmaid. It focuses on June's pregnancy to delve into the relationship between Serena Joy Waterford, the Wife of the household, and June: they become progressively but intermittently unlikely allies to protect the future baby. When presented with an escape option, June

decides to stay in Gilead to recover her older daughter, Hanna, and to fight with the resistance (after ensuring the newborn will escape to Canada with Emily/Ofglen, another Handmaid). Serena is brutally punished for helping June liberate the baby, Nicole. In season three, June joins an underground group formed by Marthas and plans to escape with Hannah. The season ends with fifty-two liberated girls arriving safely in Canada thanks to June, but she remains in a forest in Gilead, wounded from the fight to extricate the children.

To unfold the narrative's intricacies in relation to nostalgia and contemporary feminist debates, we start by delving into the similarities between the Reagan era—when Atwood's work was written—and the current milieu under Trump, in which it was released. We then reflect on the backlash that the Reagan and Trump governments constituted for women's rights (including the growth of popular misogyny) to consider how the series responds to this context. We not only analyze the different approaches to nostalgia that the series displays but also question the type of feminism this female dystopia recuperates for contemporary feminist debates. Finally, we inquire into the political capacity of the show's nostalgia to advance the complex debate on feminism. We argue that the series articulates a conservative recuperation of old feminist debates centered on the female subject (motherhood, rape, pornography, prostitution, etc.), not only due to the threat of contemporary misogyny but also in response to the growth of political power by the LGBTQI movement and the subsequent displacement of traditional feminist issues. Nevertheless, despite the drawbacks of a series that falls short of intersectional and structural critique of gender injustice, it has proven to be a stimulating catalyst in the debate regarding the improvement of women's lives against retrograde attitudes and policies in current times. Ultimately, the series defies any monolithic understanding of nostalgia as either amnesiac and regressive/recuperative or reflective and inspiring in relation to gender.

**The Novel, Feminism, and the 1980s.** Adaptations to the screen of works created in a different era present an invaluable opportunity to assess the motivations and social consequences of such transformations. Adaptations can be seen as a negotiation between aesthetic and ideological issues at many levels. Thus, it is worthwhile to evaluate which messages are recuperated by Hulu's adaptation and why. Atwood describes a dystopian world, but wrote in a specific cultural, social, and political context that is now being translated to a different medium and context. As Susan Sontag observes, "interpretation is not (as most people assume) an absolute value, a gesture of mind situated in some timeless realm of capabilities. Interpretation must itself be evaluated, within a historical view of human consciousness" (5). Atwood's novel has become a modern classic and been translated into plays, an opera, and an earlier film. The level of the popularity achieved by the series (evinced by the appropriation of the Handmaids' attire in protests around the world, and the use of the sentence "*Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum*" in the 2017

Women's March on Washington) is noteworthy. Is this the popularization of feminism? Is it propelled by the menace of new toxic masculinities?

Atwood sets the story in a futuristic America (reborn as the Republic of Gilead) led by religious fundamentalists who, in an attempt to populate a world decimated by pollution and infertility, limit women's roles to Wives, Handmaids, and Marthas, as described above. In 1985 the US embraced staunch conservatism, with the election of Ronald Reagan and the increasing power of the Christian Right: "The time has come," Reagan said, "to turn to God and reassert our trust in Him for our great nation's healing. We need to join forces to reclaim the great principles embodied in the Judeo-Christian traditions and in Holy Scriptures" (qtd. in Coste 2). Reagan possessed a traditional view of the relationship between men and women and of the role of women in society. He disdained the motivations and aspirations of feminist activists and, conscious of the electoral potential of the Christian Right, invested himself with the mission to denounce homosexuality, fight against abortion rights, and oppose the Equal Rights Amendment (see Coste; Bashevkin). Overall, his administration discriminated against women and its budget cuts affected women to the point that Reagan is considered "The most anti-woman president of the 20th century" (Burk; cf. Schafran).

The 1980s also saw the fragmentation of the feminist movement due to competing visions. In the 1960s and 1970s, a self-defined feminist movement parted from the achievements of the suffragists and pursued the fight for legal and political emancipation. Known as the Second Wave, the movement in its variants not only reopened the theoretical debates around women's political subjectivity, but it also made concrete political demands to change women's circumstances. Disappointed with the lack of changes in social relations, however, contemporary feminists "concentrated on issues which specifically affected women: reproduction, mothering, sexual violence, expressions of sexuality and domestic labor" (Gillis, Howie, and Munford 1). Although they engaged in the peace movement, antiracist activities, and "reclaim the night" marches, their main focus was women as the object and subject of discourse. Soon critiques pointed out the elusiveness of the term "woman," prompting reflections about the nature of identity and grounds for a collective fight. Class differences, racial diversity, the multiplicities of sexual orientation and gender identity have all been the foundation for different kinds of identity politics (a tradition distinct from Judith Butler's ontological critique of categories such as "women" or "men" during the 1990s). Since then, such debates have taken center stage, including contentious topics such as pornography and transgender identity.

In the 1980s, among the many divisions that seemed to threaten a sense of unity within the feminist cause was the occasional confluence of so-called "anti-porn" feminism and the cultural agenda of the Right (particularly religious conservatives).<sup>1</sup> Anti-porn feminism opposed pornography, prostitution, and BDSM practices. For example, according to Dworkin, porn is fascist propaganda, prostitution is a founding institution of the sex class system, and engagement in BDSM, or even in heterosexual play, is based on

farcical consent or inadvertent collaboration with one's own submission to male supremacy. Catherine MacKinnon also opposed pornography but additionally called attention to the habitual harassment of women in the workplace almost forty years before the #MeToo movement.<sup>2</sup>

The anti-porn feminists were broadly criticized by other feminists, most prominently Gayle Rubin and Lynne Segal, for promoting the idea of women as devoid of agency, easily brainwashed, and, ultimately, victims of indoctrination with the purpose of fulfilling men's desires. These radical feminists promoted the ability of women (including sex workers) to be empowered, to make their own decisions, and to have sexual appetites. Atwood's novel captures these dissenting sentiments and the collision of distinct positions on the topic of feminism, and ultimately champions an alliance with other women based on a shared identity and experience of oppression. As Offred says in the novel, speaking of Serena Joy, "[How] furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word" (46). In the face of a world governed by religious misogynist zealots who are helped by female supporters, no woman will ever win, even if individuals believe otherwise.

This evolution of feminist ideas is crucial context for our argument. The questions of sex and women's role in their own subordination were not the only points of contention among feminists. Toward the end of the 1980s and well into the 1990s, debates on the universality of women's experience and the meaning of the word woman itself, and its connection to biological status, remained heated topics in the critique of essentialism. On the one hand, numerous feminist thinkers pointed out that "the (false) universalization of claims about women, in effect, casts particular forms of feminine experience as the norm and, typically, normalize[s] historically and culturally privileged forms of femininity. Essentialist theoretical moves thereby end up replicating among women the very patterns of oppression and exclusion that feminism should contest" (Stone 87). A monolithic feminist thought that used heterosexual, middle- and upper-class white women and their conditions as the norm was rejected by women who came from different histories and experiences. Teresa de Lauretis, Judith Butler, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, among others, interrogated any notion of common characteristics for all women (even if understood as culturally constructed). Furthermore, they questioned the very existence of things named by the concepts sex and gender. Their ultimate purpose was to defy a monolithic conception of identity and to embrace diversity and plurality (including experiences of class, race, ability, sexuality, gender performance, etc.). Although the intention was to free the term feminism from narrow categorizations and open it to emerging identities and political needs, what followed was a schism that challenged the very idea of the feminist subject. The result was numerous perspectives on what feminism meant, including a rejection of feminism altogether by some women, who saw it as unnecessary (deeming equality achieved), disabling (impeding female empowerment by focusing on victimization), and too serious and radical (in its opposition to patriarchy). The emerging postfeminist era conceived of previous feminism as irrelevant. Some women ended the

twentieth century and started the new one celebrating the existence of a brave new world, embracing all the perks of neoliberalism while forgetting the struggles of the past.

**The Nostalgic Recuperation of *The Handmaid's Tale* and (Post)Feminist Amnesia.** The series entered the popular arena in this context, when second-wave debates—such as on abortion rights, sexual harassment, rape, domestic violence, femicides, precarious labor, and the like—are gaining currency. It has become a cautionary tale about those who believe the fight is over, that feminism is redundant and the category of women *passé*. As Pickering and Keightley suggest, “Uncertainty and insecurity in present circumstances create fertile ground for a sentimental longing for the past, or for a past fondly reconstructed out of selectively idealized features, and ... the media help to fill this ground even as, in other dimensions of their output, they serve to undermine it” (925). Faced with precarity, we are enticed to go back to the binary system and ontological certainty. In the process, unfortunately, the media are also reproducing exclusionary discourses. This nostalgic exercise counters Munford and Water’s critique that “the postfeminist text is often marked by amnesia” (30) in relation to the previous feminist legacy of struggles. They base their argument on what Gill Plain and Susan Sellers define as the tension between “the power of feminism and its increasing spectrality” (qtd. in Munford and Waters 30). Since postfeminist discourse is marked by an emphasis on women’s power, and that, consequently, results in the term “power feminism,” any discourse suggesting the current prevalence of women’s victimization is considered obsolete and out of touch. Hulu’s adaptation, however, succeeds in putting into dialogue the fragile tensions among the present, past, and future of women’s empowerment and victimization.

The consequences of this amnesia or lack of historical memory around women’s fights are twofold. On the one hand, it presents women’s experiences of vulnerability today as particular, isolated events. On the other, believing that we face new phenomena, disparities, and injustices to be resisted from scratch creates a sense of anxiety. Hence, in these challenging political times, looking back to feminist perspectives and responses to violence and establishing connections with current issues may be valuable. Claiming feminism’s historical legacy is more pressing if we consider the multiple internal fights within feminist thought and actions that have hindered the debate between different perspectives located in their own historical moments. Undoubtedly, the approaches that take into account the legacy of suffering and traumas allow for the analysis of shared vulnerabilities and of how an injury has consequences beyond individual harm—it shapes the frameworks of perception, appreciation, and action. Interdependence, in fact, goes beyond the support structures in place as well as the interpretative structures of the social world that delimit the margins of the thinkable. The show fails, however, to delve into the shared aspects of interdependent precariousness with other

gender-based vulnerable groups by positioning itself within the most traditional approach to what the feminist fight should focus upon: women.

A sector of feminism has been pressing for a women-only coalition and steadfast defense of the feminine political subject as an antidote to increasingly visible and bolder misogyny. Collective movements such as #MeToo have brought structural issues into the spotlight. Simultaneously celebrities such as Lena Dunham, Emma Watson, Lady Gaga, and Miley Cyrus have popularized mainstream feminism. Yet structural disadvantages such as the gender wage gap, violence against women including sexual violence, policies controlling women's reproductive rights, and the like are still rampant. Furthermore, a new misogynist discourse now circulates with earnestness and is absorbed (and used) by politicians such as Donald Trump in the US, Bolsonaro in Brazil, and the extreme-right-wing Spanish political party VOX. It also gains momentum exponentially through expressions in online cultures of toxic masculinity. It is difficult, therefore, not to find resemblances between the Trump era and the Reaganite context.<sup>3</sup>

To complicate things, the increasing political visibility of the LGBTQI+ movement provoked a fierce reaction from some groups—dubbed TERFS (trans-exclusionary radical feminists)—who identify as feminist and feel that transfeminist policies may jeopardize women's agenda. The debate is complicated and calls for a calm understanding among feminists from different generations (and waves) and from diverse political standpoints (Stryker). Let us say here only that the debate among different feminist factions with regards to transgender rights hinges upon Simone de Beauvoir's permanent question as to whether one is born or becomes a woman and on the disciplining power of the medical institution upon the female body.

Hence, the nostalgic gaze that the show casts upon the past is unsurprising. While Atwood's novel is preoccupied with the idea of the recovery of memory of women's adverse experiences—"projects of excavation," as Gayle Greene calls it (304)—as a means to keep them from regaining currency in the 1980s,<sup>4</sup> we argue that the series mobilizes, in form and content, a nostalgic sentiment. Looking to a time before the debates opened by both misogyny and the popularization of feminism, and these fissures regarding the political subject of feminism, the series mobilizes the nostalgic recovery of the ontological certainty of the gendered subject (that is, the binary thought), betraying an essentialist conservatism. At the same time, the act of remembrance within *The Handmaid's Tale*, as we shall see, shows nostalgia for the past as a utopian time that was not ideal but nonetheless held a promise of a better future that would emerge from feminist activism. The return of the narrative in our time tells us that if we do not recover the utopia, women's lives will become a futurist dystopia. This paradoxical or complicated relationship between nostalgia and its political implications makes *The Handmaid's Tale* highly fascinating as a study of nostalgia. Our analysis addresses three main dimensions of nostalgia in relation to the adaptation: the characteristics of the (female body-centered) political subject on whom the series focuses, its standpoint with regards to feminist legacies (particularly Second Wave

feminisms), and the past and present conception of shared vulnerabilities (connected to debates about intersectionality, sorority, and female networking).

**Female Body-Centered Subjectivity.** We start our analysis with the first scene that reflects the idea around which the series gravitates: maternity. It opens with June holding her daughter Hannah while trying to escape from the Gilead police. We are immediately made aware that they are mother and daughter: the bond between them is, on the one hand, put at center stage, by a father who bids goodbye to his daughter, telling her to “go with mum,” and, on the other, is further magnified by a mother grabbing her offspring tightly, trying to protect her while they run through the forest, the symbolic realm where children may be lost. In subsequent flashback scenes, cinematic techniques further romanticize family life: Hannah and June appear with her husband, Luke, in natural settings that connote freedom and joy, such as the beach and the Sea Center, or are later filmed in womb-like scenarios such as under the bedsheets. This precious connotation of motherhood is distorted by the contrast that the rising theocratic group brings to the configuration of the maternal: the decline in births due to environmental issues are blamed on women’s modern lives and used to justify a *coup d’état* and the implementation of policies that secure increased birthrates. In the words of Serena, the state sees “fertility as a national resource, reproduction as a moral imperative.” The policy is described as follows: “remaining fertile women should be collected and impregnated by those of superior status, of course ... maybe the wife should be there. For the act. It would be less of a violation. There is scriptural precedence.”<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the images of the maternal in the past gain a luminous appearance of naturalness in contrast with the violent acts and grotesque performances related to surrogacy, including the rape of Handmaids by Commanders while Wives hold their wrists, the pretense of pre- and post-delivery breathing exercises, and the location of Handmaids between the legs of Wives while giving birth—accompanied by Wives’ rehearsed moans of pain to mirror labor. Such attempts to perform biological motherhood convey to audiences the absurdity and brutality of the ritual of surrogate motherhood. This is amplified by the contrast with scenes of Handmaids bonding with their babies (breastfeeding, singing, etc.) or scenes such as dangerous escape attempts that emphasize that these biological mothers will do anything for their offspring. In several scenes the only way to calm a fussy baby is through the presence of the Handmaid who gave birth to this baby. In sum, *The Handmaid’s Tale* conceives of motherhood positively as long as it is related to free will, choice, and biological motherhood, but detestable when imposed (under the pretense of biological destiny) or as a transaction. In this sense the series supports an essentialist and idealistic notion of motherhood that ignores the possibility of nonbiological maternal bonds or the politics of choosing motherhood under neoliberalism.<sup>6</sup> The exclusive focus on a subject tied to a biologically female body, heightened by the melancholic flashbacks that emphasize the cis-heteronormative nuclear family context (where the image of white middle-class

motherhood is central) constitutes the frame against which other female characters are defined. Women who have lost or lack the ability to bear children are represented (or acted upon) in relationship to their biological destiny: women as sexual toys such as the Jezebels (women working in brothels); women mutilated for undermining the heterosexual economy (such as Ofglen/Emily, who undergoes a clitoridectomy to prevent future enjoyment of sex as punishment for lesbianism); Aunt Lydia, who is presented as a resentful and childless (or resentful for being childless?) woman.<sup>7</sup> No other identity axis is used to explore the experiences of the female characters beyond their assigned reproductive role within a cis-heteronormative economy of recognition; intersectional politics are thus overlooked, as we shall explore in depth below.<sup>8</sup> This pejorative assessment also applies to Moira, who was a surrogate mother for an English couple in the past before Gilead: her lack of attachment to the infant is portrayed as awkward and not understood by June and, furthermore, the narrative does not address what role her race as someone of African descent might play in her decision.

The series actually glamorizes domestic spaces such as kitchens or products such as slow-cooked comfort foods, and the Marthas' acts of cooking, by playing with slow motion and soft-focus light even as it also critiques Gilead for distributing roles and segregating space based on gender differences. Warm lighting connotes intimacy and is used each time we see June alone in her bedroom, submerged in introspection and illuminated by the light filtering through her window. Thus, although the show demonizes the use and abuse of women by patriarchy based on the supposed natural division between public and private space, it also takes special care to depict female domesticity and intimacy in an idealized manner. The result is scenes that aesthetically embrace nostalgia for a slower pace and a more nurturing and hearth-based conception of women. We wonder to what extent this glamorization articulates "a 'return of the repressed' in which the more cozy aspects of domestic life, which Second Wave feminism neglected to acknowledge fully, enact an uncanny return, shattering the stability of female identity in the process" (Munford and Waters 69).

Traditionally, nostalgia has been aligned with conservatism because it longs for *le temps perdu*, the opposite of progress, seen as reactionary and sentimental, as evidence of hopelessness before the future (Pickering and Keightley). Janice L. Doane and Devon L. Hodges claim that nostalgia is "a frightening antifeminist impulse" because the desire for an imagined past can only bring women to a traditional place where "men were men, [and] women were women" (qtd. in Greene 296). Greene goes further when she describes nostalgia, which is merely regressive, as antithetical to historical memory, which takes on a feminist mandate inasmuch as it looks back in order to move forward. As she puts it: "women need to remember because forgetting is a major obstacle to change" (298). Nostalgia's meaning and significance are multifaceted, however; hence, it "should be seen as accommodating progressive, even utopian impulses as well as regressive stances and melancholic attitudes" (Pickering and Keightley 919). For example, Kate



Eichhorn proposes that “the preoccupation with the past in contemporary feminist thought and cultural production” differs from a typical notion of nostalgia inasmuch as it is “not about longing for some thing, time or place but rather about longing for the very possibility of living in a landscape where the past held little promise, little revolutionary potential, and the future was the only place where possibility dwelled” (Eichhorn 259). In other words, what makes feminist nostalgia unique is not the longing for “something tangible but rather for the conditions under which there was nothing for a feminist to be nostalgic about. What is desired in the case of feminist nostalgia, then, is the sheer potentiality of being on the cusp of something revolutionary” (259). In a moment where the subject of feminism is under debate, the need to bring back an idealized conception of femininity and the maternal, the latter being either biological or metaphorical (through the recuperation of a matrilineal legacy, as we shall see later), is symptomatic of the frailty of the political subject in question. This signifies the longing for a utopian moment when an ontological certainty reigned, even for a firm conviction within feminism regarding the *raison d'être* of the struggle and what was to be expected and desired for the future.

**Relation with Feminist Legacies.** Indeed, there is a further and more symbolic connotation about motherhood that brings us to the next dimension of our analysis: the matrilineal legacy (within feminism's own history) of the struggles, achievements, and teachings of previous feminist waves. In a season one episode, June reads letters from multiple Handmaids who talk about the pain of mother-daughter separation. Feminist creation and epistemology have a long investment in the metaphor of the maternal and the mother-daughter relationship as a way to describe relations between generations of feminist thought and activism, such as Virginia Woolf's remark, “We think back through our mothers” (65). Rebecca Quinn coined the term “Matrophor” to describe “the persistent nature of maternal metaphors in feminism” (179). Nonetheless, texts by Third Wave feminists and postfeminists share a desire to distance themselves from the earlier feminist legacy.<sup>9</sup> It is not surprising, then, that June's flashbacks of her relationship with her mother are filled with mixed feelings and conflict, and that her discrete acts of rebellion throughout the series resemble the depoliticized nature of “go-girl defiance” (Nussbaum).

Through June's recollections we learn that, initially, she was bitter toward her mother's militant drive, which June saw as an impediment to free-from-judgement, unconditional maternal love. She believes that her mother saw her as a sell-out because she cared for beauty, marriage, childbirth, and her child's baptism. June used to live as a postfeminist woman before Gilead, who thought that women already had equality and status. She was not particularly career oriented; she carried out a job without passion because what she wanted was happiness with her husband and child. She engaged in trivial consumer culture, such as going to Pilates, drinking Starbucks, etc. In sum, she felt fulfilled and could not bear to have her choices questioned or looked down upon by her activist mother. In fact, June's flashbacks reveal a nostalgia for

that postfeminist, neoliberal expression of women's achieved freedom (represented by beauty products, fashion magazines, lattes, and cocktails). As the series progresses, however, it manages to valorize female lineages and legacies so that differences, seemingly irreconcilable in the past, are overcome by the common experiences of women as women (united against gender oppression). This attitude is apparent through a nostalgic portrayal of June's mother (and other women) engaged in activism. For example, June remembers her mother taking her to a protest, a scene filmed in slow motion, in which the darkness is interrupted by glitter and the sparks coming from the fire where the women are burning pornographic materials, almost as if in fantasy. The mood is festive, but solemn. The scene conveys sadness, respect, and a great sense that "sisterhood is powerful."<sup>10</sup>

The idea of the necessity of cooperation among women will be resurrected in Gilead, as we discuss below. June herself hints at this when she admits that now (under Gilead's rule) she feels awake (that is, conscious), whereas before she was asleep. She seems to imply that she and women like her were too self-indulgent, taking for granted the freedom achieved by feminist struggle, as if this struggle had not occurred and freedom did not need to be sustained. There is a particularly poignant recollection when June lightly tells Moira that she has to write a paper about "campus sexual assault" and Moira asks in jest, "for or against?"—as if violence against women was of little concern. This conversation is presented in stark contrast to their current reality at the Red Center and the revelation that Janine was gang raped in the world before Gilead, and that they all will be violated monthly as part of Gilead's sexual economy. As a result, looking back fondly at Second Wave feminist manifestos and activism seems apropos.

**A Troubling Call to Sorority.** The importance of female legacies to learn from past struggles is articulated not only through the matrophor, but also in ideals of sisterhood. Sorority among women who suffered most extremely from the violence of the Gilead regime is a fundamental source of resistance. This idea of an ongoing sorority is highlighted when, while confined in her room for thirteen days, June finds an engraving in the closet that reads "*Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum*": made-up Latin supposed to mean "Don't let the bastards grind you down."<sup>11</sup> June asks, "Was it Offred? The one [Handmaid] that was here before?" and concludes, "It is a message for me." This incident connects June's experience with one that has concerned many female artists and writers: the recovery of hidden, suppressed history. In a scene that follows, Moira is carving something on a bathroom wall and June says it is not worth leaving a message, to which Moira replies, "Yes, it is. And when we are not here, there's gonna be a girl that comes in here and reads it. It will let her know she's not alone." The episode ends with June saying: "There was an Offred before me. She helped me find my way out. She is dead. She is alive. She is me. We are Handmaids: *nolite basterden carbondorum*, bitches!"

In that same episode, sorority is again highlighted when, in a flashback, June remembers being whipped for trying to escape and then being given food leftovers by the rest of the Handmaids while she lay injured in bed. The solidarity between Handmaids (and even between Handmaids and Marthas) is understandable, considering their obvious status as victims of Gilead. More problematic, though, is the search for sorority with women who are part of Gilead's power structure and who may even have helped design it, as did Serena as we learn in a flashback. Serena published a book calling for women to retreat to the private sphere to raise healthy families (failing to reflect on the irony of her public role, of course). Similarly, some women are in positions of control over others in Gilead, such as the Aunts' mission to train women to be Handmaids and their often violent enforcement of obedience. It is precisely the relationship between Serena and June that allows for the exploration of the politics of power among women who, although from different ideological strata, decide to work together. This bond that little-by-little grows between them receives narrative attention in order to explore what constrains and hinders it. For example, in the episode "God Bless the Child," June confesses to Serena that she has suggested to Commander Waterford that he should give Serena more freedom, but Serena retorts, "To do what?" June answers, "As Mrs. Waterford you have influence. Access. Power." Serena complains that she has influence only "up to a point," to which June responds, "So, move up the point. Like what we did before ... wear the dress. Pull the strings." Their relationship is used to shed light on the question of the politics of power of contemporary womanhood, and is notably an innovation of the series produced in the post-#MeToo moment: this exchange does not happen in the novel.

*The Handmaid's Tale*, in fact, offers a very understanding approach to Serena's complicated maneuvers to use the little power she has as a Wife to realize her agenda and, incidentally, rebel against Gilead. On the one hand, the narrative suggests that she is a victim of her own making; despite her role, she is constantly belittled by her husband, as well as by other men. This is plainly described by the Mexican Ambassador Castillo who asks Serena, "did you ever imagine a society like this? ... A society in which women can no longer read your book, or anything else?" Serena cannot engage in intellectual conversation, give her thoughtful opinion, play scrabble (since reading is forbidden to women), and of course she can no longer write. Nevertheless, she progressively realizes that in order to protect what she wants most (the future of her baby) she needs to contravene her husband, Fred, and help June. Serena is even portrayed as capable of enduring sacrifice and torture: she has her finger cut off for challenging Gilead law by daring to read the Bible before the Council. The series also offers audiences the possibility to sympathize with her frustration with not being able to become pregnant, such as when she feels the need to lay down next to June in bed and touch the latter's pregnant belly in season two. The precariousness of Serena's position is also emphasized when, in another scene, she is confronted and

condescended to by Aunt Lydia's continuous and steely domination over the mood of the household, supposedly for the sake of the future baby.

It is in this sense that the lack of an intersectional feminism and the nostalgic memory of Second Wave feminism becomes more palpable as the series focuses largely on the search for a shared vulnerability with the (mostly) white, cis, heterosexual, middle- to upper- class, able Wives and Aunts, who can exercise some kind of change because of the relatively privileged positions that the patriarchal structure affords them. Fredric Jameson points out that prioritizing positive accounts over less idyllic features of experience is an attribute of nostalgia. June reflects in an interior monologue on the necessity of a union of women to protect themselves from patriarchy: "There is an 'us'? It seems imagined, like secrets in the fifth grade. People with mysterious histories and dark linkages.... That's a hangover from an extinct reality.... Now, there has to be an 'us' because now there's a 'them.'" Yet this remark only pays due attention to the complex situation of white women, an omission in both the novel and the series. We agree, then, with Bevan's remark that "while competing narratives may be present in [recent TV shows], the overall political-economic architecture and underpinning of these shows is highly privileged; ... they feature white characters and target white, wealthy viewers" (15, 17).

Therefore, the show's resolution of gender, race, and class issues perpetuates some of the shortcomings for which Second Wave feminism was criticized, particularly the drive to generalize the experience of white, middle-class, heterosexual women as representative of all (see Moraga and Anzaldúa; hooks; Lorde; Hill). The form of feminism that the show tries to recuperate disregards other subjectivities informed by experiences of race and sexuality, denying how these intersect to shape women's experiences. The presence of people of color in the show seems, then, merely "a way to earn kudos in a landscape in which viewers demand inclusivity, but it is ultimately not worth direct conversation" (Bastién). It is, despite all good intentions, a way of representing neoliberal multiculturalism and political correctness.<sup>12</sup> Contemporary political calls for women to unite speak to twenty-first century viewers and seem to explain specific casting choices: June's best friend, Moira, and her husband Luke are both played by African Americans, as are several Marthas. *The Handmaid's Tale* presents a semi-color-blind Gilead, in contrast with the white supremacist theocracy of the novel, but, at the same time, it makes this society fairly unbelievable. Similarly, although it does feature gay and lesbian characters (Emily, Moira, and other men and women executed or sent to the colonies), it suggests, contrary to fact, that in pre-Gilead times, gays, lesbians, and people of color did not experience discrimination. The spirit of the series transmits that all women suffer equally under patriarchy, yet the series is focalized through June/Offred, who emerges as the true fighter against Gilead, despite Moira being the more rebellious and resourceful character. In fact, Moira appears in the series less than she is present in the novel, in both pre- and post- Gilead timelines. Furthermore, the episodes devote significant time to Moira and Emily only once they are

traumatized refugees in Canada. The series assumes that all women have the same issues, but it also portrays only white, cis women as having agency (emblemized by Offred's defiant stare into the camera at the end of many episodes), while others are presented as vulnerable (for example, Moira's and Emily's hesitant and teary attitudes when arriving in Canada).

The series also does not pay much attention to different female experiences stemming from belonging to different classes (the Econowives, women sent to the colonies, other Gilead workers). In fact, it criticizes the lower classes and the disenfranchised by associating them with Gilead's totalitarianism. For example, in a flashback to Nick's past, he is successfully recruited to Gilead extremism because he shows signs of not making it in society despite being hardworking. Resentful of a system that has failed him, he becomes a fighter for the cause and later a member of the secret police, an Eye. This is made even clearer when June's new Handmaid companion tells her: "I'm not going to let you mess this up for me.... You are cute. You used to do yoga classes, spinning or something before? And your man likes to cook.... You had a first floor down Back Bay with a garden. Had yourself a Nordstrom card, right? ... I used to get fucked behind a dumpster so I could buy a sixth of Oxy and a happy meal. I am clean now; I have a safe place to sleep every night, and I have people who are nice to me ... and I want to keep it that way." In Janine's case, besides being brutalized by the new system more than any other Handmaid, she remains strangely docile (despite outbursts of valor) and is ultimately presented as crazy. Thus, despite attempts at inclusivity and the call to solidarity among women, the series remains attached to the novel and its limited vision. It perpetuates the ideal of the Western-centric protagonist; it remains nostalgically attached to a middle-class, white, cis-gendered experience of womanhood as the center of female subjectivity.

**Conclusion.** The timely adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* emerges in a context where feminism seems to have undergone a revival, coinciding with a renewed misogyny. Despite witnessing the series' stimulating feminist solidarities and alliances, however, there are still major disagreements in the understanding of who the subject of feminism is and, therefore, who should form alliances (and who is left out). Moreover, with the critique that a broader, more inclusive sense of collectivity ought to take place comes the disillusionment of what Diane Negra deems "a striking feature of the current moment, ... the de-collectivization of feminism" (qtd. in Gillet et al. 727). This occurs at a time when misogyny (whether legal maneuvers against women's rights or outright violence against women) is increasing. From this perspective, the nostalgic recovery of Atwood's dystopia offers the possibility of acknowledging and paying homage to the legacy of previous feminisms. The battle cry, "we are Handmaids, *nolite basterden carbondorum*, bitches!" reflects also on contemporary shared vulnerabilities that may form the basis of a resistant sorority. The series thus manages to create a continuum between synchronic and diachronic vulnerabilities that may allow for a reconsideration of present injustices from the teachings of previous struggles. Within this

framework, we could say that nostalgia has a *double entendre* in the series. On the one hand, it constitutes a vehicle to articulate a complex negotiation with a feminist past in a contentious moment for contemporary women's fights—that is, nostalgia can be understood to “be recuperative, reflective, and attached to a variety of publics, not just reactionary conservatives” (Bevan 15). Looking back at the historical traumas, the social damages to communities, and the transgenerational vulnerabilities, could indeed connect us to the scars.

On the other hand, bringing ghosts from past battles in order to idealize one's legacy, instead of using them to mobilize a response that leaves traces in the present and the future, is not politically transformative. This is the other side of how nostalgia is imbricated in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Narratives that try to function as homage imply a kind of closure, hindering the possibility of reworking the traumatic past memories to address present grievances. Angela McRobbie indicates how memory of past struggles can “[offer] vocabularies, concepts, histories, narratives, and experiences which can illuminate the predicament or powerlessness and help to find ways of overcoming such circumstances” (49). But in order to do that, stories of violence and precarity need to address trauma generated by shared vulnerabilities as well as to solidify our interdependencies, which are needed to overcome those traumas. Unfortunately, the political capacity of nostalgia to advance the complex debate on feminism in *The Handmaid's Tale* seems hindered inasmuch as it articulates a conservative recuperation of old feminist debates centered on the female subject and, in doing so, it narrows the political subject that feminism ought to be fighting for. The series, which has been read as fighting ongoing worldwide gender violence, looks back at the feminist legacy to trace a genealogy of oppression based mainly on the female body. Although it succeeds in returning to some topics dismissed by popular, neoliberal feminism (and postfeminism) to the feminist agenda, such as rape culture, domestic violence, and war on women, *The Handmaid's Tale* fails to revise a legacy of feminist fights undertaken from a logic of interdependence (with other subjects made precarious by patriarchy) and of recognition of other gender identity (or social justice) struggles.

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#### NOTES

1. The main representatives of anti-porn feminism were Andrea Dworkin, Catharine MacKinnon, Gloria Steinem, and Robin Morgan, part of the feminist radical *Women Against Pornography* group. The conservative, traditionalist coalition was led by figures such as Phyllis Schlafly. Hulu's miniseries, *Mrs. America*, is about their battles over the Equal Rights Amendment.

2. Popular culture at the time also addressed domestic violence and child abuse. For example, the television movie *The Burning Bed* (1984) was seen by 75 million people and shelters for battered women began opening.

3. In fact, the nostalgic recovery of previous feminist movements has included the rehabilitation of controversial feminists such as Andrea Dworkin. Michelle Goldberg affirms that “Dworkin, so profoundly out of fashion just a few years ago, suddenly seems prophetic ... after Trump’s election, the Brett Kavanaugh hearings, and revelations of predation by men including Roger Ailes, Harvey Weinstein, Les Moonves, Larry Nassar and countless figures in the Catholic Church.”

4. Nora Caplan-Bricker argues that the essence of Atwood’s novel is “its skepticism of movements, ideologies, and any other force that flattens individuality—and she includes feminism on that list.”

5. The precedence is Genesis 30:1-25, which reads in part: “And when Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die.... And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her” (Gilbert).

6. An allusion to exaggerating the importance of the reproductive body is made when June watches a *Friends* episode entitled “The One with Phoebe’s Uterus.”

7. In the novel Serena Joy is past childbearing age.

8. Such capitalization on the female body for political purposes had a widespread impact of the vindication of female body-centered rights around the globe. Women from diverse contexts used tropes from the show in demonstrations in support of reproductive freedom (see Caplan-Bricker, Gilbert, Armstrong).

9. For examples of Third-Wave feminism, see Walker, Heywood and Drake, and Dicker and Piepmeier). For examples of postfeminism, see Roiphe, Wolf, and Denfeld. This matricidal logic is represented by the emergence of the girl culture of the 1990s.

10. This sentiment was captured by founding member of the New York Radical Women Robin Morgan in *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women’s Liberation Movement* (1970).

11. In fact, “the phrase has taken on a life of its own, as a sort of feminist rallying cry for women” and is having a special impact in current feminist fashion and affairs (see Bradley).

12. Bastián speaks of the appropriation of black (also Indigenous and aboriginal) women’s narratives of slavery, violence, and state-controlled reproductive policies by a white protagonist’s subjectivity.

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#### ABSTRACT

In this article, we turn our gaze to the television series *The Handmaid's Tale* to examine different critical aspects of nostalgia in relation to contemporary and previous feminist debates. Our purpose is to analyze not only the series' different approaches to nostalgia but also to question the type of feminism the female dystopia attempts to recuperate. We enquire into the political capacity of the show's nostalgia to advance the complex debate on the subject of feminism. In our opinion, the series articulates a conservative recuperation of old feminist debates centered on the female subject (motherhood, rape, pornography, prostitution, etc.) not only due to the threat of the recent misogynistic backlash but also in response to the growth of political power from the LGBTQI movement and the subsequent displacement of traditional feminist issues. Nevertheless, despite falling short of contributing to an intersectional and structural critique of gender injustices, the show constitutes a stimulating catalyst in the fight and debate regarding the improvement of women's lives against the advances of retrograde attitudes and policies in current times. Ultimately, the series defies any monolithic understanding of nostalgia as either amnesiac and regressive or as reflective, inspiring, and recuperative regarding gender.