

TOXIC ENVIRONMENTS IN *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*, ITS SEQUELS, AND OTHER FEMINIST DYSTOPIAS

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, was much more concerned with sexist oppression than environmental issues. The late 2010s experienced a boom in feminist dystopian novels, including a sequel by Atwood herself, and the television series adaptation of the novel is also part of this trend. This development evolves in a much more environmentally conscious context, which necessarily influences the interpretation both of the 1985 novel and the sequels. This article offers readings of recent feminist dystopias from the viewpoint of current environmental crises, especially the pollution crisis and climate change. The basic problem the religious fundamentalist regime of Gilead tries to deal with is widespread infertility, and nowadays (unlike in 1985) most readers/watchers must suppose that it is probably caused by environmental pollution. With this hypothesis, however, we can interpret *The Handmaid's Tale* in the context of material agency as an allegory of the human activity, which transforms the ecosystem in such a way that it eventually endangers the survival of the human race. The Gilead regime tries to legitimize its solution, the collectivization of the fertile female body, by falsely blaming women. Most of the recent feminist dystopias take as their point of departure a situation in which the number of fertile women is seriously diminished due to causes that may or may not be related to climate change. What makes many of them fail as warnings is a tendency to represent local dystopic realities that seem to have developed as a reaction to local rather than global environmental challenges.

Keywords

Margaret Atwood, *The Testaments*, fertility crisis, climate change, pollution, female body, post-apocalyptic narratives

About the Author

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Thirty-four years passed before Margaret Atwood published a sequel to her iconic book, *The Handmaid's Tale*, titled *The Testaments*. In this sequel, the context in which the history of Gilead's misogynistic dystopia appears is significantly different. On the one hand, the sequel enters a literary scene in which feminist dystopias are very much in fashion; on the other, readers are much more attentive towards hints and implications that the fictional Gilead invented its suffocating political and social mechanisms to cope with such environmental threats, risks, and dangers that are very much present in the real world. As a cautionary tale, the 1985 novel chiefly warned about the dangers of an ideological climate and a toxic environment metaphorically, but today both that novel and its sequels solicit readings that focus on the literal toxicity of the environment which, lacking a prompt reaction, can bring about answers rather similar to what Gilead did. It is possible that feminist dystopias are so frequent these days because people want to read and write about what might happen to the world if development remains unsustainable and if climate change, the pollution entering the bodies of every living creature, and several other risks of the Anthropocene continue to fundamentally change the conditions of human existence. Atwood's novels, which in their epilogues stage academic conferences at the end of the 22nd century very similar to the current ones, ultimately seem rather optimistic about long-term possibilities, but scrutinizing the environmental issues underlying the Gilead dystopia will challenge this optimism as too easily dismissing the problems.

For a long time, dystopia has seemed to be a male genre, but after some early examples in the 1980s, feminist dystopias¹ suddenly started blooming in the late 2010s. Among the early ones, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* has achieved the status of a classic that can be measured by the critical response, its popularity in university curricula, and its adaptations to other media such as a 1990 film and a 2000 opera. *The Handmaid's Tale's* 2018 television adaptation was partly the consequence of the new surge of feminist dystopias, but also something that gave the development a new impetus. The return of Atwood's 1985 novel in the form of a television series offers a new perspective on the novel itself, and may prompt the question of whether a text composed in the context of second-wave feminism offers valid readings for today's readers who are supposedly equipped with insights from eco-feminism and ecological consciousness. The hints at the trans-corporeal agency of several chemicals in the first novel have gained significance in the meantime, since both the ubiquity and the intensity of such agency have become much more evident. The television series itself is already a reinterpretation, and the existence of the sequels, both in the medium of television (Seasons 2, 3 and 4) and literature (*The Testaments* by Margaret Atwood), suggest that the author, the production studio, and most of all the general audience find the fictional dystopia of Gilead worth of further scrutiny in the present cultural context, in which the looming risks of environmental catastrophes place special emphasis on such

aspects of *The Handmaid's Tale* that hint at pre-Gilead ecological threats and how they affect the human body.

The Gilead dystopia centers around the female body. Sons of Jacob claim to establish Gilead as a response to a crucial problem of American society—namely, a fertility crisis. According to some textual hints, however, it was the trans-corporeal agency of the pollution that caused the crisis. This clear chain of causality makes readers/listeners see a close link between real-world risk and dystopian fiction, which allows the tale to function as a warning. Since the oppression focuses on the social context, I will first discuss the social aspects of Gilead body politics.

Members of the practically enslaved female society have very limited ownership of their own bodies, the central symbol of which is the “ceremony,” the monthly ritual raping of the Handmaids,² but one should also mention the commanders’ household slave labor, the Marthas, or the ubiquitous mutilations that enforce The Law in the TV show. The most frequent (although far from the only) victims of mutilation are the Handmaids. The Marthas are dispensable; therefore, when they commit any offense, the authorities execute them or send them to the colonies. The commanders’ wives are the privileged female caste who very rarely appear as targets of disciplinary measures, and the Aunts function as a Law enforcement caste in the female sphere and are therefore the ones who mutilate others. The Handmaids remain the female caste against which Gilead uses violence to enforce submission without wanting to completely destroy their too precious fertile bodies. Examples of this violence are the mutilation of Janine’s eye and Ofglen’s clitoris. Janine first appears as a rebellious young woman, but when her verbal insult on Aunt Lydia is punished with the removal of her right eye, she becomes very cooperative (So1E01).³ Ofglen’s mutilation, the punishment for her love affair with a Martha (who is hanged for it), does not have a similar effect on her (So1E03). These mutilations do not affect the main reproductive organs of the Handmaids. However, the beating then the mutilation of Serena Joy Waterford⁴ in Season 2 proves that not even the commanders’ wives are allowed to own their bodies, and their relatively privileged status does not make them immune to physical violence either on the marital or state level. In Season 3, Episode 6, the horror of the Handmaids’ mouths in the capital, closed with three iron rings, appears as a crucial symbol of the suppression of female voice. Aunt Lydia does not approve of this brutal method. When June (aka Ofjoseph, the former Offred) asks her “Do you want us all to be silenced?,” her answer is simply “No, I don’t.” However, silencing (one of the crucial issues for feminist criticism—see Cixous)⁵ is very much on the Aunts’ agenda, as it appeared already in the first novel with the fake Biblical quotation the Aunts used during Offred’s training as a Handmaid: “Blessed are the silent.” This is only one of the made-up, distorted, or creatively combined Biblical quotations in Gilead’s official discourse (Walker), and the Aunts

use the fundamentalist theocracy's well-established method when they make up a Beatitude for indoctrination to emphasize that meek, obedient women should not make their voices heard. In Season 3, at least in the most "advanced" capital of Gilead, the Handmaids are deprived even of the physical ability of speech. Aunt Lydia seeks to force the Handmaids—also with psychological and physical torture—to internalize the rule of silence and does not want to disable them. She does not say why. This may be a rare moment when she shows some humanity towards the Handmaids,⁶ implying that Gilead's inventiveness can develop towards unexpected levels of brutality.

The above examples show that the main target of violence in Gilead is the female body; however, the system oppresses men too (Howells, *Modern Novelists: Margaret Atwood* 128), and not only for religious-ideological reasons (as the execution of Roman Catholics priests and Quakers appears routine) but also in terms of sexuality. While several scholars have interpreted *The Handmaid's Tale* as a feminist anti-utopia (Tolan 144–73)—i.e., a parody of a feminist utopia—in which several claims of second-wave feminism have come true (such as the banning of cosmetics and pornography), currently it also may appear as an "incel" anti-utopia.⁷ Incels appeared decades after the publication of Atwood's novel, but they show a striking ideological similarity to the Sons of Jacob, founders of the fictional Gilead. Ironically, the misogynistic society in the novel, very similar to what real-life incels wish for, still leaves the majority of the male population as deprived as how incels feel, which makes Gilead an anti-utopia for them rather than a utopia. It is sexual frustration that causes the incels' hostility towards women, and the violent actions some of them have performed make the movement appear as a terrorist threat today (Attwell et al.). In Gilead, men at the top of the hierarchy (i.e., the commanders, who can be regarded as the equivalents of alphas in incel discourse) have unlimited access to sex (having wives, Handmaids, and the option to visit Jezebels); others have some limited possibilities, and the majority seem to have none. Incels blame women's free choice for their own deprivation of sex and advertise a misogynistic nostalgia for the times when society forced women to have sex with men they found unattractive. The extremely obsessive Gilead model shows that even if women are denied the choice of their sexual partners, a huge proportion of the male population will stay deprived. The Guardians who cast eager looks at the Handmaids in Atwood's novel (*The Handmaid's Tale* 25–27)⁸ may serve as an indicator of non-privileged men's frustration, which partially explains their aggressive behavior. In the television sequels, on the other hand, obligatory sex appears as a burden for some men, which could be dangerous to avoid: marital sex for Nick (S2E5, 6, 10, 12), or the ceremony for Commander Lawrence (S3E10). But even if men live in fear and oppression, their body does not become a central issue of the story or the Gilead ideology. And experience teaches us that when men are oppressed, they tend to deal with their frustration through aggression against

women or other groups even more vulnerable than themselves. Oppression of men does not make the situation of oppressed women more tolerable; it makes it worse.

Sexuality, reproduction, and family life have been central topics of utopian writing since Thomas More's *Utopia* (Fokkema 54), and Atwood in this respect might seem to create a travesty of *Brave New World* (Bényei 82).⁹ In Huxley's dystopia, birth and population control are crucial to avoiding overpopulation (but also to sustaining the biologically engineered caste society), which is implied by the name of the Malthusian belt that fertile women always wear to keep their contraceptives at hand. Thomas Malthus, who in his 1798 book *An Essay on the Principle of Population* explained that the increase in food production can never catch up with population growth, notably suggested population control by sexual self-restraint, but the brave new world finds a technical-chemical solution: while the population is produced in vitro, promiscuous, free, but infertile sex is supported for the release of tension. In contrast, everything in Gilead seems to revolve around the suppression of sexual drives and anxieties about fertility. The ubiquitous control and brutal suppression of sexuality seems to have a Malthusian air in sharp contrast to Huxley's libertine fantasy; however, the problem Gilead faces is not overpopulation, which frightened Malthus, but a fertility crisis, the rarity of children.

Since overpopulation still is a major global problem, the cautionary tale about the dangerous social consequences of a fertility crisis is counter-intuitive at first sight. However, mainstream western discourse emphasizes overpopulation in South America, Africa, and South and Southeast Asia, and not in the western world (Bauman 40) where anxieties about a low birth rate and an aging society are more frequent. The latter discourse has also been dominant in East Asian countries (including Japan, South Korea, and, more recently China). Atwood's novel identifies an important problem for local (North American) political discourses, and although the strategies the fictional Gilead develops to cope with the fertility crisis target the female body as a social and physically autonomous entity, some hints at the original causes of the crisis reveal the basic material connectedness of the human body and the non-human material world. Current scientific research reveals causal connections between trans-corporeal chemical agencies (pollution, for instance) and the western fertility crisis, but not exactly the same way as fiction represents. According to research surveys, "Sperm counts in men from America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand have dropped by more than 50 percent in less than 40 years"; the analyses¹⁰ "did not explore reasons for the decline, but researchers said falling sperm counts have previously been linked to various factors such as exposure to certain chemicals and pesticides, smoking, stress and obesity" (Kelland). These are the factors usually understood as the cause of sperm count decline, and we can summarize them as the influence of a toxic environment created by human activity.

Plastic, and especially endocrine disruptors that enter the human body and mimic the actions of estrogen, have been connected to men's infertility for a long time (Jensen et al.; Yang et al.; for new kinds of plastic as suspects, see Carr). Although it is difficult to imagine that such toxic influences can be limited to the western world, "[i]n contrast, no significant decline was seen in South America, Asia and Africa. The researchers noted, however, that far fewer studies have been conducted in these regions" (Kelland). Lack of data can easily cause this lack of proof.

From an ecocritical perspective, it is a question of crucial importance whether a dystopia extrapolates the future consequences of local or global threats. While the classical male-authored dystopias by Zamyatin, Huxley, and Orwell envisioned global deterioration, in the current feminist dystopias, one can see a tendency to represent a depressing locality. It is legitimate to suppose that different countries and cultures find different solutions to the challenges caused by obviously global issues. However, in several examples of the genre, the challenges that resulted in the establishment of a dystopian society in one country do not seem to exist on the other side of the border. Therefore, escape is a viable solution. The global/local divide is of primary importance for the concept of environmental justice, since even the most global problems affect different locations with different intensities. Toxic pollutants might have global effects, but it is direct exposure that makes the human body especially vulnerable to them. Gilead also can be a local dystopia that copes with North American problems of infertility.

The story of the Mexican trade negotiations in the first season (episode 6) is also important to understanding the global or local nature of the challenges. The episode makes it explicit that the fertility crisis is not unique to the former USA, since Mexico is also experiencing it, and the result of the Handmaid system, in terms of children born, does not fail to impress the Mexican ambassador. Moreover, she also makes a remark on a climate change-induced global food production crisis:

"How is the harvest in your country?"

"Ah, we have challenges, like the rest of the world. Most of our staples are not adjusting to the new weather patterns."

The whole world is wrestling with challenges in agriculture because of new weather patterns; therefore, declining fertility rates is not the only crisis Gilead has to face, and if one of them is global, it is legitimate to suppose that some others are too.

The food production crisis—which is obviously the consequence of climate change—appears as a global problem, which solicits an interpretation for the fertility crisis in the context of global environmental changes too. In Chapter 19, *The Handmaid's Tale* dropped some hints (to be repeated with modifications in *The*

Testaments) about the possibility that the fertility crisis was caused by pollution. This is what Offred recalls about the decline of the pre-Gilead society:

The air got too full, once, of chemicals, rays, radiation, the water swarmed with toxic molecules, all of that takes years to clean up, and meanwhile they creep into your body, camp out in your fatty cells. Who knows, your very flesh may be polluted, dirty as an oily beach, sure death to shore birds and unborn babies. Maybe a vulture would die of eating you. [...] Women took medicines, pills, men sprayed trees, cows ate grass, all that souped-up piss flowed into the rivers. Not to mention the exploding atomic power plants, along the San Andreas Fault, nobody's fault, during the earthquakes, and the mutant strain of syphilis no mold could touch. (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 112)

Here, Offred thinks that the pollution permeating women's bodies created a hostile environment for the fetus. Her insight is in accord with the current scientific knowledge, but hardly the whole truth. Not only the polluted water diminishes female fertility (although this must include the food they eat because the water enters the flesh of animals and the tissue of plants too) but also the air they breathe. According to recent studies, air pollution, or more precisely the concentration of fine dust, is inversely related to ovarian reserve (Santi et al.; for a simpler description of research results see Ramm-Fischer). The human body is not a closed microcosm but a part of the trans-corporeal system we used to call nature (Alaimo), and the delicate and vulnerable reproductive system necessarily reacts sensitively to toxic permeations. And as I demonstrated above, male fertility is also declining, which Offred does not think of, because in this scene of the novel, she remembers how Aunt Lydia educated and indoctrinated her in the Gilead system, and the main point of that indoctrination was blaming women. It is women's fault that they took pills, but it is nobody's fault that nuclear power plants were built¹¹ on the high-risk earthquake zone along the San Andreas Fault in California.¹² Although pollution has global consequences, the concentration of pollutants (and with it, health hazards) vastly differ among various localities. The mention of the earthquake-induced atomic catastrophes in California suggest that the fictional pre-Gilead USA also had to face a special local challenge of radioactive pollution. Although radioactive molecules can travel with the water and the wind (and severely influence human reproduction), their concentration must be higher close to the reactors. If the San Andreas Fault atomic power stations massively contributed to the fertility crisis, then certainly other parts of the world had to face less challenges.

In a comparable monologue of *The Testaments*, it is Aunt Lydia who lists the problems of the pre-Gilead society. The sequel lays the emphasis somewhere other than where the first novel did. A vague hint at radioactive pollution as a cause of infertility appears only at the end of the new list, which starts with natural disasters that one can easily associate with the consequences of global warming:

In that vanished country of mine, things had been on a downward spiral for years. The floods, the fires, the tornadoes, the hurricanes, the droughts, the water shortages, the earthquakes. Too much of this, too little of that. The decaying infrastructure why had not someone decommissioned those atomic reactors before it was too late? The tanking economy, the joblessness, the falling birth rate (66).

The six more or less meteorological disasters Aunt Lydia mentions in this passage are well-known consequences of climate change, which suggests that Gilead rose as a response to the deteriorating global environment. However, the earthquakes and nuclear catastrophes, which may or may not have a cause-effect relationship,¹³ appear as local problems, which can only have indirect links to the indicated environmental crises. There is no reason to suppose that earthquakes became more frequent¹⁴ or that this contributed to the country's downfall, but one can imagine that with the deteriorating infrastructure, people had fewer and fewer resources to cope with the consequences of natural disasters, whatever their cause. Several of those disasters, however, can cause accidents in nuclear power plants (as a tsunami caused the Fukushima nuclear disaster), which would raise the toxic contamination level of the environment, and dealing with nuclear disasters would require even more resources. Clearly, then, even this list might suggest climate change-related global deterioration.

The coinage (or “newspeak” expression) “unbaby” for stillborn or unviable newborn children suggests that not only is conception a problem in Gilead but so too is the delivery of viable children. The agency of a toxic environment is the most logical suspect of this major problem. In Chapter XVI.36 of *The Testaments*, an Aunt mentions an unbaby who seemed viable, but juvenile cancer, which is “alarmingly on the rise,” killed it very soon (222), and that the increasing cancer rates might be a consequence of radioactive pollution. Aunt Lydia explains in Chapter III.6 that the Aunts in Ardua Hall invest immense energy in bloodline tracking to avoid incest in a society where the wife acts as the mother, while the same Handmaid can bear children to different families, through which process she changes her name and identity. The Aunts, however, record the bloodlines to guarantee the biological quality of the offspring (35). Since every marriage is arranged, they can get involved in the preparation of every match to prevent incest. Therefore, unintentional incest is not the reason, but, as Aunt Lydia remarks, “there are enough unbabies already.” This comment leaves one with pollution as the most logical cause of the increase of unviable children.

It is clear, then, that Gilead is a response to global and mostly environmental problems, but the option of escape to Canada, which is already available in *The Handmaid's Tale* and becomes a central topic in *The Testaments* and the television

sequels, implies that other societies did not need drastic measures to overcome the same challenges or that those challenges do not concern others at all. In the latter case, Gilead does not simply give a morally wrong answer but severely overreacts. The caution about environmental threats loses much of its weight when they appear as local problems, which is unfortunately the case with several recent feminist dystopias too. The local delimitation of apparently global developments undermines the warning in Binah Shah's novel *Before She Sleeps*, which otherwise carefully elaborates how the future Middle Eastern city state Green City has developed as a totalitarian, misogynist society after it has lost the majority of its women. The development started with climate change as the following passage clearly explains:

In Green City, the first wave came from the east. The middle of the twenty-first century saw devastating climate change in South Asia, bringing floods and unprecedented torrential rain for months on end. Mudslides and avalanches in the northern territories damaged so much infrastructure that the locations of certain nuclear facilities became compromised. Militants took hold of the weapons and launched them at each other, destroying much of the subcontinent.

The shock waves juddered both eastward and west, claiming not just lives, but also millions of acres of arable land and drinkable water. The second wave destabilized the economies of all the countries in the region, shutting down major trade routes that stretched from China to Europe, as if a part of the world was simply amputated from existence.

Every student knew what the third wave was, hearing about it straight from the mouths of their parents and grandparents, when the women of Green City began to die, and Green City started to sink into anarchy. (127)

The chain of events from climate change-initiated catastrophes—through military anarchy and political disintegration, to the death of women—sounds logical. The idea that extreme or rapidly changing weather conditions might indirectly cause violent conflicts is widespread in western political discourse or, as a catchphrase expresses it, climate change is a threat multiplier (see *CNA's Military Advisory Board Reports* | CNA). However, the most frequently mentioned example, namely that the extreme drought partially caused the Syrian civil war, does not seem to stand up to scrutiny (Selby et al.). Even so, an investigation of 113 subnational level African markets showed correlations between weather conditions and food prices on the one hand, and food prices and conflicts on the other (Raleigh et al.).

The above quotation does not explain the last step, the disappearance of women, but an earlier passage in the novel notes that it was due to an epidemic:

the Virus, . . . morphed from a rare strain of HPV into a fast-spreading cervical cancer epidemic. Men could be carriers, but it was women who were felled, quickly and inclusively. Most died within four to six months of catching it. This is the reason the Perpetuation Bureau stresses fidelity within marriage; a woman's protected from the Virus when sexually restricted to her legal spouses, who are always tested before a marriage is allowed to take place in Green City. (Shah 64)

Although the virus represented here is a future, more dangerous, and fictional version of the real-world HPV (human papillomavirus infection), the description of how it spreads and the fact that it may cause cancer (in real-world cases neither so fast nor with such certain fatality, though) is correct. In history and in literary representations, epidemics are also a frequent feature of wartime. Movements of huge numbers of people, food shortages, and lower hygiene standards explain this sufficiently from our current viewpoint, but literature has never failed to see a connection: already Homer's *Iliad* started with the narrative of a plague in the Greek camp at the Trojan war. Shah's story, however, does not say whether the epidemic is a consequence of military anarchy or the collapsed infrastructure. Even so, the threat of a new epidemic has been listed among the dangers of climate change for a long time. And in 2020-21, as I wrote this paper, a pandemic that is especially devastating for one group of the population (the elderly in the case of COVID-19, the women in the case of Shah's fictional version of HPV) does not seem a wild fantasy at all. The melting of the permafrost may revive hibernating viruses, unknown to us, and the destruction of living areas brings wild animals into closer and more frequent contact with humans, giving viruses the opportunity of zoonotic transmission to human beings. Shah's virus-spread cervical cancer epidemic still sounds a bit fantastic from a medical viewpoint, but it may symbolize a crucial insight of ecofeminism—namely, that in cases of environmental catastrophes and social disorders, women are especially vulnerable.

Despite this clearly presented prehistory of the dystopic world in *Before She Sleeps*, the renegade women can simply go to the neighboring country to solve their problems. And in the finale, Sabine, the protagonist (if the story has a protagonist), is welcomed in the neighboring Semitia by a woman in military uniform, which implies that women are not reified in their reproductive capacity outside Green City and that other places did not experience the same chain of catastrophes, namely climate change disasters followed by military anarchy, then an epidemic. Climate change is global, but different communities can develop different strategies to cope with its challenges. However, in some feminist dystopias, the recurring feature of an unproblematic, uncontaminated elsewhere, an idyllic refuge that does not even experience the challenges to which the dystopic community finds a terrible answer, appears as a too-easy solace. If *The Handmaid's Tale* is a cautionary tale

about a real western-world fertility crisis that chemical pollution may cause but according to research also manifests in a sperm count decline, then the reaction, namely the suppression and forced impregnation of women, seems ill-advised. The novel and the sequels reveal in several places that Gilead men are aware of other (environmental and men-related) factors of the fertility crisis but cynically use women as scapegoats. It does not need much argumentation to understand that a dictatorship does not have to use truth to legitimize its claims. In this fictional totalitarian state, “women are universally blamed, by law, for that over which they have no control, so as to leave males officially blameless. This institutionalized, illogical pattern of blame appears throughout the novel” (Bloom 34). It explains the words with which Offred reacts to a doctor’s indecent proposal, based on the allegation that most of the commanders are sterile: “There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that’s the law,” Offred says, reiterating the official standpoint (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 61).¹⁵ Another doctor¹⁶ does Janine the favor Offred rejects, and eventually Serena Joy Waterford convinces Offred to try to get pregnant by Nick, the chauffeur, since it does not work with Commander Fred. The implications are clear, but all this becomes almost explicit in the sequels. In the second season (Episode 9), the American agent Mark Turillo tells Serena that “Gilead blames the fertility crisis on women” and speaks about a medical solution on the horizon.¹⁷ In *The Testaments*, Commander Judd explains the ideology in some detail to the first assembly of the three founding Aunts: “Our birth rate—for various reasons, but most significantly through the selfish choices of women—is in free fall” (174). He admits that there are other reasons as well, but he mostly blames women and starts establishing a society on the basis of this blame. All such hints suggest that the problem might be global, but the local reaction is illogical and follows from the special ideas of a group of evil men.

The Testaments and the second season of the TV show widened the scope of representation and developed storylines in Canada. Nothing in those fictional Canadas of the future indicates a fertility crisis (or any kind of crisis), which definitely challenges any interpretation that presupposes a global crisis triggered by pollution. Season 1 of *The Handmaid's Tale* offered a wonderfully designed visual experience, which was overwhelming, although suffocating. Season 2 could add very little to that. Its scenes from the colonies were rather disappointing with their commonplace representation of work camp wastelands, while the Canadian settings presented the current western consumer society as idyllic. The creators seem to have tried to counterbalance the lack of visual innovation with graphic violence, a feature that fails to be as effective as the less graphic psychological terror of Season 1. Visual innovation returned to the show in Season 3. But a Canada with its continuous sunshine and clean, spacious, and luxurious buildings, and with the appearance of children here and there, seems to imply that, if no fundamentalist *coup d'état* happens, consumer capitalism can continue without any major problem.

In S04E07 June is shocked by the abundance of food in a supermarket in Canada, which shows a sharp contrast to the ration cards and the empty shelves in the guarded food stores represented in many scenes of Seasons 1 to 3. Food shortage seemed a major problem in Gilead, and from Fred's dialogue with the Mexican ambassador (S01E06) it seems to be clear that adaptation of agriculture to the changing climate is a global problem. Season 4 shows a Canada that does not have to face any problem about food production. A similar tendency can be seen in *The Testaments* as well. *The Handmaid's Tale* mentioned that schools closed down for lack of children, while the Canadian schools work without any problem in *The Testaments*. This degrades Gilead as an unhappy accident and not a real danger. A group of determined and evil men may establish a terribly oppressive totalitarian regime against the interests (or even against the will) of the vast majority; it has undeniably happened to several societies (and is happening right now as well). It is a real danger that societies may react to the increasing hardships caused by climate change by installing oppressive regimes, and widespread misogyny makes women especially vulnerable in such scenarios. *The Handmaid's Tale* (the novel and Season 1) formulated a warning about the social consequences of environmental problems, but the sequels seem to tame this message.

Behind the officially sounded main causes of the fertility crisis (i.e., women's selfish behavior), both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* allow readers to reconstruct an alternative story, which seems more convincing in the current context of climate change—namely, that pollution caused the Gilead crisis by influencing the fertility of both sexes. While some recent feminist dystopias share the strategy of the sequels that represent major environmental and social problems as only locally threatening, it is worth mentioning that there is one that does not even regard pollution as a threat. In Naomi Alderman's *The Power*, women develop a new organ with which they can generate high voltage, similar to electric eels or stingrays. They can thus defend themselves against male aggression and become stronger than men. However, the now physically superior women adopt abusive and exploitative behaviors toward men with astonishing rapidity. It is an ironic fantasy of turning the tables rather than wishful thinking. What is more interesting for us in the present context is the ultimate cause of the mutation of women's bodies in Alderman's novel—a chemical agent called Guardian Angel, which the British allegedly developed and poured into the water supply during WWII to make the population resistant to possible German gas attacks. Tankers transported the chemical to overseas destinations, and the U-boats sometimes sank them. In effect, it is water pollution that very favorably contributes to the evolution of the female body (Alderman 148–50), even though in the novel the chemical agent is a medicine half-intentionally mixed with drinking water. In our actual world, we have rather different experiences with the agency of medicines as antibiotics and contraceptives in the water supply: the effects seem harmful rather than favorable.

Alderman imagines that pollution pushes human bodies towards the superhuman. If something can be called wishful thinking, then it is this: we should pollute the environment, and maybe something good will happen eventually! *The Power* is a feminist dystopia that envisions completely global changes that the trans-corporeal agency of chemical pollution fulfils but appears surprisingly optimistic about the possible effects.

In Atwood's novel, the Gilead regime uses the pollution or climate change-induced fertility crisis as a pretext to install a brutally oppressive patriarchal system, but the men of that dystopia undeniably live in a world in which there are extremely few desirable women, especially because they seem to regard women of proven fertility as the most desirable. Other recent feminist dystopias tend to imagine worlds in which not only fertile or desirable women but women in general are missing. Scarcity of women seems to be a popular point of departure for speculation. Various authors elaborated different scenarios that may result in a dystopic future in which reproduction is the most important social issue. Both Taiwanese-American writer Maggie Shen King and Anglophone-Pakistani writer Binah Shah represent high-tech totalitarian societies with panoptic surveillance, which introduce polyandry to cope with the lack of women, although this same problem has different roots in their novels. King's 2018 novel entitled *An Excess Male* is set in a fictionalized future China in which selective abortion and a one-child policy resulted in a gender imbalance. Women are so rare that they can pick their husbands (two or three) and receive huge dowries. Selective abortion is illegal, not only in the real China but also in King's fictional one, but in the latter, various forbidden practices and the help of corrupt doctors¹⁸ result in male children becoming an overwhelming majority. This scenario seems to be anchored in the actual experience of Chinese society, with its allegedly missing 20 million girls. However, recent research by John James Kennedy and Yaojiang Shi prove that the "missing girls" are only missing statistically and not in reality. Newborn girls tend to stay unregistered in rural China so that the family can have a boy later on, but six years later, when the local schools badly need students, the girls somehow appear in the registers. The statistical gender imbalance among newborns thus disappears among young schoolchildren (Kennedy and Shi). Polyandry, which has some tradition in the peripheral areas of rural China, does not make women powerful in that novel. They rather seem even more exploited. They do not have access to education, they are not allowed to have a job, and their marriage contract contains their bedroom schedule, since each husband is entitled to have sex regularly, and also one child of his own. King's dystopia does not discuss or even hint at environmental issues, and this is perhaps the main reason that the represented social problems appear as local anomalies.

Most readers of such novels perhaps first develop the expectation that polyandry implies a privileged position for women, as a simple reverse of patriarchal polygamy. Rare things are precious; therefore, a society with very few women must highly appreciate them. In reality, the reverse is true. In the societies represented by King, Shah, but also Atwood to start with, the ruling men come to the conclusion that reproduction is too important to let it depend on a woman's personal preferences. The polyandrous societies oppress women terribly. In *An Excess Male*, they are excluded from education or the job market, confined to the family sphere, where they live in financial dependence with a marriage contract that describes in detail their sexual duties as well. In Shah's Green City, women get hormone treatments to produce triplets after triplets. The high-tech totalitarian state exploits the reproductive capacity of the female body with alarming effectiveness. The men running the system develop some ideological slogans about the hope of Southwest Asia and celebrate women's heroism to make them internalize the concept that they are barely child-producing machines, but the novel does not stage any single woman who accepts this. When a high authority tries to justify the practice to Lin Sarpati in *Before She Sleeps* by saying "We preserve your [i.e., women's] dignity and your respect. Without this, you'd be bought and sold on the open market, like slaves," she answers: "Don't you see? We already are." The man in this scene takes it for granted that women become slaves or commodities if only a few of them stay alive after the epidemic, and the well-organized state that marries them to several men simultaneously and keeps them imprisoned in a new kind of marriage saves their dignity. Lin Sarpati denies that, implying that the totalitarian system that uses them as breeding animals still deprives them of respect by practically enslaving them.

Meg Alison in *The Book of the Unnamed Midwife* scrutinized more carefully the possible consequences of extreme gender imbalance. This novel is not a dystopia but a post-apocalyptic narrative, a rewriting of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* from a female point of view—a connection the whole trilogy's title *The Road to Nowhere* seems to indicate clearly (Alison).¹⁹ A pandemic kills most of the population, almost wiping out children and women. Interestingly enough, Alison stages two possibilities for women's lot in the depopulated world. Most of the female survivors the protagonist meets on the road have become gang-owned sex-slaves. However, some skillful, highly manipulative women with immense sexual appetites are able to organize "hives" in which they can rule like queen bees over five to twenty men. Whichever way it turns out seems less dependent on women's choices or abilities than on luck, and most of the women in that post-apocalyptic wasteland are very unlucky. Either way, the male survivors treat them as sexual objects, reducing their existence into one single bodily function. Until the last pages, nobody can bear viable children; therefore, sexuality loses any link to reproduction or orientation towards the future of the human race.

The recent feminist dystopias, including the sequels of *The Handmaid's Tale* in both media, tend to contain some hints at looming environmental threats but usually find a way to avoid taking them very seriously. Even such fictions that show a clear causal connection between climate change or the human body's indirect exposure to toxic pollution and the establishment of the represented misogynist dystopic social systems apply some strategies to mitigate the harshness of the warning. The most usual strategy is to represent not only the terrible reaction to the environmental challenges but also the challenges themselves as local rather than global. The protagonists eventually can go somewhere else, some better place where the environmental situation is not so challenging. It is true, however, that the closure of Atwood's 1985 novel did something similar. The 2195 conference that looks back to Gilead's history as a short and curious episode makes it hard to imagine that those people had to face real challenges. Despite the irony of the male professor's authoritative voice devaluing the female message from the past, the closure is very optimistic about the options that can only temporarily disturb the otherwise linear development of human history. I wish I could share this optimism.

Notes

1. By “feminist dystopia,” I do not mean a dystopia written by a woman writer but one that focuses on feminist issues and places strong emphasis on the female viewpoint. Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* is not a feminist dystopia despite its obvious dystopic and post-apocalyptic character, while *The Handmaid's Tale* is one. For a comparison of those novels see (Howells, “Margaret Atwood’s Dystopian Visions: *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*”). However, the paraleptic continuation (Genette 177) from 2009, entitled *The Year of the Flood*, appears as a feminist dystopic version of the story from 2003.
2. Commander Waterford refers to these acts as “Gilead’s most sacred tenet” in S03E10.
3. I will use abbreviations to indicate Season and Episode from here on. Season 1, Episode 1 is thus rendered S01E01.
4. The last name of Commander Fred does not appear in the novel. Nor does Offred’s first name. However, it is difficult to keep the invented names of the television adaptation always outside the discussion when the topic is partially or exclusively the novel.
5. Silencing is the central topic of Christina Dalcher’s 2018 dystopic novel *Vox*. In that near-future dystopic USA, women are obliged to wear a word counting tool, which punishes them with electric shock if they exceed the permitted 100 words per day. They are not allowed to write either.
6. Aunt Lydia in the television series is a Gilead fanatic. In *The Testaments*, she is a completely different figure.
7. “Incel” is the abbreviated form of “involuntary celibate men”—a largely online contemporary community of men that has been recognized widely as a misogynistic hate group.
8. “I know they are watching, these two men who aren’t yet permitted to touch women. [...] I hope they get hard at the sight...,” reads one of Offred’s typical thoughts about the Guardians.
9. The novel is usually compared with Orwell’s *1984*. The many similarities legitimize such comparisons. Margaret Atwood herself identified *1984* as her main literary source of inspiration (see Atwood, “My Hero”; and De Vaul 18–19). Other scholars interpret a series of motives as being taken from Orwell and subsequently elaborated from a woman’s point of view (Ingersoll; Robison-Greene).
10. The basic study is Levine et al. For an updated book-length summary see Swan and Colino, and for the book’s concise summary, see Walsh.
11. The California legislature that gave green light to those power plants during the years had some women members, but not many (see <https://www.library.ca.gov/collections/online-exhibits/elected-women>). Therefore, it is hardly an exaggeration to say that men made the decision, which is nobody’s fault.
12. Over the years, five nuclear power stations were built along the San Andreas Fault, but three of them were already shut down by the time Atwood published *The Handmaid's Tale*, two of them exactly because of the discovery of faults and the earthquake risk. The Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant, however, started operating in 1985 and is still active

- and regarded as a threat by many (Cf. Sherback). In 1959, The Santa Susana sodium reactor experienced one of the first core meltdown disasters in the world, but that was not an earthquake related accident (see Trossman).
13. One may recall the San Andreas Fault nuclear disasters foretold in the first novel, but since no such disaster has actually happened in the meantime, no new nuclear power plant was erected along the fault, San Onofre shut down in 2013, and the only currently active one (Diablo Canyon) will shut down in 2024, the repetition of that detail would have been ridiculous.
 14. There is a slight chance that Aunt Lydia, the homodiegetic narrator of the passage, actually means landslides that are going to become frequent due to the higher humidity in the climate change era. Since the two most usual causes of landslides are heavy rainfall and earthquakes, Aunt Lydia can just metonymically confuse cause and effect, calling the landslides earthquakes, even if they are probably caused by rainfall.
 15. The scene is adapted to television in *So1E04*, where Offred actually utters this sentence as if quoting the official discourse.
 16. It can be the same doctor, since he told Offred, "I've helped others," and "Lots of women do it" (Ibid. 60, 61).
 17. Ron Hirschbein interprets Turillo's remark as a reference to a sperm count decline (68).
 18. Corrupt doctors seem to be stock characters in feminist dystopias, but corruption may function as something that makes a totalitarian surveillance state livable. It is difficult to tell if the doctor who offers his "help" in *The Handmaid's Tale* is really trying to help out of compassion, or trying to take advantage of a desperate woman. The offer can be also interpreted as implicit blackmail: Offred is trying to find a way to reject him politely, because if he feels offended, then he can send her to the colonies with a fake infertility report. As Pilar Somacarrera formulated her generalization from the possible implications of a single scene, "[doctors] use this power to obtain [the Handmaids'] sexual favors" (53). For the female protagonist of *An Excess Male*, a doctor appears as a rare ally in a hostile world when she can bribe him to suspend her fertility, because she does not want to bear a child to her second husband whom she suspects is mentally ill. In Binah Shah's *Before She Sleeps*, a corrupt doctor issues a fake certificate of infertility so that a woman is left alone with a single husband instead of being forced to marry four or five more men and turn into a child-bearing machine with constant hormone treatments for having triplets or quadruplets. Michel Foucault described the genesis of modern medical institutions as pioneers of surveillance systems (Foucault 135-179), and doctors quite logically appear in dystopic fiction as running a stern subsystem of the totalitarian regime. Doctors, who are typically male, yet still familiar with the female body, might show compassion as well. They can help beat the system and mitigate the oppression, but gestures of such compassion, due to their illegal nature, may also be risky to accept. Doctors remain part of the oppressing power and their knowledge of the female body makes them an even bigger threat.
 19. In addition to McCarthy's book, the title of the trilogy contains another reference to a literary predecessor: More's *Utopia*. "Nowhere" is actually the name of a place, a former military base that sustains some social order and becomes the basis of a new beginning, a livable society, closer to the dreams of anarchists than democrats. Elison's 2014 book

also shows significant similarities with Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* from 2009, the sequel of *Oryx and Crake*.

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