



Women's Work in the Dystopian West: "The Colonies" in Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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This paper examines the ways the Colonies in the American streaming service Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* utilize western myth to reimagine the American West as an entirely female space. Relying on popular understandings of the significance of the mythic West, traditional conceptions of the West as masculine, and the narrative function of the western, it argues that the Colonies offer regeneration and renewal for the women whose agency has been stripped in the hypergendered oppressive nation of Gilead. By reinstilling a sense of power and freedom in the women sent there, the Colonies operate much like the West of the imagination, allowing these women to escape the confines of Gilead and the chance to both return to their authentic selves and foresee a better world.

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps as a consequence of a history of colonialism, militarization, and nuclearism, the imagined American West of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has become less a place of adventurous romance and more one of terrifying, dystopian realism in the popular culture of the big and small screens. From the films of the 1950s that articulated deep-seated fears of radioactive fallout (*Them!*, 1954) to films of the 1980s depicting all-out nuclear destruction (*The Terminator*, 1984; *Miracle Mile*, 1988) and those of the early twenty-first century that express anxieties about late-stage capitalism, post-nuclear disaster, and environmental ruin (*The Book of Eli*, 2010), we have seen filmmakers use the western landscape to make sense of the circumstances of the modern age. Science fiction and disaster films in this time frame have especially dealt with a US West destroyed through greed and inequitable access to power, reducing some of the most iconic landscapes and monuments – like the Golden Gate bridge and the Hoover dam – to piles of rubble (2012, 2009; *Godzilla*, 2014; *San Andreas*, 2015). While traditionally portrayed as a place

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of opportunity and freedom, the West of film and television is now often portrayed as one of destruction, oppression, and captivity. This emphasis on the West as dystopia may give filmmakers the flexibility to challenge long-established visions of the region. Primarily associated with notions of masculinity through the genre of the western, the West has become, in one case at least, a strictly female space.¹ This wholly feminized portrayal is found in the American streaming service Hulu's production of *The Handmaid's Tale*.²

Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a dystopian television series based on Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel of the same name. First premiering in the United States in April 2017, the show quickly gained a faithful audience.³ It has since risen to the top of the Nielsen ratings for digital series and is one of Hulu's most-watched original productions.⁴ The series tells the story of June Osborne (Elizabeth Moss) as she navigates the newly established totalitarian Christian regime of the Republic of Gilead, founded in what is now the United States following a second civil war. Due to environmental ruin and radiation, birth rates have collapsed. June's age and fertility relegate her to the class of women known as "Handmaids," who become child-bearing

¹ It may be important to differentiate between the concepts of "space" and "place" for the purposes of this article. In the fields of anthropology, cultural studies, and human geography, these two concepts occupy distinct spheres of culture. As Denise Lawrence-Zuniga writes, "Space is often defined by an abstract scientific, mathematical, or measurable conception while place refers to the elaborated cultural meanings people invest in or attach to a specific site or locale." In other words, place moves beyond geography to consider how people endow spaces with social importance. To that end, "space" is used in this essay in reference to the region known as the American West; "place" is used in reference to the meanings with which the West has been imbued. Denise Lawrence-Zuniga, "Space and Place," *Oxford Bibliographies Online*, 30 March 2017. For more on the concept of "place" see Keith Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996).

² *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017–present) is produced and broadcast in the United States by Hulu, in Canada by CTV Drama Channel, in the United Kingdom on Channel 4, in Australia on SBS on Demand, and in Ireland on RTÉ, which was also the first station to broadcast the second season in Europe.

³ The show premiered in the United Kingdom in May 2017.

⁴ The Nielsen ratings, operated by Nielsen Media Research, are an audience measurement system of American television viewership that for years has helped television networks decide whether to cancel or renew television shows. Nielsen started reporting on Hulu viewership in July 2017. For more on Nielsen ratings of *The Handmaid's Tale* see Dana Feldman, "Hulu Subscriptions Surge Past 20M with 'The Handmaid's Tale' and Lineup of New Shows," *Forbes*, 2 May 2018, at www.forbes.com/sites/danafeldman/2018/05/02/hulu-subscriptions-surge-past-20m-with-the-handmaids-tale-and-new-shows; Rick Porter, "'Handmaid's Tale' Season 4 Opens Big in Nielsen Streaming Ratings," *The Hollywood Reporter*, 27 May 2021, at www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/handmaids-tale-season-4-premiere-nielsen-streaming-1234960260; Tyler Hersko, "'The Handmaid's Tale' Shoots to the Top of Nielsen's Streaming Ratings," *IndieWire*, 18 June 2021, at www.indiewire.com/features/general/handmaids-tale-nielsen-streaming-ratings-1234645256.

slaves for those of the ruling class. June has been separated from her husband Luke and daughter Hannah and held as a prisoner initially at the Rachel and Leah Center (also known as the Red Center), where Handmaids are trained and disciplined by the fanatically religious "Aunts," the highest-ranking working women in Gilead.⁵ As a Handmaid, June is then held captive at her various "posts" in the homes of elite Commanders and their Wives, where she is subjected to monthly ritualized rape and other physical and emotional abuses.

Women who do not conform to the rigid confines of this new society face strict and uncompromising corporal punishment. Those women convicted of higher crimes against Gilead – whether violent or ideological – are deemed "unwomen" and sent to the region known as the Colonies, a female penal outpost located in the western and midwestern United States and contaminated by pollution and radioactive waste.⁶ While the Colonies of Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* appear to be part of a trend in imagining the American West as post-apocalyptic badlands, the space being occupied by women is something different.

Countless scholars have argued that masculinity and the male cowboy hero dominate the popular-culture West. Indeed, the male/female (or masculinity/femininity) binary is at the heart of the western genre. In *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (1993), Jane Tompkins calls the western "a masculinist form," writing that what makes westerns most interesting "is their relation to gender, and especially the way they created a model for men who came of age in the twentieth century."⁷ Similarly, sociologist R. W. Connell argues that, in popular culture, "the exemplars of masculinity, whether legendary or real ... have very often been men of the frontier."⁸ She explains, "The novels of James Fenimore Cooper and the Wild West show of Buffalo Bill

⁵ Here the Handmaids are taught obedience to the regime, submission to their Commanders and Wives, and the importance of bearing children for the ruling elite and the good of Gilead. Discipline is sadistic, often featuring public shaming and beatings in front of other Handmaids. More than just a place, the Red Center therefore becomes a symbol of oppression, where women are stripped of their rights, identity, and individuality.

⁶ While the novel and the Hulu series both make it clear that the Colonies are used by the regime as a means of control, the novel does not specify the exact location of the Colonies, which reside entirely outside the narrative action of the story. It is only in the second season of the Hulu series that audiences are shown a map of Gilead and the former United States, thereby revealing the location of the Colonies as being in the American West and Southwest. Another significant difference is that, in the novel, men are also sent to the Colonies; in the series, only women. See "The Word," *The Handmaid's Tale*, created by Bruce Miller, Season 2, Episode 13, MGM Television, 11 July 2018, Hulu.

⁷ Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 201, 18.

⁸ R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd edn (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 185.

Cody were early steps in a course that led eventually to the Western as a film genre and its self-conscious cult of inarticulate masculine heroism.”⁹ Media scholar Yvonne Tasker suggests that the physical strength required of life on the popular-culture frontier demands a certain expectation of masculine fortitude: the western’s “characteristic scenes of action, endurance, and violence,” she writes, “offer iconic images of male strength and resilience which elaborate an idealized masculinity.”¹⁰ Susan Lee Johnson suggests that the imagined American West “has become a sort of preserve for white masculinity.”¹¹ And film scholar Janet Thumim argues, simply, that “the stories of the West” are “the stories of the masculine.”¹²

Classic westerns have typically concentrated on the white cowboy hero, but women have nonetheless played significant, albeit supportive, roles in the cowboy hero’s journey toward masculine renewal and redemption.¹³ Often the wife or love interest of the male hero, these women symbolize an interesting duality for the western cowboy: on the one hand, a woman’s love is “a symbol of the hero’s worth and goodness” and “provides further proof of his strength and masculinity”; on the other, she embodies those aspects of society our hero would sooner reject.¹⁴ As cultural historian Stephen McVeigh argues, women in westerns “pose a threat to the [cowboy] code insofar as they are symbolic of civilization, and everything that goes with it: law and order, police, justice systems, children, domesticity.”¹⁵ Indeed, their very presence has often served as an unwelcome (and temporary) obstacle to the masculinizing processes of the cinematic frontier.¹⁶

⁹ *Ibid.*, 194, 195.

¹⁰ Yvonne Tasker, “Contested Masculinities: The Action Film, the War Film, and the Western,” in Kristin Hole, Dijana Jelača, E. Kaplan, and Patrice Petro, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Cinema and Gender* (London: Routledge, 2016), 111–20, 111.

¹¹ Susan Lee Johnson, “‘A Memory Sweet to Soldiers’: The Significance of Gender in the History of the ‘American West,’” *Western Historical Quarterly*, 24, 4 (1993), 495–517, 495.

¹² Janet Thumim, “Maybe He’s Tough but He Sure Ain’t No Carpenter: Masculinity and (In)Competence in *Unforgiven*,” in Jim Kitses and Gregg Rickman, eds., *The Western Reader* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1998), 341–54, 348.

¹³ Will Wright defines the “Classical Western” as “the story of the lone stranger who rides into a troubled town and cleans it up, winning the respect of the townsfolk and the love of the schoolmarm.” He also discusses the “Vengeance Western”: “Unlike the classical hero who *joins* the society because of his strength and their weakness, the vengeance hero *leaves* the society because of his strength and their weakness. Moreover, the classical hero enters his fight because of the values of society, whereas the vengeance hero *abandons* his fight because of those same values.” Will Wright, *Six Guns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 32, 59, original emphasis. ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 84, 86.

¹⁵ Stephen McVeigh, *The American Western* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 45.

¹⁶ Of course, the history of the actual West involves women as well as men and historians have contributed much to our understanding of the role women played in the settlement,

That being said, historian Victoria Lamont has challenged the notion that literary westerns were written exclusively by, about, and for men,¹⁷ and the West in films and television series has seen a number of productions over the years that feature strong female characters with central roles, including *Calamity Jane* (1953), *Cat Ballou* (1965), *Two Mules for Sister Sara* (1970), *Bad Girls* (1994), *Meeks Cutoff* (2010), and *Jane Got a Gun* (2015).¹⁸ While still more films and television series have explored the idea of all-female communities in the American West or featured female-centered plot lines, they have regularly relied on the insertion of male characters – typically outsiders who materialize to combat enemies and ultimately garner redemption by the society they previously renounced. Recent examples include Ron Howard's *The Missing* (2003), which focuses on the story of Maggie (Cate Blanchett) searching for her daughter Lily (Evan Rachel Wood), kidnapped by renegade Apaches in late nineteenth-century New Mexico. Ultimately it is Maggie's newly returned father, Samuel (Tommy Lee Jones), who sets the rescue in motion and finally sacrifices his own life to save the women in the film.¹⁹ The Netflix western production *Godless* (Scott Frank, 2017) was widely praised as feminist for its focus on a fictional town in New Mexico made up almost entirely of women after nearly all the men are killed in a mining accident.²⁰ But it is the male gunslinger Roy Goode (Jack O'Connell) around whom most of the narrative action revolves and where

incorporation, culture, and politics of the West. See, for example, Sandra Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience 1800–1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982); Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson, eds., *The Women's West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987); Ron Lackmann, *Women of the Western Frontier in Fact, Fiction and Film* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Publishing, 1997); and Virginia Scharff and Carolyn Brucken, *Homelands: How Women Made the West* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010).

¹⁷ Victoria Lamont, *Westerns: A Women's History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016). See also Peter William Evans, "Westward the Women: Feminising the Wilderness," in Ian Cameron and Douglas Pye, eds., *The Book of Westerns* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1996), 206–13; and Sue Matheson's wonderful *Women in the Western* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

¹⁸ Other examples include *The Quick and the Dead* (Sam Raimi, 1995) and *True Grit* (Henry Hathaway, 2010). For more on the "essential" role of women in westerns see Matheson.

¹⁹ For more about how *The Missing* falls short of being feminist see Maureen Schwarz, "Searching for a Feminist Western: *The Searchers*, *The Hired Hand*, and *The Missing*," *Visual Anthropology*, 27 (Dec. 2013), 45–71.

²⁰ See, for example, Debra Birnbaum, "'Godless' Team on Making a Western, Feminism, and Directing Horses," *Variety*, 16 Nov. 2017, at <https://variety.com/2017/tv/news/godless-netflix-jeff-daniels-michelle-dockery-scott-frank-1202617026>; Alex Maxx, "How Godless Is Shaping a Brand-New, Pro-Women Western," *PopSugar*, 8 Dec. 2017, at www.popsugar.com/entertainment/godless-feminist-western-44302291; and Amy Soto, "Godless: A Feminist Western," *Medium*, 9 Dec. 2017, at <https://medium.com/22westmag/godless-7659f91df56>.

redemption for himself and the community is finally realized. While the highly regarded HBO series *Westworld* (Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy, 2016–22) centers the story of the female “host” Dolores (Evan Rachel Wood) and represents her as stronger and more cunning than most of her male counterparts, she is presently removed from the western milieu that defines the first two seasons of the show and must depend on the characters Bernard (Jeffrey Wright) and Caleb Nichols (Aaron Paul) to unlock the “Sublime” and save humanity.²¹ *The Handmaid’s Tale* stands alone in portraying a western landscape devoid of men and male heroes altogether.²²

Male/female or masculinity/femininity is but one duality that defines the western genre. The “image of the woman serves to fix in place the binary oppositions the Western is founded on,” writes Jane Tompkins, “like those book-educated clergymen and ineffectual lawyers from back East.”²³ This statement signals a number of binaries that further characterize the western: East/West, civilization/wilderness, lawful/lawless. Westerns highlight the scarcity of a legal apparatus and other institutions associated with the “civilized East.”²⁴ Westerns are also, of course, set in the American West, typically in a place on the verge of incorporation while in an endless state of development.²⁵ These productions feature the iconography that audiences have come to recognize as “western” – dusty roads, horses, saloons, and gunfights. They emphasize the beauty and (often terrifying) vastness of landscape, “primitive” or “natural” conditions of the frontier, and the struggle to survive. Westerns also focus on the ideas of “good” versus “evil,” rugged individualism, tenacity

²¹ Within the diegesis of the series, the “Sublime” is a virtual Edenic world designed by Delos Park’s *Westworld* creator John Ford (Anthony Hopkins) that allows the park’s robotic hosts to live the rest of their conscious lives free from the violent humans who dictated their stories within the park itself. In Season 4, the Sublime becomes the paradise to which Dolores and Bernard hope humans can escape their now host captors and all can live in harmony in this “Valley Beyond.”

²² Unless otherwise noted, references to “*The Handmaid’s Tale*” concern the Hulu series, not the source novel.

²³ Jane Tompkins, “Language and Landscape: An Ontology for the Western,” *ArtForum*, 28, 6 (Feb. 1990), 94–99, available at www.artforum.com/features/language-and-landscape-an-ontology-for-the-western-205207.

²⁴ McVeigh, 38. See also See Richard Aquila, ed., *Wanted Dead or Alive: The American West in Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998); Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998); Jon Tuska, *The Filming of the West* (New York: Doubleday Books, 1978); and Wright, *Six Guns and Society*.

²⁵ “Incorporation” is a process by which territories come under the governmental control of the United States or a municipality becomes chartered under the auspices of a particular state. In either case, the newly incorporated town, city, or region can then elect government officials and have the autonomy to set up the legal apparatus in their community.

of spirit, frontier violence, and the hero's ultimate regeneration and redemption. Indeed, as McVeigh writes, for a western, "this element of redemption is crucial."²⁶ The Colonies in *The Handmaid's Tale* – located in the American West and Southwest – tap into these same strands: women not only till the soil and work the land but also occupy positions of power and control, mete out frontier justice, and find their own redemption and renewal. The West of the Colonies is in some ways the West traditionally imagined by Americans and represented by filmmakers – a place of opportunity, freedom, and authenticity – where women deprived of their rights and liberties in the cities of Gilead are no longer bound by the rules that controlled them before they arrived. An unexpected consequence of removing them from a space of brutality and domination is that they have been moved to a region – arguably – of liberty and deliverance.

In the ensuing paragraphs, this paper explores the ways the motifs, icons, and themes of the western emerge in the Colonies in the Hulu series *The Handmaid's Tale*, which reimagines and redefines the American West as female. More than that, it reveals how, in keeping with conventional understandings of the mythic frontier as a place of individual freedom, reinvention, and redemption, the women in the Colonies reclaim the freedom they were stripped of after the revolution in Gilead. The series in some ways reflects historical realities of the West, specifically the feminization of the West by the Women's Land Army during World War I and the militarization of the region during the Cold War, both of which will be discussed in this paper. But the show also illustrates that the symbolic West is still very much resonant to audiences in the twenty-first century. To historian Robert Athearn, not only does the western myth shift according to current concerns, but it also remains a unifying emblem of a constructed national identity: "We are a stew into which the world has thrown whatever scraps have been at hand, and with so little in common, our people have reached out for something – anything – to bind them together. In the western myth, many have found what they were looking for."²⁷ *The Handmaid's Tale* may be unique in representing the region as entirely female but it also is part of a trend in contemporary westerns to expand traditional understandings of the West, despite what some consider the limitations of the genre. For Jim Kitses, the western itself

provides contemporary filmmakers a readymade canvas for correcting the sins of our fathers, for inscribing other genders, other races, other sexualities. If the Western is no

²⁶ McVeigh, 44.

²⁷ Robert G. Athearn, *The Mythic West in Twentieth-Century America* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 272.

longer the grand narrative, central, totalizing, hegemonic, it has already shown its resiliency and value as a set of codes that can speak with authority to a new millennium.²⁸

Ultimately, this essay demonstrates the numerous ways the ideologies that undergird the imagined West still inhabit American popular culture, even the most horrific visions of possible futures, offering glimmers of hope in an otherwise dark world.

THE MYTH OF THE COLONIES

The term “myth” is being used in this essay in relation to both the Colonies and the imagined West, constituting what Gerard Bouchard would classify as the sociological function of myth. He explains that this perspective “suggests that we consider myth as a type of collective representation (sometimes beneficial, sometimes harmful), as a vehicle of what I would call a message – that is, of values, beliefs, aspirations, goals, ideals, predispositions, or attitudes.” In relation to *The Handmaid’s Tale*, stories about the Colonies are used as a form of intimidation and control for those who threaten to oppose the values and goals of the draconian Gilead society. Before viewers are shown the Colonies, they are made aware of the territory through whispered accounts of torture and slow, painful death. Though the Colonies are but a story, a myth, in the first season of the show, the Handmaids understand their significance very well. In relation to the “myth of the West,” the term “myth” is defined by historian Richard Slotkin as

a complex of narratives that dramatizes the world vision and historical sense of a people or culture, reducing centuries of experience into a constellation of compelling metaphors ... Thus myth can be seen as an intellectual or artistic construct that bridges that gap between the world of the mind and the world of affairs, between dream and reality, between impulse or desire and action. It draws on the content of individual and collective memory, structures it, and develops from it imperatives for belief and action.²⁹

In both cases, myth is used in the sociological sense. But for the mythic West, it is a utopian promise; for the Colonies, a dystopian threat that nonetheless fulfils many of the utopian promises of the mythic West itself.

As in the novel, the audience is made privy to the Colonies and who is sent there throughout the first season of the show. The Colonies are first mentioned in the initial episode. In a flashback, it is nighttime at the Red Center and June (called “Offred” in the first two seasons in reference to her

²⁸ Kitses and Rickman, *The Western Reader*, 21.

²⁹ Gerard Bouchard, *Social Myths and Collective Imaginaries* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 23; Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 6.

Commander, Fred) is whispering to her best friend Moira (Samira Wiley) after lights-out. “What about Odette?” June asks. Moira responds, “She was rounded up in one of the dyke purges. She was reclassified as an ‘unwoman,’ sent to the Colonies.”³⁰ Also in Episode 1, another Handmaid at the Red Center, Janine (Madeline Brewer), is having a dream about her life before, as a server at a cafe, and walking and talking in her sleep. She is standing next to the window naked, talking as if speaking to a customer, and though prompted to stop talking by the other women in the room, she is unable or unwilling to do so. The other Handmaids are angry that she might cause the Aunts to punish all of them and assign more prayers, or worse. Moira slaps her: “Snap out of it. You’re not there anymore.” Moira further scolds Janine: “Don’t you know what they’ll do? They’ll send you to the Colonies. You’ll be cleaning up toxic waste. Your skin will peel off in sheets and then you’ll die. You’ll die, Janine.” In the next scene, in the present day, a Salvaging – a public execution of a person accused of horrendous crimes against the nation of Gilead, often carried out by the Handmaids themselves – is about to take place. June runs into another Handmaid, Alma, who asks if June has seen Moira. June says she has not, “Not since the Red Center.” Then a very pregnant Janine, sitting a few rows up, turns around and says, “She’s dead.” June asks, “Janine, who’s dead?” “Moira,” Janine responds. “She tried to run away. They caught her and sent her to the Colonies. So, she’s dead. She’s dead by now.”³¹ These mentions make clear that the Colonies are used to terrorize the Handmaids and keep them from getting out of line. At this point in the narrative, the Colonies are more of an idea – a myth – than an actual place, one with express ideological purpose; that is, to ensure total submission of the Handmaids.

The Colonies are brought up again in other episodes of the first season. In Episode 4, for example, Alexis Bledel’s Handmaid Emily (known as “Ofglen” in reference to her Commander, Glen) is brought to trial for being a “gender traitor” (i.e. for being a lesbian) and is sentenced to redemption.³² In the novel, Ofglen dies by suicide. In the series, Emily lives and is sent to the Colonies not to be seen again in the present-day scenes of the first season. Later, in Episode 8, June is shocked to run into Moira at Jezebels, a nightclub and brothel that caters to Commanders and foreign diplomats where certain women in Gilead are sent to work as prostitutes.³³ June believed that Moira had been sent to the

³⁰ “Offred,” *The Handmaid’s Tale*, created by Bruce Miller, Season 1, Episode 1, MGM Television, 26 April 2017, Hulu. ³¹ Ibid.

³² “Nolite te Bastardes Carborundorum,” *The Handmaid’s Tale*, created by Bruce Miller, Season 1, Episode 4, MGM Television, 3 May 2017, Hulu.

³³ “Jezebels,” *The Handmaid’s Tale*, created by Bruce Miller, Season 1, Episode 8, MGM Television, 31 May 2017, Hulu.

Colonies for running away. Moira tells June she chose this posting rather than go to the Colonies for what she understood would be a slow, painful death. In other words, the threat of being declared an “unwoman” and being sent to the Colonies worked on Moira, who opted to live a life as a degraded sex slave rather than be sent away.

According to a map of Gilead seen in the final episode of Season 2 (“The Word”), the Colonies are located in what is now the American West, Midwest, and Southwest.³⁴ Despite hearing about the Colonies throughout the first season, the audience does not actually visit the region until the second episode of the second season, “Unwomen.” This episode takes up Emily’s story after she has been sent to this contaminated place to perform hard labor tilling the soil to regenerate it for food production. This episode signals the connection between the Colonies and the western – particularly more recent dystopian imagery – through cinematic and color choices.³⁵

The women prisoners of the Colonies dig into the destroyed earth in an effort to rejuvenate it for future agricultural use. Situated in the actual American West and similar to parts of the region that have been sacrificed for atomic testing and uranium extraction, the Colonies occupy land that has been decimated and contaminated, possibly by industrial pollution, possibly by a nuclear bomb. Unlike the cities of the new Republic of Gilead, where the setting is punctuated by sharp contrasts of color and women wear clothes of rich pigments that render them easily recognizable according to their caste – with teal worn by the Commanders’ Wives, members of the powerful elite class; brown by the Aunts, the women responsible for training and punishing Handmaids; green by the Marthas, tasked with housekeeping duties; and blood red by the Handmaids, women assigned to Commanders to bear children for the future of Gilead – the Colonies are essentially a colorless gray, with the unwomen who have been sent there wearing clothing that blends in with the ominous, leaden landscape.

The first glance of the Colonies is of a sepia-toned steaming ditch. The camera moves along the ditch as ominous music plays over the scene. There is burned-out brush on either side of the frame. The camera then pans up from the ditch to reveal four women on horseback – the four horse(wo)men of the Apocalypse, perhaps: harbingers of the final judgment, but also a moment that can be interpreted as granting the possibility of repentance.

³⁴ “The Word,” *The Handmaid’s Tale*, created by Bruce Miller, Season 2, Episode 13, MGM Television, 11 July 2018, Hulu. Again, the location of the Colonies is not specified in the novel; it is only in the visual realm that the Colonies become associated with the American West.

³⁵ “Unwomen,” *The Handmaid’s Tale*, created by Bruce Miller, Season 2, Episode 2, MGM Television, 25 April 2018, Hulu.



Figure 1. Long shot of unwomen working the land. Note Aunts on horseback at the back. ©2024 Hulu (Hulu/George Kraychuk – credit).

They are the Aunts responsible for overseeing the work the unwomen do at the Colonies, mostly ensuring that they do not pause for very long throughout the workday. They are wearing gas masks, their brown clothing mimicking the brown, dead landscape. Behind them marches a motley crew of imprisoned women wearing grayish blue frocks and head scarfs. They are coughing but not talking. The landscape in the distance is vast and empty, with rolling hills and hints of green and pink. But mostly it is a dingy grayish brown.

The women prisoners till the topsoil, an attempt to restore the marred earth for (re)production and cultivation. Two Aunts walk among them. Like the Aunts on horseback, these Aunts are wearing gas masks, the women doing the work are not. Steam – smoke, stench? – is everywhere. A conveyor belt carries to trucks bags filled with dirt, removed to reveal more generative land. These bags – marked with the radioactive warning symbol – dot the landscape. In a long shot, we see white yurt-style buildings and long structures covered in blue tarps, and a lookout tower made of wood. Women in gray are at work on the hillside. Half of the hill is covered in ash; the other half is cleared. Dead trees line the top of the hill. An ominous gray sky blankets the scene. The working women's clothing is rags, tattered and worn (Figure 1).

The unwomen are seen in silhouette with farm equipment – hoes, sickles, and shovels, the glow of the sun diffused by smog in the background. There is an Aunt galloping on horseback with the vast and beautiful – if sinister – western sky as backdrop. “We wanted it to be beautiful,” showrunner Bruce Miller tells *Variety* writer Amber Dowling. “Startling but beautiful because that’s one of the things in Gilead and the way we shoot the show:



Figure 2. Unwomen in close-up. ©2024 Hulu (Hulu/George Kraychyk – credit).

beautiful and awful often go hand-in-hand.”³⁶ This romantic awfulness connects directly with the images and sounds of the classic western, as an old church bell rings and all the women kneel to pray. “It’s a church of redemption,” Miller explains, using the language of the Western genre, “where people are earning their place back into the good grace of God by performing labor.”³⁷ Viewers then see a close-up of the unwomen’s faces, burned with peeling skin. Like their clothing and the landscape itself, their faces are cracked and gray. They have difficulty breathing, even speaking or standing upright. In many ways, these initial images of the Colonies are redolent of western films, particularly with an emphasis on landscape and a homestead teetering between deterioration and incorporation. The sound of wind whipping across the land as moving metal signs squeak in the distance offers aural familiarity. The half-finished bell tower is reminiscent of that which we see in western films – typically understood as a symbol of progress.³⁸ Even the barracks where the women live are suggestive of the beginnings of a western town: wooden, rustic, incomplete (Figure 2).

³⁶ Amber Dowling, “The Handmaid’s Tale’ Team on Crafting the Colonies as ‘Romantic’ Purgatory,” *Variety*, 9 May 2018, at <https://variety.com/2018/tv/features/the-handmaids-tale-bruce-miller-artisans-crafting-the-colonies-interview-1202791821>.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Examples of movies that utilize the bell tower include *Bells of San Angelo* (William Witney, 1947); *High Noon* (Fred Zinneman, 1952); *3:10 to Yuma* (Delmer Daves, 1957); *3:10 to Yuma* (James Mangold, 2007); *The Magnificent Seven* (John Sturges, 1960). For more on the imagery seen in classic westerns see Michael Budd, “A Home in the Wilderness: Visual Imagery in John Ford’s Westerns,” *Cinema Journal*, 16, 1 (1976), pp. 62–75.

Inside the barracks after a day of grueling work, the women prepare to sleep. Emily, a former university professor with a PhD in biology from Harvard, acts as a medic, helping other women as their skin and nails fall off, or their teeth fall out. They joke with each other in ways forbidden in Gilead. For example, after Emily helps a friend deal with the deterioration of her fingernails, the friend jokes, “best nail place in town,” to which Emily responds, “give me a good review on Yelp,” quips suggesting a longing for the albeit gendered banality of the time before Gilead – simplicity and nostalgia so central to the western myth. In such a rugged and unforgiving landscape, these women are finding again their more authentic selves, lost in the highly regimented society of Gilead. Their transformation is akin to what Tompkins argues impels a person toward the frontier: “Fear of losing [her] identity drives a [wo]man west, where the harsh conditions of life force [her] [wo]manhood into being.”³⁹

Significantly, despite the intention of Gilead authorities, sending women to the Colonies can be liberating. Even the term “unwomen” can be emancipatory: unwomen are purged from the tyrannical, hypergendered space of Gilead, in which their only options are to serve men – as wives, housekeepers and cooks, handmaids, or prostitutes – and sent to the oppressive yet somehow freeing space of the Colonies. No longer defined by their gender, women in the Colonies do not submit to the whims of men, but instead are able to forge bonds with other women in ways that are completely proscribed in Gilead itself. Women fall in love there; they help each other, nurture each other. They know their real names; what previously had been forbidden and learned only through whispers is now spoken freely. In the Colonies, former Handmaids nurse other former Handmaids, former Marthas, former prostitutes; when someone dies of overwork or radiation poisoning, they are buried with dignity and words of love. While the Aunts are ostensibly in charge, they play only a marginal role on-screen. Just as the celebrated hero has done countless times in classic westerns, the unwomen have created a new society in the Colonies in which they are more in control, liberated in a way that had previously been prohibited. Intended to further strip them of their humanity, the Colonies in some ways restore it.

Still in Episode 2 of the second season, the audience get a glimpse of Emily's desire for vengeance and ability to dole out frontier justice. Many westerns tend to embrace violence as a way for the hero to fulfil his (or her) role of protecting a community from any threats to their settlement and prosperity. While violence and killing are part of the hero's role, this is mediated by an individual moral code: that in protecting vulnerable people, the hero is

³⁹ Tompkins, “Language and Landscape,” 4.

representing the side of good. These motives are at the heart of the way Emily deals with the arrival of a Commander's Wife, Mrs. O'Conner (Marisa Tomei), into the Colonies on the prison bus from Gilead after committing adultery. O'Conner is recognizable because of her teal-colored dress. Emily watches the Wife from behind a wall, the wind blowing through her hair and howling through a desolate land. The other women rally around their hatred for the Commander's Wife. She is immediately ostracized by the unwomen, who represent all the women she had abused and allowed her husband to repeatedly rape. Not completely oblivious to the other women's hatred of her but befriended by Emily, O'Conner believes she has found a woman of piety and compassion. But Emily takes the opportunity to secretly poison O'Conner for her crimes against the women of Gilead. While she is choking, Mrs. O'Conner begins to realize what Emily has done. "What did you do? What did you give me? God will save me. God will save me. You will suffer. You will burn in agony for all of eternity," she says to Emily among her gasps. Emily responds, "Every month, you held a woman down while your husband raped her. Some things can't be forgiven." When O'Conner begs Emily to stay and pray with her, Emily coldly replies, "You should die alone."⁴⁰

The next morning, the women are all facing forward toward the camera. An Aunt makes her way through the group from behind, yelling, "there will be consequences!" The camera pulls back in slow motion, revealing a dead Mrs. O'Conner tied to a cross, her body slumped over and her back to the camera. A close-up of the women shows them smiling. As always, the wind is howling over the deadened landscape. A bell rings in the distance and the women disperse.⁴¹ O'Conner's merciless killing by Emily and the joy seen on the faces of the other women prisoners signify a total rebellion against the laws of Gilead and the women who enable them. Social historian Will Wright contends that the "real but limited use of violence to settle differences in the West is simply the final rationale for the transformation of a historical period into a mythical realm in which significant social conflicts and abrupt, clear resolutions can be made both believable and meaningful in a readily understandable way."⁴² Like the often satisfying death of the outlaw and the celebration of vigilantism in so many western films and television series, O'Conner's death symbolizes an empowering and regenerative

⁴⁰ "Unwomen," *The Handmaid's Tale*, created by Bruce Miller, Season 2, Episode 2, MGM Television, 25 April 2018, Hulu.

⁴¹ For more about the sounds commonly used and associated with the western see Kendra Preston Leonard, ed., *Re-locating the Sounds of the Western* (London: Routledge Publishing, 2018).

⁴² Wright, *Six Guns and Society*, 6.



Figure 3. Mrs. O'Conner's merciless killing, unwomen looking on. ©2024 Hulu (Hulu/George Kraychyk – credit).

transformation for the unwomen of the Colonies, as well as the hope of remaking Gilead itself into a more just world (Figure 3).

At the end of Episode 2 of Season 2, Janine arrives in the Colonies, punishment for attempting to jump off a bridge with her baby rather than give the baby up to her Commander and his Wife. While Emily – who has clearly been in the Colonies for months by the time we see her there – has a very dark view of her existence, Janine sees something more hopeful, even beautiful, commenting on the perfection of flowering weeds growing from the damaged earth. There is something romantic about the Colonies that allows Janine and other women a chance to be their authentic selves. In Season 2, Episode 5, “Seeds,” Janine organizes a wedding for two women, creating a moment of true happiness for the couple and for those who witness the ceremony. Later, after one of the women dies, they hold a burial service for her – in sharp contrast to the humiliating public display of execution of rebels in Gilead – as Janine places the flowers she had briefly enjoyed earlier in the hands of the dead woman.⁴³ The Colonies are the only fully female space in

⁴³ “Seeds,” *The Handmaid's Tale*, created by Bruce Miller, Season 2, Episode 5, MGM Television, 16 May 2018, Hulu.

the show, and though the Aunts serve to police the prisoners during the day, the unwomen are mostly on their own. In this way, there is a certain freedom there. Aunt Lydia declares in Episode 1 of Season 2 (“June”) that “there is freedom to and freedom from.”⁴⁴ In the Colonies, women are *free from* raping Commanders, abusive Wives, maniacal Guardians, and spying Eyes. They are also *free to* care for each other, form friendships, and fall in love. Janine’s positivity has an impact on Emily, who admits to Janine that the wedding was beautiful, and implicitly that it was a necessary moment of optimism. This again reflects the ways the mythic West is understood as a place of renewal, of individual agency, of hope – ideas that are also implicit in the community the women of the Colonies have created themselves.

“THE HITHER EDGE”: THE DRAW OF THE AMERICAN WEST

It is clear that Hulu’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* is capitalizing on the iconography and mythos of the American West as a narrative device, tapping into a powerful ideology that continues to make sense to audiences. The symbolic power of the myth has been widely discussed at least since historian Frederick Jackson Turner presented his 1893 thesis “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” at the World Columbia Exposition in Chicago just a few years after the US Census declared the frontier officially closed.⁴⁵ Turner’s thesis posited that America’s unique character and spirit can be explained through its steady advance westward, away from the congested cities of the eastern United States, still suffering under the influence and ideological grip of Europe, toward this land of authenticity, restoration, and rebirth. When Turner presented his paper, in the wake of the official closing of the American wilderness and at the dawn of the twentieth century, Americans were both celebrating progress and wistfully nostalgic for a simpler past, one lost in the push for incorporation. Like Turner, Americans looked toward the West for authenticity and renewal and to find the meaning of America.⁴⁶ Turner’s vision of the settlement of the American West was romanticized, mythologized, and popularized at the time by Buffalo Bill Cody and Theodore Roosevelt, dime novelists, fiction writers, and artists, and later by film and television producers. “Sensing for themselves, as Turner had argued, that the West was such a central force in American life,” John E. O’Connor and Peter C. Rollins write, “Hollywood producers used it as

⁴⁴ “June,” *The Handmaid’s Tale*, created by Bruce Miller, Season 2, Episode 1, MGM Television, 25 April 2018, Hulu.

⁴⁵ Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” *Annual Report of the American Historical Association*, 1893, 197–227, 198.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

a backdrop for a myriad of dramatic relationships and situations that were characteristic of the American experience and American values."⁴⁷

Many scholars have argued that it is the mythic aspect of the story of the West that gives it its resonance. Richard Slotkin defines mythology as "a complex of narratives that dramatizes the world vision and historical sense of a people or culture, reducing centuries of experience into a constellation of compelling metaphors."⁴⁸ Slotkin also maintains that "the primary function of any mythological system is to provide a people with meaningful emotional and intellectual links to its own past."⁴⁹ The myth of the American Republic, the "national creation myth," as Slotkin, Robert G. Athearn, Richard Etulain, Patricia Limerick, Richard White, Richard Drinnon, and others have contended, is that of westward expansion. As Brian Dippie argues, "National myths – even more than heroes, who serve as examples – are instructional devices that, indirectly and painlessly, instill in the citizens those values and beliefs that constitute their country's tradition ... No other area in the United States rivals the trans-Mississippi West as a breeding ground of national myths."⁵⁰

Turner helped crystalize the foundation of the mythic West that has found expression in popular culture and resonated with Americans for well over a century. While Turner's thesis has been challenged for excluding women, African Americans, Native peoples, Asians, and other people of color who either made their way into or already lived in the American West as part of the story of westward expansion, for a critique of Turner, see the unwomen who are sent out west by Gilead to recultivate and nurture the land are imperative to Gilead's nation-building efforts and akin to what Turner classified as a civilizing process of the wilderness.⁵¹ And although, as Tasker argues, "In the broadest terms the Western deals with the formation of America, its articulation of masculine identity bound up with the establishment of white male authority over territory and peoples that seemingly require subjection," in the Colonies "white male authority" is offscreen.⁵² The feminization of the West in the Colonies of *The Handmaid's Tale* allows for both a

⁴⁷ John E. O'Connor and Peter C. Rollins, "Introduction: The West, Westerns, and American Character," in O'Connor and Rollins, *Hollywood's West: The American Frontier in Film, Television, and History* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 1–34, 6.

⁴⁹ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 638.

⁵⁰ Brian Dippie, *Custer's Last Stand: The Anatomy of an American Myth* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1976), 3.

⁵¹ See Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1987).

⁵² Tasker, "Contested Masculinities," 111.

reflection on the traditional ideals of the mythic West as masculine and a critique of the perpetuation of those ideals in the current moment.

While *The Handmaid's Tale* is relevant to the modern world, that the Colonies are entirely populated by women who embody the gendered notions of fertility and rebirth and are tasked with regenerating the land bears more than a fleeting resemblance to the American Women's Land Army of World War I and World War II. Modeled after the British Women's Land Army of World War I, the American Women's Land Army (WLA) brought at first tens of thousands and then millions of women from cities and towns to rural areas of the western United States to fill agricultural jobs left open by men fighting in Europe.⁵³ While the Land Army obviously offered women in the early to mid-twentieth century lives more aligned to the concept of emancipation than the Colonies do, there is something intriguing about the link between the women of the Colonies and the women of the WLA tending to the production of the land in the American West and Southwest to ensure its continual (re)generation, (re)production, and fertility.⁵⁴

Most of the historiography about the WLA rightly explores the ways it pushed back against traditional gender roles of the time by welcoming women into what were generally considered men's jobs. There is less discussion, however, of how agricultural work relates to the gendered concepts of fertility, birth and rebirth, cultivation, and reproduction, as well as gendered food conventions. Traditionally linked to domestic food practices in the maintenance of the family as a patriarchal system, women of the Land Army demonstrate a logical extension of familial ideology. This is analogous to the feminization of the American West in *The Handmaid's Tale*, in which women have also been tasked with rejuvenating the land. More than that, there is tacit commentary in the series about the conventional gendered realities of women and expectations about food, family, and the home under patriarchy. The show is using the idea of working the land as punishment for crimes against Gilead in direct contrast to the ways the women of the WLA had been celebrated as patriotic in newspapers of the

⁵³ For more about the Women's Land Army of World War I and World War II see Stephanie Ann Carpenter, "Regular Farm Girl': The Women's Land Army in World War II," *Agricultural History*, 71, 2 (1997), 163–85; Elaine F. Weiss, *Fruits of Victory: The Woman's Land Army of America in the Great War* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2008); and Weiss, "Before Rosie the Riveter, Farmerettes Went to Work," at www.smithsonianmag.com/history/before-rosie-the-riveter-farmerettes-went-to-work-141638628, 28 May 2009.

⁵⁴ The Women's Land Army was a national effort, with women working in agriculture in New York, Maryland, Virginia, Washington, Oregon, Florida, North Carolina, South Carolina, and other states throughout the war. Carpenter, 170.

early twentieth century.⁵⁵ It is an interesting juxtaposition that highlights both the ways women are reasonably connected to notions of rejuvenation and rebirth on the land and the ways this kind of work is understood as punitive when considered an extension of expectations in the domestic sphere. Here, then, the Colonies both celebrate the democratizing effects of the movement west, where individualism and freedom thrive, and question ideas of fertility and homemaking so wedded to the Cult of Domesticity. The unwomen of the Colonies have broken free from the violent patriarchy of Gilead and the gendered expectations under which they were bound. And they are doing so in a space that not only reifies gendered expectations of home but also (quite literally) excoriates them.

In more sinister ways, the Colonies of *The Handmaid's Tale* reflect the militarization and destruction of the western landscape throughout the twentieth century by the US government. Like all post-apocalyptic narratives set in the American West, and in contradistinction to the utopian impulse of the concept of the mythic West, the dystopian, radioactive landscape of the Colonies can be linked to the real history of western/sacred lands as sacrificial for dangerous and damaging uranium mining and nuclear weapons storage and testing, a situation that ecocritical and cultural-studies scholar Valerie Kuletz calls "nuclear colonialism."⁵⁶ Kuletz argues that traditional Indigenous lands have been sacrificed in the interest of money and power. As such, it is the appropriate location in the Hulu series for a labor colony that punishes women for any action perceived as opprobrious. In essence, the Colonies are a death sentence for the women who are sent there as its acute radioactivity eats away at those who labor without the benefit of gas masks and other protective clothing. The Colonies themselves are a dead landscape that reflects what happened in the true West as a result of the Manhattan Project.

Similar to the legend of the cowboy hero in western films and television series, the story of the Manhattan Project and its legacy, according to Laura Considine, is "the story of men and masculinity." This story focuses "in particular [on] the tragic male figures of the Manhattan Project scientists whose brilliance is matched in size only by the scale of the moral dilemmas they faced in developing atomic weapons." In other words, the stories Americans tell themselves about both the western landscape and its nuclearization lionize masculinity as it is wrapped up in notions of nation and progress. At the same time, these narratives sideline the stories of those on whose labor the

⁵⁵ See, for example, articles in the *Spanish American* (New Mexico), 26 Oct. 1918, 3, col. 4; *Estancia* (New Mexico) *News-Herald*, 29 Aug. 1918, 4, col. 1; *Deming* (New Mexico) *Graphic*, 26 July 1918, 5, col. 2; and *Deming Graphic*, 16 Aug. 1918, 1, col. 5.

⁵⁶ Valerie Kuletz, *The Tainted Desert: Environmental and Social Ruin in the American West* (Oxford: Routledge, 1998).

successes of these moments rely. “Although the nuclear world created by the Manhattan Project story was male and masculinist,” Considine argues, “the workers at assembly lines handling uranium products were often women and generally working-class women.”⁵⁷

Both the destruction of the western landscape and the attempts to rejuvenate it for the good of Gilead can be seen as what Joseph Mascoe calls “nation-building projects,” the irony being that those projects that “pursue the public good through means that are simultaneously corrosive of the social contract ... contaminate the public sphere.” Indeed, much like the “nuclear waste and environmental contamination left from the Cold War,” the women sent to the Colonies – at least those women viewers know more personally – now “pose a new kind of threat to the nation.”⁵⁸ In many ways, nuclear colonialism in the American West and Southwest serves as a Cold War extension of Manifest Destiny, the idea that taking control of the entire continent was both a moral obligation and divinely ordained, an ideology subscribed to by the United States of the nineteenth century and fictionally the nation of Gilead in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Just as the lands of the West and the Southwest had been sacrificed to the US government in favor of weapons testing and uranium mining, the unwomen of Gilead have been sacrificed for the good of the nation. And just as those communities who have been heavily impacted by the devastation of these lands in the actual West and Southwest have been impelled to endeavor to bring them back to life, the women of the Colonies are forced to regenerate the landscape in *The Handmaid’s Tale* and reimburse this infertile and barren landscape with their own fecundity.

CONCLUSION

The tragedy of the Colonies in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is the same tragedy that has plagued the American West for decades. Both born of mythology, the redemption sought by Gilead for the unwomen and promised by the West of the Colonies is untenable and unattainable. Ultimately, neither Emily nor Janine is redeemed in the Colonies, at least not in the ways Gilead had hoped. Instead, they both move further West, to join June and the resistance with the hope of fully realizing the optimism Janine had expressed when she first arrived. In Season 3, Episode 2, “Mary and

⁵⁷ Laura Considine, “Rethinking the Beginning of the ‘Nuclear Age’ through Telling Feminist Nuclear Stories,” *Zeitschrift für Friedens- und Konfliktforschung*, 12 Dec. 2023, 185–93, 187.

⁵⁸ Joseph Mascoe, *The Nuclear Borderlands: The Manhattan Project in Post-Cold War New Mexico*, new edn (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 18, 25.

Martha,” we find out that there is also a resistance movement that’s working “out west somewhere.”⁵⁹ While regeneration is yet a myth, it makes sense that the West of the imagination – that of freedom and renewal – continues to be the space of resistance to the gender oppression under the Gilead regime.

Most critical explorations of the show have focused on the series as dystopian and feminist, and as science and speculative fiction.⁶⁰ This essay, however, has made place central to the analysis as a way of underscoring the significance of the American West as a site of contemplation and transformation. The “inherent strange familiarity” of the science fiction western, American cultural-studies scholar Neil Campbell argues, “jars the viewer into a space of reflection, a critical dialogue with the form, its assumptions and histories, moving us to think differently and better about not only the history and assumptions of the genre itself but also about the historical realities that Westerns mirror back to us.”⁶¹ While *The Handmaid’s Tale* is decidedly not a western, the scenes that take place in the Colonies push us to reconsider the presumptions of the genre, western history, and the myth itself. By re-creating the West as truly female, the series prompts viewers to reflect on the history of the West and western myth, on restrictive notions of gender, on the history of nuclear and other colonialisms and systems of oppression, and on the way these ideas resonate through the familiar and meaningful iconography of the American West.

Tompkins argues that the

West seems to offer escape from the conditions of life in modern industrial society ... The desert light and the desert space, the creak of saddle leather and the sun beating

⁵⁹ The audience find this out when Rita says to June, “Alison’s not going to Canada. She’s going deeper in; resistance cell out west somewhere.” “Mary and Martha,” *The Handmaid’s Tale*, created by Bruce Miller, Season 3, Episode 2, MGM Television, 5 June 2019, Hulu.

⁶⁰ See, for example, Heather Hendershot, “The Handmaid’s Tale as Utopian Allegory: Stars and Stripes Forever, Baby,” *Film Quarterly*, 72, 1 (2018), 13–25; Courtney Landis, “A Woman’s Place Is in the Resistance : Self, Narrative, and Performative Femininity as Subversion and Weapon in *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” MA thesis, Millersville University of Pennsylvania; and Aino-Kaisa Koistinen and Hanna Samola, review of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Science Fiction Film and Television*, 11, 2 (2018), 347–51. Other critics have discussed the racial undertones of the show. See, for example, Meredith Neville-Shepard, “‘Better Never Means Better for Everyone’: White Feminist Necropolitics and Hulu’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 109, 1 (2023), 2–25.

⁶¹ Neil Campbell, “Post-western Cinema,” in Nicolas S. Witschi, ed., *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American West* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011), 409–24, 414. See also Michael K. Johnson, *Hood Doo Cowboys and Bronze Buckaroos: Conceptions of the African American West* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014).

down, the horses' energy and force – these things promise a translation of the self into something purer and more authentic, more intense, more real.⁶²

As the unwomen of the Colonies in *The Handmaid's Tale* labor to impart their fertility into the blackened soil, so too have they become their more authentic selves, away from the spying Eyes and hypergendered expectations of Commanders and their Wives in the cities of Gilead. In this world altogether populated by women, they have developed their own culture of openness and truth, of justice and social harmony. At the Red Center in Season 1, Episode 1, Aunt Lydia tells the Handmaids in training, "They made such a mess of everything. They filled the air with chemicals and radiation and poison. So God whipped up a special plague, a plague of infertility."⁶³ Viewers can only assume that the "they" Lydia is referencing are the men of the nation prior to the establishment of Gilead. It is now up to women, particularly June, Moira, Janine, and Emily, the latter two reinvigorated by their relative independence in the Colonies and all four rejuvenated by the promises of the American West, to redeem an entire nation and usher in a more equitable and promising future.

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I am a cultural-studies scholar with a primary focus on the ways the themes and significance of the mythic American West emerge in and intersect with science fiction. I received my PhD in American studies from the University of New Mexico and am currently an Assistant Professor of American Culture and Literature at Bilkent University in Ankara, Turkey. My first book, *Imagining Tombstone: The Town Too Tough to Die*, was released by the University Press of Kansas in 2016. Recent articles include "Home. Family. Future: Authenticity, the Frontier Myth, and *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes*," published in *ContactZone* in the spring of 2022, and "Searching for Wyatt Earp in Anatolia: The American West in the Turkish Imagination," published in the *Journal of Arizona History* in the fall of 2022.

⁶² Tompkins, "Language and Landscape," 4.

⁶³ "Offred," *The Handmaid's Tale*, created by Bruce Miller, Season 1, Episode 1, MGM Television, 26 April 2017, Hulu.