

# Whispering without Sound: Patriarchal Historiography of Women's Reproduction and Herstories in *The Cider House Rules* and *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Building upon historians' challenge of reading patriarchal archives on illegal abortion, this paper examines the representation of women's voices and silence in John Irving's *The Cider House Rules* (1985) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). *Cider House* illustrates a male utopia in which white, male, middle-class doctors benevolently exert control over the helpless women's bodies. *Handmaid's Tale* on the other hand envisions a dystopian world where powerless women exercise their own agency no matter how limited. While historians of illegal abortions imagine an alternative discourse in which women talk intimately about their reproductive choices, Irving reproduces the language that real-life male doctors used in pre-Roe America. By contrast, not unlike the historians who listen to the reverberations of women's lost voices in the patriarchal archives of illegal abortions, *Handmaid's Tale* reinscribes women's soundless but subversive voices: turning the patriarchal history into a collection of herstories, *Handmaid's Tale* reconstructs the female network of care.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Tropes of voice are fundamental to the cultural politics of feminism. From Seneca Falls to the #MeToo movement, women's struggles have consistently centered on finding and raising their voices, which have often been ignored and misunderstood in the patriarchal culture of the United States. In *The Mother of All Questions*, feminist writer Rebecca Solnit

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writes: “Violence against women is often against our voices and our stories. It is a refusal of our voices, and what a voice means: the right to self-determination, to participation, to consent or dissent, to live and participate, to interpret and narrate.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, women’s empowerment often starts with breaking the silence. Indeed, two of the most recent and powerful films about sexual violence are very aptly titled *She Said* (Schrader 2022) and *Women Talking* (Polley 2022).

The rhetoric of voices and silence is crucial to understanding the history of illegal abortion in the United States, particularly in light of the U.S. Supreme Court’s recent decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* (2022), which overturned *Roe v. Wade* (1973). While a significant number of pregnant women in pre-*Roe* America made their own decisions about their bodies and chose to have illegal abortions, they were mostly forced to not talk about their experiences in public. But women were not completely silent about abortion in pre-*Roe* America. Sharing information about their reproductive choices through an intimate network of female friends and relatives and male allies, women did talk about abortion as “an open secret” as historian Leslie J. Reagan discusses in her seminal study *When Abortion Was a Crime: Women, Medicine, and Law in the United States, 1867–1973*.<sup>2</sup>

Historians like Reagan have struggled with the relative lack of historical sources that give voices to the American women who chose to terminate their pregnancies when abortion was illegal. Studies of illegal abortion have drawn mostly upon patriarchal archives—legal documents, medical literature, press coverage, and other such materials—in which men defined the significance of women’s reproduction. In pre-*Roe* America, men exerted control over women’s voices as well as their bodies. In her study of criminal abortion in California, historian Alicia Gutierrez-Romine notes, “[b]ecause of their illegality and because of the public shame often associated with illicit sex, few women spoke openly about their abortions. Furthermore, the stories of abortion that did come to light were those that were fatal.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, women’s stories on abortion were ventriloquially represented in the courtroom by male physicians who conducted their postmortem. Therefore, writing a history of illegal abortion is an attempt to carefully listen for the faint echo of women’s voices that have been distorted and muted in patriarchal archives.<sup>4</sup>

This study builds upon historians’ challenge of reading patriarchal archives on illegal abortion. It examines the representation of women’s voices and silence in John Irving’s *The Cider House Rules* (1985) and

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), questioning the contested significance of the unilateral (re)construction of patriarchal historiography in these two speculative fictions.<sup>5</sup> In so doing, this paper draws upon Asian-American studies scholar Frances Tran's intriguing idea of speculation as an untidy reflection, that allows us to not only "retrace the violence and occlusions of the archive" but also "create openings for other narratives to come into focus."<sup>6</sup> Tran's interdisciplinary analysis of the historical and cultural representation of the lost voices of female "coolies"—an extremely small number of indentured Chinese female laborers—opens a path for reading patriarchal archives on illegal abortion as speculative fictions and conversely, reading speculative fictions as part of patriarchal archives.

Despite Irving and Atwood's common focus on women's limited reproductive choices, the two novels depict very different worlds. *Cider House* illustrates a type of male utopia in which white, male, middle-class doctors benevolently exert control over the helpless women's bodies. *Handmaid's Tale* on the other hand envisions a dystopian world where powerless women exercise their own agency no matter how limited. While *Cider House* focuses on male doctors' choice to perform illegal abortions, most of the pregnant women in this novel are helpless victims who lack agency or voices of their own. Irving's speculative fiction stands in remarkable contrast to historians' untidy speculations on women's lost voices in patriarchal archives on illegal abortions. While historians like Reagan imagine an alternative discourse in which women talk intimately about their reproductive choices, Irving reproduces the language that real-life male doctors—most notably his grandfather who was a renowned obstetrician—used in pre-*Roe* America.

By contrast, envisioning a dystopian theocracy in which ruling elites force "handmaids" to bear children, *Handmaid's Tale* consistently focuses on women's struggles to find their voices. The handmaids have no freedom of speech in this dystopian world; nevertheless, not unlike the historians who listen to the reverberations of women's lost voices in the patriarchal archives of illegal abortions, the novel reinscribes women's soundless but subversive voices. Turning the patriarchal history into a collection of herstories, *Handmaid's Tale* reconstructs the female network of care.

However, this novel also foregrounds male historians who appropriate herstories and misrepresent their significance. Fictional "Historical Notes" at the end of this novel—a historical lecture given by a male historian in the post-Gilead era—recount how women's dead voices are overwritten with a patriarchal understanding of history. While *Cider House* does not question

its reproduction of male doctors' scientific knowledge of women's bodies, the metafictional and metahistorical narration in *Handmaid's Tale* critiques how men's purportedly "authentic history" obscures the little agency that women have over their bodies.

## 2. *THE CIDER HOUSE RULES*: PATERNALISTIC CHOICES ABOUT WOMEN'S REPRODUCTION AND THE RHETORIC OF SILENCE

Set in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, *Cider House* envisions a type of male utopia in which white, male, middle-class doctors perform illegal abortions. The novel centers around the protagonist Homer Wells, who grows up in an orphanage called St. Cloud's. Homer works at St. Cloud's as a medical assistant for Dr. Larch, the founder of the orphanage who also serves as a surrogate father figure for Homer. Although Dr. Larch secretly provides illegal abortions, Homer has "pro-life" values and refuses to help him. This moral conflict with Dr. Larch prompts Homer to leave St. Cloud's. Yet, when Dr. Larch dies, Homer, by then an obstetrician himself, returns to the orphanage and provides illegal abortions. Ultimately, *Cider House* is a kind of *bildungsroman* about a white male doctor who transitions from "pro-life" to "pro-choice" values.

Nevertheless, *Cider House's* advocacy for women's reproductive choice is equivocal at best. Focusing exclusively on male doctors' choice to perform illegal abortions, the novel downplays the significance of women's rights to control their own bodies. In the novel, the language of choice works as a cloak under which men in actuality reinforce their own right to choose. For example, when Dr. Larch discusses the pros and cons of abortion with Homer, he asks: "Do I interfere? ... When absolutely helpless women tell me that they simply *can't* have an abortion, that they simply *must* go through with having another—and yet another—orphan: do I interfere? .... I give them what they want: an orphan or an abortion."<sup>7</sup> Here, Dr. Larch states that choices should be made by women, not male doctors. Yet, it is difficult to take his comment at face value. The novel rarely depicts a pregnant woman making a decision of her own and represents Dr. Larch as a medical expert who benevolently makes reproductive choices for "absolutely helpless women."

Furthermore, *Cider House* narrows down women's choices to the two options given by Dr. Larch—an orphan or an abortion—excluding the possibility of financially and emotionally supporting single mothers in raising their children. Activist Loretta J. Ross and historian Rickie Solinger

define reproductive justice as “(1) the right *not* to have a child; (2) the right to *have* a child; and (3) the right to *parent* children in safe and healthy environments.”<sup>8</sup> While the options given by Dr. Larch satisfy (1) and (2), they do not guarantee (3). The limitations of women’s choices in *Cider House* are emblematic of the realities that were faced by a large number of women in pre-*Roe* America, who were forced to give up their babies for adoption. Stigmatized as bad decision makers, countless single mothers were deprived of their right to parent.<sup>9</sup> Men’s utopia can be women’s dystopia: *Cider House* is paternalistic in its limitation of women’s choices.

The absence of women’s voices in this novel about women’s reproductive choice epitomizes what feminist scholar Tania Modleski calls “feminism without women.”<sup>10</sup> In *Cider House*, male doctors rarely listen to pregnant women. For example, when one pregnant woman arrives at St. Cloud’s, she does not say a word in response to Dr. Larch’s questions. As if to compensate for the lack of women’s agency, the novel’s narrator identifies with Dr. Larch’s perspective and observes her body:

Dr. Larch bent so close to the speculum, he had to hold his breath. The smell of sepsis and putrefaction was strong enough to gag him if he breathed or swallowed, and the familiar, fiery colors of her infection (even clouded by her discharge) were dazzling enough to blind the intrepid or the untrained. But Wilbur Larch started to breathe again, slowly and regularly; it was the only way to keep a steady hand. He just kept looking and marveling at the young woman’s inflamed tissue; it looked hot enough to burn the world. Now do you see, Homer? Larch asked himself. Through the speculum, he felt her heat against his eye.<sup>11</sup>

While the nameless woman is turned into a “mere body” without any subjectivity, Dr. Larch is an “embodied subject” who has the power to diagnose her body and make the right decision about it.<sup>12</sup> Ignoring the woman’s obvious pain, the story focuses on Dr. Larch’s daring act of confronting her putrefying body. Moreover, Dr. Larch imagines speaking to Homer in the middle of the surgery; the nameless woman is a medium without agency through which white male doctors secretly debate about women’s reproduction.<sup>13</sup> Dr. Larch cares more about Homer than the woman right in front of him, who needs urgent care.

Women in *Cider House* are generally represented as “absolutely helpless” victims who do not have voices of their own. As literary critic

Helena Wahlström discusses, women in this novel “are predominantly patients at the mercy of male physicians.”<sup>14</sup> For example, young Homer Wells observes the women who deliver babies in St. Cloud’s and leave them there for adoption: “The women who boarded the coach did not look back, or even at each other. They didn’t even speak.... Importantly, Homer knew they did not look delivered of *all* their problems when they left. No one he had seen looked more miserable than those women; he suspected it was no accident that they left in darkness.”<sup>15</sup> The women, who come to St. Cloud’s to give up their babies, are represented as “miserable” and nameless others whom the male protagonists cannot fully understand and with whom they are not willing to communicate. Reagan notes the limitations of the rhetoric of silence in understanding the history of abortion: “Emphasizing the ‘silence’ surrounding abortion inaccurately represents the history of abortion and ignores what women did say in other arenas ... We need a more nuanced understanding of the ability of women to voice their concerns and of the limits on women’s speech.”<sup>16</sup> Placing women into the realm of “darkness” and imagining a male utopia in which benevolent men save powerless women, *Cider House* refuses to speculate on an alternative reality in which women struggle to retain their reproductive choice.

### 3. RESUSCITATING THE VOICES OF “MARIES AND MARYS”: SPECULATIVE HISTORIES OF ILLEGAL ABORTION

While *Cider House* suppresses the voices of women who choose to have illegal abortions, historians have listened carefully for the reverberation of their voices in the patriarchal archives.<sup>17</sup> These voices are rarely represented in patriarchal archives because women in pre-*Roe* America could not talk openly about abortion due to its illegality. Nevertheless, historians like Reagan have gathered the fragments of women’s muted voices in the patriarchal archives and demonstrated that women in pre-*Roe* America were not always “absolutely helpless” victims. In spite of abortion being criminalized, numerous women underwent the procedure.<sup>18</sup> Redefining abortions in pre-*Roe* America as an “open secret,” Reagan argues: “The publicly articulated and published discussion of abortion rarely included the voices or perspectives of women who had abortions, except to provide shocking examples of depraved womanhood. Women who had abortions did not intervene to explain themselves, but instead, in other nonpublic arenas, made their perspectives known and acted to obtain a much-needed method for preventing births.”<sup>19</sup> In pre-*Roe* America, numerous women

maintained “an unarticulated, alternative, popular morality” that respected women’s choice to abort; it was not open to the public and thus illegible in patriarchal archives, but silently shared by countless women.<sup>20</sup>

When reconstructing women’s lost voices, these historians’ works tend to be speculative in nature. Although women’s alternative morality about their reproductive choices is unwritten and mostly missing from official records, it is tangible if we cautiously trace these historians’ painstaking endeavors to imagine different ways of listening to women’s voices in pre-*Roe* America. For example, in examining an inquest on a lethal abortion, Reagan ruminates over the significance of women’s intimate bonds and their limitations. When Mary Schwartz, a worker at the Illinois Meat Company, had an abortion, she depended entirely on the help of her coworker Marie Hansen. Marie not only told Mary the name of the doctor from whom she had obtained an abortion three years before but negotiated with that doctor to reduce the price of Mary’s abortion and loaned Mary five dollars. Furthermore, Marie accompanied Mary to the doctor’s office, brought Mary back to her own home after the operation, and took her to the doctor again when her condition deteriorated. We can infer this from the legal record. However, there is something the patriarchal archive does not note. Reagan speculates: “[t]he grief that [Marie] must have felt when she testified at her friend’s inquest was muted. The only hint of her feelings is that she had to be told to ‘talk up a little louder.’”<sup>21</sup>

A work of speculation—“to create room for those who have been denied room to live and breathe within ... hegemonic time-spaces”—is necessary here because women’s voices are not fully represented in patriarchal archives.<sup>22</sup> What would Marie have felt during her testimony? Why was her voice so weak? What would Marie and Mary have discussed in her bedroom? Since patriarchal archives remain silent, our reflections are necessarily inconclusive. Nevertheless, we can acquire new perspectives when we think about Marie and Mary and numerous other women like them with care. Yes, they were in many ways powerless victims of patriarchy; yet, they were more than victims: hundreds of thousands of Maries and Marys might have survived illegal abortions, protecting each other from a patriarchal society that controlled women’s reproductive rights. Speculative histories of illegal abortion embody what Queer Studies philosopher Eve Sedgwick calls “reparative criticism,” which as Tran suggests is “not to change or fix the past, or, for that matter, the archive, but to suggest a different vocabulary and practice of encounter.”<sup>23</sup> Women in pre-*Roe* America would have had intimate languages to talk in, even if they were

somehow coded and concealed in the public sphere.<sup>24</sup> It is impossible to locate such languages in patriarchal archives, but these historical records give us clues about what numerous Maries and Marys might have talked about.

Accordingly, histories of illegal abortion can and should be read as a variation of speculative fiction. It is as if women in pre-*Roe* America had lived in a multiverse in which two different realities coexisted: in one reality, abortion was officially prohibited and women had to obey the patriarchal rules; in another, abortion was tolerated, if not accepted, and women's reproductive choices were supported by their female friends, relatives, and male allies. The first universe represents Maries' and Marys' silenced voices as those of bad decision makers, while in the second universe, Maries and Marys have intimate conversations about their reproductive choices. Women in pre-*Roe* America were forced to live simultaneously in these two different universes, jumping from one to another according to their needs and circumstances. Marie's silence in the courtroom suggests a rupture between these two universes. Reagan's speculative history exemplifies the struggle to listen to voices from the second universe, whose distant echo can be faintly heard in the remnants of women's silenced voices in the patriarchal archives.

#### 4. REPRODUCTION OF PATRIARCHAL ARCHIVES AND THE MYTH OF THE "BACK ALLEY BUTCHER"

While speculative histories of illegal abortions critically explore the lack of women's voices in patriarchal archives, Irving's speculative fiction replicates the language male doctors used in pre-*Roe* America. At the end of the novel, Irving clarifies in "Author's Notes" that in describing the medical conditions of women, he relied on his grandfather Dr. Frederck C. Irving's reports in his obstetric texts. After graduating from Harvard Medical School in 1910, Irving's grandfather worked as chief of staff at the Boston Lying-in Hospital and became William Lambert Richardson Professor of Obstetrics at Harvard.<sup>25</sup> Judging from young Dr. Larch's background—a Harvard Medical School graduate who had worked at the Boston Lying-in Hospital—we can infer that he is, to some extent, modeled after Irving's grandfather.

Furthermore, in his memoir *My Movie Business*, Irving expresses his admiration for his grandfather: "Although he scarcely knew me, I always wanted Grandfather Irving to be proud of me. ... You may wonder why it



matters to me—namely, what Dr. Irving might have thought of the novel and the film of *The Cider House Rules*. But it is not as a famous physician that I remember my grandfather; it is as a *writer*.”<sup>26</sup> Just as Dr. Larch conducts an imaginary conversation with Homer about the pros and cons of women’s reproductive choices, Irving imagines talking with his grandfather. Irving is more interested in seeking his grandfather’s opinion about the novel than first-hand accounts of women who experienced illegal abortions. Thus, patriarchal archives are passed on to the next generation, with very little attention to women’s voices.

Reproducing his grandfather’s archive, Irving exclusively allocates scientific language to white male doctors. For example, Dr. Larch’s first obstetric delivery is based on Irving’s grandfather’s experience; throughout this scene, Irving comically portrays the trouble his grandfather experienced as an inexperienced obstetrician. The Lithuanian family whose home Dr. Larch visits to perform the delivery cannot understand English, and when he squeezes the new mother’s uterus through her abdominal wall to separate the placenta, her whole family attacks him because they think he is trying to hurt her.<sup>27</sup> The miscommunication between Dr. Larch and the immigrant family is very suggestive: in this novel, enlightening and authentic knowledge about science belongs exclusively to white male doctors. In this scene, Irving represents immigrant women as thoroughly ignorant about their bodies. At another point, the patient’s mother shows Dr. Larch a large mole on her face using “a strange language of gestures,” and Dr. Larch believes she is “feeble-minded.”<sup>28</sup> If science is, unsurprisingly, the preserve of men, women in this novel are defined by their ignorance and silence.

The contrast between men’s scientific knowledge and women’s ignorance is further emphasized by Irving’s sensational portrayal of the vices of the underworld businesses of foreign-born female abortionists. To legitimize Larch’s benevolent but illegal offers of abortion, *Cider House* needs to provide not only the detailed background of Larch as a fully trained and skillful doctor, but also the stereotyped image of an unskilled and ignorant abortionist called Mrs. Santa Claus. When a young woman runs into Dr. Larch’s office, she is suffering from terrible hemorrhaging and infection caused by a failed abortion conducted in Mrs. Santa Claus’ unsanitary clinic. Her face and neck have also been severely beaten because she could not pay the clinic’s fee: women’s bodies are abused when paternalistic male doctors lose control over them. Furthermore, when Dr. Larch visits Mrs. Santa Claus’ clinic, he hears screams of women while a choir sings German *Lieder* next door, which is supposed to ease a woman’s pain during an

abortion in place of anesthetics. By ridiculing the stereotypes of unscientific and unsafe reproductive procedures practiced by female immigrants, Irving implies who should “play God” when the law is absent. Even if both Larch and foreign-born female abortionists are on the wrong side of the law, Larch’s criminality is benevolent, even salvific.

Irving’s stereotypical representation of the female abortionist is a far cry from the reality of those who performed abortions in pre-*Roe* America. Solinger calls such representations the myth of the “back alley butcher” and describes the central part it plays in the discourse of “pro-choice” supporters as “the most widely accepted justification for granting women reproductive choice.”<sup>29</sup> In the late twentieth century, many “pro-choice” supporters, including Irving, justified abortion by stressing the dangers of the underworld business of abortionists in sensational ways. However, Irving’s reinforcement of the myth of the back alley butcher obscures pregnant women’s agency by emphasizing their victimhood. Solinger observes that pregnant women in pre-*Roe* America were not always “helpless, desperate victims”: “these abortion-seeking women could be simultaneously, or alternately, awash in terrified helplessness *and* terribly focused on finding a way out, determined not to be victims of sex, of their sexual partners, of their bodies, of the law.”<sup>30</sup> In contrast, *Cider House* by repressing women’s voices turns the nuanced history of abortion into a melodrama between benevolent male doctors and helpless women. White male doctors control women’s bodies in this novel, even if their intention is benevolent.

##### 5. FINDING WOMEN’S VOICES IN PATRIARCHAL ARCHIVES: “AMPUTATED SPEECH” IN *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*

Irving’s obliteration of women’s agency in *Cider House* contrasts strikingly with Atwood’s feminist novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which was published the same year as *Cider House*. *Handmaid’s Tale* highlights women’s limited but existing choices in a nightmarish world where motherhood is controlled by men and the state. In this dystopian novel, Gilead, the religiously fundamentalist state born of a *coup d’état* in the United States, confiscates everything from women: their property, jobs, education, right to read and write, and most significantly, reproductive freedom. Because of toxic pollution and sexually transmitted diseases, most women in Gilead are infertile except for the “handmaids” who are possessed by the Commanders, Gilead’s exclusively male ruling class. In

*Handmaid's Tale*, a child is a very rare national resource that only the ruling class can have access to. Exercising round-the-clock surveillance, Gilead has complete control over women's reproduction; abortion is the most serious crime in *Handmaid's Tale*, and all the obstetricians who helped women have abortions before Gilead are executed. Offred, the female protagonist of *Handmaid's Tale* who calls herself a "two-legged womb," seems to have no choice but to have regular sexual intercourse with the Commander to have his babies.<sup>31</sup>

The patriarchal rules in Gilead are far more oppressive than those in *Cider House*, but the women in *Handmaid's Tale* do not give up their agency even if it is very limited. Their resistance takes many forms. Offred secretly has a relationship with the Commander's chauffeur Nick, who may be one of the members of the underground resistance network against Gilead. Even more audaciously, Offred's best friend Moira attempts to escape from Gilead, supported by the "Underground Femaleroad," which offers shelter to women on the run and helps them cross the border into Canada. In contrast to *Cider House's* exclusive focus on male doctors' choice to perform illegal abortions, *Handmaid's Tale* elaborates on women's rebellion against the patriarchal regime and its limitations. Women in *Handmaid's Tale* are powerless but not helpless.

Gilead's patriarchal control of women is reinforced by its gendered manipulation of language. As the Commander reads from the Bible, Offred recognizes that "[h]e has something we don't have, he has the word."<sup>32</sup> The patriarchal power of Gilead's language is symbolized by its renaming of women; demanding allegiance to the patriarchal discourse, Gilead deprives the handmaids of their original names. Renaming women with derivations of their Commander's names—for example, Offred, Ofglen, and Ofwarren—the totalitarian regime exhibits its dominance over women. Fertile women are valuable assets of the state and possessed by men in power.

Moreover, not unlike women in pre-*Roe* America, the handmaids in this novel are not allowed to speak freely in public. Monitored by the ubiquitous authority, the handmaids are forced to use pseudo-Biblical greetings like "blessed be the fruit" and "may the Lord open (your womb)" that constantly remind them of their obligation to procreate. As literary scholar Dominick M. Grace discusses, "Gilead represents perhaps the most extreme example of textual reductionism, for it reduces all experience to a single perspective, single story."<sup>33</sup> To impose motherhood, the patriarchal discourse of Gilead denies women's multiple voices.

By stripping the handmaids of their voices, Gilead subverts the goals of feminism; the phallogentric language in Gilead severs bonds between women. For example, before the handmaids are assigned to a Commander, they are trained and re-educated in the Rachel and Leah Center by the Aunts, a class of women whose primary role is to oversee the handmaids. In one re-education session, Aunt Helena appropriates the methodology of consciousness raising to make a handmaid confess her traumatic experience of being gang-raped at fourteen and having an abortion. However, the purpose of this group activity is not to make women aware of their sexual oppression and enhance their solidarity. Quite the contrary, Aunt Helena urges other handmaids to participate in a second rape of the woman: they are forced to chant that it was her fault, that she encouraged men to rape her, and that God had taught her a lesson. As Offred and the other women chant these phrases, they start to believe their words and despise the victim. Appropriating feminism, the phallogentric language in Gilead compels the handmaids to blame the victims while reinforcing a sexual double standard.

Nevertheless, learning to “whisper almost without sound,” the handmaids are never silent.<sup>34</sup> In pre-*Roe* America, numerous women maintained their intimate bonds by secretly sharing information about their reproductive choices within their intimate network. Similarly, in *Handmaid’s Tale*, the handmaids reconstruct their female network using “amputated speech.” Forming their lips and inventing coded words—“Mayday” is the password for their underground network—the handmaids challenge Gilead’s patriarchal discourse even if their conversations may have severe consequences.<sup>35</sup> Seeking opportunities for disobedience and rebellion, the handmaids covertly exchange information about other handmaids by word of mouth. As Offred states, “[t]he crimes of others are a secret language among [them].”<sup>36</sup> When Moira escapes from the Rachel and Leah Center, the handmaids share her story “in the semi-darkness, under [their] breath, from bed to bed.”<sup>37</sup> The handmaids’ voices might be nearly soundless, but they are not muted. Offred records their fragmented but empowering voices to retrieve their subjectivity and fight back against the patriarchy.

Listening closely to the voices from the past, Offred is also a historian who questions the overwhelming absence of women’s voices in Gilead’s patriarchal archives. Gilead legitimizes its patriarchal dominance by rewriting history from male points of view. For example, by forcing the handmaids to watch pornographic films in which women are tied up, raped, and mutilated, Aunt Lydia inculcates the idea that the history of Gilead represents a liberation of women. Appropriating feminism’s criticism

of sexual violence, Gilead creates a paternalistic illusion that it rescued women from their dark history. As literary scholar Seohyon Jung argues, the patriarchal temporality of Gilead means for women “a chance to prove their fertility.”<sup>38</sup> Gilead represents its history as linear progress for women. Women in pre-Gilead America are defined by their abuse of sexuality and erased from the history, while women in Gilead are, for the most part, judged by their “biological clock.” Once their fertility decreases, the handmaids are sent to colonies to engage in forced labor.

In opposition to Gilead’s historical revision, Offred carefully seeks traces of women’s lost voices and envisions different ways of understanding women’s history. When Offred searches her room in the Commander’s house, she finds a mysterious faux-Latin phrase “*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*” scratched on the floor of her closet. She tries to decipher the sentence but cannot understand what it means. However, in spite of the illegibility of the text, its context tells her something: this is “an ancient hieroglyph to which the key’s been lost” left by the previous Offred who intended her replacement to read it.<sup>39</sup> Offred speculates on its message:

It pleases me to know that her taboo message made it through, to at least one other person, washed itself up on the wall of my cupboard, was opened and read by me. Sometimes I repeat the words to myself. They give me a small joy. When I imagine the woman who wrote them, I think of her as about my age, maybe a little younger. I turn her into Moira, Moira as she was when she was in college, in the room next to mine: quirky, jaunty, athletic, with a bicycle once, and a knapsack for hiking. Freckles, I think; irreverent, resourceful.<sup>40</sup>

Evoking the feminist metaphor of “waves,” Offred’s reading of this coded message constructs a link between the previous Offred and the current Offred. Furthermore, in Offred’s imagination, the woman turns into Moira, the most rebellious female character in the novel. Recovering her lost memory of pre-Gilead when women were free and unafraid, Offred reconstructs the female network. She later learns that this message literally means “don’t let the bastards grind you down.”<sup>41</sup> Offred’s speculation was thus right on target; Gilead can impose gag rules, but it cannot prevent imaginary communication between the Offreds and their friends.

As a “refugee from the past,” Offred further endeavors to find meanings from shattered remnants of patriarchal archives.<sup>42</sup> As Jung suggests, “[Offred] combines her knowledge from the past with that of the present to

imagine a future that has never been an option for her when she inhabited the normative, patriarchal temporality.”<sup>43</sup> She can imagine a better future only when she listens to women’s lost voices and escapes from Gilead’s linear narrative of progress. When the Commander asks Offred to meet him in his office, he plays Scrabble with her. In addition to this transgressive act, the Commander allows her to read women’s magazines such as *Vogue*, *Mademoiselle*, *Esquire*, and *Ms.* For the Commander, these magazines are nothing more than sexist evidence of lookism. Calling singles bars and high-school blind dates “[t]he meat market,” the Commander emphasizes that pre-Gilead was a horrific time for some women.<sup>44</sup> In contrast, Offred finds “promise” and “an endless series of possibilities” in these magazines. Offred sees these women as powerful and independent, reminding her of her own childhood: “bold, striding, confident, their arms flung out as if to claim space, their legs apart, feet planted squarely on earth.”<sup>45</sup> Although these women do not say anything, Offred’s alternative reading transforms their silent bodies into an embodiment of feminist resistance.

Narrating her own story and recovering women’s lost voices, Offred turns Gilead’s patriarchal history into a collection of herstories. To borrow from Tran’s reading of a speculative fiction about a female coolie, Offred “confronts gaps in the archival record not as spaces that need to be filled but as sites from which we might work collectively toward other modes of knowing and rationality.”<sup>46</sup> The purpose of Offred’s speculation is not to represent a singular, most probable and authentic story as an alternative for Gilead’s patriarchal history; Offred’s speculation is always untidy, and she challenges “the forms of mastery attached to the archive.”<sup>47</sup> For example, when the Commander takes Offred to a secret night club called Jezebel’s, Offred sees Moira and hears from her how she failed to escape from Gilead. Her story has a traumatic ending that Moira herself does not want to talk about, and Offred is disappointed when she hears in Moira’s voice “indifference, a lack of volition.”<sup>48</sup> However, Offred does not simply reiterate Moira’s story. Offred speculates on alternative endings: “Here is what I’d like to tell. I’d like to tell a story about how Moira escaped, for good this time. Or if I couldn’t tell that, I’d like to say she blew up Jezebel’s, with fifty Commanders inside it. I’d like to end with something daring and spectacular, some outrage, something that would benefit her.”<sup>49</sup> Offred is less interested in the facts and historical accuracy; she envisions multiple endings for Moira, criticizing Gilead’s “textual reductionism” that chains women to a linear narrative of procreative temporality.

In *Handmaid’s Tale*, however, the subversive power of Offred’s

alternative herstories is undermined by post-Gilead “Historical Notes” at the end of the novel. Represented as Professor James Darcy Pieixoto’s keynote speech at an academic conference on Gilead in 2195, the “Historical Notes” section clarifies how Pieixoto and his fellow historians transcribed the handmaid’s stories from voices recorded on cassette tapes. However, unlike historians of illegal abortion who create room for those who remain silent in patriarchal archives, Pieixoto shows no interest in the alternative histories that Offred narrates. His lack of interest in women’s history is most evident in his ridicule of the “Underground Femaleroad,” which he jokingly calls the “Underground Frailroad.”<sup>50</sup> In his keynote speech, Pieixoto spends most of his time identifying the Commander and revealing historical facts about Gilead, lamenting that Offred “could have told us much about the workings of the Gileadean empire, had she had the instincts of a reporter or a spy.”<sup>51</sup> For Pieixoto, Offred is a side character whose voice has no influence on the protagonists of the patriarchal history. Pieixoto’s obsession with what he considers historical accuracy and his view of Gilead’s history as linear and singular coincides with Gilead’s patriarchal historiography. As literary scholar David S. Hogsette argues, the “Historical Notes” section illustrates how not to read the handmaids’ herstories because “the political voice of women that breaks from its earlier silenced state can be appropriated by men, thus threatening women again with silence.”<sup>52</sup> Pieixoto “off-read[s]” Offred’s voices like male doctors do in *Cider House*; however, in contrast to *Cider House*’s embrace of patriarchal historiography, *Handmaid’s Tale*’s “Historical Notes” critiques such paternalistic overwriting of women’s reproductive history. Like the male doctors in *Cider House*, Pieixoto fails to be a male ally because he does not listen to herstories.

## 6. LIVING IN THE “GILEADVERSE”: WOMEN’S RESISTANT VOICES SINCE THE RISE OF DONALD TRUMP

Echoes of women’s multiple voices in *Handmaid’s Tale* have been reflected in unpredictable and complicated ways since the 2016 election of Donald Trump as President. Sales of *Handmaid’s Tale* rose 200% after the election, and in 2019 Atwood published a graphic novel version of the book as well as *The Testaments*, a sequel to *Handmaid’s Tale*. In 2017, Hulu also released the first season of a TV adaptation of *Handmaid’s Tale*, which won five Emmy awards, including one for Outstanding Drama Series.<sup>53</sup> *Handmaid’s Tale*’s transmedia popularity shows how Gilead’s nightmare

feels more real to many people since the rise of Trump.<sup>54</sup> Its transmedia representation of women's resistant voices also openly criticizes the patriarchal control of women's reproduction in Gilead and the United States under Trump. *Handmaid's Tale* offers an imaginary space that enhances women's solidarity and their vocal resistance against the patriarchy.<sup>55</sup>

Resonating with the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements, women's voices in Hulu's adaptation are more unequivocally rebellious than those in the original novel. While Offred in the novel does not clearly state her real name, at the end of the pilot episode of Hulu's *Handmaid's Tale*, Offred intimately reveals to the audience that her real name is June.<sup>56</sup> Underscoring the difference between Offred's silent subservience and June's vociferous rebellion—unlike Offred, June is “vocally rebellious, increasingly heroic, very much like Atwood's Moira”—Hulu's adaptation delivers a more straightforward message about the possibility of women's resistance against patriarchy as well as its limitations.<sup>57</sup>

Furthermore, Hulu's adaptation incorporates a variety of women's voices not represented in the original novel. As Media Studies scholar Amanda Howell observes, the adaptation creates “the Gileadverse, a dystopic fantasy world where silenced and oppressed women bear witness, speak up, and talk back.”<sup>58</sup> Reflecting diverse voices of women in Trump's America and reinscribing them in the margins of the novel, the adaptation follows Offred's attempt to imagine what might have happened to other women in Gilead.

There are innumerable differences between the novel and Hulu's adaptation. Although the first season of the show is roughly based on the storyline of the original novel, the rest of the show speculates on how women might have fought against Gilead's patriarchal dominance in the aftermath of the novel's ending. The show's inclination to polyphonic stories is most symbolically suggested in the final episode of the first season in which Offred opens a package she smuggles for the Mayday resistance. In the package she finds hundreds of letters written by other handmaids. As Offred reads the letters, several women's voices echo with Offred's voiceover narration. The women's names and backgrounds differ, but their messages are basically the same: they were raped, their children were taken, don't forget them, and whoever receives their letters must tell people what's happening in Gilead. The Gileadverse reverberates with many women's voices, and it underscores the significance of breaking silence.

Women's resistant voices in the Gileadverse echo real-world women's



protests against patriarchy in the United States and all over the world; boosted by the growing popularity of the adaptation, the handmaid—with her red robe and white bonnet—has become a symbol of women’s resistance. Media Studies scholar Amy Boyle notes that female protesters have used handmaid cosplays in “numerous cities across the United States and also in Canada, Australia, England, Ireland, Croatia, Finland, Poland, Slovakia, Costa Rica, and Argentina” in order to protest against “[taking away] female reproductive rights, violence against women, and the rise of misogyny and the conservative far Right in governments.”<sup>59</sup> In the Gileadverse, one woman’s voice resonates with another; the handmaid as a symbol reflects every type of woman’s resistance everywhere all at once, both in fiction and in the real world.

However, the Gileadverse has another face: Atwood’s *Handmaid’s Tale* (and its graphic novel version) is “among books most often challenged or banned in US schools” because of its allegedly “sexual explicitness.”<sup>60</sup> In her recent essay “Go Ahead and Ban My Book,” Atwood critiques: “My novel is also an exploration of the theoretical question ‘What kind of a totalitarianism might the United States become?’ I suggest we’re beginning to see the real-life answer to that query.”<sup>61</sup> Gilead’s dystopia seems to be unrealistic, but elements of it are already here. Not unlike in pre-*Roe* America, in one universe the handmaids’ voices are strictly policed and women’s reproductive rights are deprived. By contrast, in another, the handmaids raise their voices at the forefront of their reproductive struggles.

Examining the representation of women’s lost voices in two speculative fictions and the history of illegal abortions in the U.S., this essay has discussed how patriarchal and paternalistic discourse can, either intentionally or unintentionally, obscure women’s subjectivity. The patriarchal cultures represented in these texts are not relics of the past nor a figment of the imagination: we have been witnessing the dark side of the Gileadverse in which women’s reproductive rights are heavily restricted and women’s voices are muted. However, even so, it is not helpful to overestimate the danger of women’s silence. No matter how severely their voices are oppressed, they keep talking. The echoes of the handmaids’ voices can be heard everywhere as long as we carefully listen for them and speculate on their significance.

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Solnit, *The Mother of All Questions: Further Feminisms* (London:

Granta, 2017), 19.

<sup>2</sup> Leslie J. Reagan, *When Abortion Was a Crime: Women, Medicine, and Law in the United States, 1867–1973* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 19–45.

<sup>3</sup> Alicia Gutierrez-Romine, *From Back Alley to the Border: Criminal Abortion in California, 1920–1969* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2020), 5.

<sup>4</sup> Although oral collections of women’s testimonies about illegal abortions were published after *Roe*, these oral histories do not cover the entire time period when abortion was illegal. For examples of oral histories of illegal abortions, see Ellen Messer and Kathryn E. May, *Back Rooms: Voices from the Illegal Abortion Era* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1988) and Patricia G. Miller, *The Worst of Times: Illegal Abortion—Survivors, Practitioners, Coroners, Cops, and Children of Women Who Dies Talk about Its Horrors* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Speculative fiction, which is distinguished from a subgenre of science fiction, is an umbrella term for non-mimetic narrative fiction with “a mode of thought-experimenting that embraces an open-ended vision of the real.” According to this critical framework, Irving’s alternate history of pre-*Roe* America, as well as Atwood’s dystopian vision of the future, are categorized as speculative fiction. See Marek Oziewicz, “Speculative Fiction,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedias, Literature*, March 29, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.78>

<sup>6</sup> Frances Tran, “Time Traveling with Care: On Female Coolies and Archival Speculations,” *American Quarterly* 70, no. 2 (2018): 191.

<sup>7</sup> John Irving, *The Cider House Rules* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985), 186 (emphasis in original).

<sup>8</sup> Loretta J. Ross and Rickie Solinger, *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 9 (emphasis in original).

<sup>9</sup> Rickie Solinger, *Beggars and Choosers: How the Politics of Choice Shapes Adoption, Abortion, and Welfare in the United States* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 44. The pressure for adoption was especially strong for white unwed mothers in post-war America. See Rickie Solinger, *Wake up Little Susie: Single Pregnancy and Race before Roe v. Wade* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 148–186.

<sup>10</sup> Tania Modleski, *Feminism without Women: Culture and Criticism in a “Postfeminist” Age* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>11</sup> Irving, *The Cider House Rules*, 490.

<sup>12</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 71–97.

<sup>13</sup> Similarly, when Homer is performing the big surgery for a woman who has puerperal convulsions, Homer “was beginning to worry more about Dr. Larch than about the woman, and he had to fight down his fear of something happening to Dr. Larch in order to concentrate on his job.” Irving, *The Cider House Rules*, 134.

<sup>14</sup> Helena Wahlström, “Reproduction, Politics, and John Irving’s *The Cider House Rules*: Women’s Rights or ‘Fetal Rights’?” *Culture Unbound* 5 (2013), 257. See also Bruce Rockwood, “Abortion Stories; Uncivil Discourse and ‘Cider House Rules,’” in *The Critical Response to John Irving*, eds. Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack (London: Praeger, 2004), 129–130.

<sup>15</sup> Irving, *Cider House Rules*, 30 (emphasis in original). This is Homer’s first impression about the women who visit St. Cloud’s to get an abortion, but it does not change until the end of the novel: see *ibid.*, 528 for a similar description of these women.

<sup>16</sup> Reagan, *When Abortion Was a Crime*, 21.

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of women’s silence in archives, see Reagan, *When Abortion Was a Crime*; Gutierrez-Romine, *From Back Alley to the Border*, 1–13; Solinger, *Wake up Little*

*Susie*, 12–14.

<sup>18</sup> It is impossible to know the exact number of abortions in pre-*Roe* America, but the Michigan Board of Health estimated in 1898 that as many as one-third of pregnancies in Michigan might have resulted in abortion. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 221. Reagan also cites Dr. C. S. Bacon who estimated that “six to ten thousand abortions are induced in Chicago every year.” Reagan, *When Abortion Was a Crime*, 23.

<sup>19</sup> Reagan, *When Abortion Was a Crime*, 7–8.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 29–30.

<sup>22</sup> Tran, “Time Traveling with Care,” 190.

<sup>23</sup> Eve Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Tran, “Time Traveling with Care,” 190.

<sup>24</sup> Reagan discusses how women avoided the word abortion; instead, they used phrases such as “to be fixed up,” “to be put straight,” and “to get rid of it.” Reagan, *When Abortion Was a Crime*, 24.

<sup>25</sup> Irving, *Cider House Rules*, 553–554.

<sup>26</sup> John Irving, *My Movie Business: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1999), 38 (emphasis in original).

<sup>27</sup> Irving, *Cider House Rules*, 52–54. See also Irving, *My Movie Business*, 18–19.

<sup>28</sup> Irving, *Cider House Rules*, 52.

<sup>29</sup> Solinger, *Beggars and Choosers*, 37.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 55 (emphasis in original).

<sup>31</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (London: Vintage, 1985), 146.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>33</sup> Dominick M. Grace, “*The Handmaid’s Tale*: ‘Historical Notes’ and Documentary Subversion,” *Science Fiction Studies* 25, no.2 (1998): 485.

<sup>34</sup> Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 14.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 287.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>38</sup> Seohyon Jung, “Motherhood as Boundaries of Life in *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Fifth Child*,” *Margaret Atwood Studies* 11 (2017): 4.

<sup>39</sup> Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 156.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>43</sup> Jung, “Motherhood as Boundaries of Life in *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Fifth Child*,”

12.

<sup>44</sup> Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 231.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>46</sup> Tran, “Time Traveling with Care,” 207.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>48</sup> Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 261.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 313.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 322.

<sup>52</sup> David S. Hogsette, “Margaret Atwood’s Rhetorical Epilogue in *The Handmaid’s Tale*: The Reader’s Role in Empowering Offred’s Speech Act,” *Critique* 38, no.4 (1997): 276.

<sup>53</sup> Margaret Atwood and Renee Nault, *The Handmaid’s Tale: The Graphic Novel* (New

York: Nan A. Talese Doubleday, 2019); Margaret Atwood, *The Testaments* (New York: Nan A. Talese Doubleday, 2019); Andrew Liptak, “Sales of Margaret Atwood’s *Handmaid’s Tale* have soared since Trump’s Win,” *The Verge*, February 11, 2017. <https://www.theverge.com/2017/2/11/14586382/sales-margaret-atwoods-handmaids-tale-soared-donald-trump>; Michael Schneider, “‘The *Handmaid’s Tale*’ Breaks the Emmy Awards Streaming Barrier, One of Several Records Shattered This Year,” *Indiewire*, September 17, 2017. <https://www.indiewire.com/awards/industry/handmaids-tale-emmys-hulu-elisabeth-moss-1201877653/>

<sup>54</sup> For the interaction between Trump’s politics and Hulu’s *Handmaid’s Tale*, see Holly Willson Holladay and Chandler L. Classen, “The Drip, Drip, Drip of Dystopia: *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Temporal Boundaries, and Affective Investment,” *Feminist Media Studies* 21, no. 3 (2021): 477–492; Heather Hendershot, “*The Handmaid’s Tale* as Utopian Allegory: ‘Stars and Stripes Forever, Baby,’” *Film Quarterly* 72, no.1 (2018): 13–25; Amanda Howell, “Breaking Silence, Bearing Witness, and Voicing Defiance: the Resistant Female Voice in the Transmedia Storyworld of *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 33, no.2 (2019): 216–229.

<sup>55</sup> *The Handmaid’s Tale* was also turned into a film in 1990, but the film’s focus on the Commander deprived female characters of their resistant voices. See Howell, “Breaking Silence, Bearing Witness, and Voicing Defiance,” 220–222.

<sup>56</sup> For a close analysis of this scene—which is contrasted with the scene at the beginning of the episode in which Offred states “my name is Offred, I had another name, but it’s forbidden now”—see Hendershot, “*The Handmaid’s Tale* as Utopian Allegory,” 14–15. In the novel version, Offred does not clarify her name; however, as critics point out, her name is most probably June because “of the [female names] listed at the end of chapter one, only June is unaccounted for in the text.” See Grace, “*The Handmaid’s Tale*: ‘Historical Notes’ and Documentary Subversion,” 488.

<sup>57</sup> Howell, “Breaking Silence, Bearing Witness, and Voicing Defiance: the Resistant Female Voice in the Transmedia Storyworld of *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” 219 and 225.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 217. While the adaptation focuses on a lot of female characters whose stories are not fully developed in the original novel, it is also criticized for its racially blind representation of the characters. While Atwood suggests the intersection between race and gender in the reproductive politics of Gilead, her implication is not adequately reflected in the TV show. See Amy Boyle, “‘Domestic Feminism’: The Politics of Reproduction and Motherhood in Hulu’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” *Television & New Media* (2023): 1–17; Kristina K. Miranda, “Nonreproducing Women: On the Handmaid Protests and the Failure of Coalition Politics in Performance,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 41, no.3 (2020): 79–106; Hendershot, “*The Handmaid’s Tale* as Utopian Allegory,” 20–21.

<sup>59</sup> Amy Boyle, “‘They Should Have Never Given Us Uniforms If They Didn’t Want Us to Be an Army’: The *Handmaid’s Tale* as Transmedia Feminism,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 45, no.4 (2020): 857.

<sup>60</sup> Martin Pengelly, “Atwood Responds to Book Bans with ‘Unburnable’ Edition of *Handmaid’s Tale*,” *Guardian* May 24, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/may/24/margaret-atwood-handmaids-tale-unburnable-edition>

<sup>61</sup> Margaret Atwood, “Go Ahead and Ban My Book,” *The Atlantic* February 12, 2023. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/02/margaret-atwood-handmaids-tale-virginia-book-ban-library-removal/673013/>