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entitled Narratives of Feminist Resistance: Women's Bodily Autonomy and the Dystopian Mode,

submitted to the English Department in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with English Honors, has been read and approved by the following:

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Narratives of Feminist Resistance: Women's Bodily Autonomy and the Dystopian Mode

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Preface

"Grace, how do you Americans feel about President Biden?" Oran MacLaverty asked me over the mushroom risotto dinner he had cooked. Although the MacLavertys described themselves as conservative, they had a poster of Obama hanging in their hallway. Over the four months I had been in Ireland, I'd learned that their conservatism was concerned with economics, and not with trying to outlaw gay marriage or abortion rights, like America's conservative political parties.

I paused for a moment, unsure what to say when I knew that they loved many American democrats. It was strange to think that I had met the MacLavertys through my uncle, a staunch Republican. Oran had gone to graduate school with my Uncle David, and he and his wife, Monica, had been eager to open their home to me for occasional home-cooked meals when I told them I would be studying abroad in Dublin.

"He's fine," I said. "He's a lot better than the alternative." Oran scoffed at that, knowing exactly who I was talking about. "Still, I think I, and many other young people, wish he would do more."

"What do you mean?" Monica asked from my left. Their children, Colm and Laura, had already eaten an early dinner and were being put to bed by their eighteen-year-old French au pair, Gail. The sun went down later in Dublin than in my home in Massachusetts, but it was still starting to get dark at 8:00 p.m.

"I wish he was doing more to codify abortion rights," I admitted. In less than two weeks, I would return to America, back to the contentious politics from which Ireland had been an escape. Only, back when I first left America four months ago, *Roe v. Wade* was just in the early stages of being vulnerable to the courts. Now there were leaked documents that said it was going to happen. It was just a matter of when.

Monica looked at me with pity and I shifted the subject slightly. “When I get back to Holy Cross, I’m going to be working on a thesis on women’s reproductive rights in dystopian literature, looking at *The Handmaid’s Tale* and maybe something Ireland-related, seeing how Ireland seems much more progressive than the U.S. right now.”

“You know that abortion was illegal until 2018, right?” Monica asked. Although Oran and Monica now lived in the suburbs of Dublin, Oran had spent most of his life in England and Northern Ireland. She, however, had grown up in Ireland. The history I was eager to learn about was just a part of her life.

I nodded. In my first week in Ireland, I went on a walking tour of Dublin’s public art where I saw several murals devoted to the slogan “Repeal the Eighth,” the amendment to the Irish constitution that banned abortion. It wasn’t until 2018 that the amendment was overturned by popular vote. Prior to that, women who wanted abortions– whether out of personal choice or medical necessity– would have to travel to England to have the procedure done. If found out, they could face imprisonment. On several occasions, women who were unable to obtain abortions for miscarriages died of sepsis.

Still, I couldn’t help but admire the progress Ireland had made since 2018. At University College Dublin, my study abroad university, signs in the laundry room reminded women that abortion was free in Ireland and that there were numbers they could call if they needed help obtaining one. These signs were occasionally posted over the free condom and lube dispensers–a sight unheard of at Holy Cross. Although people like Monica, residents of Ireland for their entire lives, had a better understanding of Ireland’s harsh past, for me as an American in 2022, Ireland was freedom. America was going in the opposite direction, reverting to a time before *Roe v. Wade.* Abortion access had been far from perfect in the years since Trump's presidency but at least there was some legal precedent in place. Now, just as I was about to return to the United States, we were close to losing even that.

In my University College Dublin dorm room, I had been able to tune out the American news and the divisive politics that seemed to eat away at me since Covid happened. Yet, with the impending Supreme Court decision, I wanted to do something meaningful, and a thesis about women's reproductive rights that I could present at the Holy Cross academic conference seemed to be a good way of making my voice heard, especially as I feared for the future of *Roe v. Wade* in America.

I first learned about abortion in the religion class my Catholic middle school required me to take. Deacon Chris, who served as the teacher, focused far more on dogma and law than on love. "Reconciliation is one of the most important sacraments of the Church," Deacon Chris started. "It is how you renew your relationship with God, no matter your sin. Even women who commit the sin of abortion have the power to be reconciled if they repent in the presence of a priest."

Although it seemed like the words he was saying should have been kind, they were laced with a judgment and bitterness that felt off-putting. "As you go into the world, you will encounter many people who believe that abortion is okay. However, the Catholic Church affirms everyone's right to life, including the unborn."

As some of my classmates nodded their heads in agreement, I stayed unmoving, anger boiling inside of me for reasons I didn't understand back then. Although he never outright defined abortion, I could guess what it was from context clues and somehow it didn't seem like the worst thing in the world, at least not as morally wrong as he made it seem.

I walked out of that class and waited for my friend, Abby, to leave too. Although we were both thirteen, she always seemed to know more about the world than me. Sure enough, she was also seething with rage.

"I can't believe he would say that," she said.

"Yeah," I repeated, attempting to process it all. That would be far from the last time I would talk to Abby about abortion but that was the first moment that I knew that I would champion a woman's right to choose.

The Church's policies on abortion would be what finally pushed me to leave the Catholic church for good almost two years later. On the night of my first confirmation class at St. Joseph's parish, thirteen other fourteen-year-olds clustered around the plastic table that wobbled on uneven legs every time one of us rested our weight on it. The teacher, Mrs. Ford, was a traditional Catholic, stuck in dogma like Deacon Chris.

"While the church accepts gay people, they can never be married within the church. While women are valued members of the church, they cannot preach and should never be made priests. Abortion is always wrong no matter what." Maybe my anxious brain altered the words Mrs. Ford used in that first class, but that version of her words would haunt me for years to come. I knew that my childhood memories of fun and games in Catholic education classes could never outweigh the despair I felt at the thought of submitting myself to an institution with which I so fundamentally disagreed. When I sobbed to my mother that night, she gave me the choice not to get confirmed, an option I gladly took. My mother, after all, had only joined the Catholic

Church to get married to my father, and the parish she joined had a pride flag hanging proudly outside the door.

I took the first steps toward my thesis in my bedroom in my family's Massachusetts home when I emailed my future advisor, Professor Shawn Maurer. However, it was in that dorm room in Ireland– my safe haven– that I first met with her on Zoom. Despite my usual conviction regarding abortion, I was hesitant to take a political stance. I was scared my thesis would get shut down before I could begin because Holy Cross was a Catholic institution. When I emailed Prof. Maurer, I said "I recognize that this is a controversial topic so I am planning to avoid taking a political stance in the thesis; I would focus on exploring how different authors use literary tools to portray their message, staying as objective as possible." While I had spent the last ten years gradually distancing myself from my Catholic background, some of the Catholic guilt and deferment to authority remained with me. However, when we first Zoomed on a sunny Tuesday, she assured me that I did not have to remain apolitical with this topic. I left the meeting feeling happy, eager, and empowered. I began to write my thesis proposal in that dorm room that overlooked lush green Irish hills.

On the night of May 2nd, 2022, I officially decided to spend my senior year writing an English thesis.The next morning, I checked my phone at 8 a.m. to find it blowing up with text messages from my friends back in America. I froze when I saw the words *"Roe v. Wade*" repeated over and over. My chest seized with panic and I quickly switched to my news app to see the news plastered on the home page: someone had leaked the court documents that said the U.S. Supreme Court was planning to overturn *Roe v Wade.*

For a few moments, I forgot that I lived in Massachusetts, that my liberal state meant I wouldn't need to worry about reproductive rights the same way women in Texas or Alabama would. Instead I felt a primal fear of being caged and an all-encompassing anger that a group of nine judges, selected largely by men, could decide to ban what should be a fundamental woman's right. Where was the democracy in that?

I texted Annelise, my flat-mate and a fellow study-abroad student from America whom I'd met in Ireland.

"Can you believe it?" I asked her.

"No," she replied. "I'm furious."

"I know it's just a draft, but I don't even want to hope at this point."

"I get that. Although I hope public outcry could change one of their minds."

I sighed. "I'm glad I'll be writing a thesis about this," I texted.

"You decided to do it?!" Even through the screen, I could sense her enthusiasm. "I'm so excited for you."

I closed my phone and stared at the ceiling for a few minutes. For so many women, the decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* could be the end for any reproductive healthcare, yet for me, this moment marked the beginning. I knew that my thesis would be far more relevant– and more satisfying– than I could have possibly imagined.

Introduction

My thesis examines how and why the dystopian mode of fiction has been so invested in responding to the sociopolitical issue of restrictions on women's bodily autonomy.[1] Particularly, I am eager to understand how readers can use novels of this tradition to shape real-world dialogue and how authors can use narrative strategies to encourage readers to protest. I use the phrase "women's bodily autonomy" to signal women's abilities to control their reproductive rights, their sexuality, and any medical procedures that doctors perform on them. To consent to any reproductive, sexual, or medical acts, women must have autonomy over their own bodies. The dystopian mode, which has typically been understood as describing novels that take place in dystopian societies or societies in which "everything is bad" (Oxford English Dictionary, dystopia, n.), has a fixed series of tropes that allow dystopian novels to explore sociopolitical issues, especially restrictions on women's bodily autonomy. Sean Seeger and Daniel Davison-Vecchione argue that some of the major tropes of the dystopian mode closely connect it to the sociological imagination, a term coined by C. Wright Mills as a way to explore the relationship between society and the individual (Seeger and Davison-Vecchione 48). Seeger and Davison-Vecchione state that the conventions of the dystopian mode allow authors to explore the interplay of "biography and history" (Seeger and Davison-Vecchione 50). Seeger and Davison-Vecchione's argument comprises the basis of my argument; however, I believe that not only can dystopian literature look at sociological issues like totalitarianism and world wars, but that it is especially primed to consider societal restrictions on women's bodily autonomy because women are the building blocks of society. When totalitarian regimes can control women and their ability to make choices over their reproduction by either banning abortion or enforcing birth control, they can control the size and racial makeup of their populations. Since dystopian novels often explore the power of totalitarian regimes, authors frequently examine restrictions on women's reproductive rights in their novels in their attempt to reflect historical power dynamics.

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[1] In this thesis, I will be referring to reproductive rights in regards to women as opposed to using the terms pregnant people or people who can get pregnant. However, I do not use the word "women" to exclude or devalue the experiences of trans-men or non-binary people who can get pregnant, as these issues certainly affect them too. I also do not mean to assert that the ability to get pregnant determines womanhood. Rather, I say "women" to recognize the underlying misogyny in both American society and the Supreme Court decision to overrule *Roe v. Wade,* and to reflect the language of the novels I explore.

Women's reproductive rights are similarly fundamental to national identity and politics in modern American society. Although abortion rights have been a major topic of moral and political debates in the United States since the nineteenth century, these debates have become more vocal since the initial ruling of *Roe v. Wade* in 1973 (Hull 189). Religious leaders, politicians, and white nationalists all want to limit women's ability to obtain abortions for a multitude of reasons. Since the over-ruling of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022, these political debates have become even more timely and dangerous. Literature, specifically dystopian literature, can become an antidote for these debates. By using satire and speculation to respond to sociopolitical attitudes, writers of dystopian novels can create allegories that elicit both fear and hope in their audiences. Additionally, by showing their protagonists and other characters resisting oppression, authors can model resistance strategies for readers.

Since its rise to prominence in the early twentieth century, the dystopian mode of fiction has explored how women and their bodies fit into an advancing world. Even early dystopian novels, like *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley, often consider women's bodily autonomy as integral to their plots or subplots. In the later half of the twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries, the dystopian mode has developed beyond its original status as a unique literary genre to become a mode through which novels of other genres, like science fiction, and popular culture can explore restrictions on women's bodies. Although few critics have looked at the dystopian mode with this specific focus in mind–opting instead to look more broadly at sexuality in the case of Lyman Tower Sargent and Lucy Sargisson, or how the mode can explore all societal issues in the case of Tom Moylan–I believe that to do so is pertinent in post-*Roe v. Wade* America in order to remind readers the far-reaching dangers of stripping women of their reproductive rights. By viewing dystopian novels in this way, critics can examine how authors use dystopian conventions and narrative tools, like utilizing a first-person or limited third-person narrator, to compel readers to act and resist patriarchal control.

In my first chapter, I explore how the dystopian mode has evolved over time from an aspect of the science fiction and utopian genres to a genre with its own unique tropes. To explore the dystopian mode's development, I consider its history and the conventions that have developed with it. I will also argue that dystopian fiction can be viewed as a mode or method of inquiry that authors use to explore and criticize restrictions on women's bodily autonomy in a variety of fiction genres, from science fiction to modern utopian fiction. To prove that argument, I examine *Woman on the Edge of Time* by Marge Piercy (1976), paying attention to how Piercy demonstrates feminist resistance and blends the dystopian mode with other genres to offer feminist critiques.

I focus my second chapter on Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and how the novel has become a warning about the dangers of reproductive rights restrictions. With its plausible predictions and intimate first-person stream of consciousness narrative style, *The Handmaid's Tale* has become a cultural intervention that many women still turn to as a symbol of protest almost four decades after its publication. Throughout the chapter, I look at how Atwood expands on the tropes of the dystopian mode to create a fearful world, urging readers to protest sexist laws and decrees in order to avoid the development of societies like Gilead. I also analyze how Atwood uses visceral portrayals of the human body to remind readers of the far-reaching possibilities of restrictions on women's reproductive rights.

My third and final chapter focuses on *Dawn* (1987) by Octavia Butler as a feminist resistance narrative. Although *The Handmaid's Tale* focuses on the reproductive rights aspect of women's bodily autonomy, with *Dawn*, I take a closer look at medical malpractice and the importance of medical consent, as well as sexual consent. I look at how Butler uses the limited third-person perspective to build empathy towards the narrator, Lilith Iyapo. With Lilith, a Black American woman, Butler draws on America's long history of reproductive injustices against Black women; however, in the future setting, Lilith can resist in ways that her ancestors could not. As a resistor's narrative, Butler shows readers that using one's voice in protest, exhibiting empathy, and never losing hope are valuable tools of feminist resistance that can give women power.

Just as I open my thesis with a personal essay that explores my decision to write this thesis, I conclude by tracing my own developing feminist understanding of the need to speak out against restrictions on women's reproductive rights in America in the 2020s, especially in the wake of the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*, and the means I have found through which to act.

Chapter 1: Dystopian Fiction as Mode of Feminist Resistance

The term "dystopian" was first used in 1868 by J. S. Mill in a speech known as "Handsard Commons" given to the English Parliament. In his speech on English and Irish relations, Mill spoke against the government's policies around Ireland, claiming that they were morally wrong: "it is, perhaps, too complimentary to call them Utopians, they ought rather to be called dys-topians, or caco-topians. What is commonly called Utopian is something too good to be practicable; but what they appear to favour is too bad to be practicable" (Oxford English Dictionary, dystopia, n.). In this context, Mill uses the term "dystopian" to describe people in his present society and does not refer to any hypothetical future societies. The noun "dystopia," first used in 1952 by G. Negley and J. M. Patrick in their anthology *Quest for Utopia*, is defined as "an imaginary place in which everything is as bad as possible, as opposed to a utopia" (Oxford English Dictionary, dystopia, n.). Dystopian fiction is, at its most basic level, fiction that takes place in a dystopian society. Since these words were first conceptualized, the dystopian literary genre has risen, and even surpassed the utopian literary genre, in popularity (Vieira 18).

Although the term dystopia was not used until the nineteenth century, Thomas More coined the term "utopia" in 1516 in his book by the same name, which sparked the creation of the utopian genre. The term came from both u-topia, meaning no place, and eutopia, meaning beautiful place, concepts that readers can see in certain fantastical elements of More's *Utopia* and later utopian works (utopia, n.). *Utopia* describes the tales of the traveler, Raphael Hythlodaeus, who visited and observed a land known as Utopia. Novels in the utopian genre generally include similar plot devices as *Utopia*, with a person detailing their previous experience traveling to a foreign land and receiving a tour of the land from the inhabitants, with attention to details like laws and social order. The fictional utopian societies represented in these novels generally repress individuality due to the belief that human nature can corrupt the common good (Vieira 7).

Nearly four centuries after More's *Utopia*, what critics and scholars usually recognize as the first dystopian novels were published in the early twentieth century. While some scholars claim that H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895) is a dystopian as well as science fiction text, most scholars and critics accept *We* by Yevgeny Zamyatin (1924), *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley (1932), and *1984* by George Orwell (1949) as the first canonical examples of the dystopian genre. Scholars of dystopian literature look to these novels as the blueprints for other novels written in the dystopian mode. In each of these foundational texts, the protagonists live in a totalitarian state in which totalitarian governments closely monitor and control all-aspects of their citizens' lives, especially sexuality and reproduction. In *We*, D-503 lives in the nation of One State; in *Brave New World,* Bernard Marx and Hemholtz Watson live in World State; and in *1984*, Winston Smith lives on Airstrip One in the nation of Oceania. These novels end dismally, with protagonists either brainwashed or exiled, and yet, the authors leave seeds of hope for the readers that these governments will someday collapse as a result of more characters protesting. In each of these canonical novels, the authors drew upon the political climate and fears of the time to create frightening and satirical warnings about the danger of totalitarian states with the hope that readers would act to prevent the rise of such states.

Although not all of the novels I listed above would necessarily be considered feminist texts, all explore sex, reproduction, and motherhood in some way. For example, in *Brave New World*, the World State government tightly controls sexuality with reproduction happening via artificial wombs, with the exception of the "Savage Reservation" where the offensively described "savage" Native Americans still reproduce naturally. On the reservation, Bernard and Hemholtz meet John, the secret biological son of one of the World State leaders, whom they decide to bring back to World State with them. Due to John's natural birth, society ostracizes him. With Lenina Crowne, one of the only developed female characters in the novel who is the love interest of both Bernard and John, Huxley criticizes the first-wave feminist movement and rising divorce rates. In *We*, the One State government also limits sexuality and reproduction; however, fixations on motherhood liberate women from the overarching control of One State. Even *1984* considers the role of women's sexuality when Julia views having sex for pleasure as an act of revolt. Other dystopian novels feature women's rights and bodily autonomy as more central to their plot, including Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Butler's *Dawn.*[2]

The conventions of the dystopian mode allow authors to criticize restrictions on women's bodily autonomy in a way that invites readers to empathize with characters experiencing nightmarish versions of the readers' own world. Authors of past and present dystopian novels 1) tell the story from the perspectives of inhabitants within the dystopian societies, 2) draw on historical and sociological events and concepts, and 3) portray a totalitarian government that attempts to control all aspects of its citizens' lives including their thoughts and bodies. Authors use the combination of "biography and history" (Seeger and Davison-Vecchione 50) and totalitarian control of citizens to explore women's bodily autonomy while also attempting to influence how readers react when they see such restrictions in their real world.

By telling their stories through the perspectives of inhabitants within the societies, as opposed to an outsider, authors of dystopian novels can foster more personal and empathetic connections between characters and readers. *We* and *The Handmaid's Tale* use a first-person narrator to explore their societies, but that does not have to be the case. *1984* relies on a third-person limited point of view; however, readers can still see how the society unfolds from the main character, Winston Smith's, perspective. Over the course of most dystopian novels, protagonists begin to question or react to the laws and social systems around them, either because of prior experiences or events within the novels (Moylan 13). Readers can question the fictional societies, and even their present society, at the same time that protagonists undergo awakenings or partake in rebellions. By using characters' lived experiences, authors can especially draw attention to the plights of women characters, who are often trapped by exaggerated traditional gender-roles, which protagonists come to question.

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[2] Another novel that features women's rights as central to its plot is *Swastika Night* by Katharine Burdekin (1937). Although this novel was published between *Brave New World* and *1984* and follows the same dystopian formula, it is never mentioned as one of the foundational dystopian novels. As I focus my Chapter 1 on novels that scholars widely accept as the foundational dystopian texts, I do not feature *Swastika Night* in my thesis; however, I believe that critics should give the novel more attention and potentially recognize it as a canonical dystopian text.

Within dystopian novels, writers reflect and critique their historical and sociological moment, thereby connecting readers' own world to the nightmarish, fictionalized dystopias. While many dystopian novels take on universal themes, they are a direct product of the time when they were written. It is no coincidence that the dystopian genre rose in popularity in the twentieth century following two World Wars and a rise of world-wide fascist governments. *Brave New World* was written in the 1930s and reflects cultural issues related to that time period like the rise of capitalism and the eugenics movement. Orwell wrote *1984* in 1949, using the novel to reflect fears of totalitarian superpowers following the rise of Stalin and the Soviet Union after World War II. Different waves of feminist movements and conservative reactions to pushes for equality were also essential parts of the economy and politics of the twentieth century. Thus, in their attempt to reflect history, subsequent authors naturally incorporate women-centric sociopolitical moments into their dystopias. The inclusion of history allows authors to critique real social systems in addition to allowing readers to explore the faults of those systems in worlds with varying degrees of similarity or differences to their own.

By featuring totalitarian governments that restrict personal identities, language, and all citizens' bodies, authors show readers how far reaching restrictions on privacy and women's bodies can become in the real world. To achieve that goal, dystopias generally repress individuality to create obedient citizens and homogeneous populations. In *Brave New World,* World State forces people to wear clothing that identifies their eugenically-determined social class. In a similar vein, in *1984*, the government strictly controls language, restricting any speech related to rebellion and instead introducing "Newspeak," a controlled language developed to disable rebellious sentiments. Moylan claims that "throughout the history of dystopian fiction, the conflict of the text has often turned on the control of language" and "language is a weapon for the reigning dystopian power structure" (Moylan 148). This repression of individuality in the dystopian mode extends to the loss of bodily autonomy, and often intellectual autonomy, faced by women in those societies. Yuval-Davis and Anthias argue that "women's oppression is endemic and integral to social relations with regard to the distribution of power and material resources in society" and that women's oppression will appear whenever there are other forms of oppression or repression (7), an assertion that holds true for dystopian novels.

Dystopian modes and feminist critiques: *Woman on the Edge of Time*

"Genre" has been defined as "a recognizable and established category of written work employing such common conventions as will prevent readers or audiences from mistaking it for another kind" (Baldick). This term has been used to describe broad categories like fiction and nonfiction as well as sub-categories like fantasy and memoir. On the other hand, a mode "implies not a kind but a method, a way of getting something done" (Hollinger 140). Modes do not need to be tied to literature; they can also be means through which readers conceptualize real scientific or sociological issues (Hollinger 140). Alastair Fowler, a genre theorist, believes that modes develop out of genres to stay relevant in society (Hollinger 143). When readers view dystopias as a mode rather than a genre, the term dystopia can be used as a method of inquiry to explore modern restrictions on women's bodily autonomy both in fiction and on the news.

Most genre scholars and theorists agree that a genre with flexible tropes and boundaries can easily evolve into a mode. For example, both gothic fiction and science fiction have been considered modes by various scholars. Jerrold E. Hogle believes that gothic fiction developed into a mode due to its "malleability" (Hogle 2). Fowler claims that the gothic mode "outlived the gothic novel or romance" and that the term has been applied to novels of other genres like science fiction and psychological novels (Hollinger 143). In addition, scholars and authors have applied the term "science fiction" to more fantastical novels due to that mode's adaptability; Hollinger argues that science fiction has "permeable boundaries" which allows it to be "increasingly deployed outside the immediate field" (145), or extended beyond its original status as a literary genre.

Like gothic fiction and science fiction, dystopian fiction contains flexible conventions that allow it to explore real-world politics, especially those surrounding women's bodies and restrictions on reproductive rights. Despite the origins of the term dystopia in literature, in 2023, the phrase "dystopian America" calls up news articles that consider how America is becoming a dystopian society. For example, the *Guardian* published an article titled "The dystopian American reality one month after the Roe v Wade reversal" (June 25, 2022). Less than a month later the *New York Times* published a series of letters to the editors titled "An American Dystopia, After Roe" (July 7, 2022). *MSNBC* claimed that "Trump and DeSantis push further into dystopian view of U.S. ahead of 2024" (March 17, 2023). These headlines show how dystopia has become a mode through which citizens explore encroachments on their personal rights. Authors and critics can also use the dystopian mode across a variety of literary genres to critique sociopolitical trends. Although such dystopian novels like *Brave New World, 1984, We,* and *The Handmaid's Tale* can be viewed as purely dystopian, other works such as *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *Dawn* blend genres to use the dystopian mode as a framework that creates a stronger critique of societal restrictions on women's bodily autonomy.

Published in 1976, Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* shows how the dystopian mode can exist simultaneously with other genres to offer feminist critiques, especially by modeling means of resisting patriarchal control. *Woman on the Edge of Time* follows the story of Connie Ramos, a Mexican-American woman who connects with Luciente, a time traveler from the future, and travels forward in time to learn more about the utopian village of Mattapoisett. In her present, Connie remains detained in a mental asylum where doctors experiment on patients. Due to its inclusion of time travel, advanced technology, and idealized future societies, critics and scholars rightly label *Woman on the Edge of Time* both utopian fiction and science fiction. However, Piercy also includes tropes of the dystopian mode like telling the story through the limited third-person perspective of Connie, who experiences the horrors of the mental asylum first-hand. Piercy also draws on history, particularly the second-wave feminist movement and the work of Shulamith Firestone, who believed that women would never reach full equality as long as they were responsible for reproduction (Margree).

Piercy critiques the dangers of restrictions on women's bodily autonomy through her inclusion of two dystopian societies as contrasts to the utopian Mattapoisett. In Chapter 15, Connie accidentally time travels to a future in which Mattapoisett does not exist. In this alternate, dystopian future, women take drugs and engage in surgical operations to stay young and desirable as their worth relies on their appearances. Women sell their bodies either as prostitutes or as surrogates, dying at age forty unless they are one of the “richies” (Piercy 282). One of the police in the society tells Connie that the woman she speaks to, Gildina, is “cosmetically fixed for sex use” (Piercy 290). The man dehumanizes Gildina in his conversation with Connie, by treating Gildina as though she is not there. The term “sex use” makes sex seem like it is something that is done to Gildina and not something she has an active part in, which shows the patriarchal nature of sexuality in this future world. Although Connie only visits this future society for a chapter and readers cannot get a broad sense of it beyond Gildina’s own limited perspective, the totalitarian control of her and other women’s bodies show that the ruling class seems to repress women’s individual identities and that they are nothing more than sex objects.[3] Using this dystopian alternative in contrast to Mattapoissett’s hopeful way forward, Piercy attempts to remind readers that optimistic futures are not a given and that building a bright future requires effort in the present.

Piercy writes Connie’s present New York as a dystopia as well, which highlights the dangers of patriarchal control of women even in readers’ present world. Many oppressive patriarchs dominate Connie’s present, including her niece, Dolly’s, pimp-boyfriend, Geraldo, who forces Dolly to get an abortion, and Connie’s brother, Luis, who places Connie in a mental institution against her will. Inside the mental institution, the doctors have total control over their patients and the male Dr. Redding experiments on patients without their consent. Piercy details Dr. Redding’s successful experimentation on one patient, Alice: “Alice collapsed and began to giggle. / ‘You see, we can electrically trigger almost every mood and emotion– the fight-or-flight reaction, euphoria, calm, pleasure, pain, and terror! We can monitor and induce reactions through the microminiaturized radio under the skull'" (Piercy 196). Dr. Redding's list of all the emotions he and the other doctors can now control in Alice shows how much power he has over Alice's mind. He exults that he can make her feel whatever he wants her to feel. The fact that Piercy portrays this lack of control happening to a woman and not a man shows that this concept especially affects women patients. Alice's emotions and body are under Dr. Redding's complete command, a dangerous situation for any woman, as has been true historically. Piercy writes this moment through Connie's eyes, which allows readers to view Connie's personal fears about the procedure, especially when she speaks to her friend and fellow patient, Sybil: "'I don't want that done to me!' Connie's voice scooted up with fear. She cleared her throat. 'There must be a way to stop them'" (Piercy 197). Connie's exclamation mark denotes her fear at the prospect of this experiment happening to her; however, Piercy also shows Connie beginning to wonder about how she can escape that fate. By centering the story on Connie's perspective, Piercy allows readers to better sympathize with Connie while also showing readers that hope can be a strategy of resistance, especially when it leads to action.

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[3] In Piercy's dystopian future, Gildina explains to Connie how lower-class women’s identities are directly tied to their sexual or reproductive abilities. Women are either forced to become prostitutes for upper-class men or surrogates for upper-class women to use so they don’t have to experience pregnancy themselves.

Piercy frequently demonstrates ways that Connie fights against the patriarchal world that seeks to destroy her individuality, modeling feminist resistance for readers. Throughout the novel, Connie fights against Dr. Redding's, and the other corrupt doctors', control, by talking with the other patients, running away from the institution, and escaping into the future; however, most notably, Piercy ends the novel with Connie taking extreme action and poisoning the doctors, terminating their ability to experiment on anyone. Connie reflects on this experience by speaking to the bathroom mirror after she poisons the doctors' coffee pot: "'I killed them. Because it is war.' Her hands shook like a willow branch used by dowsers in Texas, a willow branch pulled by water deep in the ground. 'I'm a dead woman now too. I know it. But I did fight them. I'm not ashamed. I tried'" (Piercy 364). Although Piercy's metaphor of the willow tree illustrates Connie's internal fear, the sentences all end in periods, which shows Connie's steadfast conviction that she made the right choice. Connie cannot regret making a stand against totalitarian control, reminding readers that fighting may come at a cost but urging them to recognize how it can be worth it too. Connie's reference to a war denotes a larger conflict than just the singular battle between her and the doctors, most likely the conflict between patriarchal institutions in America and women, especially women of color like Connie.

Through Connie's resistance, Piercy urges readers to attempt to fight patriarchal control by whatever means available. For Connie, the doctors stripped her of her independence and ability to stand up for herself, leaving her with no choice but to kill them; however, that does not need to be the case for readers. Piercy illustrates this point more thoroughly when Luciente explains to Connie her own understanding of fighting oppressors: "'Power *is* violence. When did it get destroyed peacefully? We all fight when we're back to the wall– or to tear down a wall.'" (Piercy 359). Luciente's use of a hypothetical question encourages Connie–and readers–to think about the truth behind her statement that violence is sometimes necessary to end corrupt power structures. However, that does not mean she believes that people should kill; rather, as a model of feminist resistance, Luciente and Connie show that engaging in conversations with the purpose of learning and developing strategies for fighting oppression can be effective. Feminist resistance in *Woman on the Edge of Time* means remembering that sexism is a war on women and that each battle matters.

Although Piercy's utopian Mattapoisett shows an idyllic possible future, her inclusion of the dystopian future, and the reflection on the dystopian present, creates a fearful alternative she urges readers to work to avoid. Both Piercy's utopia and dystopia draw on historical concepts that make each one seem equally likely to develop. Piercy leaves her readers to decide whether they want to be passive bystanders or if they want to act like Connie to stop the creation of dystopian-like societies. As a mode of inquiry, authors, including Piercy, use the conventions of dystopian fiction to encourage readers to think about the ramifications of real-world restrictions on women's reproductive rights, heightening the stakes of real-world problems to an extreme scale to incite both fear and hope in readers. With the eliciting of strong emotions, authors attempt to alter the ways that readers consider women's bodily autonomy. By modeling feminist resistance, dystopias urge readers not to be complacent as human complacency leads to totalitarian governments taking control.

Chapter 2: *The Handmaid's Tale* as Cultural Intervention

May 2017, Austin. June 2017, Washington D.C. July 2018, Philadelphia. On all these occasions, women in red cloaks and white caps marched outside state capitals and government buildings in protest. Dressing up as the titular Handmaids of Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, these women challenged abortion restrictions and anti-abortion politicians. News outlets like the *New York Times* and the *Guardian* reported that the Handmaid costume had become an "international protest symbol" after women dressed up as Handmaids at the 2017 Women's March following Donald Trump's election (Kroller 196). In addition to making a political stand, these demonstrations show the continued hold *The Handmaid's Tale* has had on the United States since its publication in 1985 and its revival after the 2017 Hulu television series. This novel continues to resonate with so many women today due to its status as an optimal example of the dystopian mode, utilizing a first-person narrative voice and speculating about a dismal future to show the dangers of real world restrictions on women's bodies.

The Handmaid's Tale follows the story of Offred, a Handmaid in the society of Gilead. Before the start of the novel, a far-right, theocratic dictatorship has taken over the United States government. Although Atwood writes the novel in the dystopian tradition, she works within and expands upon the mode to create a poignant warning about the dangers of governments stripping women of their bodily autonomy. To maintain the dystopian mode, Atwood invites readers to view Gilead from the first-person perspective of Offred. Handmaids like Offred live in the houses of Commanders and act as forced surrogates for the Commanders and their Wives. Once a month, as part of "The Ceremony," the Commanders have sex with the Handmaids for procreative purposes. By the time the novel begins, Offred resigns herself to her role as a forced surrogate rather than actively attempting to run away or physically fight her way out of Gilead.

Although in many previous dystopian novels government leaders are happy with the societies they created, Atwood writes a dystopia in which even the ruling class, like the Commanders and the Wives, seem to recognize flaws in their new world. Moylan claims that "the discontent of the women and men in the power elite turns Atwood's Gilead into a weak dystopia compared to the ubiquitous efficiency in the societies created by Forster, Zamyatin, Huxley, and Orwell" (Moylan 164).[4] However, I would argue that the elite's dissatisfaction is precisely Atwood's point. By showing that even the strongest advocates for the theocracy do not want to live in the world they created, Gilead acts as a warning for all people, not just the feminists who would already agree with Atwood about the far-reaching dangers of restrictions on reproduction rights for all people.

While the message of *The Handmaid's Tale* resonated with protesting women back when Atwood first published it, there has been an uptick in cloaked protestors since 2016, following Donald Trump's election as president.[5] In 2016, *The Handmaid's Tale* and other dystopian novels like *Brave New World* once again became bestsellers. Out of the eight million copies of *The Handmaid's Tale* sold worldwide since its original release, three million of those copies have been sold since 2016 (Kroller 189). In the following year, Hulu launched a television adaptation of the novel.[6] Although the show has been criticized for displaying "torture porn" and taking a color-blind approach to a white-supremacist state, overall the television series has garnered positive attention (Kroller 189). The series delves deep into politics, with lead actress Elizabeth

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[4] Molyan refers to the societies within the "classic" dystopian novels *The Machine Stops* by E. M. Forster (1909), *We* by Yevgeny Zimyatin (1924), *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley (1932), and *1984* by George Orwell (1949). Moylan argues that, in all these novels, the elite exerts total power over the rest of society, without the remorse or regrets exhibited by Serena Joy and the Commander.

[5] In her *Burning Questions,* Atwood claims that after the novel's publication 1985 women in the United States were already fearful that Gilead could come true, with quiet forms of protest breaking out. Atwood mentions that "the handwriting was evidently already on the wall, back in 1985. In fact, some of it appeared on an actual wall, the seawall of Venice, California, where an anonymous hand spray-painted "The Handmaid's Tale Is Already Here."

[6] Although the date of the show's release may seem coincidental, Hulu ordered the show's production in early 2016 prior to Trump's nomination as the Republican party's candidate for president (Dowling).

Moss telling viewers who found the series too frightening that “this is happening in your real life. Wake up, people” (Kroller 196).

In 2019, *The Handmaid’s Tale* franchise grew again when Atwood published a sequel, *The Testaments*. Rather than picking up where the original novel left off, *The Testaments* follows three new women as they grapple with inner workings and rebellions within Gilead. Atwood claims that she was inspired by the “turn toward authoritarianism, both in Europe and elsewhere,” and that she “wanted to explore, at least in fiction, a turning in the other direction; a veering toward freedom, not away from it” (*Burning Questions* 420). Atwood takes a different perspective on the resistance that takes place within Gilead by focusing on Aunt Lydia, an antagonist in *The Handmaid’s Tale*; Agnes, the daughter of a Commander who trains to be an Aunt to avoid becoming a Wife; and Daisy, the daughter of a Handmaid who was smuggled into Canada and adopted by two rebels when she was a baby.[7]

The popularity of these recent adaptations shows how Atwood’s dystopian societal predictions remain just as relevant now as they were in 1985. Although Atwood developed *The Handmaid’s Tale* during a specific cultural and historical moment, the theme of government control of women’s bodies and their reproductive rights continues to resonate with women in America, inspiring readers to protest unjust bodily restrictions. By expanding upon the tropes of the dystopian mode and not branching too far into extraneous speculation, Atwood creates a novel that allows readers to recognize the personal ramifications that reproductive rights restrictions can have. As a form of cultural intervention, *The Handmaid’s Tale* harnesses the power of a first-person dystopian narrative to raise readers’ awareness of the way their own society is threatened by similar concerns.

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[7] Readers have speculated that Agnes and/or Daisy could be Offred’s daughters but Atwood has not confirmed these theories.

***The Handmaid's Tale* and History**

Although *The Handmaid's Tale* is a work of fiction, Atwood admits that she wanted to stay as close to reality as possible when speculating about the future in the novel. In her essay anthology *Burning Questions*, she states that "I made a rule for myself in the writing of this book: I would not include any detail that people had not already done, sometime, somewhere; or that they lacked the technology to do" (*Burning Questions* 252). Like her dystopian predecessors, Huxley and Orwell, who were inspired by events like the Industrial Revolution, World War I, and the Cold War, Atwood drew directly from historical and current events, yet she leaned more on the side of realism. As a result of this rule, she connects Gilead closely to both history and the present. With this increased likeness to readers' own world, Atwood makes Gilead more fearful due to the implication that there is a higher chance that a similar kind of society could develop.

Atwood began to write *The Handmaid's Tale* in the spring of 1984, following a rise of feminism that she would go on to reflect in her writing of the novel. In the 1970s, the second-wave feminist movement and decades of work to decrease sexism granted women both economic and sexual freedom. Women could open their own bank accounts and workplaces enacted more anti-discrimination policies (Faludi ix). Additionally, the increased availability of contraceptives and abortion, made legal by a series of important court cases, meant that women could stay in the workforce on their own terms (Faludi 404). In 1965, *Griswold v. Connecticut* legalized birth control by ruling that people should have privacy surrounding contraceptives. On January 22, 1973, *Roe v. Wade* granted women across America the right to abortion (Hull 173). These measures offered women the freedom to control their sexuality and reproduction, meaning that they no longer needed to put their lives and careers on hold if they got pregnant (Faludi 404).

The conservative pushback in the 1980s would stall the progress of the 60s and 70s as religious and secular groups worked to control women's bodies to maintain a male-dominated society. Far from the goal of taking abortion out of politics, *Roe v. Wade* forced political candidates to consider their stance on abortion to appeal to voters as lawyers and politicians tried to combat abortion from a legal perspective (Hull 189). Roman Catholics and Evangelicals, known as the Religious Right, viewed *Roe v. Wade* and women's ability to obtain abortions as an affront to life and Christian ideals. Politicians who were either of those denominations or who wanted to appeal to those voters would publicly oppose abortions to gather political support (Hull 189). Secular, middle-class men opposed *Roe v. Wade* because of shifting social and economic dynamics stemming from the availability of abortion. The sexual freedom brought forward by birth control allowed women to gain more financial power as they could now control when they wanted to have children, making men feel insecure about their role in the family (Faludi 404). As a reaction to this perceived loss of male authority, men at this time attempted to file "father's rights" lawsuits against their wives or partners who wanted to seek abortions and divorce without their permission. Faludi states that "men who found these changes distressing couldn't halt the pace of women's bedroom liberation directly, but banning abortion might be one way to apply the brakes" (Faludi 405). The common theme in both the Christian and male groups was the desire to control women's bodies to maintain the male-dominated status quo of society, a concept that Atwood recognized and incorporated into Gilead.

Atwood includes specific parallels to American history to show that a society like Gilead could develop if readers do not stop reproductive rights restrictions. Serena Joy, the Wife of the house Offred resides in, reflects Phyllis Schlafly, a real-life conservative figure who maintained that a woman belonged in the home and who led "counter-rallies" to stop the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) (Critchlow 245). Offred notes that Serena Joy used to make speeches to encourage women to take on traditional roles in the home:

> By that time she was worthy of a profile: Time or Newsweek it was, it must have been. She wasn't singing anymore by then, she was making speeches. She was good at it. Her speeches were about the sanctity of the home, about how women should stay home. Serena Joy didn't do this herself, she made speeches instead, but she presented this failure of hers as a sacrifice she was making for the good of all. (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 45)

Atwood portrays Serena Joy as a contradictory figure who preaches that women should stay invisible in the home while giving speeches in public. She uses an ironic tone when describing this inconsistency between Serena Joy's words and actions, showing readers the hypocrisy. Schlafly similarly appeared in a very public role, getting up on stage at anti-ERA rallies or giving televised interviews to preach the importance of women staying in the home. Schlafly opened many of her speeches by thanking her husband for "letting" her attend and give the speech (Critchlow 247). These two women claim that their natural role was in the home, but their actions said otherwise. Additionally, while The names of their husbands further connect Serena Joy and Schlafly. While Atwood never outright calls the Commander by any first name, readers can assume that his name is Fred, both due to his Handmaid's name, "Offred," and the Epilogue's attempt to pair him to a historical figure named Frederick (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 306). Schlafly's husband was also named Fred (Critchlow 247). Atwood commits to the connection and critique of Schlafly, and yet she paints Serena Joy as a tragic figure who is unhappy in the world she helped to create, showing the dangers of demanding that women stay in the home.

Just as Serena Joy embodies Phyllis Schlafly, Offred's mother represents the second-wave feminist of the 1970s, creating another historical reference readers can use to connect Gilead to their own world. At the Red Center, the re-education center for the Handmaids, the Aunts show the soon-to-be-Handmaids videos of feminists to condition them into believing that actions against patriarchal societies are wrong. Offred's mother is among the crowd in one of the videos: "[my mother is] in a group of other women, dressed in the same fashion; she's holding a stick, no, it's part of a banner, the handle. The camera pans up and we see the writing, in paint, on what must have been a bedsheet: TAKE BACK THE NIGHT" (Atwood*, The Handmaid's Tale* 119). The reader sees Offred's mother as a vocal activist, unafraid to be on camera. The Take Back The Night movement referenced in this passage was a real movement of marches that brought awareness to sexual and domestic violence (Valk 186). Atwood also describes Offred's mother as playing an active role in porn riots, connecting her to the "Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography" publication developed during the 1978 Take Back the Night conference (Valk 186). By protesting violence and exploitation against women, Offred's mother exerts control over her body and attempts to create a sexism-free world. However, Offred's mother's feminist efforts go unappreciated by her daughter and son-in-law, Luke (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 122). With this conflicting dynamic, Atwood shows that the downfall of the 1970s feminist movement, and the fictional rise of Gilead, stemmed from an underappreciation of the feminists' efforts, especially by the people around them. Atwood's historical critique connects the novel to the long history of the dystopian mode while also allowing for a feminist critique of her present day.[8]

The Handmaid's Voice: Narrative and Form in *The Handmaid's Tale*

One of the most important pieces of *The Handmaid's Tal*e is the Handmaid herself, Offred, who narrates the story through a first-person perspective that allows readers direct access to her story. By employing a stream of consciousness style, Atwood draws readers into Offred's inner-thought process, oftentimes making it seem like she speaks to readers in a spontaneous manner. After Offred kisses the Commander, she considers how else she could have acted, musing aloud to both herself and the reader: "This is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction. It's a reconstruction now, in my head, as I lie flat on my single bed rehearsing what I should or shouldn't have said, what I should or shouldn't have done, how I should have played it. If I ever get out of here– Let's stop there" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 134). Offred speaks candidly to the reader, emphasizing that her story is a "reconstruction" and she might not tell it exactly as it happened due to the fault of her own memory. With the repetition and em dash signifying Offred cutting herself off and restarting, she suggests that she speaks to readers in the immediate present without thinking about how best to phrase her words. The familiar and colloquial way of writing gives the impression of a personal connection between Offred and the readers. Atwood attempts to use this intimate writing style to humanize Offred and create sympathy for her plights in Gilead.

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[8] Atwood also used the dystopian mode's trope of drawing on history for her sequel, *The Testaments*. She claims that since 2001 there had been an uptick in global instability and that the possibility of dictatorships rose from these uncertainties: "These kinds of scary events led to a desire for greater safety and security on the part of citizenry: right-wing policies suddenly had a bit more appeal. Chaos and threat precede dictators" (Atwood, *Burning Questions* 418). *The Testaments* served as Atwood's way to re-explore the possibility of an authoritarian government, this time through the more hopeful lens of rebellion.

More than just building an intimate relationship with readers, the stream of consciousness style of writing in which Offred often plays with words shows that she refuses to lose herself to the re-education of Gilead. Offred frequently muses on the meaning of words and verb tenses or works song lyrics into her thought process. She finds joy in words, taking back what Gilead stole from her when it banned women from reading as a form of control. A notable example of Offred's enjoyment of language happens when she breaks the rules and reads in the Commander's office: "I read quickly, voraciously, almost skimming, trying to get as much into my head as possible before the next long starvation. If it were eating it would be the gluttony of the famished; if it were sex it would be a quick furtive stand-up in an alley somewhere" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 184). The many metaphors Offred uses contribute to the idea that she finds pleasure in the written word and in reading, using long poetic phrases that allow her to show the intellectual prowess that Gilead could not fully steal from her. The drawn-out sentences and semicolon force readers to read without stopping, mirroring the fervor in which Offred consumes the novels. Although the Commander only allows her to read when he can take perverse pleasure by watching her, in this moment, Offred takes back the literacy that has been stolen from her. Allison Halsall claims that this word-play "enables Offred to preserve a sense of identity as well as to keep her capacity for language limber" and that "Offred's personal narration questions and eventually subverts the rules of the collection" (Halsall 89). I would agree with that assertion; Offred's play with language allows her to maintain her intellect and individuality in a society that seeks to destroy it. Although the dystopian Gilead seeks to repress and control women by banning their connection to the written word and even their connections to their own names, Offred proves that they cannot touch her mind. Consequently, she reminds readers that words have power and that language can be a form of resistance to avoid erasure and objectification.

Atwood further uses the stream of consciousness style to switch between Offred's present and her past memories, offering a powerful juxtaposition to the bleakness of her life in Gilead. For Offred, these memories–days spent with her daughter or her college years with her friend, Moira–allow her to maintain pieces of her identity. Although her body, career, property, and ability to write have been taken from her, she draws hope from her ability to remember the past. For example, Offred remembers being in her college dorm room with Moira, reminding herself of days of easy conversations and camaraderie: "Now, said Moira. You don't need to paint your face, it's only me. What's your paper on? I just did one on date rape. / Date rape, I said. You're so trendy. It sounds like some kind of dessert. *Date rapé*" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 38). At first glance, Offred's joke about date rape may seem insensitive; however, the inclusion of it shows how Offred yearns to go back to when she could laugh about rape and sexism. In her life as a Handmaid, the Commander and Gilead confront her with these concepts daily. Although the memories are fleeting, they remind Offred of a time when she had power over her life and offer her subtle internal resistance. Gilead cannot stop her memories, nor can the government tamper her hope.

In the "Historical Notes" epilogue that takes up the last twelve pages of the novel, readers learn that *The Handmaid's Tale* is actually a frame narrative, which complicates the readers' perception of the story and yet makes it more hopeful by showing that the resistance movements in Gilead succeeded. Atwood reveals that *The Handmaid's Tale* is a series of thirty tapes found in a house on the Underground Femaleroad that fictional professors transcribed into a book years after the fall of Gilead. Professor Pieixoto, one of the professors of Gileadean Studies presenting at a research symposium in the utopian Nunavit in the year 2195, references two resistance groups, Mayday and the Underground Femaleroad, noting that "the latter was purely a rescue operation, the former quasi-military. A number of Mayday operatives are known to have infiltrated the Gileadean power structure" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 310). Although Pieixoto does not specifically mention if Mayday and the Underground Femaleroad directly led to the downfall of Gilead, one can assume that, because he mentioned them, they played a significant role. The utopian frame solidifies the idea that resistance can lead to change, and that resistance and protest work to end totalitarian regimes like Gilead.

Atwood also uses the frame narrative to show how even in seemingly near-perfect societies, sexism can still exist and readers must examine themselves for any misogyny. The professors in Nunavit believe that they have risen above the age of oppressive sexism that led to Gilead, which is partly true as women in the future society can hold professorship positions again; however, discrimination still exists and cannot be ignored. Although a woman, Professor Maryann Crescent Moon, leads the conference and the professors discuss a woman's contribution to the historical knowledge of Gilead, Pieixoto makes jokes about his colleague's body: "now we are enjoying an equally charming Arctic Chair. I use the word "enjoy" in two distinct senses" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 300). The audience laughs, not considering the ramifications of their objectification of Professor Maryann Crescent Moon's body. Piexoto also belittles the women who escaped from Gilead, calling the Underground Femaleroad the "Underground Frailroad," denoting that women are weak and frail, even as those same women proved themselves capable of surviving the harsh society of Gilead (Atwood 301). Atwood reminds readers that even in a distant idealized future, sexism and objectification of women's bodies can still exist. As Patrick Murph claims, the frame narrative provides a "warning about the possibilities for a resurgence of such oppression" (31) that readers must actively strive to avoid.

While many authors who utilize the frame narrative start novels with the frame, cuing readers into the style from the beginning, Atwood waits until the end to make this reveal, which strengthens the power of the novel for several reasons. If Atwood started the story with the frame narrative, readers would have felt more distance–about a century and a half–between themselves and Offred. Additionally, the reveal of the frame narrative at the end rather than the beginning forces readers to rethink what they know about Offred. Atwood pushes readers to pay attention anew to the story rather than just closing the book. Piexoto claims that "as I have said elsewhere, all such arrangements are based on some guesswork and are to be regarded as approximate, pending further research" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 302). On this last note, readers are left to reflect on whether there are other ways to arrange the chapters.

The Handmaid's Tale **and the Body**

Atwood's exploration of power dynamics through visceral portrayals of sex allows readers to understand the larger workings of Gilead through a smaller lens, showing how the Gileadean government exerts control over moments that should be private. Throughout the novel, Offred is forced to have sex once a month with the Commander solely for the purpose of procreation. Her worth and status in society depend on her ability to produce a child. Outside of the constraints of Gilead's laws, sex still acts as a way for men to exert control over women. As the novel develops, Offred reflects on the sexual relationship she had with her husband, Luke, and engages in sex outside of the monthly Ceremony with the Commander's chauffeur, Nick. However, even in these cases, sex is based on male pleasure and procreation. The sexual relationships Offred has outside of Gilead's authorities show how sexism and unequal power dynamics exist even in private spheres. In that way, her message becomes even more relevant to readers, showing that the loss of bodily autonomy can happen easily within their own homes rather than just in a distant future that they can ignore. By forcing her readers to read uncomfortable sex scenes, Atwood makes readers grapple with why they may find women's fictional loss of bodily autonomy unsettling.

The most glaring example of the Gileadan government exerting control over its citizens' private lives is through the existence of the Ceremony. Although the literal act involves the Commander penetrating his Handmaid, the Wives partake in this event too by holding the Handmaids' hands in an effort to unite the two women and cement the idea that the ensuing child will be fathered and mothered by the Commanders and their Wives, not the Handmaids. Although the act takes place in a marriage bed, it is devoid of intimacy and personal connection. Offred describes the distance between herself and the Commander after the sex act: "The Commander, who has been propping himself on his elbows, away from our combined bodies, doesn't permit himself to sink down into us. He rests a moment, withdraws, recedes, rezippers. He nods, then turns and leaves the room, closing the door with exaggerated care behind him, as if both of us are his ailing mother" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 95). Atwood lists his actions with singular words, separated by commas, that all have roughly the same number of syllables. These listed words show the mechanical nature of the sex dictated by Gilead, devoid of love and spontaneity. The metaphor of the ailing mother shows how Gilead laws have taken romantic love and sexual intimacy out of sex, instead making it something comical to Offred in its awkwardness. In this scene, the dystopian destruction of individuality and privacy is also visible in Gilead's perversion of conjugal sexuality, a perversion that turns what should be intimate and spontaneous into a prescribed and semi-public ritual.

Offred's attempt to find a word that best describes the Ceremony also shows how Gilead's laws separate love and passion from sex. In the midst of the act, Offred does not think about the Commander but rather thinks about how to define what she does with him:

> Below [the skirt] the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he's doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for. (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 94)

Compared to a term like "make love," "fuck"–defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as coarse slang–seems more animalistic and less romantic, which further cements the idea that the Ceremony's sole purpose is to produce a child rather than to foster any intimacy or love between the Commander, the Handmaid, or the Wife. Additionally, the fact that Offred muses on the definitions and connotations of various words during the act, shows that the Handmaid at least finds the Ceremony unstimulating to the extent that she can think very clearly. Her statement that the ceremony "has nothing to do with sexual desire, at least for me, and certainly not for Serena" solidifies that idea (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 95). Atwood urges readers to see how patriarchal government restrictions can quickly become personal, eliminating sexual pleasure in the case of Gilead.

Although Offred largely looks back on her life with Luke with happy nostalgia, the majority of her memories portray an unequal sexual relationship that shows readers how gendered tensions can exist and be dangerous in their own present world as well as Gilead. The only sex scene between Offred and Luke that Atwood writes takes place on the night that Gilead made it illegal for women to have jobs and bank accounts. Offred describes how Luke initiates sex against her desires: “after I’d lost my job, Luke wanted to make love. Why didn’t I want to?” (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 182). Offred uses syntax to set up the idea that even though Offred was the one who experienced the horrible effects of the day, Luke was the one who desired sexual intimacy, seeming to disregard Offred’s fears to sate his bodily desires. Luke’s inaction and carelessness illustrate that sexism starts in personal spaces and that even if men like Luke did not start Gilead, they can profit from the extreme patriarchal government in a way that women never could. Atwood shows the harm in letting men get away with apathy towards even subtly sexist governments, let alone when totalitarian sexist governments take control.

Through Offred’s continued descriptions of the sex scene with Luke, Atwood shows the danger of male indifference, even in the privacy of the home. Offred explores the unequal gendered power dynamics she feels during this moment of intimacy:

> He kissed me then, as if now I'd said that, things could get back to normal. But something had shifted, some balance. I felt shrunken, so that when he put his arms around me, gathering me up, I was small as a doll. I felt love going forward without me.
>
> He doesn't mind this, I thought. He doesn't mind it at all. Maybe he even likes it. We are not each other's, anymore. Instead, I am his. (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 182)

The idea that Luke does not care and even might like her helplessness stems from Offred’s description of him continuing to have sex with her despite her discomfort. Offred portrays herself as being small and vulnerable to Luke’s whims, heightening the uncomfortableness of the scene. Atwood urges readers to recognize their own vulnerability in the face of governmental restrictions, coaxing them to act to prevent laws that encroach on their safety and comfort in their private life.

Although Offred has more agency in her secret sexual relationship with Nick than in her relationships with the Commander and even what the readers see of Luke, through her sexual relationship with Nick, she gives up her desire to escape and submits to a patriarchal sexual power dynamic. When Ofglen, a fellow Handmaid and member of the resistance group, offers Offred escape, she does not want to take it: “The fact is that I no longer want to leave, escape and cross the border to freedom. I want to be here, with Nick, where I can get at him” (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 271). Although Offred displays a kind of sexual freedom in her choice to be with Nick against Gilead's laws, it ultimately comes at the cost of her ability to escape. She has the chance to experience true freedom by escaping to Canada or England, to be free to wear whatever she wants or work wherever she wants but she wants to stay on account of Nick, further sacrificing her bodily freedom for a sexual relationship. Atwood shows that Offred's worth and value remain tied to men and their assessment of her body rather than her own. As a warning, readers can view this scene as Atwood telling them not to give up their power for a man. Instead, Atwood encourages readers to take every moment to act to avoid situations that place them in danger, whether that be a personal action like leaving a toxic situation or an attempt to fight back against an oppressive government.

***The Handmaid's Tale* and Motherhood**

Although Atwood protests forced birth in both *The Handmaid's Tale* and in her non-fiction essays, consensual motherhood plays a large role in her novel, offering a nuanced lens through which to consider reproductive rights and abortion. Both Offred and her mother had children by choice in pre-Gilead society and the love that Offred has for her daughter is an integral part of the story. The frequency with which Atwood explores motherhood in a positive light shows that she does not vilify all pregnancies, only forced pregnancies. In her *Burning Questions*, Atwood claims that pregnancy can be a gift: “we say that women ‘give birth.’ And mothers who have chosen to be mothers do give birth, and feel it as a gift. But if they have not chosen, birth is not a gift they give; it is an extortion from them against their wills.” (Atwood, *Burning Questions* 251). On the other hand, Atwood likens abortion bans to slavery, claiming that “women who cannot make their own decisions about whether or not to have babies are enslaved because the state claims ownership of their bodies and the right to dictate the use to which their bodies must be put” (Atwood, *Burning Questions* 361).[9] For Atwood, women must consent to being pregnant, and be willing to pay the costs of giving birth and raising a child, for it to be a blessing. Atwood’s writing implies that one can be a mother and appreciate the gift that is motherhood, while simultaneously denouncing forced pregnancies and legislation that restricts abortion and birth control.

Offred herself has a positive view of motherhood pre-Gilead, showing that although she is uncomfortable in her role as a forced surrogate for the Commander, she does not oppose pregnancy as a concept. Before the events of the novel, she had a baby with Luke by choice. Her love for her child is visible in her many memories of her daughter and their happy times together. Little details in Offred’s daily life cause her to reminisce about her time as a mother with her daughter, for example, when she walks into the Commander’s kitchen that “smells of yeast, a nostalgic smell. It reminds me of other kitchens, kitchens that were mine. It smells of mothers; although my own mother did not make bread. It smells of me, in former times, when I was a mother" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 47). Offred's instant recognition of the smell of yeast shows the positive memories she associates with her past identity as a mother. She loved those times, leading to yeast being a comforting smell for her. Serena Joy also recognizes the importance of motherhood to Offred when she uses the promise of a photo of Offred's daughter to motivate Offred into breaking a law.

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[9] This chapter in *Burning Questions* was written in 2018. On May 7, 2022 the chapter was republished on The *Guardian* under the title “‘Enforced childbirth is slavery’: Margaret Atwood on the right to abortion” as a reaction to the leaked supreme court documents regarding *Roe v. Wade.*

Even Offred's feminist mother who actively protested for the right to have an abortion chose to have a child, which shows that feminists who want abortion to be legal are not anti-birth or anti-children, as stereotypes claim (Park). Offred recalls her mother telling her that she wanted to have her: "I had you when I was thirty-seven, my mother said. It was a risk, you could have been deformed or something. You were a wanted child, all right" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 121). Offred's mother knew that she risked health complications by having a child at thirty-seven and yet, any fears she may have had paled in comparison to her desire to be a mother. She reinforces the idea that Offred was a "wanted child" to leave no doubt in Offred's mind that this was a choice she made freely. One of the many myths about feminism states that women are anti-family and anti-children (Park), however, Atwood's novel shows that that is not the case and that just because feminists oppose forced pregnancies, does not mean that they oppose all pregnancies.

The contrast between Offred's happier memories of her life as a mother before Gilead and her present further highlights the loss of privacy and intimacy faced by women in her world. While Atwood glorifies motherhood pre-Gilead, she juxtaposes past and present to show that Gilead treats birth in a manner that seems hollow and uncaring. When Handmaid Janine gives birth, Offred reflects on her own daughter's birth, showing the differences between the two moments:

> Aunt Elizabeth, holding the baby, looks up at us and smiles. We smile too, we are one smile, tears run down our cheeks, we are so happy.
>
> Our happiness is part memory. What I remember is Luke, with me in the hospital, standing beside my head, holding my hand, in the green gown and white mask they gave him. Oh, he said, oh Jesus, breath coming out in wonder. That night he couldn't go to sleep at all, he said, he was so high
>
> Aunt Elizabeth is gently washing the baby off, it isn't crying much, it stops. As quietly as possible, so as not to startle it, we rise, crowd around Janine, squeezing her, patting her. She's crying too. The two Wives in blue help the third Wife, the Wife of the household, down from the Birthing Stool and over to the bed, where they lay her down and tuck her in. The baby, washed now and quiet, is placed ceremoniously in her arms. (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 126)

In Offred's present, Aunt Elizabeth holds up the baby to Offred and the other Handmaids witnessing the birth. She states that they "are one smile," linking the several Handmaids in the room as a singular unit. The words "we," "us," and "our" are used repeatedly, showing that birth is a public and communal affair with more parties than just the woman giving birth and her partner supporting her. The women present give the baby straight to the Wife, rather than caring for the emotional or physical needs of Janine, the woman who gave birth. To Janine, whose body underwent the birthing process, the women simply "squeeze" and "pat" her as she cries, words that seem less nurturing than the term used to describe the Wife, "tucked in." Ultimately, Janine's childbirth belongs to the Handmaids, the Wives, and the Aunts, not herself. In contrast, in Offred's memory, the only other person described is Luke. Only he and Offred matter, making the birth seem more welcoming and intimate, without any interference of government rituals.

Offred makes her contrast explicit when she calls the Handmaids' happiness at Janine's birth "part memory." Offred's happiness stems from her positive memories of Luke and her daughter, rather than the way birth happens in Gilead. Atwood shows that the true happiness of birth lies in intimacy and the ability to choose, not the government-prescribed birth that Gilead forces women to undergo.

The Handmaid's Tale's **audience: A warning to privileged women**

Over the years, many scholars and writers have criticized Atwood's handling of race in her novel. Karen Crawley states that *The Handmaid's Tale* "enacts, albeit problematically, for white women precisely what has been suffered by so many women of colour both historically and in our present" (Crawley 342). The novel seems to portray a white supremacist state and yet never fully explains the role of people of color in Gilead. By ignoring race, the book fails to fully explore the pitfalls of white feminism and ignores the long history of reproductive injustices faced by people of color in America. For example, many of the negative actions Atwood portrays, like Gilead forcing women into a type of slavery and the government stealing children from their mothers to be brought up and re-educated elsewhere, were part of the historical experience of Black and indigenous women. However, Atwood fails to reference or acknowledge these historical and racial reproductive injustices in her novel. Crawley further criticizes Atwood's appropriation of the slave narrative, a Black-American literary genre, while suppressing its origins (Crawley 343).

On the other hand, the sparse references to race may be more purposeful than simply a case of Atwood profiting from the historical experiences of women of color. Crawley identifies that race does play a large part in the novel's impact:

> Race was central to the novel's dystopian plausibility: the Gilead of Atwood's book was a white supremacist regime. In a passing reference Offred overhears the television newscaster reporting that the so-called 'children of Ham', named after one of Noah's sons who is often construed as black, were 'resettled' in 'the National Homelands', an undisclosed place somewhere in the Midwest, one of the colonies where people go and die of toxic waste exposure. Atwood's epilogue mentions that Gilead's 'racist policies… were firmly rooted in the pre-Gilead period, and racist fears provided some of the emotional fuel that allowed the Gilead takeover to succeed' (Crawley 335)

By this reading, Atwood does include sparse references to race, but she largely excludes it from her novel because she wants to explore a white-supremacist regime much like that of the Nazis. Offred subtly mentions Hitler twice, although never by name, perhaps cementing the idea that Gilead is partly inspired by this dictatorship.

By intentionally minimizing explicit racial aspects, Atwood focuses instead on privileged women who may have never experienced struggles surrounding reproductive rights. Crawley claims that "the text only works as a terrifying dystopia for those who have thus far been sheltered from such experience" (Crawley 343). As a cultural intervention, *The Handmaid's Tale* creates a world in which privileged women are forced to examine what life would be like if the government were to take reproductive rights away from them. *The Handmaid's Tale* becomes a warning to white women who have historically had more rights in this situation. Atwood explores this concept in both Serena Joy, a conservative white woman, and Offred, a middle-class white woman.

With Serena Joy's unhappiness at her current role as a Commander's Wife in this society, Atwood demonstrates the importance of feminism and not limiting women's reproductive rights to the conservative women who believe that the world would be better if women stayed in the home. Atwood frequently describes Serena Joy's misery in her life, especially visible in Offred's depiction of her crying the night before the Ceremony: "I can hear her, behind my back. It isn't the first time. She always does this, the night of the Ceremony" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 90). Serena Joy's tears show an uncontrollable sadness she carries with her in regards to the world that she helped to create. In contrast to Serena Joy's life as a public figure, Offred details the negative emotions she experiences as a Wife in Gilead. Serena Joy publicly championed that women should stay in the home and yet now is miserable in her position. Atwood's creation of a Phyllis Schlafly-like character serves as a warning to outspoken, conservative women who benefit from freedoms granted to them by feminism movements even if they refuse to acknowledge them. Sarah Jones comments that "Atwood reminds [conservative] women that they might not like the results of their labor; that by the time they come to regret it, the culture they helped create will have developed far beyond their control. Serena Joy is a warning, not only to her feminist antagonists, but to conservatives, too" (Jones). By warning the Serena Joys of the world the dangers of stripping all women of their independence and bodily autonomy, Atwood creates a fearful world for everyone, a world that demands action in order to avoid America from entering a similar fate.

Beyond a warning for conservative women actively opposing women's equality, *The Handmaid's Tale* warns women like Offred who remain blissfully ignorant of the suffering and changes happening around them. In Pre-Gilead America, Offred recounts how as a college student she often trivialized traumatic events like date rape, while her friend Moira fought to be heard. As a married adult, Offred let her husband tease her mother even though his jokes often had sexist undertones. In Gilead, Offred regrets her complicity:

> There were stories in newspapers, of course … but they were about other women, and then men who did such things were other men. None of them were the men we knew. The newspaper stories were like a dream to us, bad dreams dreamt by others. How awful, we would say, and they were, but they were awful without being believable. (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 56)

Offred takes on a regretful tone in this piece, repeating words to emphasize the surrealness she once felt. Although Offred did not actively lead to Gilead's takeover, in her remorse, Atwood shows readers that passive mindsets like Offred's allow for sexist and totalitarian governments to take over. For readers, Offred models awakening to a realization that just because sexism and domestic or sexual violence does not affect everyone, every woman has a responsiblity to speak out against it.

Although Atwood engages with many tropes of the dystopian mode, the power of *The Handmaid's Tale* comes from certain elements that are unique to Atwood. Unlike previous dystopias like *Brave New World* that include science fiction elements, Atwood's determination not to write about anything that could not plausibly happen makes the novel more realistic to readers. With her choice of first-person narrative, Atwood delves deeper into both the positive and negative emotions of her narrator and builds an intimate connection between the protagonist and readers. The combined effect of realism and narrative structure makes the frightening events of the novel seem as though they could take place in readers' own world and therefore something readers should be concerned about. However, Atwood ensures readers that there is hope to be had even in places like Gilead. By ending with the utopian frame, Atwood proves that forms of resistance like Mayday and the Underground Female Railroad have the power to end governments like Gilead, giving her readers an incentive to keep fighting for their bodily autonomy and reproductive rights.

Chapter 3: *Dawn* as Resistor's Narrative

As with *The Handmaid's Tale*, the dystopian work of Octavia Butler has experienced a popular resurgence in recent years. There are currently five television and film adaptations of her fiction in the works, including adaptations of her series *Lilith's Brood* and *Earthseed* (George). Although her novel, *Parable of the Sower,* allowed her to finally reach the New York Times best-seller list in 2020, 14 years after her death, Butler explores bodily autonomy and consent more fully in *Lilith's Brood*, particularly with the first book *Dawn*.[10] While *The Handmaid's Tale* pushes the limits of the dystopian mode by including a utopian ending, *Dawn* blends dystopian fiction with the slave narrative, Afrofuturism, and science fiction. Butler's choice to draw on these multiple genres allows the novel to grapple with the sexual violence and losses of bodily autonomy women have experienced across time, while highlighting the particular reproductive injustices Black women have faced throughout America's history. As a resistor's narrative, *Dawn* shows readers a variety of strategies to resist gender-based or racial oppression, particularly through empathy and raising one's voice in protest.

Dawn, like *The Handmaid's Tale,* explores the idea of authoritarian control of women's bodies and a concomitant lack of privacy. However, the location is not a fictionalized future America but the orbit of Earth, on an alien spaceship. *Dawn* acts as an "extrapolative dystopia," in which human interactions and social dynamics are explored in a setting that is more obviously fantastical than a more traditional dystopia like *1984* or *The Handmaid's Tale* (Seeger and Davison-Vecchione 55). Although *Dawn's* futuristic setting may seem impossible to many readers, Butler makes this future come about through plausible catastrophes: a nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union which destroyed the Earth and the majority of the human population. This setting allows Butler to explore what it means to be human, especially when there are so few humans left. Her novel's alien species, the Oankali, claim to be saviors of the humans; however, their version of saving means cross-reproducing with the humans, rendering the humans on their spaceship the last "real" human beings. As the remaining members of the human race, the humans Lilith exists amongst must decide if they want to adapt to the life that the Oankali offer or if they can move forward as humans without devolving to barbaric cavemen. Although the Oankali offer a non-violent and non-hierarchical way forward, they problematically also ignore the humans' stated boundaries and disregard human notions of sexual and medical consent, complicating alliances between the two species.

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[10] Octavia's Butler trilogy consists of *Dawn* (1987)*, Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989). These books originally went by the series title *Xenogenesis* and were even published together in a now out-of-print compilation under that name. In 2000, the novels were reprinted together under the name *Lilith's Brood*. For the purpose of this thesis, I will be referring to the trilogy as *Lilith's Brood*, as that is the version I used.

The protagonist, Lilith Iyapo, is a survivor, but more than that, she is a resistor. Butler makes this status apparent when she makes Lilith into an archetype of historical women, specifically the mythological figure of Lilith, the outspoken first wife of Adam. By incorporating elements of the slave narrative, Butler also connects Lilith to American slave women, especially the slaves who were able to escape and tell their stories. Despite the hardships Lilith experiences over the course of the novel, such as the Oankali operating on her without her consent and a human man attempting to assault her, she continues to be an advocate for the independence of the humans. As Butler tells this story with a third-person limited narrator centered on Lilith, she allows readers to experience the perspective of a woman who found power after her initial powerlessness. Additionally, Butler chooses to tell the story in the middle of the action and to focus on Lilith's current predicament rather than her past memories, as in *The Handmaid's Tale*, thereby placing more emphasis on Lilith's immediate struggles. Lilith's identity as a Black woman allows Butler to explore the intersection of race and gender in a futuristic setting where

Lilith can resist in ways that her predecessors did not have available to them in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Although several writers have previously remarked on how Lilith uses her voice and sexuality to survive oppression (Mann 67), it is also important to consider how she uses empathy as an integral part of resistance. Meghan Hurley-Powell mentions that Lilith resists by teaching her children empathy; however, Lilith's own empathy allows her to triumph over both the Oankali's imprisonment and the human male's violence. By employing the dystopian mode to speculate about a dismal future for humanity, one that reflects Black women's past and present struggles in society, Butler shows readers the dangers of gender-based and racial oppression as well as hierarchical violence and toxic masculinity. As an antidote to these societal flaws, Butler offers readers, especially women readers, a resistor's narrative which shows that feminist forms of resistance, like using one's voice and exhibiting empathy despite difficult circumstances, can allow them hope and power even in the worst hardships.

Racialized Medical Abuse

Just as Atwood committed to grounding *The Handmaid's Tale* in scientific probability, Butler draws upon specific historical and sociological events to cement *Dawn* in the tropes of the dystopian mode. In 2000, Butler published a piece on how she attempted to predict the future in her novels. She cited that leaning into strong emotions, such as fear, and studying the past helped her create predictions that many have remarked as uncanny (Butler, "A Few Rules" 166). Butler noted that writing "does encourage me to use our past and present behaviors as guides to the kind of world we seem to be creating. The past, for example, is filled with repeating cycles of strength and weakness, wisdom and stupidity, empire and ashes" (Butler, "A Few Rules" 166). Given

Butler's statement, it is no surprise that the conflicts and power dynamics she writes about in *Dawn* represent issues that she saw at the time she was writing in the 1980s. Most important to the immediate plot of the book, *Dawn* explores the negative consequences of a "winnable" nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War (Butler, *Conversations with Octavia Butler* 23). However, Lilith's identity as a Black American woman allows Butler to draw on and comment on a much larger history of the United States, particularly the history of Black women since slavery. Throughout American history, doctors and scientists experimented on or sterilized Black women for scientific purposes, often hiding behind the guise of acting for a "greater good." By making Lilith Black and showing the many ways that the Oankali disregard her autonomy over her body, Butler places her novel alongside the long history of reproductive injustices faced by Black women.

I refer to the type of abuse and history detailed in this chapter as "racialized medical abuse" for several reasons. Several significant historical moments can fall under this category including, but not limited to, the experimentation of J. Marion Sims and the use of Henrietta Lacks' cells. Firstly, it is important to recognize the racism that underlies these cases. For centuries, Black people in America were treated as inferior or as pathogens (Jones 12). Due to these pseudo-science-based stereotypes, white scientists believed their experiments were justified. Doctors experimented on Black bodies without their consent, which makes it racialized abuse. In all of these cases, white scientists believed their practices had an ostensibly "higher good" for the expansion of medical knowledge; however, modern readers now recognize that those ends can hardly justify the abusive means.

One particular figure, J. Marion Sims, the widely-considered founder of modern gynecology (Wall 1299), made discoveries that were problematically achieved at the expense of the bodies of Black slave women. In the mid-1800s, many slave women, and white women, faced complications in childbirth, one of the worst being the obstetrical vesico-vaginal fistula (Wall 1299).[11] Sims improved the lives of many women when he discovered a way to repair the fistula and wrote a manual on how to replicate the procedure. However, to reach his goal, he tested the treatment on several slave women–including women named Lucy, Betsey, and Anarcha–without anesthesia between 1845 and 1849 (Cronin 6).

Despite Sims' racist practices, he still has many supporters who argue that he acted mercifully by "saving" those women from their suffering. These defenders argue that anesthesia, which was not even invented until 1846, could be dangerous when used by inexperienced doctors in the nineteenth century. Additionally, these supporters highlight that Sims claimed that he did receive consent from the slave's owners and that the slaves themselves assented to the procedures and even worked to assist him later (Wall 1302). Although it is true that he had no experience using anesthesia, he also had no experience attempting to close obstetrical vesico-vaginal fistulas (Cronin 10). Monica Cronin also points out the issues with saying that these women could have willingly consented to medical procedures: "Lucy was an enslaved woman. She had no bodily autonomy. Under antebellum law, Lucy was considered chattel" (Cronin 9). If her owner granted permission for surgery, it would not matter what Lucy wanted. In a position of such inferiority and dehumanization as slavery, it is difficult to imagine how anyone could consent, or even assent, to medical treatment. Although these experiments do not have a direct parallel in *Dawn*, the myth of the benevolent slaveholder that Sims perpetuates is visible to some degree in the Oankali.

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[11] Obstetrical vesico-vaginal fistulas are complications of prolonged labor in which the tissues of the vesico-vaginal septum are destroyed and an abnormal connection between the bladder and vagina opens. The condition leads to extreme suffering and urinary problems (Wall 1301).

The experiments scientists performed on the cells of Henrietta Lacks' after her death represent another important historical instance of racialized medical abuse. Born in 1920, Lacks went to Johns Hopkins Hospital in 1951 where doctors took a biopsy of her cervical cancer without her or her family's knowledge. Those cancer cells would become known as the HeLa cells and would reproduce at an inconceivable rate, even as Lacks herself died of the cancer. The HeLa cells were shipped around the world in order to test new treatments and vaccines (Rogers). As in the case of Sims, many scientific advancements were made using the HeLa cells; however, Lacks never consented to this usage of her cells. Until 1976 and the investigative work of *Rolling Stone* reporter Michael Rogers, most of the scientists who used the HeLa cells did not even know Lacks' real name (Rogers). In 2010, with Rebecca Skloot's publication of the book *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks,* greater attention was finally brought to the life of the woman whose cells would impact much of the modern world. Although there is no definitive proof as to whether or not Butler was inspired by Lacks when writing *Dawn*, Butler's own assertion that science fascinated her and the public nature of the Lacks case in the late 1970s makes it highly probable that Butler was inspired by Lacks (Butler, *Conversations with Octavia Butler* 15).

In fact, Lacks' life story closely resembles one of the experiments that the Oankali perform on Lilith. Upon her Awakening, Lilith notes that her body has been altered without her consent:

> Her hand touched the long scar across her abdomen. She had acquired it somehow between her second and third Awakenings, had examined it fearfully, wondering what had been done to her. What had she lost or gained, and why? And what else might be done? She did not own herself any longer. Even her flesh could be cut and stitched without her consent or knowledge. (Butler, *Dawn* 6)

Butler's repeated use of question marks creates an unsettling effect that attempts to mirror the fear that Lilith feels for the audience. Her explicit statement that this was done "without her consent or knowledge" shows that she had not allowed the Oankali to perform any experiments on her, much less cut into her. She later learns that the Oankali removed a cancerous tumor from her abdomen and that they have been using that cancer to learn how to medically and scientifically advance themselves. Although there is a positive outcome, with Lilith being cured of her cancer, the Oankali achieve their desired result by using Lilith without her consent. By modern medical standards of informed consent, the Oankali's lack of verbal consent may seem concerning and off-putting for readers. The Oankali's treatment of Lilith mirrors Johns Hopkins' treatments of Lacks both in terms of the existence of the cancer and the lack of informed consent present at the time of experimentation; however, Butler writes her novel so that Lilith still has a chance to stand up against her aggressors, while Lacks did not.

Beyond medical experimentation, the birth control movement also abused Black bodies. On one hand, the ability for Black women to control their own body and pregnancies offered a hopeful way to achieve equality (Davis 206). However, to make the birth control movement more mainstream, Margaret Sanger gave into eugenicist rhetoric, supporting compulsory sterilization of groups deemed to be "unfit" (Davis 214). Angela Davis states that the birth control movement "had been robbed of its progressive potential, advocating for people of color not the individual right to birth control, but rather the racist strategy of population control" (Davis 215). As late as the 1960s and 1970s, Black women and teens were involuntarily sterilized, a procedure that the Oankali perform on Lilith while she sleeps as well (Butler, *Dawn* 98).

Re-imagining these instances of historical racialized medical abuse in the 1980s, Butler invites readers to experience anger at the injustices faced by Lilith and countless women like her throughout history. Although the slave women Sims experimented on and Lacks could not escape their fates, by using the dystopian mode to export this racist past into the future, Butler maintains that Lilith can still resist. Just as Lilith resists throughout the book, Butler implicitly reminds readers of the importance of countering toxic hierarchies that would imprison women, especially Black women, in their bodies.

The Narrative Style and Genre of *Dawn*

Although there are three novels in *Lilith's Brood*, *Dawn* is the only one to be told fully through Lilith's perspective, already making it more female-centric than its successors in the trilogy. In comparison, Butler tells *Adulthood Rites* through the third-person limited perspectives of Akin, Lilith's hybrid son; Tino, a human villager who comes to live with the Onakali and becomes Lilith's lover; and Dichaan, a male Oankali. *Imago* is the only novel told in the first-person point of view with the narrator Jodahs, the first ooloi human-Oankali hybrid child of Lilith.[12] Butler uses the female-centric perspective of *Dawn* to model how women can resist patriarchal hierarchies and oppression both internally and externally.

As I explored in Chapter 1, hearing the perspective of individual characters is an important trope of the dystopian mode. Butler centers *Dawn* around character experience; however, unlike the first-person perspective Atwood uses in *The Handmaid's Tale*, she writes from a third-person limited perspective. Also unlike Atwood, Butler focuses attention on the powerlessness Lilith goes through in the moment. She does not rely heavily on memory or temporality, which makes Lilith more trustworthy to readers as she cannot "reconstruct" her narrative the way that Offred, who speaks in a stream of consciousness first-person narration, can (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 134).

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[12] The Oankali species has three sexes: males, females, and ooloi. The ooloi are responsible for reproduction, via a process in which an ooloi will take a female's egg and a male's sperm and combine them in its body. In the case of human-Oankali reproduction, the ooloi will re-insert the fertilized egg into the human woman's uterus with the addition of their genetic engineering. The ooloi are referred to by the pronouns "it/its."

Butler's use of the third-person limited perspective allows readers to sympathize with Lilith's vulnerability and confusion upon waking up in the Oankali ship at the beginning of the novel. Butler purposefully keeps both Lilith and the readers in the dark about her location: "Her captors spoke when they were ready and not before. They did not show themselves at all. She remained sealed in their cubicle and their voice came to her from above like light" (Butler, *Dawn* 7). Butler ends these sentences in periods, using punctuation to convey a matter-of-fact tone, that only certain facts are discernible. She does not name the captors and she states that Lilith is in a "cubicle," which gives readers no defining traits or clues to help them position Lilith in their minds. The Oankali have rendered Lilith devoid of control over her body and mind, and Butler writes in a way that attempts to imitate that vulnerability for the readers. By making readers experience ignorance in the same way that Lilith does, the narrative structure creates a connection between readers and Lilith. As Butler uses Lilith to represent the struggles of Black women throughout history, Lilith's powerlessness here is a tool to foster an understanding and empathetic response in readers towards both historical and modern women who similarly had their bodily autonomy stolen from them.

While *Dawn* falls under the dystopian mode, scholars also categorize it as containing elements of the slave narrative, Afrofuturism, and science fiction, which allows Butler to critique the past in a futuristic setting where resistance remains possible. The slave narrative, which Marion Wilson Starling first acknowledged as a unique and significant literary genre, allows

Butler to include and explore elements of historical suffering faced by Black women. In her 1946 dissertation, *The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History,* Starling pointed to over six thousand autobiographical accounts from ex-slaves dating from the eighteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries that could be considered slave narratives (Moody 109). These accounts were not all written in novel form but were instead found across judicial records, abolitionist newspaper records, scholarly journals, and church records. According to Jocelyn Moody, the slave narrative as a literary genre has several distinct goals and tropes (Moody 121). Writers of antebellum slave narratives attempted to shape the way that free people thought about slavery and to counter the stereotypes surrounding Black people. Moody states that the slave narrative, specifically slave narratives written by women, offered “a space in which to document African American women’s moral, mental, intellectual, and psychological strengths, their capacity to endure the horrors of slavery as well as to develop and maintain a strong and abiding sense of self-respect and self-determination” (Moody 119). This goal also had a political motive: to persuade free men to end slavery.

Especially during the antebellum period, slave narratives had a formulaic nature, either beginning or ending with a testimonial, usually from a white person, that would verify the authenticity of the slave narrative. The main text of these narratives included descriptions of slaveowners, depictions of torture, intense labor, and dehumanizations, scenes of sales and separation of slave families, and a desire for literacy (Moody 110). Literacy remained important to the slave narrative as banning slaves from reading and writing was one significant way that slaveholders exerted power over their slaves. When slaves and ex-slaves could read and write, they could organize resistance and publish their stories. A theme that is significant specifically to women’s slave narratives is what Moody calls “verbal warfare” and exhibiting “sass,” defined as slave women's use of their voices to protest against oppressive authority figures (Moody 123). Although these original slave narratives were often autobiographical, neo-slave narratives, such as *Jubilee* by Margaret Walker, attempt to create fictional accounts that contain many of these tropes (Rushdy 87).

Although the Oankali do not resemble traditional slave owners, Butler shows many ways in which Lilith resembles historic slaves and remains enslaved to the Oankali. Lilith has no choice but to go along with the Oankali's demands as she is trapped aboard their spaceship, without any means of returning to Earth without their help. The Oankali initially keep Lilith and the other humans from reading and writing, an action that is reminiscent of slave owners banning their slaves from reading (Moody 110). The Oankali also impregnate Lilith without her consent, which circles back to Atwood's assertion that "forced childbirth is slavery" (Atwood, *Burning Questions* 251). At the same time, Lilith can resist the Oankali more readily than slave women could resist their owners because she has tools and knowledge about both her slavers and the world that her ancestors did not have. Butler uses Lilith to garner reader sympathy and force readers to reflect on the difficulties of slavery, while also offering alternatives that were not available in nineteenth-century America.

Although Butler can explore the past mistreatment of Black women in American society by including elements of the slave narrative, the science fiction and Afrofuturism genres allow Butler to explore what types of gendered and racial dynamics could be present in the future. Afrofuturism, which developed out of science fiction, specifically centers around the experiences of Black people in the future. Mark Dery, a cultural critic, first coined the term Afrofuturism in his 1994 collection *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* (Womack 16). His introduction of the term sparked a wave of Afrofuturism studies in the 1990s. Dery defines Afrofuturism as "speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of 20th-century technoculture" (Womack 42). Scholars of Afrofuturism agree that the genre explores the role of Black bodies and identities in the future, with the goal of critiquing racism in the present and celebrating the potential futures of Black people. Despite Butler's having written *Dawn* prior to the creation of the term Afrofuturism, modern scholars posit Butler as an early proponent of the genre, hailing her as a role model and pioneer for both women and Black writers. Ytasha Womack claims that "Butler provided a blueprint for how women, particularly women of color, could operate in these skewed realities and distant worlds. Butler set the stage for multidimensional black women in complex worlds both past and present" (Womack 110). Butler paved the way for women to exist in science fiction and Afrofuturist spaces; with *Dawn*, specifically, she empowers Black women to lead humanity's way into the future.

By virtue of its Black woman protagonist, *Dawn* is an Afrofuturist story; however, Butler ventures further into the goals of the genre by using Lilith's three-dimensional identity to celebrate the power of the Black female voice and body. Lilith is well-spoken and unafraid to stand up for what she believes in, evident in her protesting both human male characters' mistreatment of women and the Oankali's mistreatment of all humans. Additionally, the Oankali set Lilith up to be the parent of the new human race: "To teach, to give comfort, to feed and clothe, to guide them through and interpret what will be, for them, a new and frightening world. To parent" (Butler, *Dawn* 111). The actions the Oankali describe indicate Lilith as both a parental figure and a leader. Lilith's identity as a Black woman creates an added layer of significance, as, at the time of *Dawn*'s publication, there had been no Black or women United States presidents, the highest form of leadership in America. Butler imagines a future in which Black women can lead humanity's way into a new world, showing that Black women have a place at the end of the world as trailblazers.

Lilith as an Archetype of Women Resistors

In order to understand Lilith Iyapo as a survivor and resistor, readers should consider her similarities to her namesake. In a 1988 interview, Butler revealed her inspiration for Lilith's name:

> In *Dawn* I name one of the characters Lilith, who according to mythology was Adam's first wife and who was unsatisfactory because she wouldn't obey him. Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable defines "Lilith" first as a Babylonian monster. I wonder whether her terrible reputation results from her refusal to take Adam's orders. (*Conversations with Octavia Butler* 25)

Butler asserts that Lilith Iyapo's name stems directly from the Babylonian and Jewish mythological figure of Lilith; however, for this thesis, I believe it is most important to focus on the Jewish version of Lilith. For centuries, the Jewish Lilith was portrayed as a demon woman. As Michele Osherow puts it, "her figure pervades Western culture; she is the original femme fatale, the insatiable seductress" (Osherow 71). However, starting in the 1970s, many Jewish feminists adopted Lilith as a face for their movement and focused on her positive traits like her independence and courage to live her life free from the influence of men (Osherow 71).[13]

Although the mythology surrounding Lilith is Biblical in nature, the Bible never names her, the first clue to her complicated history and relationship with religious patriarchs.[14] Rather than her origin stemming from the Bible, the Jewish scribe Ben Sira first refers to her in a Jewish midrash in the year 1000.[15] Sira named Lilith to explain the differences in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 regarding how God created women. Genesis 1 states that "God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (Genesis 1:27). In this account, God seems to create man and woman at the same time. However, Genesis 2 tells a different account of woman's creation: "The LORD God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man" (Genesis 2:22). Sira attempts to explain this difference by claiming that the woman of Genesis 1 is different from the one present in Genesis 2. The woman of Genesis 1 is Lilith, Adam's first wife, rather than Eve. Genesis 2 does not mention Lilith because Lilith fought with Adam over their equality and left the Garden of Eden to be with Satan instead (Osherow 70). Osherow cites a passage from a later version of the story that explains the nature of Lilith and Adam's fight:

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[13] In 1976, a group of Jewish feminists founded a publication titled "Lilith" devoted to "amplifying Jewish feminist voices" (Lilith Magazine). The magazine is still in publication today.

[14] Although she is not named in the Bible, Lilith may be referenced in Isaiah 34:14 in which a monster takes the form of a screech owl. Lilith's name can be translated to mean "screech owl." A 1985 Hebrew Bible later would refer to the owl as "the lilith" instead (Osherow 70). Today the New Revised Standard Version and the New

> She said: "I will not lie beneath you." He said, "I will not lie below you, but above you. For you are fit to be below me." She responded: "We are both equal because we both come from the earth." Neither listened to the other. When Lilith realized what was happening, she … flew off into the air." (Osherow 70)

The central conflict between the mythological Lilith and Adam is that Lilith refuses to have sex beneath Adam as they are equals. Although there is no explicit sexual assault, the phrase "when Lilith realized what was happening" denotes Lilith's understanding that Adam would have forcibly taken her if she continued to refuse him. Lilith can therefore be considered a survivor of an abusive marriage and patriarchal misogyny and can be a symbol for other women to stand up against abuse and misogyny.

American Bible use the name "Lilith" to describe the creature while several other popular Bible version like the King James Version or the New International Version use the terms "night creature" or "owl" (BibleHub).

[15] A midrash is a type of Jewish literature which attempts to interpret parts of the Bible (Osherow 69).

The mythological story of Lilith frames Butler’s Lilith as she too survives hardship and advocates for equality both as a human amongst the Oankali and a woman amongst the human men. Although the Oankali continuously experiment on Lilith without her consent throughout *Dawn*, Paul Titus is the only human who attempts to sexually assault her. Paul, a human who chose to continue living with the Oankali after they rescued him from Earth when he was a teenager, is the first adult human male Lilith encounters after waking up on the spaceship. The Oankali tell her that they want to introduce her to Paul so she can learn more about their culture from another English-speaking human. However, Paul states that the Oankali told him that Lilith was being brought to him so he could have sex with her: “‘They said I could do it with you’” (Butler 96). The Oankali’s pairing off of Lilith and Paul resembles God’s pairing off of Adam and Lilith, and, just as the mythological Lilith protested against Adam’s desire to have sex with her the way he wanted to, Butler’s Lilith does as well. When Paul tries to force himself on her, Lilith stops him by asserting that they should be better than the Oankali: “‘Maybe we can’t stop them, but we don’t have to help them.’ …. ‘Don’t make yourself their dog!’ she pleaded. ‘Don’t do this!’” (Butler 95). Lilith’s refusal to sleep with Paul has two dimensions: on the human side, Lilith’s protest shows her asserting her own autonomy and desires in the face of a man who will take her by force, if necessary. On the other hand, Lilith’s refusal to sleep with Paul is her way of “not helping them,” meaning the Oankali. She believes that the Oankali want her and Paul to have sex so that they can have more humans on which to experiment. Just as the mythological Lilith broke away from the influence of Adam and God, Lilith manages to escape and survive this moment without submitting to the perceived desires of Paul and the Oankali, relying solely on her own abilities, without having to align herself with Satan either.

If readers consider this moment with Paul as one example of Lilith as a survivor, then they can find in it strategies to resist real-world oppression. Lilith remarks that to survive, she cannot fight Paul physically: “He stared at her for several seconds and she feared him and pitied him and longed to be away from him. The first human being she had seen in years and all she could do was long to be away from him. Yet it would do no good to fight him physically. … he was much bigger” (Butler, *Dawn* 95). Her list-like processing of her emotions in the moment as Paul approaches her shows her calmness even in the face of danger, indicating that she knows she has the power to get out of this situation. After recognizing that brute strength will not help her fight Paul, Lilith ultimately decides to get creative, relying on her voice and wit to stop him: “‘Maybe they’ve made you do it with your mother!’ she shouted. / He froze and she prayed she had hit a nerve. / ‘Your mother,’ she repeated. ‘You haven’t seen her since you were fourteen. How would you know if they brought her to you’ (Butler, *Dawn* 96). In order to stop Paul, Lilith accuses him of incest.When he pauses, she chooses to repeat the accusation, showing her understanding that her words have power over him. Lilith’s mind games with Paul and reliance on her intellect show an alternate form of resistance in response to masculine violence. Hurley-Powell states that Lilith “demonstrates that women can exercise resistance in complex ways from the margins, which can then empower women to find their own ways that resist gender-based oppression in complex ways in the real world” (Hurley-Powell 14). Lilith’s decision to focus less on masculine-based fighting traditions in favor of using her voice and creative thinking to survive this encounter allows readers to recognize other ways that they too can resist and protect themselves against adversaries.

More than just in her encounter with Paul, Lilith continues to use her voice to stand up to sexist practices amongst the humans, notably when a group of men intend to use rape to soothe their fears of impotence. When several men attempt to rape a woman, Allison, because she refused to pair off with one of them to reproduce, Lilith stops their attempt and tells them that the human survivors will not rape one another: "'There'll be no rape here,' she said evenly. She raised her voice. 'Nobody here is property. Nobody here has the right to the use of anybody else's body. There'll be no back-to-the-Stone Age, caveman bullshit!' She let her voice drop to normal. 'We stay human. We treat each other like people, and we get through this like people'" (Butler, *Dawn* 178). In this moment, her words command the audience, showing the impact she has amongst the humans. Lilith does not limit her resistance to one-on-one encounters with Paul or members of the Oankali, but fearlessly takes on the responsibility of standing up against sexist male leaders, thus acting as a role model for other women who see groups of sexist men. Although Lilith's words are strong on their own, when they are attached to the stories and experiences of a cultural icon and archetype like the mythological Lilith, Butler allows critics, and readers familiar with the Lilith myth, to see an added depth that would not otherwise appear.

Like her namesake, Butler's Lilith is also a mother, haunted by her monstrous offspring; however, Lilith only protests or shows reluctance towards being a mother when the Oankali make that choice for her.[16] The mythological Lilith becomes the mother of demons through her relationship with Satan (Osherow 77), much like Lilith later becomes a mother of non-humans due to the Oankali's intervention.[17] Lilith frequently remarks that any children she has will not be human, especially when the Oankali forcibly impregnate her at the end of *Dawn*: "'But it won't be human,' she whispered. 'It will be a thing. A monster'" (Butler, *Dawn* 247). Lilith's inclusion of several synonyms for non-humans shows readers just how horrified she is that the fetus inside her will not fully human. It seems almost unfathomable to her and she must repeat it to assure herself of this truth. Butler, like Atwood, suggests that for motherhood to be a gift, it must be freely chosen by the woman, not something forced on them like the Oankali do to Lilith.

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[16] The revised title of the trilogy, *Lilith's Brood,* further solidifies Lilith's status as a mother and her connection to the mythological Lilith, mother of monsters. The previous name of the series, *Xenogenesis,* also had a dual biblical meaning. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term xenogenesis literally means "production of offspring permanently unlike the parent;" however, within the term exists the word "genesis," connecting it back to the Biblical book. The suffix "xeno" means other, naming the series "another Genesis." However, with the new title *Lilith's Brood*, Butler can still capture the biblical allusions while maintaining a feminist focus on Lilith.

[17] Although the Oankali impregnate her with the human Joseph Li Ching's sperm at the end of *Dawn*, due to their physical enhancements of both Lilith and Joseph and the manner in which they impregnate Lilith, the ensuing child also carries Oankali DNA.

In contrast to her later horror at her human-alien offspring, Butler references Lilith's late husband and son Ayre often enough to make readers believe that Lilith enjoyed being a mother and felt Ayre's death deeply. When the Oankali first ask her if she had children, she responds emotionally: "Oh god. One child, long gone with his father. One son. Gone" (Butler, *Dawn* 7). The exclamatory "god," the other monosyllabic words, and the short sentences show Lilith's strong emotional experience, particularly her experiences of grief and shock that her son is dead, that leave her unable to form complex words. She feels this grief because she has lost a wanted child. When Lilith is left alone, she "found herself thinking of Sam and Ayre, her husband and son, both taken from her before the Oankali, before the war, before she realized how easily her life– any human life– could be destroyed" (Butler, *Dawn* 77). This reflection by Lilith comes in the form of a long sentence separated by commas, a stream of consciousness style. The fact that in her alone time she still thinks of her son shows that she clearly had a loving connection to him.

Like Atwood, Butler uses Lilith's conflicting feelings towards different moments of motherhood to show readers that pregnancy and motherhood are only desirable when women can freely make the choice to be mothers. Otherwise, pregnancy is a burden akin to slavery. Through Lilith, Butler, like Atwood, shows readers that just because a woman agreed to be a mother in the past does not mean that she will always want to have more children. This nuanced view of motherhood may be particularly valuable in that it allows female readers to assert that they can choose to have or not to have children on a case-by-case basis Lilith's reactions to motherhood– displaying love and empathy when it is her choice and protesting when it is not– offer women a model for resisting authoritarian controllers that try to restrict their reproductive rights.

Lilith as an Example of Feminist Resistance

Although Butler portrays toxic masculine violence and draws on a history of racialized medical abuse, she also offers powerful alternative feminist ways to resist oppression. Particularly, she shows that women do not need to rely on violence and that using one's voice and exhibiting empathy are valuable, and even preferable, modes of resistance. Although the Oankali were initially wary to grant Lilith writing tools, they acquiesce when they see her empathize with one of their own, which shows that compassion can be used to change minds and mend barriers. Although Lilith stays mad at the Oankali for their treatment of her with their racialized medical abuse and Paul Titus's attempted rape, she chooses to physically comfort the ooloi, Nikanj, during his metamorphosis, rather than explore the ship.[18] Butler considers Lilith's internal conflict at her decision to stay: "She sighed, tried to understand her own feelings. She was still angry–angry, bitter, frightened… / And yet she had come back. She had not been able to leave Nikanj trembling in its beds while she enjoyed her greater freedom" (Butler, *Dawn* 104). Based on Lilith's "trying to understand her own feelings," her empathetic response was second nature. Even though she is still angry at the Oankali–something that Butler shows through her ruminating pause conveyed by the ellipses–she does not let that stop her from caring for another intelligent creature. Lilith sacrifices her chance to be free in order to comfort Nikanj because she recognizes that it is in pain due to its "trembling." Although not explicitly stated by Butler, the

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[18] The metamorphosis is the ooloi's version of puberty in which their sensory arms, used for reproduction and healing, develop.

Oankali gift Lilith writing and reading material two chapters later, showing a connection between Lilith's intrinsic selflessness and the piece of freedom. For modern readers, Butler implies that empathy is a strength that can be used to resist.

Butler links people's capacity for empathy to experiences of pleasure, especially visible in the scene in which Lilith and Joseph Li-Chin Shing, her human lover and mate whom she meets on the spaceship, lie with Nikanj. Butler does not portray sex in a way that her human audiences would understand, and yet, she gives the scene sexual undertones with both the references to pleasure and Nikanj's phallic sensory arm.[19] Lilith's openness and understanding of the Oankali's differences from humanity allow her to experience a type of pleasure and intimacy that only the ooloi can give her. Butler describes her making the conscious choice to lie with Nikanj:

> Nikanj freed one sensory arm from Joseph's waist and extended it towards her.
> She stayed where she was for a moment longer, proving to herself that she was still in control of her behavior. Then she tore off her jacket and seized the ugly, ugly elephant's trunk of an organ, letting it coil around her as she climbed onto the bed. She sandwiched Nikanj's body between her own and Joseph's, placing it for the first time in the ooloi position between two humans. (Butler, *Dawn* 161)

This scene is the first time that Lilith willingly allows herself to be penetrated by an ooloi. While Nikanj makes the first move in offering out its arm toward Lilith, she closes the distance between them herself, showing that this act is her choice. Butler uses no ellipses, exclamation points, or em dashes, a matter-of-fact tone that implies that Lilith does not judge the Oankali's different approach to sexual intimacy. Instead, Lilith accepts and appreciates Nikanj's difference from her and this empathetic approach to connection that allows Lilith to experience all the pleasure Nikanj offers her.

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[19] Although this scene has sexual undertones, the act Butler describes is neither just for pleasure nor for reproduction. Instead, Nikanj connects its arm to Joseph in order to physically strengthen him, as the ooloi can do. Lilith joins to experience a closeness with Joseph that can only be achieved with the ooloi (Butler, *Dawn* 160).

Even though Joseph is the most peaceful and accepting of the men in *Dawn*, his internalized misogyny and reliance on archaic, gendered hierarchies keep him from experiencing the same pleasure that Lilith does, showing the damages of such mindsets. Although Joseph initially exhibited openness by being the one to initiate lying with Nikanj of his own accord which allowed him to feel pleasure with Lilith, his preconceived prejudices and internalized misogyny keep him from recognizing the experience that he just had. He afterward denounces Nikanj, using male pronouns to describe it: "don't let him touch you! If you have a choice, keep away from him!" (Butler, *Dawn* 170). Lilith responds by saying "it isn't male, Joseph" which fails to placate him (Butler, *Dawn* 170). Joseph's view of Nikanj as a "he" in this scene because it took on the more dominant penetrating role in their union shows his internalized homophobia and fear of being taken advantage of the way many men take advantage of women. Butler shows readers that sexist and homophobic attitudes lead to anger and pain, while maintaining empathy and an open-mindedness like Lilith does allows for extra-human pleasure.

Gabriel, another human whom Lilith awakened, has a similar view of Joseph, showing how the human men's reliance on typical masculine social constructs leaves them feeling emasculated and unable to accept the Oankali's differences like Lilith can. Like Joseph, Gabriel uses male pronouns to describe the Oankali to Lilith:

> "Look at things from Curt's point of view," Gabriel said. "He's not in control even of what his own body does and feels. He's taken like a woman and… No, don't explain!" He held up his hand to stop her from interrupting. "He knows the ooloi aren't male. He knows all the sex that goes on is in his head. It doesn't matter. It doesn't fucking matter!

> Someone else is pushing all his buttons. He can't let them get away with that." (Butler, *Dawn* 203)

When Gabriel says "taken like a woman," he implies that it is natural for women to be passive and "taken" rather than doing the acting. He further elaborates that when someone is "taken like a woman" they have little control over what happens to their bodies, showing a demeaning view of women. The men view the ooloi as male because it does to them perhaps what they see other men, or even what they themselves, have done to women: i.e., strip them of their autonomy and ability to choose. Gabriel's fear of being emasculated by the Oankali stems from his belief that men have a tendency to disrespect and demean women, and he is scared of being the one in the helpless position. Similarly to how Atwood appealed to the conservative, white Serena Joys of the world, Butler places Gabriel and other men in this helpless position to show the dangers that misogyny poses to everyone on a personal level. While much of *Dawn* shows resistance strategies, Butler uses this moment to show readers the damages of sexism, especially if it were to be reversed with men feeling the bodily effects of it.

Despite the advances that Lilith seems to make with the Oankali throughout the book, she ends up trapped on the spaceship and impregnated against her verbal consent at the end, an image that, at first, may seem deeply upsetting and disturbing to readers. Butler shows Lilith's horror when Nikanj tells Lilith what they did to her: "'Is it an unclean thing that I have made you pregnant?'/ She did not understand the words at first. It was as though it had begun speaking a language she did not know./ 'You … what?'" (Butler, *Dawn* 246). The ellipsis shows that Lilith does not even have the words to be outraged or horrified, and that she cannot initially process what the Oankali tells her. When the Oankali finally explain that they made her pregnant with Joseph's child Lilith responds initially with silence, shocked by the Oankali's seeming betrayal of her desire not to be impregnated by them without her verbal consent. For Lilith, this moment represents a shift in everything she came to know about the Oankali in the past few months and renews her initial anger at them.

Once Lilith is over her initial shock, she begins to plan how she fights back, showing that readers, especially women, can resist in any way available to them, even in the bleakest circumstances, by keeping hope alive. Lilith's last thoughts of the novel recount her planning:

> At least she would get another chance with a human group. A chance to teach them… but not a chance to be one of them. Never that. Never?
>
> Another chance to say, "Learn and run!"
>
> She would have more information for them this time. And they would have long, healthy lives ahead of them. Perhaps they could find an answer to what the Oankali had done to them. And perhaps the Oankali were not perfect. A few fertile people might slip through and find one another. Perhaps. Learn and run! If she were lost, others did not have to be. (Butler, *Dawn* 248)

Although Lilith has been placed in an awful position, unwillingly carrying a child that will contain alien DNA due to Oankali intervention, she remains strong and optimistic that she will be able to help other humans escape her fate. Even in her belief that she can never be reunited with the other humans, she uses a question mark, allowing some ambiguity if her unification with the humans may still be possible. With the command "learn and run," which lacks an explicit subject, the intended audience can be both the future humans she will encounter as well as herself. Regardless of her audience, Lilith refuses to give up, showing that hope can be a final tool for resistance when all else fails. This ending follows Butler's view that hope is integral to all her storytelling: "the one thing that I and my main characters never do when contemplating the future is give up hope. In fact, the very act of trying to look ahead to discern possibilities and offer warnings is in itself an act of hope" (Butler, *Conversations with Octavia Butler* 165). Hope and speculating about possible alternatives, often included as part of the dystopian genre, can offer characters strength to keep fighting totalitarian governments, while also modeling to readers how to fight oppression in their current worlds.

Although this ending traps Lilith, her words remind readers that they are not similarly trapped and that they still have a chance to learn from her. Hurley-Powell states that "there is hope for the individual reading the feminist dystopian text because they do not live in the same dystopian world as the female protagonist and still have a chance to fight for change in the real world to avoid a similar fate" (Hurley-Powell 12). In this regard, readers still have a chance to fight against the election of leaders who would strip women of their rights and further violent power in the world. The dystopian genre shows readers the importance of fighting in whatever means are available to them, using characters as models. For Lilith, her resistance comes in the form of her determination to continue to mentally resist the Oankali's dominion over her body and her desire to give new humans the tools to escape the Oankali.[20] On a larger scale, Dawn teaches readers to fight against hierarchical powers that would lead to nuclear war or further losses of women's, especially Black women's, bodily autonomy, through whatever means are available to them.

Although Butler includes more fantastical plot elements than many of her predecessors in the dystopian tradition, her differences only strengthen the message of her novel. By portraying the struggles of a Black woman as potentially leading to the end of the world as readers know it,

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[20] The third and final book of *Lilith's Brood* ends with the Oankali giving humans the choice between peacefully coexisting and reproducing with them on Earth or going to a terraformed Mars to reproduce only with other humans. In this way, Lilith's conflicting desires to compromise with the Oankali as well as allow humans the choice to preserve themselves as an individual species both come to pass.

Butler invites readers to see how limiting the freedoms of Black women can affect all of humanity in detrimental ways. With the third-person limited narrator, Butler invites readers into Lilith's thought process, building sympathy and empathy for her plights and those of women like her in both past and present America. In terms of a resistor's narrative, *Dawn* shows readers that there are always more ways of resisting and that just because one way does not work does not mean that one should give up hope. Lilith shows that feminist ways of resistance, like using one's voice and acting with empathy, are valid and strong ways to resist and that women should never lose hope in their ability to keep fighting for their rights.

Conclusion

The third floor of Fenwick is quiet at this time of evening. Most professors and students have gone home for the day, leaving the building nearly empty. However, the room I sit in is still alive with several students, professors, faculty, and the three panelists from Holy Cross's "Ensuring Abortion Access" talk sitting around a circle of tables and eating food from Nu Kitchen. The room seems peaceful, with a stained glass window letting in the setting sunlight. Although I feel self-conscious that I am the only student who doesn't want to go into health studies or politics at the table, I ask the first question.

"Is there any way someone like me, who doesn't want to do medicine or write policies, could get involved with this activism work?"

I look at the three panelists who sit across from me: Julie Amaon, a doctor and medical director of Just the Pill in the western United States; Rockie Gonzales, an activist from the Rio Grande Valley and founder of both Texas's Frontera Fund and the R.E.D. Moon Project; Thu Nyugen, Worcester City Council's first openly non-binary speaker and a strong opponent of crisis pregnancy centers.

Rockie answers my question, her voice calm, steady, and powerful in the small room. "When people ask how to get involved in activism, there's this idea that there is something to do that will have a direct impact that they can see and that's just not how it works," she says. "Just talking about it with friends and family is important. That is where this work actually starts. Abortion has always been stigmatized, even though one in four people with uteruses in the United States will have one. So just keep talking to your friends, your neighbors, your relatives and telling them that these are things that happen."

I was not one of the people out marching when I learned that *Roe v Wade* was overruled on June 24, 2022. I didn't immediately talk to people about it either. Instead, I got the news notification on my phone while I was at my desk at the corporate internship I had only worked at for a couple weeks. I scanned my news app for signs that it was just another leaked draft like in May, but we wouldn't be so lucky this time.

I stared at my computer screen in silence, trying to distract myself. On days when the sun shone, the office seemed lively and full of color, highlighting the pride flags and red company logos. Today the sky was overcast and the whole office seemed to take on a monotone, gray mood, reflecting the emptiness I felt. I was isolated, disconnected from my friends, my mom, the small feminist communities I had formed. Part of me wanted to announce to my coworkers "*Roe v Wade* was overturned" to try to process what I was feeling with someone face-to-face, but I couldn't risk breaking my heart further if my coworkers celebrated. I went on with my job, occasionally checking my phone as it blew up with text messages from my friends, all voicing their shock. I couldn't let myself get too invested in those texts; I had an office to be present in, even though my head hurt from spending too much time staring at the computer.

It wasn't until I got home that I could start feeling. I sat on my bedroom floor, my knees tucked up to my chest as I scrolled through my phone, unable to tear my eyes away. In nearly half the states, trigger laws had already made abortion illegal. Women were already being turned away from procedures that could literally save their lives. I felt like I was going to cry but the tears wouldn't come. My whole body felt on edge as I just kept asking myself how this could happen. How could "Justices" decide that their reading of a 250-year-old document was more important than the millions of American women they had just stripped of any privacy or bodily autonomy? How could the president sit there and talk of midterm elections when six months would be too late for many women who needed healthcare and abortions now?

I imagined a dozen alternative timelines in which *Roe v. Wade* was still in place. A universe where Ruth Bader Ginsberg had stepped down when Obama was president and he had been given the chance to choose another liberal justice. A universe where Mitch McConnell wasn't such a hypocrite and had waited for Biden to choose a justice, rather than allowing Trump to appoint Amy Coney Barrett with two months left in his presidency. A universe where even just two other judges believed that upholding the privacy of *Roe v. Wade* was more important than catering to lobbyists and conservative politicians. Of all the possible futures, why had my America found itself on the path towards a dystopian one?

Despite my grief in those initial days after, I sought out opportunities to build community. I talked to my mom, who admitted that her late mother donated to Planned Parenthood all her life and that this change of events made her want to start donating too. I attended a Zoom meeting hosted by Holy Cross' Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies (GSWS) concentration to share our thoughts and experiences following the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*. With only four other attendees, the meeting became a small and intimate space for us to share our emotions and find community in the midst of all the chaos on the news. I had a similar experience a few days later when I joined a Zoom meeting with Holy Cross's Feminist Forum. As most of us were white women or from the Northeast, we admitted that while this ruling was frightening for us, it would be worse for poor women, women of color, and women in southern or midwestern states that had already made or were in the process of making it illegal. We brainstormed way that we and future feminist leaders on campus could push forward measures to help Holy Cross women, including getting health services to allow birth control for any reason and by getting Students for

Life to stop calling abortion “the most pressing threat to life” in their club description (Clubs & Organizations). I also called my thesis advisor, Prof. Maurer, to talk about what this change would mean for me and my work and shared with her the creative nonfiction pieces I wrote in the wake of these changes.

In those early days, I was still filled with many unknowns but I knew that I wanted to keep engaging in these types of conversations when I returned to campus. I had a responsibility to myself and the other women around me not to let our struggles be sidelined.

Upon my return to Holy Cross in the fall, I made a point to look at how my fellow college community members responded to issues surrounding the encroachment on women’s reproductive rights. I happily found that many of the people I considered my close friends were just as enraged as I was. That didn’t mean that there wasn’t opposition: the *Fenwick Review* claimed that abortion was wrong on both religious and secular grounds and the Students for Life painted “Life Begins at Conception” on the campus center window. However, I found solace in the lectures about subjects like how different faith traditions considered abortion and by having meaningful conversations with my friends.

One of the most impactful events I attended surrounding these discussions was a craft talk by non-fiction essayist Nicole Walker. A small group of creative writing students and professors gathered around her in a classroom in Smith Hall. The size of the group gave it a refreshing intimacy and allowed Walker to individually answer our questions and candidly talk to us about her writing process.

While she began by speaking more generally about her work, the focus quickly shifted to her August 2022 New York Times piece “My Abortion at 11 wasn’t a choice. It was my life.” In this deeply personal, auto-biographical essay, Walker tells the story of the abortion she got at age eleven after being molested by her neighbor for several months. She admitted that she forced herself to just sit down and write the essay, which she had tip-toed around in the past.

“What was it like to write and publish something so deeply personal?” I asked, thinking of my own creative non-fiction. Writing any form of memoir means exposing yourself and your inner thoughts and actions to the world, even if the events you detail are not traumatic. I could only imagine what it was like to reveal trauma to the world for family, friends, and strangers to see.

“When I sent it to my family, I got different reactions,” Walker started. “I did feel naked and exposed with my colleagues, but it felt like it was the time to write this piece. The right to abortion is about more than choice, it’s bodily. What would people say if a basketball player couldn’t go to the hospital to heal a broken arm? My anger protects me against feeling shame for this experience and allows me to write more.”

Another student asked Walker if she ever journaled about her trauma, to which she responded no.

“Writing about it without the intent to publish would mean no artistry or metaphors,” Walker started. “Craft protects me from those raw emotions because I have to decide what metaphors to use. Writing is a dangerous place to be political and without clarity there’s more risk.

“All creative nonfiction needs to have a ‘slant’ or a story,” Walker continued. “It doesn’t need to be trauma-based, all stories and narratives need to be shared. For any type of change to happen, we need to decide that these specific stories matter. Storytelling breaks apart the monolith of politics surrounding these issues.”

I walked out of that craft talk feeling empowered. Although I am lucky that my belief that abortion should remain legal does not stem from personal trauma, I still have a story to tell. It breaks my heart to live in a country where women's reproductive rights and bodily autonomy are casually disregarded, and I have a responsibility to speak out when I see these injustices. If I, and the many other American women who feel the way I do, speak out against why abortion and reproductive rights should matter to everyone, maybe we can make a difference. For me, this thesis has given me the chance to explore my own identity as a feminist and how the means of resistance I can use include things I already do like talking to my family and friends. In the larger Holy Cross community, I have spoken out against sexist language and the spread of misinformation surrounding abortion, both by calling out acquaintances and by writing for the student newspaper. My experience leading a Montserrat seminar for a day let me unpack sexism and toxic masculinity in *Dawn* with a group of first-years who will someday be the leaders of the campus and capable of ushering in more change at Holy Cross. I hope to continue to make a stand for the betterment of our world when I graduate and to use my identity as a writer to make a difference.

"I love that you're a writer. I don't know if you're a creative writer or what kind of writer you are but in the abortion-access-movement world we celebrate Dirty Dancing Day," Rockie Gonzales continues. "*Dirty Dancing* was the first pop culture movie that was released that had an abortion in it where the stigma in the movie wasn't about the abortion. I think that's a big responsibility for your generation in general: producing media, internet content, or whatever that puts abortion into the normal zone and celebrates it in a positive light."

I still have writing to do.

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