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Over the pond– Thomas Örn Karlsson

**REVIEW** | *The Handmaid's Tale* (Hulu, 2017)

**BY** | Katherine Cornell

Towards the end of Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, its protagonist and narrator – Offred – reflects upon her horrible predicament: the experience of the oppressive and violent dystopia she is trapped in, alongside the memory of her freedom before the creation of this society. It is in this state of tension between past and present that Offred offers this poignant insight: “I would like to be without shame. I would like to be shameless. I would like to be ignorant. Then I

would not know how ignorant I was” (Atwood 304). The desire to revoke shame from political inaction or lack of foresight contains echoes of the current political climate in North America, where *The Handmaid’s Tale* locates its dystopian society. Indeed, Offred’s observation about the relationship between ignorance and shame might also describe that experienced by the many white voters who expressed shock after the presidential election of Donald Trump and who could not believe how embedded racism and misogyny are into the fabric of American life and its institutional structures.

These connections between Gilead – the theocratic Christian society of *The Handmaid’s Tale* and the sociopolitical conditions of present day America have informed most of the recent analysis of Hulu’s adaptation of the novel for television, lauding the show’s content for a near uncanny timeliness. These comparisons are worth noting, if not to identify that Margaret Atwood’s writing has often served as a speculative warning bell. This is true not only of her fiction – much of which is politically conscious speculative fiction, combined with elements of horror or the Weird – but also of Atwood’s critical writing as an activist in the public sphere. A recent example is an article Atwood wrote for *Matter*, describing two heavily researched, exquisitely imagined and illustrated futures on Earth without oil, asking that its readers conceptualize climate change as “everything change”. This is true of many parts of Atwood’s speculative fiction: a critique of the neoliberal tendency to consider social phenomena in isolation, for a more ecological focus on how systems are deeply interwoven and feed each other. One point of analysis in this article sets the tone for much of Atwood’s writing, an affective exploration of “the bad things that may happen in that future; also the desire to deny these things or sweep them under the carpet so business can go on as usual” (Atwood, “It’s Not Climate Change” n. pg.).

In many ways, this is what *The Handmaid’s Tale* is about, and it is highlighted in Hulu’s adaptation. Or perhaps, how rapidly business can become *unusual* when “bad things” are ignored: political oppression, surveillance, climate change, and the increased legislation of bodies, especially those historically considered secondary. In both novel and series, we see the creation of Gilead unfold slowly. While the mid-1980s inform the pre-dystopian days of the novel, the series chooses that this period be set in the current moment or very near future, with all of our present technologies. Gilead is created through a militant government takeover by Christians repulsed by

perceived societal moral disorder and responding to a significant drop in the North American fertility rate. This “restoration of order” produces a society ruled by men called Commanders, and governed by Biblical legislation enforced by a secret police called The Eyes. Women are either Wives of these Commanders (those who vocally supported the Christian takeover and who suddenly find the society they advocated for involves the loss of this vocality); Marthas (servants and cooks); and the Handmaids. Handmaids are women with “viable ovaries” who are raped weekly by Commanders, between the legs of their wives, in a lurid interpretation of Genesis called “the Ceremony”. While in the novel Offred refuses to refer to this process as rape, the television series is decisive in its imagining of the Ceremony as the camera steadily focuses – for an uncomfortably long duration – on Offred’s (Elisabeth Moss) harrowed and numbed expression, as her head violently bobs up and down to the soundtrack of acute thuds dissonantly mixed with a religious choral song called “Onward Christian Soldiers”. Yet these sequences are far from fetishistic, as is so often the case with on-screen depictions of sexual violence. In watching these disturbingly choreographed scenes, viewers must actively confront speculative visualizations of misogynistic legislation. It is unsurprising, then, that the show has had ripples in the public sphere, with activists in Canada, America and, recently, Poland, dressing up in the red robes and white bonnets worn in the show by handmaids as an act of political protest against the regulation of women’s bodies (Mack n. pg.).

While *The Handmaid’s Tale* is considered a classic novel within North American speculative fiction, the show gains its unique *momentum* and tone by producing an atmosphere of muted but impending terror. This affective disquiet is produced by analeptic interplay between flashbacks of a lively contemporary North American society and Gilead’s nightmarishly overcast colour palette of browns, greys, and blues (often the only “colour” in this world is red from either the dresses worn by the Handmaids or blood, creating moments of startling visual tension). In addition to visuals, the physicality of the show is intense and watching the performances of the Handmaids is exhausting as they are assaulted, blinded, beaten, or mutilated. The show’s characterization of misogyny as not only a horror, but also an embodied horror is powerful. This amplification of the novel, made possible through the televisual and performance medium, positions the series within a

burgeoning canon of “feminist horror” (Towlson 198). This is not to say that the show is saturated in scenes of physical violence. Scenes are often cut off right before or after the moment of peak physical violence has occurred, or the nucleus of this violence is obfuscated by carefully framed shots. As credit to the exceptional direction and editing of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, each episode deploys physical violence strategically rather than gratuitously. These directorial and cinematographic choices emphasize significant scenes such as The Salvaging – a forced participatory execution in which criminals are beaten to death. These carefully paced eruptions of violent frenzy highlight the repression of Gilead and graph its rising tensions through moments in which they cannot be contained.

Adaptations are challenging, especially when they are born from a novel that is deeply ingrained into a genre’s canon, such as is the case with *The Handmaid’s Tale* in speculative fiction and feminist literature. This being said, Hulu’s adaptation is successfully managing to remain faithful to its source text while working with the advantages of television – particularly its increased narrative space – to give the original story new life. One of the methods taken by the series to revitalize the novel is believably extending the stories of its minor characters. The novel, written as Offred’s oral account of her time in Gilead, is recorded on cassette tapes, ultimately containing the reader within her narrative. The television format necessitates the reworking of this singular perspective, focusing instead on how its dystopia intimately shapes the experience of multiple characters. The most powerful expansion of a character from the novel is Moira (Samira Wiley), a lesbian who refuses to accept Gilead as the new normal and perpetually fights back at the system. While the novel ends Moira’s narrative as a burnt out sex worker in an underground nightclub for Gilead’s political elite, the first season of the show has Moira escaping to Canada. While much of *The Handmaid’s Tale* feels claustrophobically without hope, the story of the eventual escape of a queer woman of colour from an American police state is one that reverberates.

Despite the exhilarating moment of Moira’s escape, the show does not cover how inequalities beyond gender and sexuality might function in Gilead. While Hulu’s adaptation aims for present day relevancy, there remains a neglect to move Atwood’s novel away from feminisms of the 1980s into present day conversations around

intersectional feminism.<sup>1</sup> Although there are Handmaids and Marthas who are women of colour, whiteness totally and completely dominates the ruling elite of Commanders and their wives. In watching the show, there is an immediately noticeable missed opportunity to conceptualize how racism operates in Gilead. While Atwood's original novel factored white supremacy into the totalitarian foundation of Gilead, the series does not go beyond casting in conceptualizing race. Season one presents a missed opportunity to identify and explore the particular difficulties that characters like Moira, Luke (O-T Fagbenie), and Rita (Amanda Brugel) might encounter. Critic Angelica Jade Bastién sums this problem up in a review for *The New York Times*: "if you're going to trade in allegories of reproductive rights and body horror that throughout this country's history continue to harm women of color, especially black women, it's alarming that the actual black women in the narrative aren't granted any consideration for how they're wrestling with these very themes". As *The Handmaid's Tale* enters a second season that extends beyond the novel's ending, it might intensify the way it combines horror with political ideas, by shifting its focus onto speculating rather than ignoring how racism effects the characters of colour both inside and outside of Gilead.

*The Handmaid's Tale* has much to offer conversation around feminist speculative fiction and its onscreen iterations. Hulu's version of Atwood's text will also be of interest to scholars working in adaptation studies, especially those who have studied the 1990 film. For Margaret Atwood scholars or scholars working in the area of speculative fiction studies more broadly, the adaptation of such a canonical text has both revitalized interest in the novel and created new areas for critical investigation. Finally, fans who hold the novel dearly should be comforted by the fact that Hulu's adaptation has managed a seemingly impossible task, to maintain the familiar spirit of its original: that of being unsettled into action.



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<sup>1</sup> For an analysis of this issue specifically, see Cate Young, "Hulu's the Handmaid's Tale Might Be Race Blind – But That's Not a Good Thing", *Cosmopolitan*, 13 Jun. 2017, <http://www.cosmopolitan.com/entertainment/tv/a10001322/handmaids-ales-race-problem/>. See also Priya Nair, "Get Out of Gilead: Anti-Blackness in *The Handmaid's Tale*", *Bitch Media*, 14 Apr. 2017, <https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/anti-blackness-handmaids-tale>.

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