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"They Should Have Never Given Us Uniforms If They Didn't Want Us to Be an Army": The Handmaid's Tale as Transmedia Feminism

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"They Should Have Never Given Us Uniforms If They Didn't Want Us to Be an Army": The Handmaid's Tale as Transmedia Feminism

Abstract

Even prior to its premier in April 2017, Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* inspired a series of cosplay protests against antiabortion legislation at the Texas State Capitol. The red robes and white bonnets have since been popularized by the critically acclaimed series, and handmaid-style cosplay protests have continued transnationally, with the handmaid heralded as what the BBC calls "an international protest symbol" against heteropatriarchal oppression. Due to a surge of visible feminisms in popular media, it has become good business to create such female-centric, avowedly feminist texts. As the television industry has evolved from a broadcast network to a subscription market, content options have emerged that have both cultivated and responded to a feminist niche audience. Industry interests and feminist interests have seemingly aligned, with the adaptation of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* representing a pertinent example of the popular and the political intersecting. *The Handmaid's Tale* has been positioned by both industry and audience as a transmedia text that bridges fiction and reality to become part and parcel of contemporary feminist movements. This article will thus make an argument for how the shifting television landscape might enable new forms of public feminisms. Through a case study of *The Handmaid's Tale*, I will examine how transnational feminist communities might mobilize around such texts and how fiction and fan activities might be used to embolden feminist political action.

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**"They Should Have Never Given Us Uniforms If They
Didn't Want Us to Be an Army": *The Handmaid's Tale*
as Transmedia Feminism**

On March 20, 2017, NARAL Pro-Choice activists descended on the Texas State Capitol to make a striking silent protest of Senate Bill 415, legislation that proposed to ban a common second-trimester abortion procedure.¹ The protesters were dressed in the red robes and white winged bonnets of "handmaids," representing women used as reproductive slaves in Hulu's adaptation of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017–). The NARAL volunteers were inspired by a Hulu marketing stunt at the 2017 South by Southwest festival, where hired cosplayers had silently circulated as handmaids to promote the upcoming premiere (Webb 2017).² With no speaking permitted in the senate galleries, the activists seized on the idea of a "powerful visual protest" and punctuated the galleries in a costume that "spoke volumes."³ Images of the handmaids went viral on social and mainstream media, and this protest constituted one of the first interactions audiences had with *The Handmaid's Tale* series beyond the marketing hype. Its use as political stimulus in the public sphere had only just begun. NARAL volunteers went on to form the activist organization "Texas Handmaids," which inspired the "Handmaid Coalition," "Handmaids Costa Rica," and multiple handmaid-style protests across the United States, Canada, Australia, England, Ireland, Croatia, Finland, Poland, Slovakia, Costa Rica, and Argentina (fig. 1).⁴ These transnational protests have responded to a slew of antiabortion legislation, violence against women, and the rise of misogyny and the conservative far Right in governments and in everyday life. The series's costume designer Ane Crabtree has aptly stated, "it is not about the costumes anymore" (2017).

¹ NARAL stands for the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League for Pro-Choice in America.

² "Cosplay" is a portmanteau of "costume play" and describes a practice whereby fans produce and perform costumes inspired by fictional characters, usually from visual media (Lamerichs 2011, 1–3; Hale 2014, 8–10).

³ See Texas Handmaids, "About Us," at <http://www.texashandmaids.org/wordpress/press/>.

⁴ See Liptak (2017a), Beaumont and Holpuch (2018), Bell (2018), Castillo (2018), and *Slovak Spectator* (2018).

Figure 1 Misscoloreta, *Intervención the Handmaid's Tale en Santa Fe por el aborto seguro legal y gratuito en Argentina* [Intervention: The Handmaid's Tale in Santa Fe for safe, legal, and free abortion in Argentina], 2018. Argentina: Wikimedia Commons. Distributed under a CC BY-SA 4.0 license. A color version of this figure is available online.

In fact, the handmaid has come to be recognized as an “international protest symbol” (Bell 2018) against heteropatriarchal oppression.⁵ *The Handmaid's Tale* television series has come to be seen as a fiercely feminist “call to action” (Roberts 2017). That this text has been adopted so fervently suggests that there is something worth investigating in how the shifting television landscape might be contributing to new forms of public feminisms.

There is a wealth of recent journalistic and academic literature that discusses the role of creative industries and new media in relation to contemporary feminisms. While there is some contention as to whether we should refer to this moment as “fourth wave feminism” (Chamberlain 2017; Rivers 2017), “popular feminism” (Banet-Weiser 2018), “neoliberal feminism” (Rottenberg 2018), or a continuance of “postfeminism” (Gill 2017), there appears to be a consensus that feminism has gained a “new luminosity” (Gill 2017, 611) and is, in effect, “trending” in mainstream media. In contrast to

⁵ See Liptak (2017a), Beaumont and Holpuch (2018), Bell (2018), and Castillo (2018).

the repudiation of feminist politics in previous decades, the feminisms gaining visibility in the contemporary moment avowedly embrace feminist ideals and are committed to recognizing gender inequality (Gill 2017, 611; Banet-Weiser 2018, 19–20). Feminist scholars have attributed this turn to the way certain feminisms (along with other social movements) are being incorporated into brand cultures, the uptick in celebrities and public figures adopting the feminist moniker, as well as the proliferation of the internet and digital media.⁶

Given the intersections with neoliberal capitalism, this popular resurgence has been met with ambivalence. *Bitch* Media cofounder Andi Zeisler has derided such mainstream manifestations as “marketplace feminism” and argues that feminisms in commercial and popular spaces have been co-opted—repurposed and repackaged for sale (2016, xii–xiv). Similarly, despite acknowledging the innovative potential of visible feminisms as popular culture, media scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser has suggested that such manifestations usually amount to just that: “visibility” (2018, xi). These concerns resonate with larger anxieties about intersections between popular culture and politics (van Zoonen 2005), whereby it is assumed that politics in the popular are depoliticized shadows and that the associated media representations and their consumption do not equate to real political action but merely satiate the desire for political participation (Klein 2002; Jones 2009, 13–44). Such critiques imply that an “authentic” or “proper” feminism exists elsewhere and argue for a separation of “real” feminist politics from the “inauthentic” feminisms in commercial and popular culture (Hollows and Moseley 2007, 7–11; Hobson 2017, 999–1000). While some contemporary popular feminisms are indeed problematic, this binary argument risks dismissing the meaningful and affective relationships that consumers form with celebrities, popular culture, and fan communities (Jenkins [1992] 2013); that economic value and cultural value may be mutually dependent and meaningful politics *can* be embedded in commercial and popular culture (Banet-Weiser 2012); and that widespread transnational displays of public feminisms are continually occurring alongside this environment (Chamberlain 2017). To move forward in such debates, it is imperative that we investigate not only how different feminisms are used by commercial industries in popular culture but how such popular feminist commodities and/or texts are being used by consumers/audiences. It is from this standpoint that I hope to examine the case of *The Handmaid’s Tale* and the phenomenon by which the text has been adopted by both industry and audience as a feminist stimulus.

⁶ See Banet-Weiser (2012, 2018), Chamberlain (2017), Rivers (2017), and Rottenberg (2018).

In recent media scholarship exploring public feminisms, emerging television has received minimal attention. Much of the media and creative industries analyses have focused on feminism within advertising and celebrity culture.⁷ A good deal of the new media theory has focused on social media and how the networked internet culture has enabled more immediate forms of feminist engagement, communication, dissemination, and the formation of transnational feminist communities around certain issues (Chamberlain 2017; Banet-Weiser 2018). With the advent of online streaming services, however, television has become an intrinsic part of contemporary creative industries and new media. Such accounts often overlook the pervasiveness of fiction entertainment in the evolving media context. When we can have multiple screens or tabs open at once—and slip from social, news, and fiction media in an instant—the flow of fiction entertainment and popular politics is a foundational part of the lived mediated experience (van Zoonen 2005; Gray 2008, 131–55). With digital spaces incorporated into our everyday public and private lives, we are all “part-time residents” of this transitory mediascape (Gray 2010, 1; see also Chamberlain 2011), so it is ever more pertinent to acknowledge the slippages between the “real” politics and popular politics that inform our citizenship practices. Sociologist Liesbet van Zoonen (2005) has asserted that we must take seriously the politics represented in fiction entertainment and associated fan activities, lest we risk only examining factual information in the formation of political identities and decisions. As van Zoonen argues, people have always drawn on informal, intertextual, and emotional knowledge learned from popular fiction in order to make sense of society and politics. Given that visible feminisms are increasingly circulated across different television characters, genres, services, and platforms (Loofborouw 2016), such entertainment media is just as central in facilitating what Prudence Chamberlain terms this particular “surge” of feminist consciousness, conversation, and activism (2017, 107).

Where in the past female and/or feminist consumers might have been resistant consumers who had to read “against the grain” (Willis 2018, 23–26, 77–80), the evolving mediascape has responded to commercial and political changes to cater to specific feminist niche audiences and interests. In the evolving television landscape, it has become good business to create women-centric, more explicitly feminist texts.⁸ Over the past fifty years, television has evolved from a broadcast-network, mass-audience environment to

⁷ See Banet-Weiser (2012, 2018), Zeisler (2016), Hobson (2017), and Rivers (2017).

⁸ The move to target female niche audiences as a form of “good business” is referenced throughout Julie D’Acci’s study of *Cagney and Lacey* (1994, 72). The term has been used in this context by numerous scholars since (Rabinovitz 1990; Lotz 2006).

a multichannel, multiplatform, niche-audience environment. This phenomenon has incurred a movement away from an advertiser-supported marketplace to a consumer-supported marketplace where, increasingly, audiences subscribe to their content of choice. This means that the main business in television is no longer the selling of audiences to advertisers via ad-friendly content but the direct sale of content to audiences. This shift is placing additional pressure on television networks to tap into current trends and audience interests, a shift that, as it affects subscription television, also ripples across to (and then competes with) broadcast television (Napoli 2003, 2010; Lotz 2006, 2014). Women from the ages of eighteen to forty-nine have long been one of the most lucrative television audiences, with the highly desirable audience being (usually white) middle-class, college-educated professionals with above-average income who can pay for products or content.⁹ Due to the seeming resurgence of feminist discourses in mainstream media, it is increasingly the case that this audience is also politically aware. Consequently, the industry has made a concerted effort to cater to a feminist niche audience, producing an expanding range of aligning television series (Loofbrouw 2016).

While it is true that television networks have engaged feminist discourses to attract desirable audiences in the past, this address appears to have intensified in the contemporary television context.¹⁰ In previous decades, the political address was often ambiguous, preferring “balance” in order to appeal to both progressive and conservative audiences (D’Acci 1994). This competing desire within the creative industries undeniably contributed (and in some contexts, still contributes) to the repudiation of feminist politics, leading film and television scholar Linda Mizejewski to contend that “post-feminism” is not necessarily a new or “post” feminist era but more a matter of female and/or feminist representation in entertainment media (2005, 122; see also Hollows and Moseley 2007). However, in line with the turn to avowed popular feminisms, series like *The Handmaid’s Tale* evidence a shift from what television scholar Julie D’Acci has called “ambiguous or tacit feminism” (1994, 147), which represents gender inequality as an individual issue, to “explicit general feminism” (161), which represents gender inequality as an institutional issue. In D’Acci’s definition, ambiguous or tacit feminism represents instances of sexism as isolated anomalies; it disseminates conservative and progressive discourses evenly through characters and narratives, and it often pins feminist expressions down to personal traits and desires. Explicit general feminism, on the other hand, represents instances of sexism as structural

⁹ See Rabinovitz (1990), Byars and Meehan (1994), D’Acci (1994), and Lotz (2006).

¹⁰ Ibid.

issues; it refers explicitly to feminist conversations and communities, and while popular examples may exhibit some examples of intersectional feminism, they often lean toward more liberal feminisms (1994, 142–67). This shift toward explicit general feminism, where desirable feminist niche audiences are both cultivated and responded to, has come about due to a convergence of commercial and political changes. It is in this popular feminist mediascape that Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* ([1985] 2010), was able to be adapted for subscription television and reach popular and critical acclaim among the wider content offerings. This is not to suggest that the television industry has become more inherently political but, rather, that industry interests and feminist interests have seemingly aligned.

To compete in the proliferating mediascape, creative industries employ various strategies. These include the adaptation of popular texts, and franchising and transmedia practices, with the ultimate goal of creating texts that inspire committed fan communities (Jenkins 2008; Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013; Mittell 2015). With a multiplicity of screens and content options, texts can no longer draw audiences by simply being “what is on” television. The prerogative is thus to create what television scholar Amanda D. Lotz has termed “prized content,” which “people will seek out and specifically desire” (2014, 12–15). To be economically viable in the long term, this content must be residual and attract an equally residual audience to ensure its longevity and circulation.¹¹ According to media scholars Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, the surest way to achieve this is to tap into communities that are already established in the mediascape and to create content that can function as their “rallying cry” (2013, 215). People don’t “just watch” TV; in a transnational networked internet culture they talk about it, quote it, share it, review it, create it, and use it across borders, and these activities are often undertaken in real time, during or shortly after viewing. Thus, Jenkins, Ford, and Green assert that content must be designed to be immediately “spreadable.” To ensure their exchange and use value, texts must make a valuable contribution to their target consumption communities, add to discussions that matter within these communities, and complement their respective activities, particularly on social and participatory media. Due to the residual nature of social movements, contemporary branding strategies have sought to harness social activist communities as consumers (Banet-Weiser 2012). Therefore, as feminist conversations, activisms, and communities have

¹¹ As Jenkins, Ford, and Green write: “The residual can linger in popular memory, become the object of nostalgic longing, be used as a resource for making sense of one’s present life and identity, serve as the basis of a critique of current institutions and practices, and spark conversations” (2013, 97).

become visible and popular in the media, it has become an increasingly lucrative strategy for subscription services to create content in direct conversation with such mediated feminisms.

In this fashion, Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* has been positioned by both industry and audience as a transmedia text that bridges fiction and reality to become part and parcel of the contemporary feminist moment. A "trans-media story" is one that "unfolds across multiple media platforms" (Jenkins 2008, 97). Commercially, it is more commonly referred to as a franchise, where a film, for example, becomes a video game or is complemented by a story-based web platform, which serve to encourage more consumption. Transmedia extensions are not new, but nowadays, transmedia practices have increased exponentially and are necessary for salience amid the proliferating mediascape.¹² When creative-industry personnel and scholars discuss transmedia stories, they usually refer to fictional texts that extend across different media. *The Handmaid's Tale* has expanded this definition and is consciously situated as part of the metastory of the feminist movement. In its adaptation, its marketing, its reception, and its political uses, the series is continually framed in relation to contemporary feminisms. It is often unclear where *The Handmaid's Tale* as transmedia story ends and where *The Handmaid's Tale* as transmedia feminism begins. This hybridity of *The Handmaid's Tale* as onscreen story and *The Handmaid's Tale* as offscreen politics could expand the way we conceive of how media is being used and could be used for feminist agendas.

Of course, the fact that it is a commercially produced text is perhaps why many feminist scholars are reluctant to include fiction entertainment in their accounts of public feminisms and their relation to new media. As Lotz points out, "this conundrum is characteristic of a commercial media system that often gives with one hand while taking with the other" (2006, 35). As Lotz's analogy suggests, the commodification of feminist interests undoubtedly benefits commercial interests. However, this relationship should not discount the transgressive potential of the text and its demonstrated value to its audience. I am inclined to agree with D'Acci's assertion that even while monetized, commercial texts "may nonetheless be part of a feminist project and a rallying point for pleasure and politics (1994, 9), and I propose to examine how the case of *The Handmaid's Tale* demonstrates this claim. While the initial protests occurred during the hype prior to the season 1 premiere the continued handmaid-style protests appear to have been sustained by the explicit feminism of the series, its marketing, and its reception as such.

¹² See Jenkins (2008), Gray (2010), Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013), and Mittell (2015).

Margaret Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, has long been embraced as part of the feminist literary canon. When it was published in Canada in 1985 and the United States in 1986, it was an immediate best seller. It won a Nebula, a Booker Prize, and a Prometheus Award, and it is still in print today in over thirty languages. The novel is a prominent speculative text that is well known for its exploration of female subjugation in a hetero-patriarchal society, particularly in relation to reproductive rights and sexual and economic independence.

The Handmaid's Tale is set in an alternate United States where fertility rates have declined due to a combination of sexually transmitted infections, contraceptives, pollution, and nuclear warfare. After staged terrorist attacks and an ensuing civil war a fundamentalist Christian group called the "Sons of Jacob" establishes the theocratic state of "Gilead." Under their totalitarian regime the remaining fertile women are taken hostage in "training centers," where they are taught by ruthless women called "Aunts" to serve "the Commanders" and their wives as "handmaids." Based on the Old Testament story of Rachel and her handmaid Bilhah (Gen. 30:1–21), the handmaids are forced to partake in a monthly raping, called "the ceremony," with their allocated Commander in the presence of the Commander's wife. Those who do not adhere to the Gilead regime, such as infertile, LGBT+, and older women, are executed or sent to perform slave labor in the toxic "Colonies." The remaining women of Gilead are segregated by conservative clothing based on their roles: the Commanders' wives wear blue dresses reminiscent of the Virgin Mary, the Commanders' maidservants wear green dresses and are called "Marthas" based on the biblical parable (Luke 10: 38–42), and the handmaids wear menstrual-red gowns and white winged bonnets. Subjugated as reproductive hosts, the handmaids take patronymic names with the possessive preposition "of" and the first name of their Commander. The protagonist is assigned to Commander Fred Waterford and so is renamed "Offred." The story traces her experience of Gilead and that of being a handmaid in relation to her previous life until she is taken away in an ominous van, uncertain if she is being held by "Eyes," who are the devout agents of Gilead, or rebels who are part of the "Mayday" resistance. To date, the novel has been adapted into a film; a radio production; an audiobook; various stage, opera, and dance adaptations; and more recently, into the critically acclaimed Hulu television series. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a culturally entrenched narrative, and the red robes and bonnets of the handmaids have become icons of sorts, featuring consistently across the aforementioned texts and their promotional materials over the past three decades.

For the purposes of this essay, I will refer to the television series, which in its adaptation has intensified the feminist themes of resistance and revolution.

This heightened thematic is revealed through a brief comparison of Atwood's novel and Hulu's television adaptation. First, where the novel does not reveal Offred's true name, the first episode of the television series ends with Offred (Elisabeth Moss) asserting "my [real] name is June" and that she is determined "to survive" ("Offred" 1001). Second, save for the epilogue, the novel is written in the first person from Offred's perspective. Unlike the earlier film adaptation, the television series features the protagonist's voice-over in full force, and June's determined, autonomous, and often sardonic narration of her experience in Gilead has been met with overwhelming praise (VanArendonk 2017).¹³

The novel concludes with a controversial epilogue set after Gilead's downfall, where male academics muse over Fred's identity, with the question of Offred's survival uncertain. However, due to the ephemeral nature of television, the series has continued beyond the novel and former adaptations to tell June's, the handmaids', and more recently, the Marthas' and Commanders' wives' stories of resistance and revolt (from "After" 2007), until, presumably, Gilead will be overthrown.¹⁴

What is significant about the adaptation process is that from the novel to the television series, the acts of feminist resistance have migrated from private to public feminisms. Where Offred's acts of resistance in the novel are mostly contained to her narration and her private interactions with Fred and his driver Nick, in the series, June and the handmaids' rebellion has entered the public sphere. For instance, in an empowering scene during the season 1 finale, the handmaids revolt against the Aunts and refuse to stone their friend and fellow handmaid Janine (Madeline Brewer) ("Night" 1010). In this instance, the handmaids demonstrate the dual nature of power and realize their potential collective power (Foucault 1977), as Gilead's regime relies on their compliance. In season 2, the collective resistance becomes more prominent. For example, former handmaid Moira (Samira Wiley) and June's husband Luke (O-T Fagbenle) publish a package of Mayday letters on the internet composed of powerful testimonies by handmaids and Marthas of their experience in the oppressive Gilead. These testimonies go viral on social media, sparking international outrage and protests, with an explosive effect reminiscent of the #EverydaySexism and #MeToo campaigns ("Smart Power" 2009). Such moments speak directly to contemporary feminisms, and the audience is invited to empathize with and perceive the handmaids

¹³ At the director's decision, the 1990 film omitted Offred's voice-over, a decision that was heavily criticized, as it rendered the text an escape plot rather than an exposé of female experience (Bignell 1993).

¹⁴ The showrunner, Bruce Miller (2018a), has revealed that *The Handmaid's Tale* may run for up to ten seasons and will continue to document the revolution until after the fall of Gilead.

as figures of the resistance against the heteropatriarchy. It has been suggested that as celebrities and prominent figures have publicly adopted the moniker of “feminist,” this has promoted popular acceptance and enabled feminism to enter the mainstream as a valid and visible social movement (Hobson 2017, 1003–5; Rivers 2017, 56–77). The adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale* has undoubtedly been influenced by this public embrace and is one of the fictional examples that might well have influenced it.

The marketing of Hulu’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* continues in this vein, as much of it has explicitly framed the text in relation to its political relevance. After the US presidential election in 2016, book sales for speculative and dystopian fiction soared, most notably for George Orwell’s *1984* and Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (Liptak 2017b). Hulu’s adaptation went into production in early 2016, when a Hillary Clinton presidency seemed imminent. However, after Donald Trump’s inauguration, the series had an unintended purchase, and the first trailer, released in March 2017, resounded all too familiarly, using a spliced version of June’s voice-over from episode 3: “I was asleep before. That’s how we let it happen. When they slaughtered Congress, we didn’t wake up. When they blamed terrorists and suspended the Constitution, we didn’t wake up then either. Now I’m awake” (“Late” 1003). Trump’s ascendance and the widespread backlash in the form of transnational Women’s Marches provided attention for *The Handmaid’s Tale* that money could not buy.

While the marches have been criticized for excluding marginalized groups of women, they remain an enormous display of transnational resistance against the heteropatriarchy (Rivers 2017, 145–52; Banet-Weiser 2018, 178–83), and the promotion of the series took its lead from this context. The effort to draw similarities to the postelection reality was epitomized by Hulu’s aforementioned IRL marketing campaign at the 2017 South by Southwest festival (Webb 2017), and similar handmaid cosplayers were hired for publicity stunts by the Bravo online streaming service in Canada (O’Neil 2018), the SBS network in Australia (Sargeant 2017), and the HOT cable channel in Israel (Tobin 2017).¹⁵ If there were any misconceptions about its feminist connotations, the day after its premier in April 2017, Hulu released character posters with the titular poster of June as Offred surrounded by the phrase “The Future is a F*cking Nightmare.”¹⁶ This echoed the feminist epithet “The Future is Female,” which had resurfaced during Clinton’s

¹⁵ IRL (In Real Life) marketing is an umbrella term for promotional strategies that integrate fictional or virtual environments with those of the real world (Gray 2008, 75–82; Jenkins 2008, 95–134).

¹⁶ Elisabeth Moss, poster, “The Future Is a F*cking Nightmare,” *The Handmaid’s Tale*, IMDB. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5834204/mediaviewer/rm1199584256>.

2016 campaign (McNally 2016) and marked the title of her first public statement after Trump's inauguration when she responded to the Women's Marches during the 2017 MAKERS Conference (Kreps 2017).¹⁷ The poster's sardonic tone imitates June's and the handmaids', but it no doubt also spoke to the increasingly angry sentiment of a newly visible feminist audience in the wake of a misogynist Trump presidency.

What is most interesting is that this political marketing strategy has been used not only by subscription services but also by broadcast networks with the rights to air *The Handmaid's Tale*. This was particularly salient in the SBS campaign in Australia, where the series aired on the SBS broadcast channel and could be streamed online through SBS On Demand.¹⁸ In the lead-up to seasons 1 and 2, SBS published a series of articles that were disseminated across social and mainstream media platforms. These include, "5 Laws from around the World That Sound like They Should Be in *The Handmaid's Tale*" (Martin 2017), "*The Handmaid's Tale* Creator on the Show's Political Relevance: 'It's Sickening'" (*SBS Guide* 2018), and "If You Don't Understand Why Women Still Have to Protest, Watch *The Handmaid's Tale*."¹⁹ Such articles position *The Handmaid's Tale* as a feminist political text and, additionally, posit the watching of the series as a feminist political act. Most pertinently, one article stresses that "it's our responsibility to watch" *The Handmaid's Tale*, so that we may "investigate and learn" to "better help . . . in the real world" (Sargeant 2018). Previously, production companies were reluctant to proclaim their texts as feminist so as not to alienate audiences, and any marketing that has aligned with feminist agendas has been posited as peripheral. For example, when the *Cagney and Lacey* production team partnered with Gloria Steinem in a publicity event at a women's shelter, any links were undercut by the disclaimer, "we don't want to be considered 'a [women's] issue oriented program'" (in D'Acci 1994, 87).²⁰ Contrarily,

¹⁷ The MAKERS Conference is a global women-centric gathering of creatives, artists, media personnel, women in business and technology, etc. It is an interesting platform for a politician and exemplifies a deliberate attempt to foster dialogue with and harness the contemporary mediascape and popular cultures.

¹⁸ SBS (Special Broadcasting Services) is a hybrid-funded public broadcast radio, online, and television network in Australia. It operates via multiple channels, including the online service SBS On Demand. SBS is also a trusted news provider in Australia. The articles in relation to *The Handmaid's Tale* were disseminated across various SBS social media platforms.

¹⁹ "If You Don't Understand Why Women Still Have to Protest, Watch *The Handmaid's Tale*." Facebook share of SBS article, July 6, 2017. <https://www.facebook.com/SBSAustralia/posts/10155443200153686>.

²⁰ The term "women's issues" has been rightly criticized, as it implies that institutionalized gender inequality only concerns women (D'Acci 1994, 155–56). "Women's issue" was used to encompass "feminist" in this context; it was not the case that the *Cagney and Lacey* production company preferred a different definition of feminism.

the marketing for *The Handmaid's Tale* has been brazenly feminist. In fact, its promotion far surpasses the bounds of the story to highlight that the text draws from sexist oppression in the real world, that the Gilead onscreen is very present in reality, that *The Handmaid's Tale* is more of a plea for feminist action than a dystopic warning.

The Handmaid's Tale has been distributed transnationally, and despite differences across cultures, the reception and celebration of the text as feminist has been strikingly similar around the world. While the series went into production before events like Trump's election and the Brexit vote, popular, critical, and academic readings have received it as a response to our political moment. In an article for the *Guardian* that has been shared on social media almost thirty-five thousand times (as of February 1, 2019), after the season 1 finale Sam Wollaston (2017) writes, "no television event has hit such a nerve." Wollaston states that "set against traumatic real-world events," the series is "resounding and resonating" and that Hulu's move to document the revolution beyond Atwood's novel is pertinent—"because of what is going on" in the world, "we need *The Handmaid's Tale*." Later in the year, this was echoed in a *Guardian* piece by Matthew d'Ancona (2017), which heralds the series as "a disturbing text for our times" and suggests that "it did more than a thousand news bulletins to capture all that was most toxic about the new populist right and the shredding of constitutional norms." D'Ancona adds that *The Handmaid's Tale* not only provides "commentary upon the culture wars of the Trump era," it also "prefigure[s] the fight-back of the #MeToo movement." This thematic of feminist resistance has been taken up by popular audiences, with one of the most popular tie-in fan podcasts titled "Mayday," which is the name of the underground rebellion against Gilead. Furthermore, this revolution-fronted podcast has in a sense become the "official" unofficial podcast as it is one of the few fan initiatives to garner interviews with the Hulu cast and crew.²¹ This endorsement is telling of the kind of reception that the series is activating and that was desired by the industrial powers at Hulu.

To move away from English-speaking countries, an interesting comparison is the series's reception in Spain. *The Handmaid's Tale* initially premiered through the HBO Spain cable channel shortly after the US release in 2017. However, after nationwide mass feminist protests for gender equality in the workplace in March (Urrea 2018) and for consent laws and against the inadequate conviction of rapists in April 2018 (*The Local* 2018), Atresmedia

²¹ "Mayday: *The Handmaid's Tale* Podcast." Podcast produced by All Consuming Content: <https://www.stitcher.com/podcast/all-consuming-content/mayday-the-handmaids-tale-podcast>.

acquired the rights to broadcast the series on the major network channel Antena 3. This announcement was met with great praise and relief that this “revolutionary,” “legendary” series would “finally” air on broadcast television (Hernández 2018; Migelez 2018; 20 [viente] *Minutos* 2018). In response, popular culture writer David Cruz García (2018) has proclaimed *The Handmaid’s Tale* to be “a series that has made history and that, precisely in the social moment we live in is more than necessary.” Much like Wollaston and d’Ancona, Cruz García highlights “the strength of women against a patriarchal society” as “a central element of the plot” and appeal of the series. Subsequently, upon its Spanish prime-time premier in June 2018, *The Handmaid’s Tale* garnered 17 percent of the available audience and signifies one of the most successful premieres of international television fiction in Spain (Antena 3 2018). *The Handmaid’s Tale* represents a unique phenomenon in its widespread celebration as a feminist text. Its transnational responses are punctuated with comments that the series speaks to an increasingly visible resistance against misogynistic and conservative heteropatriarchal ideologies, and it thereby marks a historical moment in popular culture and politics.

Bolstered by the explicit feminism in its adaptation, marketing, and reception, *The Handmaid’s Tale* has gone on to have a tactile political influence, with the handmaid costume appearing in instances of transnational feminist activism. The number of handmaid-inspired protests is climbing, and to date they have occurred in numerous cities across the United States and also in Canada, Australia, England, Ireland, Croatia, Finland, Poland, Slovakia, Costa Rica, and Argentina.²² The reasons for the protests have varied, but they have generally been in relation to female reproductive rights, violence against women, and the rise of misogyny and the conservative far Right in governments. For instance, in Buenos Aires, Argentina, dozens of handmaids marched for women’s reproductive rights in the days leading up to a senate vote on whether to legalize abortion in August 2018 (Comunidade Cultura e Arte 2018). In Zagreb, Croatia, handmaids marched in protest of the government’s failure to ratify the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women in February 2017 (Miličić 2018). In Warsaw, Poland, in 2017 (Buckle 2017) and London, England, in 2018 (Beaumont and Holpuch 2018), handmaid protesters greeted Trump on his arrival, sending a strong message against his policies, his election as president, and his presence in their country. In Costa Rica, multiple handmaid-style protests were staged against conservative presidential front-runner Fabricio Alvarado in the lead-up to the 2018 election (*EFE* 2018),

²² See Liptak (2017b), Beaumont and Holpuch (2018), Bell (2018), Castillo (2018), and *Slovak Spectator* (2018).

and many also took their costumes to the voting booth (Stanley 2018). This activism has also extended to US legislative proceedings when handmaids presided on the balconies outside of Brett Kavanaugh's Supreme Court confirmation hearings in Washington, DC, in September 2018 (Murray 2018). Thus, in articles published by the BBC and other popular news outlets, the handmaid has been recognized as an international protest symbol for feminist activism.²³

Through the practice of cosplay, protesters bring the semiotics of the fiction into the political realm to create a rich intertextual urgency. In *The Handmaid's Tale* season 1 finale, June reflects that where the handmaids used to look at each other in terror, they now look at each other with a mutual knowledge of a brewing underground rebellion. The handmaids are becoming unified, and June's voice-over states, "it's their own fault. They should have never given us uniforms if they didn't want us to be an army" ("Night" 1010). Uniforms allow for recognition and recruitment, and the recruitment of the handmaid army has expanded well beyond the onscreen story. The onscreen army of handmaids and their rebellion have become synonymous with offscreen feminisms, and "the handmaid" employed as a symbol for feminist communities and activism. Evoking the theories of Benedict Anderson ([1983] 2006), in his study of nationalism and sexuality, historian George Mosse highlights that visibility is crucial to community formation and members' identity development in relation to others (1985). Similarly, cultural studies scholars Jochen Schulte-Sasse and Linda Schulte-Sasse (1991) suggest that community cohesion in modern societies requires collective signs or images. Through cosplay, the handmaid appears to have become such a symbol, reinforced by an enduringly feminist body of texts. Folklorist Matthew Hale (2014) has coincidentally observed that cosplay is used as a network of signs and communication in fan culture. Cosplay acts as a "declaration of personal identity and membership" and also "as an intertextual medium of exchange" (2014, 10–11). Nicolle Lamerichs's work extends this to propose that through cosplay of the fictional, we can "actualise a narrative" in relation to reality and expand the dimensions of communication (2011, 12–15). In this fashion, the handmaid protesters not only march as individuals but also evoke the powerful intertext of *The Handmaid's Tale* story and the associated metatext of feminist histories and futures. The identification with the handmaid is twofold. First, the protesters identify with the oppression experienced in Gilead and imply the similarities in reality. Second, as a result of Hulu's intensification of public feminist themes, the protesters align themselves with the resistance against the heteropatriarchal system in

²³ See Liptak (2017a), Beaumont and Holpuch (2018), Bell (2018), and Castillo (2018).

the hope that, as in Gilead, it will be deposed. Through the handmaid, feminist communities are unifying and fortifying their message transnationally.

Rather than single incidents, the handmaid-style protests have incited the establishment of feminist activist organizations. These organizations extend the role of the handmaid to create not just reactive instances of feminist resistance but also proactive feminist activities. The first of these was the Texas Handmaids, who are leading organizers/members of NARAL Pro-Choice America. The Texas Handmaids website is prefaced by the popularized mantra from *The Handmaid's Tale*, "don't let the bastards grind you down," which hovers over a clip of June's first triumphant moment in the series after she realizes her potential power over Commander Waterford ("Birth Day" 1002). In a diversity statement, the Texas Handmaids proudly reveal that they are composed of and welcome "people of color, members of the LGBT+ community, religious minorities, neurodiverse individuals, and survivors." Their stated mission is to use the handmaid costume "to call out politicians and businesses that keep Texas women from accessing reproductive justice," but their website indicates a broader purpose.²⁴ With its members' previous experience as NARAL activists, the Texas Handmaids website contains resources about abortion, reproductive health, and abuse as well as details about their events, which include monthly meetups that welcome new members, information sessions to raise awareness about women's health clinics, and upcoming handmaid-style protests.

The second documented group, the Handmaid Coalition, sports the motto "fight to keep fiction from becoming reality." This organization has attempted to establish feminist activist groups in each state and is responsible for a number of the cosplay protests across the United States. The Handmaid Coalition aims to advocate for "women, the working class, and minority groups," through "support, lobbying, or peaceful protest" in coordination with grassroots and established feminist organizations.²⁵ Both Texas Handmaids and the Handmaid Coalition publish regular information and event newsletters, and both include donation links to support their causes. The two groups are also active on social media.

Beyond the United States is Handmaids Costa Rica. This group can be found on Facebook and is most vocal regarding issues of reproductive rights and violence against women. Furthermore, Handmaids Costa Rica often expresses solidarity with other groups oppressed by misogynistic and conservative legislation across Latin America, with one event organized in support

²⁴ Texas Handmaids, "About Us": <http://www.texashandmaids.org/wordpress/press/>.

²⁵ Handmaid Coalition: <https://handmaidcoalition.org/>.

of the Argentinian women and handmaids marching for the legalization of abortion in 2018.²⁶ While the organizations undeniably draw on the visibility of the series, their fan/feminist activities represent more than the mere “visibility” purported by some scholars of popular feminisms (Gill 2017; Banet-Weiser 2018) and instead serve as examples of productive grassroots politics. Across cultures, these groups are drawing on the affective following of *The Handmaid’s Tale* and the phenomenon of handmaid-style protests to mobilize transnational feminist communities and activism.

The use of *The Handmaid’s Tale* in politics has been endorsed by the television industry, as Hulu has attempted to recreate handmaid-inspired feminist activism for its own purposes. In the past, media industries have been resistant to fan activity that has sought to politicize a text or make it more controversial. In his study of fan culture, Matt Hills defines fans as consumers who translate the “exchange-value” of texts into sentimental “use-value” through a variety of activities (2002, 35; see also Jenkins [1992] 2013, 2008; Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013). Referencing the influential fan blogger *obsession_inc* (2009), Jenkins, Ford, and Green outline two types of fan activity: “affirmational fandom,” which seeks to reinforce the industry-inferred narrative within the canonical bounds of the story world, and “transformational fandom,” which repurposes and expropriates the text to better serve fan interests (2013, 150). The former is usually sanctioned by the industry and has historically been produced by male fans. The latter is usually unsanctioned activity produced by female and queer fans, which is policed by the industry and distanced from the text (Jenkins [1992] 2013; Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013). However, in the case of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the industry has embraced the transformational use of cosplay beyond the entertainment sphere as affirmational, sanctioned activity. Prompted by the handmaid-style protests, the links to feminist activism were heightened for *The Handmaid’s Tale* season 2 marketing campaigns. For the 2018 South by Southwest festival, Hulu created the hashtag #ResistSister, recalling campaigns like #MeToo. At multiple locations in Austin, #ResistSister was scrawled on the front of display boxes that encased handmaid costumes being “burned” by a ring of fire (Richards 2018). Hulu posted a viral live video on social media, asking, “What do you fight for? #ResistSister. . . . For June and for all of us, we must stand together and keep the spark of the resistance alive. Tell us what you resist in the comments below.” The video published the live responses on handwritten notes and concluded with the burning of

²⁶ “There we will be, where the fight for women’s rights is!” Facebook post, translated by the author, August 10, 2018. <https://www.facebook.com/handmaidscr/posts/1676410819152229>.

a handmaid costume, evoking the burning in “June” (2001).²⁷ This strategy was taken up by marketing teams at Bravo Canada and SBS Australia, where handmaid-style protests were staged for publicity and hired cosplayers distributed the hashtag (Braithwaite 2018; O’Neil 2018). For instance, in the days leading up to the season 2 premiere, handmaids circulated the Sydney central business district holding #ResistSister posters and discretely giving handwritten notes to passersby that read “RESIST” on one side and “Meet Tonight. 5pm on SBS on Demand. 8:30pm SBS TV. #ResistSister” on the other (Braithwaite 2018). #ResistSister was disseminated transnationally and taken up by industry and audience on social media to promote both the text and feminist messages.

While the former example was skewed toward industry interests, Hulu later partnered with Equality Now to foster feminist interests in *The Handmaid’s Tale*–inspired campaign “Hope Lives in Every Name.”²⁸ Equality Now is an international human rights organization that advocates for women’s and girls’ rights, fighting to end sex trafficking, sexual violence, harmful practices such as female genital mutilation and child marriage, and legal systems that disadvantage women. In a style imitating the Mayday letters released by Moira and Luke (“Smart Power” 2009), midway through season 2 a viral video was distributed by both Equality Now and Hulu where the cast and crew read aloud the testimonies of real women experiencing oppression around the world. The campaign reinforced that *The Handmaid’s Tale* is based on actual sexist oppression and asserted, “this is not fiction. . . . These are the real stories of real women. They’re the real network on the ground.” The cast and crew implored the public to “Join them. Join us. Join Equality Now” and to support such women by giving their name to the cause. The campaign invited people to subscribe to Equality Now, sign petitions, and donate to the organization. The subscriber received a series of emails that began by emphasizing that *The Handmaid’s Tale* is not fiction and then proceeded to raise awareness of women’s rights issues and how individuals might support Equality Now. For example, the first email came from the global executive director, Yasmeen Hassan. It began by asserting that the “setting for *The Handmaid’s Tale*” is “not fiction. Inequality is everywhere . . . and it affects real women and girls.” Hassan provided a list of examples and explained, “we’ll be sending you exclusive information on how the fiction of Gilead is becoming a reality all over the world—and how you can use your name

²⁷ “What Do You Fight For? #ResistSister.” Facebook live video post, April 28, 2018. <https://www.facebook.com/handmaidsonhulu/videos/595575867469682/>.

²⁸ “The Handmaids Tale—Hope Lives in Every Name.” Internet campaign launched by Equality Now, 2018. https://www.equalitynow.org/hope_lives_in_every_name?locale=en.

to resist.”²⁹ The email headed “*The Handmaid’s Tale* is happening right here, right now” came from the American regional director, Shelby Quast. She used the example of handmaid Emily’s female genital mutilation in season 1 (“Late” 1003) to highlight that this practice occurs internationally and asked for donations to support the legal battle to criminalize it.³⁰ “Hope Lives in Every Name” reached over half a million people.³¹ While the campaign did promote the series, it used the affection toward the characters and narratives to inform the public of how they might contribute to offscreen feminisms.

The Handmaid’s Tale represents an unprecedented convergence of popular culture and feminist politics, problematizing debates over the relationship between popular and commercial culture on the one hand and feminisms on the other. The shifting mediascape has led to the simultaneous commodification and increased visibility of feminist communities and agendas, which understandably provokes mixed feelings about feminist politics being used for commercial purposes (Lotz 2006, 35; Jenkins 2008, 62–63). However, the feminist potential of commercial texts like *The Handmaid’s Tale* cannot be underestimated, as such commodities ensure the visibility that is key to establishing feminist identities and communities (Mosse 1985) and to fostering ongoing feminist conversations. The relationship goes two ways; while it is true that the television industry is recruiting audiences by speaking to feminist interests, feminists are simultaneously recruiting activists and attention by using commercially produced texts. For example, M’Evie Mead from Planned Parenthood Advocates in Missouri organized one of the first cosplay protests after the Texas Handmaids, and in an interview with the *Guardian* she explained, “we really wanted to jolt some attention to it[,] and the handmaids were really effective in generating attention and press coverage” (in Beaumont and Holpuch 2018). *The Handmaid’s Tale*’s success relies on the text’s relevance and “spreadability” as a feminist “rallying cry” (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013, 215), but the handmaid as feminist protest symbol is also being used to the same effect. Arguments that advocate for a feminist resistance outside commercial and popular culture perhaps overestimate the political influence of individual feminists and underestimate the sociocultural political influence that feminisms in popular spaces might have. This is not to say that popular feminisms are not without

²⁹ Yasmeen Hassan, global executive director, Equality Now: “Gilead didn’t happen overnight.” Email, June 25, 2018.

³⁰ Shelby Quast, American regional director, Equality Now: “‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ is happening right here, right now.” Email, June 27, 2018.

³¹ Emma Thompson, “Hope lives in your name. Thank you.” Email on behalf of Equality Now, July 18, 2018.

their problems; in some respects, *The Handmaid's Tale* does support the claim that the “feminist visibilities” in the mainstream are “uneven” (Gill 2017, 611). For instance, while the series makes a strong attempt to explore the discrimination experienced by LGBT+ persons, despite having a racially diverse cast it has underexplored black histories of sexual and domestic slavery and the forced separation of families (as of season 2, Crawley 2018). Offscreen, however, Hulu has made a concerted effort to ensure that the cast and crew of *The Handmaid's Tale* incorporate diverse female representation (Miller 2018b), and the series has been taken up transnationally by people of various identities.³² In its use as a vehicle for feminist consciousness, conversation, and activism, *The Handmaid's Tale* demonstrates that commercial feminism can indeed function as a feminist “rallying point” (D’Acci 1994, 9).

The argument for a separation of commercial popular culture and feminist politics is unproductive in our context. Historically, feminist scholars have been suspicious of the popular as perpetuating dominant ideology and supporting heteropatriarchal structures and have instead advocated for an alternate culture (Hollows and Moseley 2007, 3–6; Willis 2018, 23–26). However, in a moment where feminism has become “popular” (Banet-Weiser 2018), it is useful to recall Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley’s assertion that we can no longer discuss “feminism *and* popular culture” as if they are distinct but rather must recognize and look for inroads to “feminism *in* popular culture” (2007, 1). Van Zoonen contends that to argue otherwise is dangerous and limiting. She writes: “Popular means of political communication, celebrity politics, or populist rhetoric . . . are not simply valuable because they are up to date, savvy, and in touch with the experience of ordinary people . . . they are an important sign that politics is part of everyday culture and not above it” (2005, 4).

Having feminist politics incorporated into and celebrated by popular media ensures that feminist figures and feminisms are manifest, accessible, and residual. This connection is especially important in a climate where women and other minority groups might feel disenfranchised by institutional politics (van Zoonen 2005; Gray 2008, 131–55). Far from being merely symbolic, *The Handmaid's Tale* has enriched and multiplied, rather than diluted, visible public feminisms. The way it has been taken up as feminist stimulus suggests this is not the depoliticized, dehistoricized, individualized feminism some scholars have described (Zeisler 2016; Gill 2017; Banet-Weiser 2018); in

³² Hulu is not exceptional in its efforts toward more female representation on and off the screen. The television industry is at the forefront in this respect and has significantly more diverse representation than other media industries (Lauzen 2018a, 2018b, 2018c).

fact, its success and uptake rely on its political and historical connections and its emphasis on collective feminisms. While it may have started out as a niche commodity on Hulu, the series has been distributed transnationally on online streaming services, cable services, and broadcast networks, and “the handmaid” as public feminist has been distributed through cosplay, hashtags, social and mainstream media, and grassroots and established feminist organizations. Van Zoonen (2005) and Jenkins (2008, 217–50), among others, have theorized how fan activity and audience affect might translate to and strengthen citizenship practices. *The Handmaid’s Tale* provides a tactile example of fan practices literally transposed to politics: with a community gathering around a much-loved text, poaching the text for their own purposes through fan activities and grassroots media, and drawing on their affection toward characters and narratives to provide fodder for conversation and sustain the community (Jenkins [1992] 2013). In its adaptation processes, its marketing, its receptions, and its uses in the political sphere, *The Handmaid’s Tale* provides a strong example of how transnational feminist communities might mobilize around onscreen feminisms and how fiction and fan activities might facilitate public feminisms. Consequently, I am not arguing for one feminism over another but rather advocating for a multiplicity of feminisms: both on and offscreen, in popular media and academia, grassroots activism and politics, informal and formal spaces.

In the evolving television landscape, Lotz has suggested that we are in an “embryonic moment” of “institutional uncertainty,” where industrial norms are being renegotiated and “new possibilities can develop” (2014, 16). Jenkins, Ford, and Green similarly contend that in a mediascape where relationships between industries, audiences, content, and culture are shifting, the norms of media industries and consumption are somewhat “up for grabs,” open to definition (2013, xiv, 305). This moment of transition could present an opportunity for feminism, but it requires intensely interdisciplinary study if it is to be understood or harnessed. As visible feminisms continue to be channeled through the media and creative industries, it is imperative that we introduce more media, reception, and audience studies into the conversation. The field of critical television studies has much to offer in this respect. It is multipronged by necessity, negotiating the study of macro and micro structures, empirical data and close analysis, audiences and content, and situated within cultural and economic industries (Lotz 2009, 25–29). In a mediascape where one can move fluidly from an open-access feminist journal, to an informal feminist blog, to participating in feminist movements online and learning about feminisms through *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the ethos of eroding binaries should also apply to feminist scholarship. While the feminist potential of entertainment

media might feel intangible in comparison to other manifestations, the case of Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* demonstrates that such texts can indeed contribute to public feminisms. Furthermore, the success of *The Handmaid's Tale* might enable more progressive political texts, audiences, and discourses to enter the mainstream, and not just in relation to gender but also sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, religion, and disability. We are already starting to see a diverse representation of identities, narratives, and issues as a result of the shifting television landscape. Due to the ephemeral nature of both television and feminism, it is not possible to say where this will lead us. For now, we can take solace in the knowledge that we are working toward the fall of Gilead and that the handmaids' revolution will be televised.

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