

Nolite te Bastardes Carborundorum?

Using Kylie Jenner and Reproductive Rights to Examine the Cultural Afterlife of *The Handmaid's Tale*

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ABSTRACT: Emerging from the shocking image of Kylie Jenner's 2019 *Handmaid's Tale* themed birthday party — in which women clad in red dresses and bonnets drank cocktails and celebrated — this paper analyzes the cultural afterlife of the Handmaid symbol from Margaret Atwood's celebrated novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. Spanning from Jenner's birthday celebration to abortion protests in Philadelphia, I begin by understanding how the Handmaid herself is conceived of by Atwood in the novel. Building from this literary analysis, I question all modern utilizations of the Handmaid symbol. In the same way that acts of resistance are subsumed by the tyrannical system in *The Handmaid's Tale*, I argue that contemporary deployments of the Handmaid symbol — whether for protest or not — have no lasting impact, as they are inevitably assimilated into the oppressive cultural from which they emerged.

KEYWORDS: The Handmaid's Tale, Kylie Jenner, Reproductive Rights, Cultural Symbols, Social Media

In June of 2019, clad in a red dress and a white bonnet, Kylie Jenner served “Under His Eye” tequila cocktails at a *Handmaid’s Tale*-themed birthday party she threw for a friend (Hesse). One year earlier, 100 similarly dressed women gathered in Philadelphia to protest the arrival of then-Vice President Mike Pence, whose administration sought to eradicate “women’s most basic right, the right to control when and if they bear children” (Goldman). These two instances are examples of cultural afterlife, a term which refers to when “phenomena acquire new capacities for finding and making meaning” even after their removal from their original contexts—after their figurative ‘deaths’ (Biber 2). The cultural afterlife of the Handmaid symbol is kept on a tight leash—it cannot stray too far from the novel’s initial message of oppression and resistance without being deemed unacceptable. However, returning to *The Handmaid’s Tale* and examining the novel’s protagonist, Offred, complicates the original assumption that the Handmaid herself can be viewed as a symbol of resistance. Offred’s own acts of resistance are minimal at best, and are eventually subsumed by the very same system that perpetuates her oppression. Thus, is there really a ‘correct’ way to use the symbol of the Handmaid? In the following essay, I argue that much like how Offred’s acts of resistance are eventually exploited by the system that oppresses her, the same can be said for contemporary uses—or the cultural afterlife—of the Handmaid symbol.

Understanding Offred

Before we can examine the cultural afterlife of the Handmaid symbol, we must return to Margaret Atwood’s 1985 novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which takes place in the dystopian, totalitarian setting of the Republic of Gilead. Due to a declining population, fertile Gileadean women have been forced into sexual slavery—they serve as Handmaids to the Commanders, whose wives are unable to bear children. To mark their valuable status, the Handmaids are forced to wear red dresses, gloves, and shoes, all “the colour of blood, which defines [them]” (Atwood 8-9). Around their faces, they wear a white bonnet which covers almost everything except “a scrap of face” (Atwood 32). The white wings are meant to “keep [the Handmaids] from seeing, but also from being seen” (Atwood 9). In this way, clothing—which visibly and figuratively forms the symbol of the Handmaid—is used to interesting effect in Atwood’s novel: it simultaneously conceals and exposes, operating in both visibility and invisibility. The red dress and white bonnet seek to strip away all that is unnecessary—the Handmaids’ individual identities—and preserve only that which is important: their fertile bodies.

Because Offred is vital to the continuation of Gileadean society, she is tracked and surveilled, in order for her body and purity to be preserved. Offred is constantly aware of the possibility that the Eyes, Gilead’s secret police force, are watching (Atwood 20). In fact, Offred cites her Handmaid uniform as one of the reasons why she cannot escape Gilead: when she considers fleeing, she stops herself, knowing that eventually she would be noticed since “red is so visible” (Atwood 336). The Handmaid uniform is a symbol, which, as Andrea Mubi Brighenti explains in *Visibility in Social Theory and Social Research*, is a “device for visibilisation” (64). Yet, embedded within this ‘visibilisation’ is the goal of making the Handmaids themselves completely invisible. In the “Ceremony,” Offred lies between the legs of the Commander’s wife while he has sex with her fertile body (Atwood 107). Describing the Ceremony, Offred explains that ‘copulating’ would be an inaccurate term, as “it would imply two people and only one is involved” (Atwood 107). This ritual reveals the true purpose of the Handmaid, what is implied in the symbolism of her red dress and bonnet: she is simply a receptacle, a dehumanized reproductive system. While Offred is constantly observed, she is never truly recognized; she begins to see herself as “a thing [she] must now compose, as one composes a speech” (Atwood 75). While she tries to convince herself that “it doesn’t matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others” (Atwood 95), her lack of identity—her simultaneous (in) visibility—wears her down. Staring at the garden of the Commander’s wife, she notes that there is “something subversive” about it—“a sense of things bursting upwards, wordlessly, into the light” (Atwood 176). Perhaps foreshadowing the rest of the novel, she concludes that “whatever is silenced will clamour to be heard, though silently” (Atwood 176).

And what is to be heard? Much debate has taken place questioning the complicity of Offred’s character, thus complicating the idea that the Handmaid can be used as a symbol of resistance. It is revealed in the last chapter, titled “Historical Notes on *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” that the novel is actually comprised of a set of tapes recorded by Offred which are later unearthed by a group of male historians (Atwood 345). Thus, the story has been filtered through the lens of Offred’s perspective: it is her story, albeit not a very happy one. However, by telling her story to an unknown audience, she believes them “into being” (Atwood 308). Thus, she “keeps on going” with her narration—and her life—because she wants someone else to hear it and to bear witness to it (Atwood 308).

As scholars such as Hilde Staels have noted, this act of self-narration, as inconspicuous as it is, can be seen as a form of resistance. Because Offred “produces a profusion of words and desires that are not allowed” and gives voice to an “alternative discourse that continuously cut[s] through the rigid logocentric texture of the [Gileadean] superstructure” (Staels 233), she becomes a figure of resistance, one which silently protests the Gileadean regime. Staels’ perspective fits well with Andrea Brighenti’s theory of resistance, which posits that “the official ‘public transcript’ of subordinate discourse in the presence of the dominant one does not tell the whole story of the relationship” (65). This is because, as is well documented in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, “there is also a ‘hidden transcript’ taking place offstage, behind the scenes” (Brighenti 65). In this way, Offred’s hidden self-narration is a subtle form of resistance, which, given her circumstances, is just as valuable as larger, more ‘formal’ acts of resistance. “For subordinate people,” Brighenti explains, “the only effective resistance may be invisible resistance, because [visible resistance] provokes ferocious repression and retaliation from above” (65). This is particularly true in the Gileadean context, where discipline is on constant display. Walking past “The Wall,” where dissenters have been publicly executed, Offred remarks that Gileadean citizens are “supposed to look: this is what they’re here for, hanging on the Wall” (Atwood 36). Thus, scholars like Staels, who exemplify Brighenti’s theories of resistance, present a compelling case: Offred’s self-narration is a powerful act of resistance simply because it is the only act of resistance possible. Had Offred resisted more publicly, we can assume that she too would have ended up dead, like one of the silent, hanging bodies on The Wall.

But what of the fact that Offred is publicly complicit in Gileadean society, even if she resists it in private? Can her silent act of resistance—her self-narration—make up for the fact that, as Allen Weiss describes it, Offred “prefers freedom from pain and acceptance of paternalistic domination over dangerous political commitment” (138)? Although “the absence of direct confrontation does not mean that hegemony goes unchallenged” (Brighenti 65), it is certainly true that Offred makes almost no conscious effort to directly challenge her oppressors. When the Commander offers her “an arrangement” (Atwood 176), in which he endows her with contraband gifts and activities, she accepts, feeling momentarily guilty but eventually giving in to the pleasure—she describes it as “something to fill the time, at night, instead of sitting alone in [her] room” (Atwood 188). Furthermore, while the Ceremony takes place, Offred once again struggles for the words to describe it: she cannot call it rape, as she explains that “nothing is going on here that [she hasn’t] signed up for” (Atwood 107). At the end of the novel, faced with the

possibility of her punishment, Offred offers to give into the system completely if it means she can survive; she pleads to God, promising that she’ll “obliterate” herself, offering to “repent,” “abdicate,” and “renounce” (Atwood 330).

Still, Staels’ argument rings true: what else could Offred do but—at least to some extent—accept her circumstances? After all, if the only thing Offred has control over is her own narrative, is preserving her story not the most resistant act possible? The “Historical Notes” chapter of *The Handmaid’s Tale* complicates this argument. Professor Pieixoto, the man who is responsible for publishing Offred’s tapes, explains that they were initially found unnumbered, and thus he and his colleague take it upon themselves to “arrange the blocks of speech in the order in which they appear to go” (Atwood 347). The fact that this information is revealed at the end of the novel has a devastating effect: the reader realizes, after 342 pages of listening to Offred, that her story has been *further* filtered through the male historians who control the only existing copy of her tapes. The Professor—who urges the audience not to judge Gileadean society too harshly, as it was “under a good deal of pressure” (Atwood 347)—dehumanizes Offred, turning her yet again into an item which men have infinite access to. Even if Offred’s self-narration was a resistant act in the time of its creation, her tapes eventually become subsumed by the overarching system of patriarchy that still dominates society. It is fitting, then, that the final sentence of the novel comes from Professor Pieixoto, not Offred. Turning to the audience of his male colleagues by whom he is well loved (Atwood 344), he asks if “there are any questions” (Atwood 358). The question remains, however, if they are his to answer.

The Handmaid’s Cultural Afterlife

The complicated nature of the Handmaid symbol—both within the novel itself, and in its reception by scholars—returns us to the topic of its cultural afterlife. The two case studies I have chosen for this essay—Kylie Jenner’s *Handmaid’s Tale*-themed birthday party and the group of Philadelphia protestors—illuminate the fact that contemporary use of the Handmaid symbol is divided into two distinct camps: what is acceptable, and what is decidedly not. In the case of Jenner, the Handmaid symbol was instantly deemed to be misused. Observers took to social media immediately, calling the party “tone deaf,” “disturbing,” and “disgusting” (Katie [@KatiePetZim]; Veronica [@veronicacz]; sophie [@thisonlyangeI]). But can Jenner really be blamed for viewing the symbol in such a lighthearted manner? And, if she had used it more solemnly, would it have had any more of a profound effect?

The term ‘cultural afterlife’ emerges from the discussion of the *afterlife* proper: the philosophical, theological, and spiritual interest in what happens to us all once we die. Whereas with the human afterlife “it is the material body that has died,” the afterlife of cultural artefacts “is what remains after they are removed from their original context” (Biber 2). Katherine Biber’s *In Crime’s Archive: The Cultural Afterlife of Evidence* focuses on the cultural afterlife of criminal evidence that has been displaced after the end of criminal trials. Biber traces the term to Walter Benjamin and his work in *The Arcades Project*, “his unfinished attempt to understand the afterlife of cultural artefacts” (3). Benjamin was “attentive to the transformations that an object underwent during its life and afterlife” and focused primarily on objects of interpretation or translation (Biber 3). As referenced in the title, Benjamin examined the arcades of Paris, seeking to discover what they said about the city’s social history after they were mostly shuttered from disuse. Thus, the afterlife of cultural objects “is a zone of either immortality or waste; it is where we keep things which are not dead to us” (Biber 2). It is where we keep concepts like the Handmaid.

Returning to contemporary examples of cultural afterlife, it is important to note that Jenner based her party on *The Handmaid’s Tale* television series, rather than the novel—however, given the fact that Margaret Atwood herself is a consulting producer for the show (“Margaret Atwood”), we can assume that general message of the television series is the same. Commenting on Jenner’s party, Washington Post columnist Monica Hesse raises the point that “in America, it’s perfectly acceptable to turn on the television and binge on rape, subjugation, kidnapping and torture—as long as we agree we’re doing it in a serious manner” (Hesse). Where ‘well-behaved’ watchers of the television show do so with the goal of education, disobedient consumers like Kylie Jenner are explicit about the fact that they view the show as entertainment—or, as Hesse puts it, they make a “*gaudy spectacle* of treating violence toward women as entertainment” (Hesse).

On the other hand, the ‘proper’ way to use the Handmaid symbol is in cases such as the Philadelphia protests, where the women—like many other activists across the country—used the cloaks and bonnets as a terrifying symbol of what was to come. Explaining the outfits, protest organizer Samantha Goldman writes that “the cloaks and white hats didn’t feel symbolic at all” when she protested the arrival of then-Vice President Mike Pence, whose administration was forthright about its pro-life stances.



Yet, since the Philadelphia protest in 2018, abortion rights in America have only continued to plummet—as of April of 2022, the fate of *Roe vs. Wade* hangs precariously in the balance (Donegan). While, of course, the blame for this injustice does not lay on the shoulders of the Philadelphia protestors, the continued disregard for the reproductive rights of women in the United States does question the power of their symbolic protest.

To further examine the commodification of the Handmaid symbol, we can look to the initial inspiration for the use of it in protest. Heather Busby, the executive of a pro-choice advocacy group in Texas, was inspired when she saw women dressed as Handmaids at a festival in 2017 (Liptak). Instantly taken by their solemn and silent presence, Busby organized for a group of women to attend legislation sessions debating anti-abortion bills dressed the same way. Yet, despite their protests, the bills were eventually passed and sent to the Texas state House for approval (Rife). And as for the original Handmaids, at the festival? They had been planted there by Hulu, who used them as advertisements for the imminent release of the television series (Luu).

As Rothe and Collins explain in “The Illusion of Resistance: Commodification and Reification of Neoliberalism and the State,” using commodities such as costumes—or, in the case of Busby’s protestors, advertisements, to resist oppression is “just another way of engaging the neoliberal market” (616) and does little to incite real change. Much like Offred’s tapes, such forms of resistance are eventually subsumed by the oppressors, and “serve to perpetuate the system” (Rothe and Collins 609). In this way, the Handmaid uniform signals nothing more than an ideological stance: the symbol is “sold to the consumer as being representative of making a political statement,” but really has little to no lasting effect on the system of oppression (Rothe and Collins 612). Symbols of protest such as the Handmaid placate feelings of injustice by imbuing a false sense of autonomy and action upon the oppressed, momentarily distracting them from the fact that their persecution continues.

In this way, we can begin to understand how Kylie Jenner and the Philadelphia protestors might not be so different from each other after all: in reality, both of their uses of the Handmaid symbol are eventually delegitimized. Whereas Jenner is more explicit about this fact—doing the work herself through selfies and Instagram posts—symbolic protestors such as the Philadelphia Handmaids

operate under an illusion of legitimacy. Although their use of the symbol is interpreted as meaningful, it achieves the same ends as Jenner’s: it does nothing. The story of the Handmaid symbol’s cultural afterlife bears a striking resemblance to the original Handmaid herself: the novel’s protagonist, Offred. Because Offred is forcibly silenced and surveilled, her self-narration is initially seen as a quiet act of resistance—perhaps the only one of its kind that is possible. However, as is revealed at the end of the novel, even Offred’s recorded tapes cannot escape the system of male oppression: they are eventually appropriated by the same people who oppress her. Knowing this, we find ourselves at a crossroads. If silent, symbolic resistance is eventually subsumed by the system, and outspoken resistance is not possible due to that very same system, is there no alternative? Must we accept oppression? Answering a question such as this may lay outside the scope of the present essay. However, doing the work of recognizing which forms of resistance are ineffective—and which forms placate and distract—is an effective first step. It brings us closer to enacting real change.

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