

An Intersectional Feminist Reading of *The Handmaid's Tale* For The Sake of Exposing Reproductive Oppression in a Post-Dobbs World

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*The question that governs this thesis is to what extent Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) still functions, in Anne Balsamo's words, as an "ethnography of the present" (1996)? If it does still function this way, what might contemporary feminists learn from the book in relation to making sense of and resisting reproductive oppression? Throughout this thesis, I will be using *The Handmaid's Tale* as a guidebook to argue that there are several mechanisms used to control women that are present both in the novel and in our contemporary world. In order to expose these mechanisms, I rely on Foucauldian concepts such as disciplinary power and docile bodies. I center U.S. Women of Color intersectional feminists that speak on interlocking oppressions and how this has historically affected women of color. To center their experiences, I utilize Dorothy Roberts's *Killing the Black Body* (1997) to show that reproductive control has been a constant throughout American history.*

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I will analyze The Handmaid's Tale alongside Killing the Black Body to expose disciplinary mechanisms that control women. I argue that the disciplinary mechanisms used to control women in the fictional and nonfictional accounts that I've presented, are also applicable to the contemporary day. I reveal where we see disciplinary power occurring in 2025 and what contemporary feminists might learn about power dynamics, so that we may resist docility in a post-Dobbs world. Reproductive health in America changed dramatically with the overturning of Roe v. Wade (1973), through the Supreme Court Case Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization (2022), opening the door to a plethora of opportunities to women's bodies to be controlled. I critically discuss the tremendous impacts this case has had on the quality and access of women's reproductive healthcare, and I argue that this is a result of an effort to make women docile bodies. My analysis of The Handmaid's Tale, Killing the Black Body, and our contemporary reality will reveal that an Reproductive Justice Framework that is anchored in intersectionality and Foucauldian concepts of power, is required in order to address the loss of women's freedoms that are under attack. This gives us a model for understanding what full bodily autonomy should look like, and why we must implement this framework to resist reproductive oppression and demand reproductive freedom for all women.

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Introduction:

In the wake of the recent overturning of *Roe v. Wade* through the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* case, many women have been living a reality similar to that of a nightmare (Supreme Court of the United States, 2021). We are currently living in a world where we see women being denied access to life saving healthcare, and whose lives have been in jeopardy because of it (Bendix and Richardson, 2024). Despite researchers and doctors projecting an increase in maternal death rates as a result of overturning *Roe v. Wade*, the current Supreme Court decided to take away the federal right to an abortion, putting so many women in danger (Spitzer, Weitz, and Buchanan, 2022). This blatant disrespect to women's lives and women's health has cost women their lives (Spitzer, Weitz, and Buchanan, 2022). It has made them fear getting pregnant because without abortion access, they do not have full freedom over their lives and their choices (Spitzer, Weitz, and Buchanan, 2022). Today, women across the country fear the current Donald Trump presidency, and many researchers have called out the effects that this administration has had on the sexual and reproductive health of women (Bernstein, Friedrich-Karnik, and Damavandi, 2024). Women across America are recognizing that their rights are being stripped away, and with Donald Trump as the president, many women are fearful of how limited their reproductive choices will become (Bendix and Richardson, 2024).

The Result of Dobbs v. Jackson

There are countless examples of women who have experienced health tragedies as a result of the *Dobbs v. Jackson* decision and lost their lives due to extreme abortion bans. Josseli Barnica was one of these women who was severely impacted by Texas abortion bans (Sherman, 2024). Josseli was a 28 year old immigrant woman from Honduras who came to the United States for a better life and for more opportunities (National Abortion Federation, 2025).

However, while living in Texas in 2021 after the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, these dreams were not realized because she became affected by Texas abortion bans that became the reason for her death (Sherman, 2024). Josseli was 17 weeks into her pregnancy when she started cramping, and went to the hospital, the day after the six-week abortion ban went into effect in Texas (Sherman, 2024). There, she was told by two separate doctors that she was having a miscarriage (Sherman, 2024). However, since doctors were still able to detect a heartbeat in Barnica's fetus, they would not give Josseli any medical care, even though she was bleeding heavily, because of Texas's heartbeat laws (Sherman, 2024). While there is an exception for "medical emergency", doctors experience hardship when determining what is considered a medical emergency, since the law does not clearly define it (Sherman, 2024). Doctors and medical professionals can now get punished and jailed for their participation in abortion services in certain states, which is why they have been so hesitant to perform services on women even when they are in grave danger (National Abortion Federation, 2024).

It wasn't until Josseli arrived at the hospital for a third time, after being sent away twice, that her fetus no longer had a heartbeat, and the doctors were finally able to expedite her labor and deliver the fetus (Sherman, 2024). As a result of this delay, days after the abortion bans were put in place, Josseli Barnica still experienced severe bleeding, and later died from sepsis which involved "products of conception", detailed in her autopsy (Sherman, 2024). Multiple doctors and experts have called Josseli's death preventable, had she been given medication right away to speed up the labor process or had a doctor performed a procedure to empty her uterus (Sherman, 2024). But, it was just after the bans were put in place and doctors were in a very tough position, and they chose to follow what was "right" under the law (National Abortion Federation, 2024).

While many people argue that these laws are put in place to protect life, it is evident through Joselli Barnica's case, that the laws actually threaten the lives of women, rather than protect them. Joselli leaves behind a daughter and a husband, who have to live knowing that their loved one died as a result of a cruel and unfair law (Sherman, 2024). Barnica's family are not the only people mourning the death of a loved one as a result of these abortion bans, because tons of other women across the country are facing something similar in their states (National Abortion Federation, 2024).

Relevance of The Handmaid's Tale

In 1985, Margaret Atwood wrote a dystopian novel called *The Handmaid's Tale*, which displays reproductive oppression in a near-future version of America. The novel showcases a totalitarian theocracy that is dealing with an environmental issue that causes infertility in most of the population. As a result, an oppressive regime called Gilead takes over, and strips women of all their bodily autonomy, using fertile women as "handmaids" or surrogates for wealthy white families (Atwood, 1985). The handmaids undergo a ceremonial and ritualized rape by wealthy men in order to get pregnant and have children born into the regime and given over to the families. The novel explores themes of forced birth, reproductive oppression, exploitation of Christian values, and power dynamics. *The Handmaid's Tale* highlights a reality where women are fully controlled and oppressed by the government, and used for its agenda (Atwood, 1985). This dystopian society, Gilead, is grounded in religious precedent that is weaponized against the handmaids (Atwood, 1985). Their bodies are completely monitored and controlled by the government; they are all forced to wear the same long red dress and bonnet that covers every inch of their body, and their behavior is closely watched to make sure they are never stepping out of line (Atwood, 1985).

The novel centers the story of the main character Offred, who shares the fragmented story of her experience while being in Gilead (Atwood, 1985). What we learn from Offred's experiences is that power dynamics, religion, socio economic status, race, and gender, all play a role in shaping the oppression in this regime. Reading *The Handmaid's Tale* today makes the novel feel very reminiscent of the world we are living in, as women across the country have been comparing America's current position to Gilead, drawing connections and comparing it to our contemporary world (Velshi, 2025).

Using Balsamo and Foucault

With the conservative and religious rhetoric that is being pushed in U.S. media, many women feel that the world we are living in now feels strikingly similar to Gilead (Velshi, 2025). While many people have been attentive to the ways that *The Handmaid's Tale* is relevant to our current day, feminist theorist Anne Balsamo also suggested in 1996 how relevant and useful this novel could be. In her 1996 book, *Technologies of the Gendered Body*, Balsamo critically analyzes Atwood's novel, and recommends that it be read as an "ethnography of the present" rather than a science fiction (Balsamo, 1996, 101). Balsamo gave this recommendation in 1996, before both of Trump's administrations and before the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, so it goes without saying that there has been a significant amount of changes in the U.S. since Balsamo gave this recommendation, but she was already picking up on the ways that *The Handmaid's Tale* was extremely relevant in 1996. In 2025, it is evident that the novel feels even more relevant and similar to the current day, as each day feels like we are taking steps closer towards Gilead (Vilesh, 2025). For this reason, I will be expanding on Balsamo's recommendation and exploring the ways in which the novel can be used to reveal how women are being controlled and oppressed in the U.S. in 2025.

Anne Balsamo makes the decision to use political theorist Michel Foucault in her analysis of power in *The Handmaid's Tale* (Balsamo, 1996, 20). She found him to be helpful because of his understanding power as being diffuse throughout society, and producing discourses and ways of behaving (Balsamo, 1996, 20). Balsamo finds that Foucault's explanations and definitions of power are useful when understanding the kind of power that leads to oppression for women. While Foucault is not a feminist theorist and does not specifically speak on women's issues, he has concepts such as disciplinary power and docile bodies that Balsamo finds to be helpful when reading the novel as an ethnography to be helpful when analyzing *The Handmaid's Tale*. Reading Foucault alongside *The Handmaid's Tale* allowed for Balsamo to recognize where disciplinary mechanisms take place.

My Question and Thesis Statement

Throughout this thesis, I will be exploring to what extent Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* still functions, in Balsamo's words, as an "ethnography of the present"? And if it does still function this way, what might contemporary feminists learn from the book in relation to making sense of and resisting reproductive oppression? Throughout this thesis, I will be exploring to what extent Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* still functions, in Balsamo's words, as an "ethnography of the present" (1996)? And if it does still function this way, what might contemporary feminists learn from the book in relation to making sense of and resisting reproductive oppression? In this thesis, I will be arguing that *The Handmaid's Tale* can be used as a guidebook for looking at and understanding the mechanisms used to control women today; with this I will reveal that a reproductive justice framework anchored in intersectionality and Foucauldian concepts of power, is required in order to resist the loss of women's freedoms that are currently under attack.

To do this, I will use intersectional feminists and RJF scholars to define intersectionality and reproductive justice, and to argue why we need this framework adopted for women in 2025 to ensure bodily autonomy. I will also use Michel Foucault's concepts of disciplinary power, docile bodies, and the three humble modalities, to show how women's bodies are made docile and how we may resist these forms or reproductive oppression. Chapter one will be dedicated to setting up the analytical lens that I will center, which is the reproductive justice framework; I will establish *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood, 1984), *Killing the Black Body* (Roberts, 1997), and our contemporary setting in a post-Dobbs world, as my political artifacts across the entire thesis. Chapter two will focus on the literal objectification of women as a disciplinary mechanism which allows for them to be devalued and be subject to inhumane treatment. Chapter three will discuss the surveillance and policing of women and how this is intended to make them docile bodies. In chapter four I address how contemporary feminists can resist the mechanisms that are controlling women that were discussed in the previous chapters, and explore what we can learn from women of color and *The Handmaid's Tale* on resisting reproductive oppression.

As a woman seeing all of this unfold, it feels extremely important to discuss this topic of reproductive injustices, while also looking forward and seeing what can be done about the loss of women's freedoms. Hearing stories like the one of Joselli Barnica's is tragic and infuriating, but as a brown woman, I know that reproductive injustices have been happening to women of color for centuries (National Abortion Federation, 2025). Women of color like Barnica have been at the forefront of reproductive injustices all throughout history (Roberts, 1997). Research shows that women of color and low-income women will be negatively impacted the most by the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* and the new abortion bans that have taken effect across the country (National Abortion Federation, 2025).

According to the National Abortion Federation, “abortion bans disproportionately harm black, brown, and immigrant communities— immigrant women like Barnica who came to the U.S. from Honduras in search of a better life” (National Abortion Federation, 2025). While many white or wealthy women will also experience suffering from the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, it cannot go without mentioning that they will not be impacted as severely as women of color or low-income women (National Abortion Federation, 2025). The *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* case shows that discipline and control of women is one of the government’s main objectives, and that they are finding ways to make this possible (2022). While I am interested in looking at what kinds of mechanisms are used to control women, I also want to see how these mechanisms especially affect women of color. To do this, I will center women of color feminists to highlight the ways in which women of color have been at the forefront of reproductive oppression throughout history.

Michel Foucault is a French political philosopher who gives an important explanation of power that is helpful when looking at how power can be used to control and oppress people (Foucault, 1984). In *The Foucault Reader*, it is said that there are positive and negative powers in society that each serve a purpose and can both be used for controlling people (Foucault, 1984). Foucault argues that there are three humble modalities in society that are used to discipline and control people, and turn them into docile bodies (Foucault, 1984). His definition of a docile body is someone that is used for someone else’s agenda, and is fully controlled and disciplined (Foucault, 1984). All of these definitions given by Foucault can be used as a helpful way for tracing and looking at the power dynamics in any society. Anne Balsamo turns to Foucault in her discussion and analysis of *The Handmaid’s Tale* as an ethnography of the present because she finds that a Foucauldian analysis of power

control, and docility can be useful and helpful to identify oppression.

Turning to Intersectionality and The

Reproductive Justice Framework

Intersectionality is a term used when describing the interlocking of oppressions (Combahee River Collective, 1997; Crenshaw 1989). It was named by woman of color feminist and legal scholar, Kimberle Crenshaw, when she used the traffic analogy to describe the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). She said that when a car accident happens in an intersection, there are multiple factors that caused that accident to happen, and that all of these factors had to have happened simultaneously in order for this accident to happen at the intersection (Crenshaw, 1989). When we apply this traffic analogy to oppression, we understand that some people are multiply burdened by simultaneous factors such as race, income, gender, sexual identity, etc. (Crenshaw, 1989). This gives us a more complex way of understanding oppression and power dynamics. The Combahee River Collective also speaks on the concept of intersectionality, as they call oppressions “interlocking” (Combahee River Collective, 1997). This Combahee is a black lesbian feminist group of individuals that explained that their lived experiences revealed that oppressions are interlocking, and cannot be separated (Combahee River Collective, 1997). Additionally, *The National Black Women’s Reproductive Agenda* (2025) says that they approach justice with a human rights perspective that incorporates the intersections of multiple factors that impact women of color. Intersectionality also focuses on the most marginalized groups in society, to reveal the multiplicity of oppression, and it focuses on centering their experiences as part of the solution (Combahee River Collective, 1997). Intersectionality recognizes that we must tackle each of these oppressions in order to achieve social justice (Crenshaw, 1989). This attentiveness to realizing oppressions are interlocking is needed to dismantle systems of oppression.

In order to understand and resist reproductive oppression, a framework is required to address injustices women have faced. The reproductive justice framework was developed by several women of color scholars and activists such as Loretta Ross (National Black Women's Reproductive Agenda, 2025). Reproductive justice is a social movement and framework that gives us an understanding of what reproductive freedom should look like for women (Ross and Solinger, 2017). This movement has three primary principles that apply to all people, which are the right to have children, the right not to have children, and also a parent's right to be able to parent children in a healthy and dignified environment (Ross and Solinger, 2017). Ross and Solinger explain that this is a human rights framework that pieces together multiple different factors or oppressions that impact the ability to make reproductive choices freely (Ross and Solinger, 2017). This framework is used to call out areas of society that are oppressing women and taking away their ability to make their own reproductive choices, as well as recognizing the lack of resources that are available when someone actually does become a parent (Ross and Solinger, 2017). The goal is to dismantle all areas that negatively impact a person's ability to make free bodily choices, and to make them in a dignified context (Ross and Solinger, 2017). This framework is essential when looking at reproductive injustices, oppression and power dynamics.

This framework goes hand in hand with intersectionality to address reproductive injustices to see what factors need to be improved in order to create a safer reproductive environment for women—where we can make our own reproductive and bodily choices (Ross and Solinger, 2017). The reproductive justice framework as Ross and Solinger (2017) explain it, is essentially the application of intersectionality; the framework looks at interlocking systems of oppression that impact a woman's ability to have reproductive freedom, and it looks to dismantle those systems.

An intersectional reproductive justice framework alongside a Foucauldian understanding of power, can be used to critically analyze power in any society by looking at disciplinary mechanisms used to control people and create docile bodies. This critical look at power dynamics may also reveal who is the most affected by this power, and what may be done to resist it.

Primary Political Artifacts

In order to argue that disciplinary powers are used to control and oppress women, I will utilize a combination of fictional and non-fictional accounts of reproductive oppression to isolate key disciplinary mechanisms. Using a Foucauldian conception of power alongside and with a reproductive justice framework, I will analyze each piece of literature with this lens in order to identify disciplinary mechanisms, and ultimately see how women can resist becoming a docile body.

The primary piece of literature and political artifact that I will be analyzing is *The Handmaid's Tale* by Atwood (1985). Taking after Balsamo's recommendation, I will be reading this novel as an ethnography of the present, and utilizing it as a guidebook of understanding disciplinary mechanisms used to control women (1996). This novel will be helpful for what can lead to a society becoming totalitarian, and what we must look out for was women (Velshi, 2025). Atwood's novel goes into detail about the ways that women can become reproductive slaves for the government, and how this can happen so quickly without many people noticing (Atwood, 1998). Additionally, it gives examples and ideas of how to resist this kind of government force, and can be used by contemporary feminists to see what resistance may look like (Balsamo, 1996). While Atwood's novel acknowledges that race and income are a part of the oppression in Gilead, she primarily focuses on gender based oppression and not other kinds.

For this reason, I will be using another book in order to do an intersectional analysis of reproductive oppression.

The second primary piece of literature I will be turning to is *Killing the Black Body* by Dorothy Roberts. This book highlights the intersection of race, gender, and income based oppression, focusing on the ways that black women have been affected throughout history (Roberts, 1997). This book was written in 1997 by Roberts and details the ways in which primarily women of color have been stripped of their bodily autonomy throughout American history and have had no reproductive liberty (Roberts, 1997). While this book predates the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, it is a nonfiction account of the disciplinary mechanisms that have been used to control women and make them docile bodies, while demonstrating that this has been the constant reality for women of color. It demonstrates powerful mechanisms of state control that impacted women's lives (Roberts, 1997). In this book, Roberts does a historical analysis that traces policy and rhetoric, to look at the ways that both of those things shaped black women's lives back then and today, and it will be extremely useful for looking at reproductive oppression and disciplinary mechanisms of power (Roberts, 1997).

The next political artifact I will use in this thesis are the stories and accounts of reproductive injustices in the contemporary day. This includes looking at recent policy surrounding abortion and access to reproductive healthcare, as well as looking at rhetoric. Doing this will be helpful to see how the disciplinary mechanisms of control that I showed taking place in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Killing the Black Body* are still being implemented today. The *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* case will be an imperative part of this discussion, looking critically at the way that the law is directly impacting women's lives. Revealing what disciplinary mechanisms are being used to control women in the

contemporary day will raise awareness to these mechanisms, and also reveal why we need a reproductive justice framework. Having this understanding will get us closer to resisting and countering these oppressions.

Chapter one will develop the analytical lens that will govern my thesis. I will describe why I chose to use this lens to analyze reproductive injustices, and why I think that this is the best lens for looking at this issue. I will explain Foucauldian concepts of power and all the components of his argument. Then, I will turn to women of color feminists to define intersectionality, which will be another key concept apart of my framework. Finally, I will describe the reproductive justice framework and its principles and ultimately adopt this in my framework. I will explain that my analytical lens will be a reproductive justice framework that is anchored in intersectionality and Foucauldian concepts of disciplinary power. Finally, I will finish methodological reflection where I discuss the decision that led me to this framework and the methodological commitments that inspired me.

Chapter two will be dedicated to the disciplinary mechanism of objectification. I will first describe objectification theory and what implications this has on a person. I will dive into my political artifacts by providing examples from *The Handmaid's Tale* by Atwood. This reveals how objectification is used to dehumanize women and make them docile bodies. Next, I will focus on *Killing the Black Body* by Roberts to how objectification has historical precedent, and it has affected black women since the days of slavery. Finally, I will show how objectification is being used as a disciplinary mechanism in the current moment, especially through the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* case, and I will be analyzing the case itself, and focusing on the rhetoric of the decision, to show the implications that it has on women.

Chapter three will reveal surveillance and the policing of women as a disciplinary mechanism. Now that objectification will be on the table, I will describe how surveillance becomes possible since women are viewed as objects that can be controlled. Again, I will start with *The Handmaid's Tale*, to give examples of how this surveillance is carried out, and how it is used as a form of control. After I have given examples of the policing of the handmaids in Gilead, I will show how this surveillance is not a fictional concept, but one that women of color throughout history have become familiar with. I will use Roberts *Killing the Black Body* to show how black women have been watched, critiqued, and surveilled their whole lives, and how this creates docility in them. I am going to connect this idea to what is currently happening in America right now, as many women feel as though they are losing privacy after the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, and how the government is effectively allowing people to police and spy on women.

Finally, chapter four will address what contemporary feminists like myself may do in order to resist reproductive oppression in 2025. To do this, I will once again start with *The Handmaid's Tale*, showing how three characters in the novel resisted disciplinary power in unique and differing ways. I will discuss what we can learn about resistance from the novel and what we can learn from these characters about resistance. Next, I will turn to *Killing the Black Body*, to reveal what Roberts argues we must do to counter reproductive injustices. Finally, I will end the chapter by arguing that a reproductive justice framework is required and necessary for contemporary feminists to resist reproductive oppression in 2025.

Chapter One: Developing an Intersectional Reproductive Justice Framework

In the process of choosing a thesis topic within reproductive justice that felt relevant and important, I came across Margaret Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*. Reading this novel in 2024 made me realize the significance of looking critically at this text, and deeply analyzing the concepts, tools, and mechanisms that are being used to control women in Gilead. It became astoundingly clear that this novel is not just a fictional account but a reality for women in 2025. The question I am exploring throughout this thesis is to what extent *The Handmaid's Tale* still functions, in Balsamo's words, as an "ethnography of the present"? (Balsamo, 1996, 114). I propose that *The Handmaid's Tale* can be used as a guidebook to interpret the ways that discipline and power are used to control the lives of women in America (Balsamo, 1996, 114). Throughout this chapter, I will be developing the analytical lens that I will use throughout the entirety of this thesis, in order to read the novel as an ethnography of the present (Balsamo 1996, 114). I will start by showing the importance of dystopian feminist fiction like *The Handmaid's Tale*, and why it is crucial to read this novel as an ethnography. Then, I will turn to Michel Foucault to begin developing my lens, starting with an understanding of disciplinary power and docile bodies. Finally, I will look at intersectional feminists and reproductive justice scholars to develop my intersectional reproductive justice framework that I will center across my thesis. Lastly, I will reflect on the choices I made in my political artifact selection as well as why I chose to develop my framework in this way with a methodological reflection to end the chapter.

The Importance of The Handmaid's Tale:

Many people are recognizing how pertinent *The Handmaid's Tale* is to the current state of our world. Author and scholar Dunja Mohr speaks to the value of dystopian fiction in *Worlds Apart? Dualism and Transgression in Contemporary Female Dystopias* (2005), arguing that Atwood's novel is a transgressive utopian dystopia (Mohr, 2005, 232). Mohr defines the term "dystopia" in a few ways, one being that "dystopia reverses, mistrusts, and parodies the ideal of a perfectly regulated utopian state, often unintentionally inclined towards totalitarianism" (Mohr, 2005, 27). Mohr argues,

"Female writers of dystopia take the stock dystopian features of slavery, exploitation, extreme collectivism, and oppressed individualism and present them from a feminist angle. Moreover, feminist dystopia inserts feminist images and critiques, addressing new issues such as sexual polarization, restrictive gender roles, female textual/actual absence, the cult of the superior masculine and the patriarchy, patriarchal views of femininity, the male gaze, male violence against women, female complicity, and inherent sexism" (Mohr, 2005, 36).

Here Mohr is arguing that feminist dystopias go beyond a regular dystopia, and adds the dimension of extreme gender based oppression. Many and most of these themes appear in Atwood's novel as she tells the story of Gilead. Feminist dystopias, according to Mohr, represent a social situation in its worst form, and attempt to warn the reader about the situation (Mohr 2005, 29). Mohr also argues that "in feminist dystopias, women in particular lose all rights" (Mohr, 2005, 36). We know this happens in Atwood's novel as she tells the story of an extremely oppressive regime towards women, where they can legally be raped, forced to wear certain clothing, have their children ripped away, and have little control over their own body (Atwood, 1985).

This storyline certainly represents a woman's deepest fears. There are many points in the novel where Offred, the protagonist, attempts to warn the reader by wishing she had paid attention earlier, or listened to warning signs—it is a powerful message from Atwood to the readers of the novel (Atwood, 1985). A transgressive utopian dystopia goes beyond a traditional dystopia according to Mohr (Mohr, 2005, 232). She argues,

"The Handmaid's Tale can be read as a transgressive utopian dystopia, since a utopian subtext is interwoven into the dystopian narrative of The Handmaid's Tale and because there are various hints in the novel pointing towards a transgression of binarisms that critics have so far overlooked" (Mohr, 2005, 232).

Analyzing Atwood's novel as a transgressive utopian dystopia, it allows for Mohr to pick up on themes such as duality and otherness as well as what she calls a "self-destructive fragmented feminine consciousness" (Mohr, 2005, 233). Mohr also argues that Offred "achieves transgression through narration" and how that is a major and defining theme for *The Handmaid's Tale* (Mohr, 2005, 233). By doing this, Mohr argues that Offred "creates polyperspectives, offers multiple versions of reality, rather than a monolithic depiction of reality, and probes for multiple rather than singular or dualistic meanings (Mohr, 2005, 233). These choices made by Offred, and ultimately by Atwood, offer a powerful way of understanding the literature but also the human mind. Mohr argues "Offred's narration, for instance, allows Offred exactly this: multiple perspectives and various realities, and telling her story as well as other's stories thus saves her from psychological fragmentation" (Mohr, 2005, 233). Using language for this use of polyperspectives as Mohr put it, makes *The Handmaid's Tale* a special kind of feminist dystopia because of what we are able to learn from Offred (Mohr, 2005, 234).

Additionally, Mohr says that “female sexuality, the female body, and its abuse are also key issues in feminist dystopia... they show women trapped by their sex, by their femaleness, and reduced from subjecthood to function” (Mohr, 2005, 36). These things are all occurring in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, as Gilead takes away sexual and bodily autonomy from women. Atwood writes in a way that warns the readers of what could happen in a Christian-centered, patriarchal, and oppressive regime. Atwood’s novel is an attempt to inform readers of the dangers attached to ignoring or paying little attention to power and control.

Reading The Handmaid’s Tale as an Ethnography of the Present in 2025

I will be reading *The Handmaid’s Tale* as an “ethnography of the present” in 2025 taking after Anne Balsamo’s recommendation in her book *Technologies of the Gendered Body* (1996). She says “ethnography can be reclaimed as a feminist practice in which we work to intervene in the production of the history of the present by writing the narratives of women’s everyday lives” (Balsamo, 1996, 114). Balsamo is offering up the usage of an ethnography as something useful for feminists to be able to shape and transform the experiences of women. With this, she believes that *The Handmaid’s Tale* can be read not as a science fiction, but as an ethnography of the present condition of women (Balsamo, 1996, 114). Furthermore, she explains that the novel should be read,

“against the grain, perhaps as a speculative ethnographic account of our collective life in a technological era... it offers us a critical framework of analysis that will counteract our propensity to ignore the probable consequences for the female body of the application of the new technologies of reproductive surveillance” (Balsamo 1996, 114).

Balsamo made this claim about reading Atwood’s novel as an ethnography in 1996, as she was picking up on the ways in which the novel can be utilized for feminist work. I want to use this framework of analysis in 2025 since the concepts in *The Handmaid’s Tale* feel so relevant and non-fictitious in our world today. This will allow us to understand the systems of oppression and mechanisms of control that are used against women. I am going to do this alongside using the reproductive justice framework, to see how women in *The Handmaid’s Tale* are being stripped of bodily autonomy and justice, and also where we see this happening in our modern world.

Criticisms of The Handmaid’s Tale

It is important to note that many women of color feminists, notably the Black Feminist Collective, have shared their critique of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. These critiques are on the basis that the story gives little-to-no attention to race-based oppression, especially referencing the Hulu-Series adaptation of the novel that aired in 2017 (Black Feminist Collective, 2018). While I agree that in the novel, Margaret Atwood does not dedicate the majority of the story to focusing on race-based oppression, she does give several hints that she is attentive to the fact that Gilead is a sexist and racist regime (Atwood, 1984, 83). Atwood makes reference to the fact that all colored people are being sent away to a different part of the country, to serve some other purpose, but that they are not wanted in Gilead (Atwood, 1984, 83). We know that it is only the wealthy families that are allowed to be given children, and Atwood gives us the sense that women of color are not chosen to be handmaids either (Atwood, 1984, 83). It says “Resettlement of the Children of Ham is continuing on schedule...three thousand have arrived this week in National Homeland One with another two thousand in transit” (Atwood 1984, 83). Children of Ham is a biblical reference deriving from the “Curse of Ham” (Haruyama, 2024).

It refers to blackness and has been interpreted as the justification of black enslavement (Haruyama, 2024). This is to show that while the U.S. was experiencing fertility troubles in the story, there were still eugenics ideals involved in which people Gilead actually wanted to be reproducing (Atwood 1984, 83). While she does not dive into it deeply, Atwood is attentive to the racist and classist ideals of this regime. I do believe the critiques are well-founded when referencing the Hulu-series adaptation of the novel because it deviates from Atwood's storyline, and it gives no attention to the inherent racism or eugenics principles involved in creating the regime of Gilead (Black Feminist Collective, 2018). For the purpose of this essay, I will only be referencing the novel written by Atwood, because I will reveal how useful it is for understanding disciplinary mechanisms that create docile bodies.

As a female student doing political theory, I acknowledge the importance of *The Handmaid's Tale* given that there is historical and contemporary precedent in Atwood's writing. The novel is extremely helpful for understanding the role of disciplinary power, docile bodies, the humble modalities, and collective resistance, and how it can occur in women's lives (Atwood 2017, xiv). Atwood says, "I made a rule for myself: I would not include anything that human beings had not already done in some other place or time, or for which the technology did not already exist" (Atwood 2017, xiii). Atwood explains that while her novel is fictional, she only included concepts or ideas into the plot that have already taken place at some point in the real world (Atwood 2017, xiv). Furthermore, she says,

"the group-activated hangings, the tearing apart of human beings, the clothing specific to castes and classes, the forced childbearing and the appropriation of the results, the children stolen by regimes and placed for upbringing with high-ranking officials, the forbidding of literacy, the denial of property rights—all had precedents, and many of these were to be found, not in other cultures and religions, but within Western society, and within the "Christian" tradition itself" (Atwood 2017, xiv).

The novel, as radical and irrational as it may seem to some people, has actually been a stretched version of reality for many women (Atwood 2017, xiv). While Atwood says that her novel is fiction and it is made up of fictional accounts of a make-believe society, there are absolutely aspects of it such as forced childbearing and clothing specific to groups, that have occurred and do still occur in the world. She also mentions that this occurs primarily in the Christian tradition, which is the religion that is exploited and used to control women and justify the actions of the regime in the novel.

Developing a RJF Anchored in Intersectionality and Foucault's Notion of Disciplinary Power

Foucault's Notion of Disciplinary Power

To read *The Handmaid's Tale* as an ethnography it is imperative to know how power gets used against women, which requires knowledge about how it operates and functions. When Balsamo decided to analyze the novel and recommend that it be read as an ethnography of the present (1996), she turned to Michel Foucault's notion of power. (Balsamo, 1996, 89; Foucault, 1984). Balsamo found Foucault's concepts to be helpful for breaking down the way that power operates in Gilead (Balsamo, 1996, 89). Taking from *The Foucault Reader*, Foucault describes that power operates in two different forms: positive and negative power (Foucault, 1984, 172). What he means by negative power is the ability to

“repress, to prevent, to exclude, to eliminate”(Foucault 1984, 172). Foucault describes this as a completely sovereign power, like having the power of a king (Foucault, 1984, 173). He says,

“The sovereign exercised his right to life only by exercising his right to kill, or by refraining from killing; he evidenced his power over life only through the death he was capable of requiring. The right which was formulated as the power of life and death was in reality the right to take life or let live” (Foucault 1984, 259).

This type of power is a conspicuous power, one unmistakably present for everyone to see (Foucault, 1984, 173). Positive power however, is different from negative or sovereign power, in that it is inconspicuous and diffuse throughout society (Foucault 1984, 174). Foucault says, “this power is exercised rather than possessed; it is not the “privilege,” acquired or preserved, of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions” (Foucault 1984, 174). This means that this power does not belong singularly to one person, but instead it is exercised through many people and is productive (Foucault, 1984, 174). Furthermore,

“positive power is not exercised simply as an obligation or a prohibition on those who ‘do not have it’; it invests in them, is transmitted by them and through them; it exerts pressure on them, just as they themselves, in their struggle against it, resist the grip it has on them” (Foucault 1984, 174).

This kind of power exists amongst bodies of people while it administers, manages, and produces life (Foucault 1984, 259). This positive or productive form of power is different from negative power, as it happens in an inconspicuous way and it is diffused all throughout society, so people may not easily identify how this power takes effect (Foucault, 1984, 259).

While these two types of power operate differently, they are both very influential and present in *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

While sovereign power may seem more authoritative, the productive nature of positive power allows for control and domination over large bodies of people. This effectively regulates and manages life (Foucault 1984, 259). Both positive and negative powers are present in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which together make up disciplinary power, and make possible the control of so many women in Gilead (Foucault, 1984, 259; Atwood, 1985). Through positive power, the management of life becomes possible and people are no longer able to easily resist and identify mechanisms of power. Foucault says that positive power “characterized a power whose function was no longer to kill, but to invest life through and through. The old power of death that symbolized sovereign power was now carefully supplanted by the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life” (Foucault 1984, 262). This type of power is dangerous because it makes people submit to standards and be accustomed to regulation. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, we see this occurring with the handmaids and women in Gilead, forced to submit to their new oppressed lives with no human rights where they are managed and used for the state’s agenda (Atwood, 1985).

The disciplinary power that uses both positive and negative mechanisms, and is present in Gilead is what Foucault calls bio-power. It is a term used by Foucault to describe when power is productive and used for management and subjugation of life (Foucault 1984, 262). He says “hence there was an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations, marking the beginning of an era of bio-power” (Foucault 1984, 262). This marks the moment when the human body becomes functional, productive, and useful (Foucault, 1984, 262). Bio-power uses people to their capacities and is interested in what result can come from controlling them (Foucault 1984, 180).

Foucault describes a moment in time where focusing on the body as a productive tool became very important. He says,

“The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down, and rearranges. A “political anatomy,” which was also a “mechanics of power” was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others’ bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed, and the efficiency that one determines. Thus discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, “docile bodies” (Foucault 1984, 182).

Here he is saying that docile bodies are bodies that are used for a function and a purpose, ones that are seen as machines made for production (Foucault, 1984, 182). These bodies are transformed, used, and improved to function for someone else’s agenda (Foucault, 1984, 182). In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, disciplinary mechanisms exist that try to make the handmaids docile bodies. The makers of Gilead saw a problem occurring in society, which was diminishing fertility rates due to an environmental issue, and they saw women as the key to solving that social problem (Atwood, 1985, xiv). For this reason, they are using certain women as fertility machines to produce more offspring (Atwood, 1985, xiv). This is a clear display of the state’s use of women to be docile bodies that are used for a purpose.

As seen in Gilead, disciplinary power plays a major role in the domination and control of masses of people (Atwood, 1984, 4; Foucault 1984, 181). Watching people, or making them feel like they are being watched, keeps them disciplined and coerced into docility (Foucault 1984, 207). This discipline is used as a technique for control, as Foucault says

discipline may be identified neither with an institution nor with an apparatus; it is a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets; it is a physical or an anatomy of power, a technology (Foucault 1984, 206).

Discipline is an effective way to control people because it keeps them in order. When a body becomes docile, it loses its humanity and individuality because it functions as a machine for someone else’s purpose (Foucault 1984, 180). This is what happens to Offred in the novel, as there are multiple instances where she is struggling to remember her identity before Gilead because it has been stripped away (Atwood, 1985). She struggles to resist the idea of her body as being an object, since the government is treating it as this way (Atwood, 1985, 60). Gilead’s objective is to make the handmaids, and really all of the women in the novel, docile bodies (Atwood, 1985, 60). The makers of Gilead thrive off of people who do not question power, who do not resist it, and those who are too afraid to walk out of step with the status quo. Discipline is so prominent in this story because discipline makes Gilead possible; when people are so disciplined, then they may not resist and that enables Gilead to keep moving forward with its agenda (Atwood, 1985, . The workers of Gilead have disciplined the women so much, hoping that they forget their identities, and solely become an apparatus.

Centering Intersectionality

Foucault’s theory and argument of disciplinary power is essential for understanding the way women are used as docile bodies in Gilead. However, this argument alone does not address the multiplicity of oppressions that take place against women, and nor does Atwood’s novel. In order to center the stories of women of color and highlight their

experiences with disciplinary power, I will incorporate into my analysis *Killing the Black Body* (1997), to show how these mechanisms are exploited for women of color. With that being said, I do believe a Foucauldian understanding of disciplinary power is necessary for revealing how power is diffused all throughout society, and utilizes different mechanisms to control people (Foucault, 1984, 188). However, addressing the domination of women requires a more in depth focus on the interlocking systems of oppression, and that is why I believe an intersectional approach is necessary for making sense of how interlocking forms of power impact women's lives. I will adopt an intersectional feminist lens that is informed by a Foucauldian notion of disciplinary power, in order to address the issues that create reproductive freedom.

The Combahee River Collective was a group of black lesbian women that understood better than anyone else, the intersection of oppressions. In their essay titled "A Black Feminist Statement" (1977), they share their experience as black lesbian women, and how this identity makes them attentive to power and privilege. They say,

"The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking" (CRC, 1977, 210).

While they were not using the term intersectionality at the time, the Combahee River Collective was clearly picking up on the fact that there are certain groups that face multiple, inseparable oppressions. They reflect on their lived experience by saying, "we also find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives today they are most often experienced simultaneously" (CRC, 1997, 212).

Because of this, the Combahee says that black lesbian feminists like themselves have often been left out of women's movements and black cultural movements, and that they have had a hard time gaining success in their politics (CRC, 1977, 214). They explain:

"The major source of difficulty in our political work is that we are not just trying to fight oppression on one front or even two, but instead to address a whole range of oppressions. We do not have racial, sexual, heterosexual, or class privilege to rely upon, nor do we have even the minimal access to resources and power that groups who possess any one of these types of privilege have" (CRC, 1997, 214).

These women are describing that the multiple interlocking oppressions they face make it hard to gain political success. They are a multiply burdened group, and most movements are not fighting for multiple oppressions at once (CRC, 1997, 214).

Legal scholar and woman of color, Kimberle Crenshaw also acknowledges that "women of color are differently situated in the economic, social, and political worlds (Crenshaw, 1991, 1250). She describes that women of color are less likely to have their needs met by feminist movements than women who are racially privileged (Crenshaw 1991, 1250). These statements by the Combahee River Collective and Crenshaw make it clear that using an intersectional framework is necessary when we are talking about issues surrounding women of color since they do not have any movement that accurately addresses their oppression as black women.

Intersectionality is imperative for understanding female oppression in *The Handmaid's Tale*, as well as in our modern society. Intersectionality as a term, was named by Kimberle Crenshaw when she was referring to the intersection of systems of oppression that oppress a person or a group that I previously mentioned (Crenshaw 1989, 140). She called it "a new analytic" (1989),

a new way of understanding oppression so that it could accurately acknowledge and recognize that for black women and other women of color, oppression cannot be understood singularly (Crenshaw 1989, 140). The reason why Crenshaw felt called to name this new analytical approach was because of the way that black women's oppressions were left out of both feminist and race-based discussions (Crenshaw 1989, 141). She says,

“Thus for feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse to embrace the experiences and concerns of Black women, the entire framework that has been used as a basis for translating women’s experience or the black experience into concrete policy demands must be rethought and recast” (Crenshaw 1989, 140).

Another reason Crenshaw coined this term is because the law saw oppression in a single-axis framework, which could not convey the multiple oppressions black women were facing (Crenshaw 1989, 139). She uses the language of intersectionality as being “multidimensional” and black women as being “multiply-burdened” (1989), which the law only accounted for one form of oppression to be occurring at a time (Crenshaw 1989, 142). Clearly this was a problem for black women, as there was no theory or movement or law that accurately described what they experience as women of color who experience racial, gender, and class based oppression (Crenshaw 1989, 142). While Crenshaw did name this new term and way of analyzing oppression, other women of color throughout history have been attentive to intersectionality for years.

Another important aspect of intersectionality is the focus on centering women's stories and experience in oppression. Bell hooks is a Black feminist and scholar who writes about the importance of keeping women's experiences central to the movement (hooks 1984, 31).

She acknowledges the importance of intersectionality in the role of ending oppression, as she says “feminism as a movement to end sexist oppression directs our attention to systems of domination and the inter-relatedness of sex, race, and class oppression” (hooks 1984, 31). Hooks recognizes that in order to focus on oppression related to women, we also must focus on the various other factors that can be attached to oppressing women (hooks 1984, 31). Additionally, she says “therefore, it compels us to centralize the experiences and the social predicaments of women who bear the brunt of sexist oppression as a way to understand the collective social status of women in the United States of America” (hooks 1984, 31). Hooks is saying that listening to what women have observed or experienced is going to be critical to the goal of feminism (hooks, 1984). We cannot do this without adopting an intersectional approach, and without fully understanding that oppression engages with multiple different factors at once. I will speak more on centering the stories of women when discussing the reproductive justice framework as a key aspect of my analytical framework.

Bringing Together A Foucauldian Notion of Power and Intersectionality: Reproductive Justice Framework

As I alluded to in the previous section, in order to read *The Handmaid's Tale* as an ethnography, we must use a reproductive justice framework anchored in intersectional feminism and Foucauldian notions of disciplinary power. Loretta Ross, along with other African American feminists are credited with coining and defining the term “reproductive justice” (Dawson, 2022). In her book with Rickie Solinger, they explain that reproductive justice merges the principles and goals of social justice with reproductive rights (Ross and Solinger 2017, 9).

They say “the definition of reproductive justice goes beyond the pro-choice/pro-life debate and has three primary principles: (1) the right to not have a child; (2) the right to have a child; and (3) the right to parent children in safe and healthy environments (Ross and Solinger 2017, 9). These principles are known to be the most prominent features of reproductive justice, in addition to the fact that the framework demands that all people have sexual autonomy and reproductive freedom (Ross and Solinger 2017, 9). This framework also demands attention when these three rights are violated or not being facilitated properly (Ross and Solinger, 2017, 10). To ensure these three rights, they contend that “all fertile persons and persons who reproduce and become parents require a safe and dignified context for these most fundamental human experiences” (Ross and Solinger 2017, 9). In order to make this possible, people must have access to resources such as “high-quality health care, housing and education, a living wage, a healthy environment, and a safety net for times when these resources fail” according to Ross and Solinger (2017). They explain that parenting under dignified and safe conditions is a requirement to be provided by the government, and the justification for the use of these resources is that having access to these resources ensures dignified parenting which is a human right (Ross and Solinger 2017, 10).

Reproductive justice adopts this three rights framework as a way of revealing where reproductive oppression is taking place (Ross and Solinger, 2017, 10). When any or all of these primary principles are broken, violated, or not being facilitated, then we know there is a lack of reproductive freedom and bodily autonomy (Ross and Solinger, 2017, 10). This is where the analytical insight of intersectionality, along with a Foucauldian understanding of disciplinary power comes together, because it can help us see instances of reproductive oppression and injustices.

Since the reproductive justice framework is rooted in intersectionality; it aims to take down and address all of the ways that women can experience oppression (Ross and Solinger 2017, 10). Ross and Solinger say that “reproductive justice is based on the understanding that the impacts of race, class, gender, and sexual identity oppressions are not additive but integrative” (Ross and Solinger 2017, 74). They are explaining that systems of oppression should not be visualized as being added on to one another, rather, they are all interwoven, which is a key insight of intersectional feminism (Ross and Solinger, 2017, 74). As they put, “reproductive justice is the application of the concept of intersectionality to reproductive politics in order to achieve human rights” (Ross and Solinger 2017, 79). This framework requires an intersectional feminist approach to be used when addressing reproductive oppression that women have historically faced (Ross and Solinger, 2017). Ross and Solinger quote Forward Together’s definition of reproductive oppression as,

“The control and exploitation of women, girls, and individuals through our bodies, sexuality, labor, and reproduction. The regulation of women and individuals thus becomes a powerful strategic pathway to controlling entire communities. It involves systems of oppression that are based on race, ability, class, gender, sexuality, age, and immigration status” (Ross and Solinger 2017, 90).

They use this definition to show that reproductive oppression can stem from multiple areas and it is linked to other systems of oppression. For this reason, intersectionality is required in order to take down and dismantle reproductive oppression (Ross and Solinger 2017, 74).

Like intersectional feminism, reproductive justice also centers women’s stories and experiences as crucial to the framework. Ross and Solinger explain that we must have solidarity for all women,

even those who do not experience the same oppressions as us (Ross and Solinger 2017, 76). They say that “in order to achieve reproductive justice, we need a united human rights movement that includes all persons and their voices” (Ross and Solinger 2017, 76). Everyone’s voice is important because they bring a new and personalized experience of oppression (Ross and Solinger 2017, 76). As they put it, “to embrace the vision of reproductive justice, one must embrace polyvocality—many voices telling their stories that together may be woven into a unified movement for human rights (Ross and Solinger 2017, 59). If the goal is human rights, then each human’s voice matters and is important to the movement, and we must center the most vulnerable group so that we may understand the complexity of oppression. They say, “a great deal of what we know about life comes from the way we store and organize our memories of lived experience and how we make them into stories” (Ross and Solinger 2017, 59). If many people are picking up on the same patterns of injustice, then it is likely that they are experiencing the same system of oppression and can be in solidarity with one another (Ross and Solinger 2017, 60). Storytelling is so important to the reproductive justice framework because it gives other people the platform to learn and be in your shoes. Ross and Solinger argue:

“stories help us understand how others think and make decisions. They help us understand how our human rights— and the human rights of others—are protected or violated. Storytelling is a core aspect of reproductive justice practice because attending to someone else’s story invites us to shift the lens— that is, to imagine the life of another person and to reexamine our own realities and reimagine our own possibilities (Ross and Solinger 2017, 59).

Prioritizing women’s experiences and observations is crucial to this framework because it helps us to better make sense of interlocking forms of reproductive oppression (Ross and Solinger, 2017). This concept is extremely discussing each of my primary political artifacts, since reproductive oppression will be occurring across all of them. What will be revealed is that intersectionality and valuing the stories of women of color is of paramount to understanding oppression.

Methodological Reflection

In the previous section, I developed the analytical framework that will guide my thesis which is a reproductive justice framework anchored in intersectionality and Foucauldian notions of disciplinary power. I will use this framework across my entire thesis in order to read *The Handmaid’s Tale* as an ethnography of the present in 2025, and use it as a guidebook for seeing the disciplinary mechanisms that are used to control women today. I chose each part of this reproductive justice framework anchored in intersectionality and Foucauldian concepts, specifically to address the growing problem of reproductive oppression in the contemporary world but also to identify it in the fictional and nonfictional books that I center. I decided to start with Foucault, even though he is not traditionally used in feminist scholarship. However, after studying Foucauldian concepts of disciplinary power, docile bodies, and the humble modalities, it became clear to me that these are important and useful concepts for contemporary feminists like myself to make use of. I decided to make Foucault central to my framework because I believe that these concepts can be useful for two reasons: for identifying disciplinary mechanisms that are used to control women, and for understanding power dynamics in an oppressive society. While Foucault’s concepts are central to my framework, in order to center women’s stories, understand, and resist reproductive oppression,

I must also make intersectionality and reproductive justice central to my framework while being informed by Foucauldian concepts.

In order to focus on the experiences of women of color, I knew that I needed center intersectionality. Intersectionality is attentive to the ways in which women of color face oppression differently than other women, and I wanted to focus on that in my analysis. Doing so allowed me to expand my understanding of oppression, and highlight the ways that injustice affects people differently. This understanding informs the rest of my thesis, as I am attentive to the interlocking systems of oppression. Being anchored in intersectionality is a key component of the reproductive justice framework that ultimately governs my thesis. The reproductive justice shapes the rest of my thesis because I use it as a guide for seeing reproductive oppression. Reproductive justice is what I argue the goal is, so that we women may have bodily autonomy and reproductive freedom, so this idea governs and informs the rest of my thesis.

In each chapter, I will follow the same structure of looking at one specific disciplinary mechanism that I argue to be present across all three political artifacts: *The Handmaid's Tale* (1984), *Killing the Black Body* (1997), and *in the contemporary day* (2025). This will show the relevance of *The Handmaid's Tale*, and why as a political theorist, I think it is imperative to read in 2025. This structure also shows through *Killing the Black Body*, shows how women of color have been most affected and impacted by reproductive oppression and disciplinary mechanisms. Finally, this structure shows that while these disciplinary mechanisms are occurring in both fictional and nonfictional accounts, they are also occurring in the present day, and I reveal where we see this happening. The purpose of each of the following chapters will be to identify, recognize, and resist the disciplinary mechanisms I believe to be occurring in women's lives.

After reading *The Handmaid's Tale* in 2024, I knew that I wanted to take a deeper dive into the meanings and the precedent of this dystopian novel. I read that Anne Balsamo recommended that the novel be read as an ethnography of the present back in 1996, and I decided that was exactly what I wanted to do, but in 2025. To me, Atwood's novel provided so much substantive information on reproductive oppression in a western society and so many examples of disciplinary mechanisms that can lead to docility. I knew that I wanted to use this novel to pull themes and mechanisms that allow for the subjugation and domination of women. However, as a woman of color myself, Atwood's novel did not go deep enough into the ways that women of color are most affected by reproductive oppression. While I still found her novel to be brilliant and useful for looking at reproductive oppression, I knew that I wanted to make women of color central to my analysis given that they are more likely to experience the impacts of reproductive domination more than women who are racially privileged.

With this intention in mind, I made the decision to include Dorothy Roberts book, *Killing the Black Body* written in 1997, to highlight the ways that women of color have been stripped of their bodily autonomy and reproductive freedom throughout American history. I use this book to show how the disciplinary mechanisms that are present in *The Handmaid's Tale* (fiction), are also present in *Killing the Black Body* (nonfiction), and I do this to show how *The Handmaid's Tale* is truly rooted in precedent, but also to show how women of color were especially affected by this mechanism. I read Dorothy Roberts book, while being informed by my framework which is rooted in intersectional feminism, reproductive justice, and Foucauldian understandings of disciplinary power. Through intersectionality and the reproductive justice framework but also being informed by concepts of disciplinary power and docile bodies, I am able to

analyze Robert's book to centralize women of color in my analysis and isolate the disciplinary mechanisms that have impacted women of color throughout history.

While I find it extremely helpful looking at history to understand reproductive injustices, the most important thing to me is seeing how women are being affected in the contemporary day. Since the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in 2021, many women's lives have been turned upside down. Hostility towards women from government powers is more pertinent than ever, and this has been exploited since the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* decision. Using my framework, I do an intersectional analysis to uncover where we see the interlocking of oppressions taking place in 2025. I also use Foucauldian notions of disciplinary power to identify and reveal mechanisms that are used to control women today. In chapters 2 and 3, I show a disciplinary mechanism taking place in the contemporary day and how women, especially women of color, are being affected by this.

The two disciplinary mechanisms that I identify in my analysis will be objectification in chapter 2 and surveillance in chapter 3. I chose these mechanisms specifically because they appear across all three political artifacts, and there are numerous points where I draw connections. The final chapter is chapter 4, and it focuses on how I can use my reproductive justice framework, anchored in intersectionality and Foucauldian notions of power to resist disciplinary mechanisms and reproductive oppression. I designed my chapters in this way so that I would end on how we may resist these mechanisms, and what we learn from women of color feminists about resistance and centering women's stories.

In this thesis I am being epistemically defiant by calling out the mechanisms that I argue are being used to control women today. I specifically use the *Dobbs v. Jackson* case to reveal how unjust

our society currently is toward women and why it is so problematic to objectify and surveil us, and ultimately want us to become docile bodies. A part of this epistemic defiance is my comparison of a dystopian novel to our current day. In various moments in my thesis, I reference the fact that in 2025, we are getting closer to a world that looks like Gilead. I make these claims because of my findings, and how strikingly similar our contemporary day looks in comparison to Atwood's novel. My reason for doing this comes back to the fact that I think *The Handmaid's Tale* is so relevant, and that there is so much that contemporary feminists can learn from the novel.

Conclusion

In this chapter I developed the analytical framework that I will use across this thesis. I explained that I am reading *The Handmaid's Tale* as an ethnography of the present of 2025, taking after Balsamo's 1996 recommendation. In order to do so, I developed a reproductive justice framework that is informed by and anchored in intersectionality and Foucauldian notions of disciplinary power. I will use this framework to analyze my three political artifacts which are *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Killing the Black Body*, and the present day to identify which disciplinary mechanisms are taking place in all three. Finally, I discussed my methodological commitments and the decision-making process when deciding how to structure my thesis and develop my framework.

Chapter 2: Objectification as Mechanism for Controlling Women:

In the previous chapter, I laid the foundation for my primary analytical lens, and I developed an intersectional reproductive justice framework anchored in Foucauldian concepts of power, which I will use to argue that *The Handmaid's Tale* can be used as a guidebook for understanding the mechanisms used to control women today.

In this chapter, I will be advancing my thesis by using this framework to look critically at objectification as a disciplinary mechanism of reproductive oppression. I will be analyzing and identifying objectification across my three political artifacts. First, I will see where objectification is present in *The Handmaid's Tale* and what this does to the women in the novel. Next, I will use Dorothy Roberts' book, *Killing the Black Body*, to show how objectification has historically existed for women of color in America. Finally, I will show how objectification is still a contemporary issue, and I will analyze where we see this occurring today in a post-Dobbs world.

Objectification is a concept that is attached to womanhood (Nussbaum, 1995). Objectification, also called "thingification" by theorists, refers to the literal objectifying of a human being—the dehumanizing and reducing of a person to a "thing" (Nussbaum, 1995). We live in a culture that treats women as less than human—constantly being sexualized, controlled, and hyper focused on the basis of their bodies (Nussbaum 1995; Foucault, 1984, 171). Other than its reduction of human value, objectification is a women's issue because it allows for the control, domination, and subjection of women's bodies (Nussbaum 1995; Foucault, 1984, 171). The government's hyperfocus on the body and its abilities leads to the state's control over it (Foucault, 1984, 172). This eliminates women's bodily autonomy and self determination because objectification silences women who have been reduced to an object since our personhood, voice, and power is taken away (Nussbaum, 1995). Objectification theory "postulates that many women are sexually objectified and treated as an object to be valued or its use by others" (Szymanski et al., 2011). Research indicates that when women are sexually objectified, or "thingified", they are more likely to be sexually abused, harassed, and mistreated because they are not being regarded as equal human beings, according to objectification theory researchers Szymanski,

Moffitt, and Carr (Szymanski et al., 2011). Their research also indicates that being sexually objectified is a regular occurrence for most women in the United States, and that women of color are more likely to be victims of sexual objectification, and reduced to an object (Szymanski et al., 2011). This objectification and thingification results in the devaluing and dehumanization of women, which has severe impacts on the quality of their lives (Szymanski et al., 2011). Foucault's Concept of

Disciplinary Power

Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power and docile bodies is crucial to understanding objectification. Disciplinary power, for Foucault, is about training and conditioning bodies (Foucault, 1984, 172). Its purpose is to discipline, control, and make productive a body of people (Foucault, 1984, 172). As he says, "in our societies, the systems of punishment are to be situated in a certain 'political economy' of the body... it is always the body that is at issue—the body and its forces, their utility and docility, their distribution and their submission" (Foucault, 1984, 172). In this quote he is reiterating that the body is always the focus when it comes to power, and it is about making sure the body is functioning for a particular purpose that benefits the state or some other entity (Foucault, 1984, 172). When a person is a disciplined, controlled, and practiced body that is getting used for a function, that is a docile body (Foucault, 1984, 182). He says,

"Thus discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies. Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience). In short, it dissociates power from the body; on the one hand, it turns into an 'aptitude,' a 'capacity,' which it seeks to increase; on the other hand, it reverses the course of the energy, the power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of strict subjection" (Foucault, 1984, 182).

Foucault's concept of docile bodies is directly connected to the literal objectification of people. It is seeing them as machine-like and functional, rather than human (Szymanski et al., 2011). In order to keep bodies docile and useful, the government must use disciplinary forces to keep these bodies in line, so that they can always be used at their maximum capacity (Foucault, 1984, 182). Objectification is one of these disciplinary forces. It is the literal minimizing of a person into an object, to justify using them—this is how a person can remain docile and subjected, since they are dehumanized (Foucault, 1984, 182).

Objectification in Dystopian Fiction via The Handmaid's Tale

The Handmaid's Tale's dystopian society is founded on the objectification of women whose bodies can be used for the state (Atwood, 1985, 174). Because of the decline of infertility due to an environmental issue, the creators of Gilead forced fertile women to become baby making machines and fetal containers (Atwood, 1985, xiv) (Annas, 1986, 13). In order for this to be possible, they had to completely reduce these women's lives to objects that can be dominated, manipulated, and docile (Atwood, 1985; Foucault, 1984, 183). The way that Offred articulated objectification is when she had a memory of her last days with Luke, just before they got separated (Atwood, 1984, 192). They were deciding what to do with their cat, now that they were leaving home and they were not bringing her (Atwood 1984, 192). Offred remembers this chilling moment, when she knew that Luke started to objectify their cat to prepare to kill her (Atwood, 1984, 192). Luke said "I'll take care of it", and Offred reflects,

"he said it instead of her, I knew he meant kill. That is what you have to do before you kill, I thought. You have to create an it, where none was before. You'll do that first, in your head, and then you make it real. So that's how they do it, I thought" (Atwood, 1985, 192-193).

Offred is reflecting on the moment where she saw the literal objectification of her cat and realizing that Luke had to make the cat an object first, and then be ready to kill it (Atwood, 1985, 193). This is a metaphor for the world that Offred is currently living in, as she has been made an object, and now Gilead is able to treat her as a fetal container (Atwood, 1985, 136). (Annas, 1986, 13). After a while of experiencing Gilead, Offred realizes her role as an objectified woman, being used as a docile body for her role of making babies (Atwood, 1985, 136). She says,

"We are for breeding purposes: we aren't concubines, geisha girls, courtesans. On the contrary: everything possible has been done to remove us from that category. There is supposed to be nothing entertaining about us, no room is to be permitted for the flowering of secret lusts, no special favors are to be wheedled, by them or us, there are to be no footholds for love. We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (Atwood, 1984, 136).

Offred reflects on being stripped of personhood and humanity, and strictly for womb with legs (Atwood, 1985, 136). This is how Gilead dominated the Handmaids, by diminishing their individuality (Atwood, 1985, 126).

In chapter two of the novel, Offred is describing how managed her life is as a Handmaid, and how every aspect of her current life is controlled by Gilead (Atwood, 1985, 7). She says,

"I know why there is no glass, in front of the watercolor picture of blue irises, and why the window only opens partly and why the glass in it is shatterproof. It isn't running away they're afraid of. We wouldn't get far. It's those other escapes, the ones you can open in yourself, given a cutting edge" (Atwood, 1985, 8).