

Additionally, Offred describes that the door of the room she's been placed in, does not shut properly, symbolizing that the Handmaids do not ever have full privacy (Atwood, 1985, 8). Offred is taking note of the makeup of her room, noticing how controlled and thought-out every part of the room is, ensuring that the Handmaid's have no freedom (Atwood, 1985, 9). The Handmaid's are disciplined in the novel through the enforcement of wearing specific clothing (Atwood, 1985, 8). In Gilead's white theocracy, conservatism is very important, and they force the women to wear long dresses, gloves, and bonnets that completely cover their skin and bodily features (Atwood, 1985, 8). Offred says,

"The red gloves are lying on the bed. I pick them up, finger by finger. Everything except the wings around my face is red; the color of blood, which defines us. The skirt is ankle-length, full, gathered to a flat yolk that extends over the breasts, the sleeves are full. The white wings too are prescribed; they are to keep us from seeing but also from being seen" (Atwood, 1985, 8).

She is describing the clothing that all Handmaids are required to wear, not only to distinguish who is a Handmaid, but also to take away all individuality and choice from them (Atwood, 1985,8). This level of control over women's lives diminishes their personhood and their ability to feel human under such conditions.

In addition to forcing the handmaids to wear the red long dresses and bonnets that cover their face and body, Gilead also uses other mechanisms to diminish the women and treat them as fetal containers such as take away their names and give them new names based on who their Commander is (Atwood, 1985, xv). The Commander is a higher up man who has a wife and is looking to have a child, so he rapes the handmaids because his wife cannot have children (Atwood, 1985, 93).

In this regime, the handmaids' names are stripped from them, and they are labeled after the commander, for example, Fred is the Commander of Offred, and her name is given because it combines "of" as in belonging to, and the Commander's name, Fred (Atwood, 1985, xv). The same thing goes for her friend, Ofglen, whose Commander's name is Glen.

Another way that these women are objectified or made to feel like objects is by not allowing them to care for themselves or do anything that pleases them. For example, the women are not able to use skincare or makeup (Atwood, 1985, 96). Offred says, "there's no longer any hand lotion or face cream, not for us. Such things are considered vanities. We are containers, its only the insides of our bodies that are important. The outside can become hard and wrinkled, for all they care, like the shell of a nut" (Atwood, 1985, 96). Offred is reflecting on the fact that they are no longer able to pamper or just take care of themselves in the way they want because Gilead does not care about anything other than their ability to reproduce and have babies (Atwood,1985, 96). Offred hides butter in her shoe to lather on her face and neck, just to feel something reminiscent of the past and to feel like a woman again just for a moment (Atwood, 1985, 96).

The objectification or "thingification" of women in *The Handmaid's Tale* is present all throughout Gilead, but especially during *The Ceremony* (Atwood, 1985, 93). *The Ceremony* involves the Commander and his Wife— it is a highly ritualized rape that the Handmaid undergoes to serve as the family's surrogate (Atwood, 1985, 94). In chapter sixteen, Offred experiences this with the Commander and Serena Joy (Atwood, 1985, 93). Serena Joy is involved in the *Ceremony* as she is latched onto Offred behind her, as if they become one during this moment (Atwood, 1985, 94). Offred says,

"her legs are apart. I lie between them, my head on her stomach, her pubic bone under the base of my skull, her thighs on either side of me. She too is fully clothed. My arms are raised; she holds my hands, each of mine in each of hers. This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being. What it really means is that she is in control of the process and thus the product" (Atwood, 1985, 94).

While the Commander carries out this ritual, Offred is completely treated as an object to be used for Gilead's agenda of forced pregnancy and creating a white theocracy (Atwood, 1985, 94). This rape as a "ceremony" is the ultimate display of Offred's body being used for the regime and the clearest display of thingification. Not only is she being devalued and dehumanized in this moment, but she is ultimately being used to contribute to the regime and to further its mission. While she is being raped, Offred experiences disembodiment as a result of what is happening to her (Atwood, 1985, 94). She says,

"my red skirt is hiked up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because it is not what he is doing... He is preoccupied, like a man humming to himself in the shower without knowing what he's humming; like a man who has other things on his mind" (Atwood, 1985, 94-95).

Offred is being raped and acknowledging that the only important part of her to the Commander is her reproductive organs (Atwood, 1985, 95). This Ceremony ritual is not only treating her body as an object, but it's also using it as a machine for reproduction as a fetal container (Atwood, 1985, 95; Annas, 1986, 13). The Ceremony is an example of objectification, domination, and the Foucauldian concept of docile bodies (Atwood, 1985, 94; Foucault, 1984, 182).

(The Handmaids experience reproductive oppression in Gilead, having no control over what happens to their bodies and not being able to stop what happens to them (Atwood, 1985, 95). This oppression comes from domination from Gilead and from all of the Eyes that watch the Handmaid's to make sure they are docile (Atwood, 1985, 212; Foucault, 1984, 182). It is through this oppression, domination, and surveillance that Handmaids become docile bodies (Atwood, 1985, 212) (Foucault, 1984, 183). Not only are they highly controlled bodies that have no rights, but they also serve a purpose of advancing Gilead's white theocracy (Atwood, 1985, 95) (Foucault, 1984, 212).

Another moment when Offred experiences feeling like an object and being disembodied is when she sees the doctor in Gilead (Atwood, 1984, 60). She has a regular doctor's visit to have her body examined to make sure she is in a position to get pregnant (Atwood, 1985, 60). She explains,

"When I am naked I lie down on the examining table, on the sheet of chilly crackling disposable paper. I pull the second sheet, the cloth one, up over my body. At neck level there's another sheet, suspended from the ceiling. It intersects me so that the doctor will never see my face. He deals with a torso only" (Atwood, 1985, 60).

Offred describes the feeling of fragmentation, being disconnected from the rest of her body. She feels this disconnect from the rest of her body because Gilead only cares for her reproductive organs, and nothing else because to Gilead, the handmaids are objects whose only importance is to make children (Atwood, 1985, 60). This visit is required by the state to ensure her reproductive ability and her compliance with the regime (Atwood, 1985, 60).

This hyperfocus on her body, especially her reproductive organs, leaves her feeling disembodied and disconnected from that part of herself. This causes her to feel like a broken version of who she used to be pre-Gilead. This is a result of the utter objectification she has experienced and the reproductive oppression she has faced. Being raped by the Commander and being examined by the doctor have something in common and its that the only important thing about Offred is her body and her duty to reproduce.

Objectification in History Via Killing the Black Body

In *Killing the Black Body* (1997), Dorothy Roberts writes about the long history of reproductive oppression that women of color have faced. In the first chapter "Reproduction in Bondage", Roberts tells the story of the domination of slavery and how this translated into the sexual oppression black women faced (Roberts, 1997, 23). She says,

"Racism created for white slave owners the possibility of unrestrained reproductive control. The social order established by powerful white men was founded on two inseparable ingredients: the dehumanization of Africans on the basis of race, and the control of women's sexuality and reproduction. The American legal system is rooted in this monstrous combination of racial and gender domination" (Roberts, 1997, 23).

As a black woman, Dorothy Roberts is attentive to the fact that racism and reproductive oppression are intertwined for black women. Slavery objectified an entire race of human beings and treated them as objects to be used for work (Roberts, 1997, 22). However, for slave women, they were not only used for work but were also used because of their reproductive abilities that the state wanted to control and regulate (Roberts, 1997, 23). Roberts says "slavery made control of reproduction a central aspect of whites' subjugation of African people in America.

It marked Black women from the beginning as objects whose decisions about reproduction should be subject to social regulation rather than to their own will (Roberts, 1997, 23).

Black women were treated as objects who can be fully controlled and manipulated during slavery (Roberts, 1997, 22). Because of their race and gender, they were multiply burdened by oppression and this allowed for white slave owners to take advantage of them and dehumanize them (Roberts, 1997, 24). In 1808, there was a ban on importing slaves putting slave owners in a position to reconsider how to continue producing slaves. Roberts explains that,

"Female slaves were commercially valuable to their masters not only for their labor but also for their ability to produce more slaves. The law made slave women's children the property of the slave owner. White masters therefore could increase their wealth by controlling their slaves' reproductive capacity" (Roberts, 1997, 24). Additionally, *"the ban on importing slaves after 1808 and the steady inflation in their price made enslaved women's childbearing even more valuable. Female slaves provided their masters with a ready feature supply of chattel. Black creation not only benefited each slaves; particular owner; but it also more globally sustained the entire system of slavery"* (Roberts, 1997, 24).

Roberts explains this moment in time that black female slaves became useful in more ways than one (Roberts, 1997, 24). She is describing that this 1808 ban on importing slaves actually created an even worse situation for black women, because they became responsible for creating more slaves, while still having the burden of being a working slave. This is an instance where we see black women being used as the means for solving a social problem (Roberts, 1997, 27). Since slaves were no longer coming from Africa, slave masters would arrange for slave women to become pregnant in order to solve that issue (Roberts, 1997, 27).

This is one of the many ways that black women in bondage were completely dehumanized, and treated as a reproduction machine for slave breeding, rather than being treated as a human being (Roberts, 1997, 28). This completely took away these slave women's bodily autonomy, and it completely violated their negative liberty (Roberts, 1997, 296). Roberts defines negative liberty as the right against state interference, and even though this was the slave master's doing and not the state, it is clear that black women in bondage were completely stripped of their negative liberty (Roberts, 1997, 28). They experienced gender and race as interlocking oppressions and were treated inhumanely as a result (Roberts, 1997, 31) (CRC, 1997).

Dorothy Roberts articulates that black women's mistreatment came from the fact that they were reduced to objects (Roberts, 1997, 23). She explains that their procreation was most often a result of domination and control rather than liberty and choice (Roberts, 1997, 23). She says,

"Black women's childbearing in bondage was largely a product of oppression rather than an expression of self-definition and personhood. As Henry Louis Gates Jr., writes about the autobiography of slave named Harriet Jacobs, it 'charts in vivid detail precisely how the shape of her life and the choices she makes are defined by her reduction to a sexual object, an object to be raped, bred, or abused'...The brutal domination of slave women's procreation laid the foundation for centuries of reproductive regulation that continues today" (Roberts, 1997, 23).

With this quote, we are seeing the direct connection between the objectification theory that I previously mentioned, and the experiences of black women (Szymanski et al., 2011). Recalling earlier in the chapter, I explain that objectification theory researchers found that most women in the United States are objectified and are reduced to an object,

and that women of color are more susceptible to this (Szymanski et al., 2011). This research also found that those who are reduced to an object are at high risk for abuse and sexual harassment (Szymanski et al., 2011). It is evident through *Killing the Black Body* that this has been true for hundreds of years, given that Roberts is attentive to the way in which objectification functions as a tool for black female domination (Roberts, 1997, 23). Another example of this is that Roberts shares that the law did not punish anyone for the rape of black women (Roberts, 1997, 31). She explains that, "Louisiana's rape law explicitly excluded Black women from its protection" because even though the language of the law seemed to protect all woman, there is not a single case in the eighteenth century that charged a white man for raping a black woman (Roberts, 1997, 31). Black slaves were subject to being raped by white men, partially for the economic value that came from having more slaves, but also because "the rape of slave women by their masters was primarily a weapon of terror that reinforces white's domination over their human property" (Roberts, 1997, 29). In this way, black women were literally regarded as the property of their slave owners and could be used for whatever purpose.

In addition, black slaves were not allowed to testify in a court against a white person, so even if the law recognized their rape as a crime, the victim would not be able to stand in front of a court to testify (Roberts, 1997, 31). Legally, they were not treated as legal humans or equal citizens at all which allowed for their abuse and harassment and dehumanization (Roberts, 1997, 30). As a result of this, Roberts says that "for most of American history the crime of rape of a black woman did not exist" (Roberts, 1997, 31). Furthermore, a black slave man also couldn't be charged with rape against a black female slave because the Mississippi Court claimed that "the crime of a rape does not exist in this State between African slaves" (Roberts, 1997, 32).

The lack of legal protection from rape female slaves from either white or black men, further reinforced their sexual oppression and truly shows how black women's bodies in bondage were completely objectified.

All in all, Dorothy Roberts tells the story of how black women were treated during slavery as a result of being reduced to objects. This objectification led to all kinds of poor and inhumane treatment, but it started with them being seen as objects to be used (Roberts, 1997,24). She acknowledges that this precedent of objectifying women of color did not end when slavery did (Roberts, 1997, 23). It still existed when she was writing *Killing the Black Body* in 1997, and I argue that it still exists in the present day.

Objectification in the Contemporary via Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization

In 1973, *Roe v. Wade* legalized abortion and gave women the federal right to an abortion in the United States (*Roe v. Wade*, 1973). The Supreme Court found that the Constitution recognizes that the right to liberty protects privacy, and that the right to continue or end a pregnancy is included in that (*Roe v. Wade*, 1973). After nearly 50 years of this federal right and protection, in June of 2022 the Supreme Court struck down this decision and overturned *Roe v. Wade* through the *Dobbs v. Jackson* decision ("Center for Reproductive Rights: *Roe v. Wade*"). *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022) established that the Constitution does not explicitly protect the right to an abortion, so it should instead be left up to the states to make that decision (*Dobbs v. Jackson*, 2022). The court wrote,

"The court examines whether the right to an abortion is rooted in the Nation's history and tradition and whether it is an essential component of "ordered liberty." The court finds that the right to an abortion is not deeply rooted in the Nation's history and tradition ... Guided by the history and tradition that map the essential components of the Nation's concept of ordered liberty, the Court finds the Fourteenth Amendment clearly does not protect the right to an abortion. Until the latter part of the 20th century, there was no support in American law for a constitutional right to obtain an abortion. No state constitutional provision had recognized such a right. Nor any scholarly treatise. Indeed, abortion had long been a crime in every single state" (Justice Alito, 2022, 2-3).

What is so dangerous about this passage written by Justice Samuel Alito, is the focus on looking to our nation's history for answers. It is said that abortion rights are not deeply rooted in the history of our nation (Justice Alito, 2022, 2). In fact, what is deeply rooted in the history of our nation (as seen in *Killing the Black Body*) is reproductive slavery, forced pregnancy, and forced childbirth (Roberts, 1997, 31). It is so deeply problematic to lean on our nation's "traditions" when it comes to making decisions about reproductive freedom. In our history, women had no reproductive freedom, no negative liberty, and they were stripped of all bodily autonomy (Roberts, 1997, 296). Roberts shows us in *Killing the Black Body* (1996) that our history shows that women of color were not treated as legal people, and that they were completely objectified and used for someone else's agenda. This is the history that Justice Alito refers to when discussing that we should be guided by our history to make decisions about liberty. For Justice Alito to say that we should rely on tradition to make these decisions, he is saying that if women were ever treated as objects in history,

then they can and should still be treated as objects now. An object is not listened to, valued, protected, or cared for, and that is why this decision is so problematic for women; it will result in the objectification of women and we will see this have major impacts on their lives. This *Dobbs v. Jackson* case reveals so much about the government's intentions, as they are willing to allow for the objectifying and dehumanizing of women. Going back to history and relying on our nation's tradition means that we are relying on racist and patriarchal ideals that have historically objectified and thingified women, to make decisions about our current laws.

Roe v. Wade was in many ways a "win" for women, as we finally got the federal right to abortion (1973). However, scholars like Dorothy Roberts and the dissenting Justices, Breyer, Sotomayor, and Kagan, discuss how even *Roe v. Wade* was a balancing act between women and the state that did not give women full liberty (Roberts, 2024, 177; Breyer, Sotomayor, and Kagan, 2022, 8). The dissenting Justices say that "the court therefore struck a balance, turning on the stage of pregnancy at which the abortion would occur. The court explained that early on, a woman's choice must prevail, but that at some point the state's interest become dominant" (Breyer, Sotomayor, and Kagan, 2022, 8). These Justices are explaining that while *Roe v. Wade* did give women choice and liberty up to a certain point, after that, the state's interests or agenda became more important and dominated the liberty and choice of the woman. While many feminists recognized *Roe v. Wade* as something to celebrate, Breyer, Sotomayor, and Kagan remind us that even *Roe v. Wade* did not give full liberty and decision making power to women.

Similarly, Roberts states that "*Roe v. Wade* was a victory for the narrow protection against state laws criminalizing abortion but it failed to recognize the full

scope of reproductive freedom, leaving in place these forms of reproductive violence that target women of color" (Roberts, 2024, 176). She reminds us that women of color are the most affected by the intersection of reproductive oppressions, and that even *Roe* was narrowly protecting the liberties of women rather than granting them full rights over their bodies (Roberts 2024, 177).. The reason I discuss this is to show that even though *Roe* was flawed and narrow in its protection, we still had it. However, today, and as of 2022, the government has completely removed women from the equation, and completely dominates this sector of our lives. It is no longer a balancing act, but a decision completely made by the government. Stripping women of their liberty and decision making power when it comes to their reproduction, does objectify them and dehumanizes them. Having absolutely no say in your reproductive decisions, treats women as objects, and it also feels strikingly similar to the reality that the handmaids are experiencing in *Gilead* (Atwood, 1985).

The dissenting Supreme Court Justices, Breyer, Sotomayor, and Kagan speak more about the dangers of this ruling in the dissenting opinion (Breyer, Sotomayor, and Kagan, 2022, 1). They acknowledge the overturning of *Roe* will be a danger to women and that it is a great loss. In the dissent, they say,

"Today, the court discards that balance. It says that from the very moment of fertilization, a woman has no rights to speak of. A state can force her to bring her pregnancy to term, even at the steepest personal and familial costs... and because, as the court has often stated, protecting fetal life is rational, states will feel free to enact all manner of restrictions" (Breyer, Sotomayor, and Kagan, 2022, 2).

The Justices are expressing that after this court ruling, the state no longer considers the woman's stakes in this debate, and instead gives all of her power and autonomy to the government. The dissenting opinion explains that the Mississippi law in question, bans abortions after 15 weeks, but there is expected to be much more extreme laws as a result of this ruling (Dobbs v. Jackson, 2022, 2). This is an attack on women's freedom, bodily autonomy, and self-determination. The dissenting justices also explain that some states have passed extreme laws that do not give women the option to terminate a pregnancy even if it is a result of rape or incest (Dobbs v. Jackson, 2022, 2). They discuss the impacts on a woman's life and health, given that she has to bear her rapist's child, or a young girl having to bear the child of an older family member even if it destroys her life (Dobbs v. Jackson, 2022, 2). This highlights how the Dobbs decision does nothing for victims of abuse even if they are children. It reinforces the abuse they have already been through by giving them no bodily autonomy or decision making power.

The dissenting justices call to attention the fact that the State will have unrestricted power when making decisions about women's lives. They argue:

"states may even argue that a prohibition on abortion need make no provision for protecting a woman from risk or death or physical harm. Across a vast array of circumstances, a state will be able to impose its moral choice on a woman and coerce her to give birth to a child" (Breyer, Sotomayor, and Kagan, 2022, 3).

Without the protection that was previously in place from *Roe v. Wade* (1973), the State will be left to decide whatever it wants for women's reproductive health, no matter how detrimental it can be for women's health.

In addition, justices Breyer, Sotomayor, and Kagan say that the state may also "impose criminal penalties on abortion providers, including lengthy prison sentences" (Dobbs v. Jackson, 2022, 3). This will make healthcare providers weary to help women in need. The State, after this decision, may also "criminalize the woman's conduct too, incarcerating or fining her for daring to seek or obtain an abortion" (Dobbs v. Jackson, 2022, 3). This clearly shows the hostility to women that exists today, and the attempt to limit her liberty when seeking abortion care.

It is obvious that the Dobbs decision has adverse effects on the future of women's lives and freedom. The dissenting justices state,

"Whatever the exact scope of the coming laws, one result of today's decision is certain: the curtailment of women's rights, and of their status as free and equal citizens. Yesterday the Constitution guaranteed that a woman confronted with an unplanned pregnancy could make her own decision about whether to bear a child, with all the life transforming consequences that act involves. And in thus safeguarding each woman's reproductive freedom, the Constitution also protected "[t]he ability of women to participate equally in [this Nation's] economic and social life." Casey, 505 U. S., at 856. But no longer. As of today, this Court holds, a State can always force a woman to give birth, prohibiting even the earliest abortions" (Breyer, Sotomayor, and Kagan, 2022, 3).

Breyer, Sotomayor and Kagan first explain that this ruling signifies that women are not free and equal citizens in America. Stripping us of our bodily autonomy, and giving that right up to the government, completely objectifies us and takes away our ability to be equal citizens in society. They explain that women will suffer the consequences of losing control over their own lives and not being able to govern their own futures, given the extremely transformative process of becoming

pregnant (Breyer, Sotomayor, and Kagan, 2022, 3). The dissenting Justices also say in this excerpt that the Court is now allowing that the government can force a woman to give birth at any stage of pregnancy without giving them any options (Breyer, Sotomayor, and Kagan, 2022, 3). This sounds shockingly like *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Killing the Black Body*, where I previously explored examples of forced birth for the states agenda, but it is also sounding very similar to the Foucauldian concepts of disciplinary power and docile bodies (Atwood, 1985, Roberts, 1997). By not valuing women as free and equal citizens, and stripping us of our bodily autonomy, they are effectively trying to make us docile (Foucault, 1984, 181). Finally, they conclude by saying that after this decision, “the Constitution will, today’s majority, provide no shield, despite its guarantees of liberty and equality for all” (Dobbs v. Jackson, 2022, 4). After this decision, we see how clear it is that the state has objectified women by completely removing their rights to decide their own reproductive choices and having the ability to force them to give birth.

The dissenting Justices also explain that economic barriers will leave some women with significantly less options than others, furthering the curtailment of rights and freedom and highlighting that low income women or women of color will be most affected by this decision (Breyer, Sotomayor, and Kagan, 2022, 3). At many points in the dissenting opinion the Justices explain that low income and impoverished women experience pregnancies at “rates five times higher than higher income women do, and nearly half of women who seek abortion care live in households below the poverty line” (Breyer, Sotomayor, and Kagan, 2022, 50). This is a significant number because it reveals that women of color and impoverished women will be severely more impacted by this reproductive oppression than white women, furthering the gap between them. This is similar to what Roberts argued in *Killing the Black Body*,

as we saw that black women experienced reproductive injustices much more profoundly than white women (Roberts, 1997, 31).

One of the most troubling parts of the Dobbs v. Jackson's decision, and the reasons given for its outcome, is that it completely takes women out of the equation, giving them no control over this situation which governs the trajectory of their lives (Dobbs v. Jackson, 2022, 12). There are adverse effects that come from objectifying women, especially young women that are victims of abuse and will have no decision but to give birth (Dobbs v. Jackson, 2022, 2). This removal of women from the decision objectifies her by treating her as less than human for not being able to make decisions about what happens to her own body—and it ultimately turns her into a docile body to be used for the state's agenda (Dobbs v. Jackson, 2022, 12; Foucault, 1984, 181). If she is completely stripped of her bodily autonomy, and women’s health and lives are in the hands of the State, it is clear that they are dehumanized and reduced to less than equal citizens (Dobbs v. Jackson, 2022, 15). This objectification treats women as responsible even for their rape or abusive circumstances, since they will have to suffer the consequences of birthing an unwanted child without having any decision-making power (Dobbs v. Jackson, 2022, 3). By far the most troubling aspect of this decision is the Supreme Court’s willingness to see women die as a result of this ruling (Presser and Surana, 2024). According to the National Library of Medicine, the majority of doctors agree that abortion is an “appropriate and often necessary” method of saving women’s lives (Xing et al., 2023). In addition, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists says that “abortion is an essential component of women’s healthcare” and that all women are “entitled to privacy, dignity, respect, and support” when obtaining abortion care (ACOG, 2025). They also say that where abortion is illegal or highly restricted, women's ability to receive life

saving care is in danger; approximately 21 million women around the world are forced to get an unsafe illegal abortion (ACOG, 2025). Finally, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists says that “personal decision making by women and their doctors should never be replaced by political ideology. The best health care is provided free of political interference in the patient physician relationship” (ACOG, 2025). When political interference is involved in women’s reproductive decision making, the government is trying to make women docile and used for their agenda. What might this agenda be? It can vary. The government’s agenda may always be changing, but what matters less what the agenda is, but rather the fact that women are being used for an agenda at all. Given that the facts show that abortions are in many cases a necessary and life saving procedure for women, it is extremely telling that the Supreme Court would reverse this as a federal right. I believe this shows their objectification of women, and their willingness to let women die as a result of their political ideology.

The *Dobbs v. Jackson* decision resulted in extreme abortion laws that have directly led to women's deaths and docility (Presser and Surana, 2024). As I previously mentioned, this is the most troubling and frustrating outcome of the *Dobbs* decision given that it led to women not receiving life saving care (Presser and Surana, 2024). According to Lizzie Presser and Kavitha Surana with *The Texas Tribune*, multiple women in Texas have been turned away or advised improperly from doctors when they were in need of a D&C (dilation and curettage), which is a “common procedure for first trimester miscarriages and abortions” (Presser and Surana, 2024). Porsha Ngumezi was one of these women; she was a 35-year-old African American woman, wife, and mother of two— living in Texas at the time that the state was imposing extreme abortion laws (Presser and Surana, 2024).

She went into hospital at 11 weeks pregnant, with severe bleeding and passing of blood clots the size of a grapefruit (Presser and Surana, 2024). Before having talked to any doctors at the hospital, Porsha called her mother-in-law, a former physician, and told her what she was experiencing (Presser and Surana, 2024). Her mother and law told her she needed a D&C to remove the remaining tissue from her uterus, and the bleeding would end (Presser and Surana, 2024). However, according to Porsha’s husband, Hope, Dr. Andrew Ryan Davis was the doctor who Porsha saw and he told her that he would only give her misoprostol to help pass the tissue, but that was all (Presser and Surana, 2024). According to hospital records, Porsha took the pills but the bleeding continued (Presser and Surana, 2024). Porsha’s husband, Hope, said that her heart stopped three hours later, and Porsha was dead (Presser and Surana, 2024). Multiple doctors and medical professionals have called Porsha’s death preventable and have said that she was clearly in need of an emergency D&C (Presser and Surana, 2024). Dr. Amber Trueheart, an OB-GYN at University of New Mexico Center for Reproductive Health, said that “Misoprostol at 11 weeks is not going to work fast enough...the patient will continue to bleed and have a higher risk of going into hemorrhagic shock” (Presser and Surana, 2024). Porsha Ngumezi’s cause of death was found to be hemorrhage— and she is being recognized as one of the many women who have died as a result of extreme abortion laws (Presser and Surana, 2024).

Porsha was treated inhumanely and was completely objectified and treated as a docile body— and she died as a result of it. Instead of doing everything that was possible to save her life, her life was neglected (Presser and Surana, 2024). Porsha’s life is a tragic example of how the *Dobbs* decision led to the death of women. It started because the majority of the Supreme Court decided that in some cases,

women would not have access to lifesaving care, and that was okay (Dobbs v. Jackson, 2022, 48). I believe that this is a direct result of the literal objectification of women. This evidence shows that even though the threat of women's lives was on the table, the Supreme Court still made the decision that the State's interest was more important. It literally treated women as objects with little importance, rather than sacred human beings. The implication of objectifying women is not only that they are dehumanized and devalued, but we have seen that it can directly lead to their deaths.

Women in 2025 are under attack. Our bodies are being reduced to objects made that are subject to death as a result of not receiving healthcare. This is a clear demonstration of the hostility towards women that exists in the contemporary day. This curtailment of human rights and negative liberty explicitly shows how women's bodies are not dehumanized, and as a result, they are treated inhumanely, not having any control or say over our bodies. This demonstrates how the government views us as docile bodies to be used for their agenda (regardless of what it is), and this highlights the lack of care or advocacy when women die because at the end of the day we are just an object to them. This Dobbs decision is the application of objectification as a disciplinary mechanism that controls women's lives, takes away their bodily autonomy, and makes them docile bodies.

Beyond Dobbs v. Jackson

This decision to limit women's rights resulted in a widespread outbreak of sexist culture in the United States. Many men with varying age groups felt validated by the Court decision, and took to social media to share their thoughts. "Your Body, My Choice" became one of the slogans that went viral on Tik Tok, Instagram, and X according to CNN (Duffy, 2024). Hateful and sexist rhetoric began to emerge as women were expressing their frustrations with their new reality (Duffy, 2024).

According to Clare Duffy with CNN, the day after Dobbs was decided, there was a 4,600 percent increase in the use of the term "Your Body, My Choice," and women had been sharing that their social media comments were flooded with using the phrase (Duffy, 2024). One of the more popular social media creators to use the phrase was Nick Fuentes when he posted a video praising the Dobbs decision, and addressing the video to women saying, "we own your body" (Duffy, 2024). According to CNN, that video had been viewed over 100 million times in 2024 and reposted more than 40 million times (Duffy, 2024). Conservative far right rhetoric gave fuel to these young men, and the Dobbs decision validated their sexism (Duffy, 2024). It is no shock that young men in our country would disrespect and objectify women so boldly, since our own President of The United States does so everyday (BBC, 2016). Donald Trump has been recorded on numerous occasions making sexual comments about women's legs, breasts, and bodies (BBC, 2016). He is famously known for saying "grab them by the p*ssy, you can do anything them" (BBC, 2016). This quote has since been put on T-shirts, magnets, and stickers, and glorified by Trump's supporters (Duffy, 2024). It is evident that our nation has fallen into a very dark place where women can be disrespected, sexually exploited, and objectified, by the most influential person on the planet. This rhetoric about women is powerful, and it has shaped the way that the government has talked about and decided on women's issues. The Dobbs decision opened the door for women to be labeled as objects rather than people and to be sexually harassed. This all contributes to women becoming docile bodies, and the Dobbs decision may just be the start.

Conclusion:

Throughout this chapter, I used a Foucauldian understanding of disciplinary power and docile bodies to see objectification as one of the mechanisms that controls women. I showed through Atwood's novel, the literal objectification of handmaids as their singular role in Gilead was to reproduce and be a fetal container, and I did this by showing their rights being taken away and their identities being stripped from them. This objectification allowed for inhumane treatment where they had to undergo rape and forced birth in Gilead. Next, I showed how objectification is an idea that is very well understood to black women, as they were dehumanized during slavery, and thus had to undergo inhumane treatment. They were not seen as legal human beings, and thus no offense to a black woman was a real offense. This created a life of horror and docility for black women in bondage. Finally, I showed objectification existing in the contemporary, through the rhetoric Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization case, and the implications that this objectification has had on women's lives today.

Chapter 3: Surveillance: A Mechanism Used to Control Women and How It Has Become Increasingly Problematic in 2025

In Chapter 2, I argued that objectification is a disciplinary mechanism that diminishes personhood and humanity for the sake of making women docile bodies, and I presented evidence to show that this mechanism is present both in *The Handmaid's Tale* and in our contemporary world. The central focus of this thesis has been to what extent *The Handmaid's Tale* still functions as an "ethnography of the present" (1996). In this chapter, I look critically at how the female body is surveilled and watched in order to control women, and ultimately make them docile. This chapter argues that surveillance is a mechanism used to control women that we see present in *The Handmaid's Tale*, in our history through *Killing the Black Body*, and in our contemporary world.

I contend that *The Handmaid's Tale* can be used as a guidebook for understanding mechanisms of control, and this chapter will advance this claim by exploring one of the mechanism of surveillance. Women may be surveilled in a variety of ways in an oppressive theocracy like Gilead, however, Dorothy Roberts demonstrates in *Killing the Black Body* that women of color have been objects of surveillance all throughout American history. In order to describe surveillance as a disciplinary mechanism, I will first use Michel Foucault's three humble modalities and his arguments about surveillance to argue why this is an effective means of monitoring a person and keeping them docile (Foucault, 1984). Then, I will show surveillance being facilitated in *The Handmaid's Tale* and argue that this is a part of the agenda to keep women in Gilead docile so that they can always be useful for the state's agenda (Atwood, 1985). I will proceed to outline the historical precedent of surveillance, using *Killing the Black Body* to show how women of color have been subject to government surveillance through the welfare program (Roberts, 1997). Finally, I will show how the surveillance of women has become a contemporary issue after the Dobbs decision, and why this poses a threat to women in 2025.

Foucault's Three Humble Modalities

Foucault's concepts of disciplinary power, docile bodies, and the three humble modalities have been crucial for understanding how power is used against women. Foucault's three humble modalities, hierarchical observation, normalizing judgement, and the examination, are necessary for recognizing how docile bodies are created (Foucault, 1984, 189-200). As a reminder, according to Foucault, "discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies", and these bodies are ultimately useful for someone else's agenda (Foucault, 1984, 182). In order to maintain docility, Foucault argues that there are "humble modalities" that are used to surveil,

objectify, and create a docile body. He states that these modalities are “minor procedures, compared with the majestic rituals of sovereignty or the great apparatuses of the state” (Foucault, 1984, 188). These are minor, everyday practices rather than blatantly obvious models of control (Foucault, 1985, 188). He argues, “the success of disciplinary power derives no doubt from the use of simple instruments: hierarchical observation, normalizing judgement, and their combination... the examination” (Foucault, 1984, 188). I will discuss each of these modalities to show they are effective at controlling and surveilling people.

Hierarchical Observation

The first modality is hierarchical observation, which is an instrument of power that surveils, observes, and watches individuals (Foucault, 1984, 189). Foucault describes this modality as “the exercise of discipline presupposed a mechanism that coerces by means of observation...the means of coercion make those on whom they are applied clearly visible” (Foucault, 1984, 189). This type of discipline occurs by watching and observing, to make sure that a person or environment is highly controlled and practiced. The “ideal model” of observation is a military camp because in a perfect camp, “all power would be exercised solely through exact observation; each gaze would form part of the overall functioning of power” (Foucault, 1984, 189). The perfect military camp is a highly controlled environment where even the architecture of the camp is set up in a way that its people can always be watched. Foucault gives examples of the structure of these camps such as “the geometry of the paths, the number and distribution of the tents, the orientation of their entrances” and how all of these layouts serve the purpose of discipline and observation of people (Foucault, 1984, 189). What this kind of architecture and set up creates is a constant state of surveillance of individuals; people know that they are in a highly controlled and

observable setting, and thus are constantly performing like they are being watched. This creates a practiced, useful, controlled, docile body who is productive for someone else’s agenda.

As I mentioned previously, Foucault argues that hierarchical surveillance consists of “minor procedures” – everyday occurrences that people may not assume as being a mechanism of control (Foucault, 1984, 188). Something that people do not often think about is the architecture of buildings, such as schools, and the thought process behind this architectural decision. Foucault says that “the very building of the École (school) was to be an apparatus of observation” (Foucault, 1984, 189). He describes the setup of rooms in schools, and how the desks are situated in a way that they can always be seen by the teacher, or how the bathroom stalls walls do not go all the way to the bottom of the floor (Foucault, 1984, 191). He argues that structure is so that students’ behavior can always be seen and supervised, and that this ultimately results in students being trained and disciplined (Foucault, 1984, 191). Finally, Foucault argues,

“This infinitely scrupulous concern with surveillance is expressed in the architecture by innumerable petty mechanisms. The role of this instrumentation, minor but flawless, is the progressive objectification and the ever more subtle partitioning of individual behavior” (Foucault, 1984, 191).

This constant surveillance of individuals is expressed in ways that may not be noticeable, but it serves as an instrument of power to ensure the observation and subjection of individuals, to eventually make them docile. Disciplinary power can be carried out in many ways but surveilling someone from an age as young as grade school, is necessarily going to create a very practiced, conditioned, and controlled body that is disciplined. This is how power gets used through surveillance, and it is problematic because it forces people to act a certain way,

knowing they are always being observed. Related to positive and negative power, Foucault describes disciplinary power of surveillance to be

“both absolutely indiscreet, since it is everywhere and always alert, since its very principle leaves no zone of shade and constantly supervises the very individuals who are entrusted with the task of supervising; and absolutely ‘discreet’ for it functions permanently and largely in silence” (Foucault, 1984, 192).

This observation is dualistic, both discreet and indiscreet, that it is everywhere all the time, but it also takes place quietly to the point where most people may not recognize that they are being surveilled. This power effectively disciplines people because they are constantly being watched to make sure they do not fall out of line.

Normalizing Judgment

Normalizing judgement is the second modality that Foucault outlines as a mechanism for disciplining people and ultimately creating docility. Normalizing judgement functions through “micro penalties” of time, of activity, of the body, and of sexuality (Foucault, 1984, 194). For example, a micropenalty of time, Foucault argues, would be “lateness, absences, or interruptions of tasks”, all things that a person can be penalized for, similarly to the micropenalties of sexuality, such as impurity, indecency, or homosexuality (Foucault, 1984, 194). These are all examples of what Foucault calls micropenalties, that serve a function for normalizing judgement. Normalizing judgement effectively creates a “norm” of behaviors that penalize “even the slightest departure from correct behavior” ...And make it “subject to punishment” (Foucault, 1984, 194). These micropenalties of behavior make anything that is not the “norm”, a punishable act (Foucault, 1984, 194). These micropenalties are not extravagant but they are just enough to create obedience in people (Foucault, 1984, 194). Foucault argues that this norm is established as a

to punish those that step out of the norm (Foucault, 1984, 195). He says, “it differentiates individuals from one another, in terms of the following overall rule: that the rule be made to function as a minimum threshold, as an average to be respected, or as an optimum toward which one must move” (Foucault, 1984, 195).

Furthermore, this rule creates a norm that people are expected to follow, and if they don't, then they will be judged, compared, and and excluded (Foucault, 1984, 194). Foucault says “the perpetual penalty that traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it normalizes (Foucault, 1984, 195). The “norm” becomes an instrument of power, and penalizes or punishes those that fall outside of it (Foucault, 1984, 194).

The way the “normal” or norm, becomes disciplinary is because Foucault says, “The Normal is established as a principle of coercion” —in other words, once a norm is established, people are coerced to follow this norm or else they will be punished (Foucault, 1984, 196). An example of where norms are established are areas of life such as sexuality, health, and education (Foucault, 1984, 196). Normalizing sets a standard for what is appropriate, normal behavior and therefore it punishes and excludes any behavior that falls outside of the norm (Foucault, 1984, 195). This facilitates discipline and control, operating through biopower, which is diffused throughout society (Foucault, 1984, 204). Biopower is different from the sovereign power that has the right to take life away (Foucault, 1984, 259). Instead, this power generates, produces, and manages life (Foucault, 1984, 260). Biopower power normalizes life, and thus “imposes homogeneity” (Foucault, 1984, 266). Normalizing judgement works together with hierarchical observation to surveil, punish, and establish norms throughout society so that anyone that falls outside of this norm may be rendered abnormal or deviant, and thus punished for their difference (Foucault, 1984, 196).

Foucault argues that “like surveillance and with it, normalization becomes one of the great instruments of power” (Foucault, 1984, 196). Foucault reminds us that the goal of normalizing judgement and surveillance is ultimately to “utilize” bodies to make them productive and docile.

The Examination

The final modality that Foucault argues is an instrument of power is “the examination” (Foucault, 1984, 197). This modality “combines the techniques of an observing hierarchy and those of normalizing judgement. It is a normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify, and to punish. It establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them” (Foucault, 1984, 194). This modality combines both hierarchical observation and normalizing judgment to distribute and rank people relative to a norm (Foucault, 1984, 201). The visibility of people is what the examination functions on, because “their visibility assures the hold of power that is exercised over them. It is the fact of constantly being seen, of being able to always be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection” (Foucault, 1984, 199). Being surveilled is an instrument of power that can result in people becoming docile bodies, as a result of always being watched and always remaining visible. Furthermore, “the examination is the technique by which power, instead of emitting the signs of its potency, instead of imposing its mark on its subjects, holds them in a mechanism of objection. In this space of domination, disciplinary power manifests its potency, essentially, by rearranging objects” (Foucault, 1984, 199). When the forces of surveillance, and normalizing judgment via punishment are combined, the examination objectifies and creates docile bodies through this discipline.

Under the examination, each individual becomes a “case which at one and the same constitutes an object for a branch of knowledge and a hold for a

branch of power” (Foucault 1984, 203). This “case” has been “judged, measured, and compared with others...trained, corrected, normalized,” while also being looked at, observed, dominated, and controlled (Foucault, 1984, 203). When normalizing judgement and hierarchical observation are combined as disciplinary mechanisms, people are objectified and subjected, becoming docile bodies (Foucault, 1984, 204). The examination enforces the constant visibility of people, and the tactics of normalizing judgement, to make people docile bodies. This power operates invisibly because subjects do not “receive directly the image of the sovereign power; they only felt its effects—in replica, as it were—on their bodies, which had become precisely legible and docile” (Foucault, 1984, 199). When Foucault’s three humble modalities all come together, we may recognize how people can become objectified and subject to another person’s agenda. These concepts are important for contemporary feminists; so that we may better understand docility and control, and how surveillance controls women. I argue that these three modalities of discipline occur in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Killing the Black Body*, and in our contemporary setting in a Post-Dobbs world.

Surveillance in The Handmaid’s Tale

Gilead is built on a society that controls and surveils its people to ensure that they are in order and following rules. It uses an abundance of disciplinary mechanisms to surveil the handmaids in particular. The agenda behind this surveillance is to make sure that they are docile bodies that are fulfilling their role as fetal containers (Foucault, 1984; Annas, 1986; Atwood, 1985). Without the mechanism of surveillance, the handmaids may run away, self harm, or commit other illegal acts that puts their ability to reproduce at risk (Atwood, 1985, 8). Therefore, the creators of Gilead and all of the regime’s actors, make sure that surveillance mechanisms are always at play (Atwood, 1985, 18). At many different points in the novel, Offred, the main character, references the

constant surveillance in Gilead. Offred experiences the “constant visibility” of hierarchical observation, as she says that even her bedroom door does not lock and it actually doesn’t even shut properly (Atwood, 1985, 8). The disallowing of privacy for the handmaids shows that it is important to Gilead that they are always visible and never have complete privacy, even in their own rooms (Atwood, 1985, 8). Another aspect of the handmaid’s lives that are surveilled are their walks to the grocery store or for other errands (Atwood, 1985, 31). Through Offred’s narrations, we get the sense that every aspect of Gilead is surveilled because there are “Guardians” everywhere, who are armed police making sure that everything is in order (Atwood, 1985, 31). While the Guardians watch the handmaids on their walks, Offred shares that the handmaids also must walk in pairs. She says,

“We aren't allowed to go there except in twos. This is supposed to be for our protection, though the notion is absurd: we are well protected already. The truth is that she is my spy, as I am hers. If either of us slips through the net because of something that happens on one of our daily walks, the other will be accountable” (Atwood, 1985, 19).

The handmaid’s walks are supervised and surveilled not only by the Guardians, but also by each other, to make sure that they are both following the rules of Gilead, and being docile bodies (Atwood, 1985, 19) (Foucault, 1985, 200). The Handmaid’s surveil each other’s conversations, interactions, and daily schedules, so if one Handmaid is resisting Gilead’s agenda, then it gives the others an opportunity to catch them (Atwood, 1985, 19). Gilead’s agenda is to keep the handmaids docile in order for them to fulfill their role of being a surrogate and a fetal container, and surveilling them is necessary in order to make sure they are not stepping out of line (Atwood, 1985, 18). The Handmaids also wear long red dresses and white bonnets over their heads, which is different attire

than everyone else in Gilead, furthering their visibility and likelihood to be spotted in public (Atwood, 1985, 8).

Religion and Surveillance

In addition, Offred refers to the “Eye” or “Eyes” many times throughout the novel, referring to the people that are always watching, thus recognizing the constant control and surveillance in Gilead. During her interactions with one of the Guardians named Nick, Offred wonders whether or not he is an Eye and if he is testing to see if she will fall out of line. She reflects on this by saying, “perhaps it was a test, to see what I would do. Perhaps he is an Eye” (Atwood, 1985, 18). Offred is experiencing the effects of hierarchical observation, and the anxiety that can come from knowing you are always being watched by someone else (Foucault, 1984, 192; Atwood, 1985, 18). One of the common phrases used in Gilead as a greeting phrase or a goodbye is “Under His Eye”, referring to being under the eyes of anyone in Gilead (a handmaid, a guardian, a commander, etc.), but it also refers to being under the watch of God at all times (Atwood, 1985, 18). Since Gilead is a theocracy built on religious precedent, it uses the idea of being under God’s watch to its advantage, in order to surveil people. In the Christian religion, God is known to be omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent— meaning that He is all knowing, all powerful, and always present (Frame, 2015). Knowing that God is always present, all knowing, and has full authority, is a powerful way of making someone feel surveilled, knowing that He is watching at all times. The “Eye” that Offred mentions, refers to the watchers in Gilead, but also as God, the constant watcher (Atwood, 1985, 18). This surveillance from other people, and from God himself is necessarily going to incentivize handmaids to remain behaved, subjected, and ultimately as a docile body for Gilead (Foucault, 1984, 191; Atwood, 1984).

The Christian religion has historically called for women to be submissive and obedient, which Atwood's novel capitalizes on, by creating an oppressive regime for women on the basis that it falls under Christian values (Hadsell, 2014; Atwood, 1985). Christianity is a way to enforce surveillance of women while also calling for their submissiveness and subjection (Hadsell, 2014). Gilead exploits these values and uses it to restrict women and take their civil rights away, while being based on precedent within the religion (Atwood, 1985). For example, 1 Corinthians 14 verse 34 states, "Let your women remain silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak. They are commanded to be under obedience, as the law also says" (Modern English Version). This verse from the Modern English Version of the Holy Bible, is clearly enforcing women's silence, as well as their obedience to God, and presumably, their husbands. This kind of language regarding women's position in society is restrictive and limiting, and we see this happening in Gilead. Additionally, 1 Timothy 2, verses 11-15 say,

"Let a woman learn in silence with all obedience. I do not permit a woman to teach or to usurp authority over a man, but to be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman, being deceived, fell into sin. Yet she will be saved in childbearing if they continue in faith, love, and holiness, with self control" (Modern English Version).

This kind of language about women being silent and obedient, as well as not being allowed to have authority over men, takes power away from women and is oppressive. There is no doubt that this kind of language has allowed for the silence of women, and this is the kind of justification that Gilead uses to take women's rights away (Atwood, 1985). This connects to the Foucauldian concept of docile bodies, which calls for the obedience, silence, and submissiveness of people— but in this case, for the handmaids in the novel (Atwood, 1985; Foucault, 1984, 191).

Using the Bible story of Adam and Eve, and highlighting Eve as a deceitful woman, is the same kind of rhetoric that is against the Handmaids in Gilead. Gilead calls for them to lean on the knowledge of men, and to not speak up against injustice— in fact, Gilead does not allow for the women to do that. The Christian religion is one of the mechanisms, not only of surveillance, but also contributes to limiting women's abilities to only being mothers and wives. This connects to Foucault's concept of normalizing judgement, since religion tries to establish women as inferior to men, and it sets a standard of obedience and submissiveness that is appropriate for women (Foucault, 1984, 194). If any woman falls outside of what a traditional, religious woman looks like, then she is likely to be judged and compared. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, if you fall outside of the norm as a handmaid not being able to reproduce or else trying to resist your role, you are deemed "Unwoman" where you are stripped of all rights, and can be sent to the colonies to do dangerous, laborious work and ultimately die there (Atwood, 1984, 10). The idea of being "Unwoman" for either trying to resist oppression, or not being able to have children, is rooted in the long held Christian belief that women are to be submissive wives and mothers.

Similar to the language used in Gilead, Proverbs 15 verse 3 of the Holy Bible says that "the Eyes of the Lord are in every place, keeping watch on the good and the evil" (English Standard Version). The Christian religion relies on the understanding that God is always present, and is always watching, that no matter where you are, you are always visible to him. Similarly, in Chapter 30 of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred says "The Eyes of God run all over the earth", furthering the understanding that people are not only watched by the "Eyes" in Gilead, but by the Eyes of God (Atwood, 1985, 18). This constant watching, both from God, and from other people in Gilead, is a powerful way to make sure that the handmaids know they are always under surveillance and are never alone.

Offred understands this, and realizes how controlled and surveilled her environment is in Gilead. In Chapter 17, there is one particular scene where she is in her room by herself and says “in the semi dark I stare up at the blind plaster eye in the middle of the ceiling, which stares back down at me, even though it can't see” (Atwood, 1985, 97). Offred is experiencing the feeling of being under constant observation and the anxiety that comes with that, as she imagines the image of an eye staring down into her room (Atwood, 1985, 97). This image of the Eye in her room, speaks to how visible Offred feels in Gilead, even in a place like a bedroom, that is supposed to be personal and private (Atwood, 1985, 97). In order to create a docile body out of Offred and the other handmaids, Gilead uses hierarchical observation to make the women feel that they are constantly under observation, and can never afford to go out of step with what is required of them (Foucault, 1984, 192).

Surveillance in *Killing the Black Body*

Being watched and observed is something that Dorothy Roberts argues is not new to black women. She describes that through the welfare program, mothers thought they were signing on to government assistance without any conditions other than being in need, however, they learned that it would come at the price of their privacy. In chapter five of *Killing the Black Body*, Roberts argues that the welfare system was an inherently racially exclusive program that for a long time did not allow black women to be welfare recipients (Roberts, 1997, 203). Roberts says,

“Black mothers, on the other hand, were simply excluded. The first materialist welfare legislation was intended for white mothers only. Administrators either failed to establish welfare programs in locations with large black populations or distributed benefits according to standards that disqualified black mothers” (Roberts, 1997, 204).

The system neglected black women from being able to obtain welfare, even if they were the most in need. Roberts says that surveillance was never a part of the welfare program, but it's because black women were barred from it for many years (Roberts, 1997, 204). However, we will learn that once black women were included, it became about surveillance and policing mothers (Roberts, 1997, 207). From this knowledge, we can infer that the state's agenda was to police black motherhood specifically, to rationalize creating negative stereotypes and also to justify taking their benefits away. According to Roberts, the majority of welfare recipients were white, however, when black mothers started to get access to welfare, they were called dependent, lazy, irresponsible, overly fertile, and burdening— characteristics that were never used to describe white women on welfare (Roberts, 1997, 207). This use of language about black women had detrimental effects for them because it shaped their lives as much as it shaped the public opinion on what kind of people they are (Roberts, 1997, 208). This kind of rhetoric about black people but black mothers on welfare in specific, later ends up justifying their loss of privacy and intrusion into their homes to surveil and inspect them but also to constantly keep them on guard (Roberts, 1997 229). The language that was used about black people led to the government justifying surveillance over their lives and of their homes, and it was all based on untrue claims about them (Roberts, 1997, 226).

Black women on welfare were paradoxically said to be “lacking work ethic”, even though many of them worked multiple jobs while being on welfare because they did not receive enough aid (Roberts, 1997, 206). Blacks received smaller money amounts than whites because they were said to “need less to live on than whites” (Roberts, 1997, 206-207). The absolutely untrue claims about the character and needs of black people had tremendous implications on their reputation in society (Roberts, 1997, 207).

This rhetoric powerfully shaped the public opinion about black motherhood, and it led lawmakers to question and make unfair assumptions about black women's "fitness" for motherhood (Roberts, 1997, 228). In 1935, an ADC law passed that required that the state "impose such other requirements—as to means, more character, etc— as it sees fit" (Roberts, 1997, 228). This question of whether or not a black woman is fit for motherhood, led to the surveillance and loss of privacy that they endured from the government and doctors (Roberts, 1997, 228). Roberts says, "the Court has upheld welfare regulations that determine eligibility for benefits based on household composition (Roberts, 1997, 228). This ruling gave social workers and welfare employees the power of surveillance over these households (Roberts, 1997, 227). Roberts points out that one of the most treasured American freedoms is to keep unwanted government agents out of our homes without warrant, yet "the Court has ruled that welfare workers can demand home entry as a condition of welfare eligibility" without any court approvals, and even in cases where the welfare applicant is refusing or protesting the entry/inspection (Roberts, 1997, 228). These families became subject to surveillance from government actors such as social workers and welfare employees, just to be able to get much needed assistance (Roberts, 1997, 227).

Roberts explains that welfare recipients were stripped of their dignity and had to be compliant with welfare workers because at the centers, noncompliant recipients could be arrested or even assaulted and beaten by security guards (Roberts, 1997, 226). Similar to Foucault's notions of normalizing judgment and hierarchical observation, these welfare recipients know that they are constantly being watched, and as a result, they have to perform a certain way that is perceived as "normal", or else they may be arrested or physically harmed (Foucault, 1997, 227). This ultimately creates docility and compliance in people, and especially in welfare mothers, so that they can receive much needed assistance for their families.

Roberts shares the experience of one black mother's experience with relief from the 1930s and argues that it is "typical of that of welfare recipients today" (Roberts, 1997, 227). The woman says,

"The investigators, they were like detectives, like I had committed a crime.... I had to tell them about my life, more than if I was on trial... the investigator searched my icebox... I was ashamed of my life ...that's how you're made to feel when you're down and out like you're nothing better than a criminal" (Roberts, 1997, 227).

It is clear that these investigators have agendas when entering these peoples homes because they are going in looking to inspect anything out of place, to cut assistance for these families or even criminalize them for anything found in their home (Roberts, 1997, 227). Similarly, a contemporary mother shares her experience with welfare workers saying "they want to know everything. They are so nosy. They control your life. I don't like it" (Roberts, 1997, 227). These women that Roberts quotes are picking up on the suspicious nature of these investigative searches by welfare workers, and it makes people feel very uncomfortable to have people earching through their homes and asking personal questions (Roberts, 1997, 227). This takes away their freedom, and allows for them to be surveilled and watched at any point from these government actors (Roberts, 1997, 226). The first woman Roberts quoted expresses that these searches make her feel undignified and ashamed of her situation, and to have someone come into your home at any given moment without any preparation on your part, it is reasonable to feel invaded and already "guilty" of something. This is the result of hierarchical observation because people feel constantly under the watch of someone else, and it creates a tension and uneasy feeling going through life knowing you are subject to this (Foucault 1984, 192; Roberts, 1997, 226).

Roberts argues that on top of these arbitrary entries of homes, this loss of privacy also involves questioning women's reproductive decision making (Roberts, 1997, 228). For example, "mothers have been required to undergo mandatory paternity proceedings involving state scrutiny of their intimate lives" (Roberts, 1997, 228). The government agenda in this scenario was partly just to take away their privacy, but it was also to label black mothers in a negative way and maybe even justify them being dropped from welfare. This intrusion of privacy puts these welfare mothers in a corner because they need and require assistance, but may not be willing to give up their personal information (Roberts, 1997, 227). In another case of what Roberts calls "government prying", the Supreme Court approved that there be a requirement for welfare mothers to determine the paternity of their children and to cooperate with finding their fathers (Roberts, 1997, 228). As a result of this requirement, "mothers must submit to investigation that often delves into their sexual activities or else lose their benefits" (Roberts, 1997, 228). Having to reveal personal details about one's sex life or sexual activity in order to get much needed assistance for their family, gives women no power and it takes away their privacy (Roberts, 1997, 228). This surveillance from government employees through welfare, is an example of one of the ways that black women, especially black motherhood has been surveilled over the years (Roberts, 1997, 226).

The agenda behind this surveillance, inspection, and watching of these homes is to "catch" welfare mothers doing something wrong that gets them cut from welfare, or for their privacy to be invaded so heavily, that maybe they opt out of it entirely (Roberts, 1998, 227). This is a mechanism of control used by the government to take privacy away from welfare mothers, and thus taking their freedom away and giving it to government agents like welfare workers, who have the power to invade and "inspect" their personal space (Roberts, 1997, 228).

Ultimately the agenda is to police motherhood, and make women constantly "visible" like Foucault's notion of hierarchical observation (Foucault, 1984,189). This creates an awareness or consciousness of the fact you are being watched, and it is likely that you become disciplined and docile (Foucault, 1984, 191). While Roberts was writing about the perceptions of black motherhood and women on welfare in 1997, these paradoxes about black women still exist today in the modern world because of untrue rhetoric shaping public opinion and people's understanding.

Surveillance in the Contemporary

Now that I have explored surveillance as a disciplinary mechanism in dystopian fiction as well as in American history, I will argue that this mechanism of control is present and becoming increasingly dangerous for women today. As I've mentioned in the previous chapter, the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* decision limited women's freedoms, and has opened the door for more losses for women. I argue that this Supreme Court decision has allowed for the increased surveillance of women, which is extremely problematic for their privacy and for their bodily autonomy. While *Roe v. Wade* did not give women full reproductive freedom with no government intervention, it still did partly provide women with decision making power over her body (1973). However, since the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, depending on where she lives, a woman may have no say in what happens to her body once she becomes pregnant (1973). The *Dobbs v. Jackson* (2022) decision argued that the government has a role to play in female pregnancy, and we have seen the aftermath of this decision since 2022. This opened the floodgates to numerous conversations across the country that are intended to surveil women in regards to their bodies during pregnancy (Dellinger and Pell, 2024). Surveilling women's bodies is not a new concept to American history, however since 2021, women have been thrust back into a

legislative battle over their reproductive decisions. This is a reality that so many women have been forced into, and it is important to know how surveillance is becoming increasingly dangerous for women (Dellinger and Pell, 2024).

Christian Nationalism and Loss of Women's Freedom

Religion, particularly Christianity, is no doubt a largely important factor when it comes to discussing women's reproductive health in America. It has been a driving factor in the reversal of women's reproductive rights. The agenda of Christian nationalism is largely to get women back to a subservient position in society where they are primarily mothers and homemakers. Of course, we know that this is a privileged way to think about womanhood since this is not the reality for many low income or women of color. Many religious communities are against any form of abortion care even in severe cases where women have been raped or where their lives may be threatened if their pregnancy continues (Kim, 2023). This stems from the religious understanding that a fetus is life and that personhood is established in the mother's womb. In various places, the Bible refers to life starting before birth. One example is Jeremiah 1 verse 5, it reads: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations" (New International Version). This verse is clearly acknowledging the personhood and individuality attached to the fetus, which is why many religious groups are against abortion care even when women are in need of it.

Even though the United States of America is referred to as a melting pot, with different cultures, religions, ethnicities, and backgrounds, many Christian individuals still believe the U.S. should be named a Christian nation, and that the law should be informed by Christian beliefs (Kim, 2024).

Christian nationalism is a term that has been in the headlines of the news in the wake of the Dobbs decision. The premise of this view is that America is a Christian nation, and thus our laws, policies, practices, and attitudes should align with the views of Christianity (Lopez and Lane, 2024). This view hierarchies the Christian religion, and tries to impose their views on the entire nation, for the purpose of gaining dominance in the political and social sphere (Lopez and Lane, 2024). This is exactly what we see happening in *The Handmaid's Tale*, where the government has completely forced all people to observe an extreme form of Christianity (Atwood, 1985). This worldview is rooted in patriarchy, white supremacy, and religious hierarchy; all of which are very problematic for women, and have allowed for the limiting of women's rights (Kim, 2024). Christian nationalism poses a major threat to women's health because it wants to only recognize the rights of the fetus when a woman is pregnant (Kim, 2024). This makes the rise of Christian nationalism a women's issue, and an important part of what women are currently experiencing. The reason I am discussing this worldview is because the rise of Christian nationalism has played a vital role in shaping laws Post-Dobbs and language used by politicians and news reporters when discussing women's freedoms such as abortion care. I argue that this rhetoric has led to the surveillance of women and the loss of their privacy.

Conservative politicians use religious rhetoric so often when discussing women's reproductive health. The Vice President of the United States, J.D. Vance has been open about being very anti-abortion, and the fact that this is rooted in his Catholic faith (Mitchell, 2025). In an interview with political commentator, Mercedes Schlapp, at the 2025 Conservative Political Action Conference, Vance is quoted saying "we've got to persuade our fellow citizens that unborn life is worthy of protection, it is sacred in the eyes of God," (Mitchell, 2025).

Vance uses this language of the unborn life, and its value to God, similar to the Bible verse Jeremiah 1:5 that I previously quoted. This rhetoric is clearly rooted in religion, and it is suggesting that all people need to follow the customs of the Christian religion. Another politician who uses religious language in his discussion of women's reproductive rights is Governor Ivey of Alabama (Office of the Governor, 2019). In his address to the state in 2019, he states:

"Alabamians' deeply held belief is that every life is precious and that every life is a sacred gift from God" (Office of the Governor, 2019).

Governor Ivey uses almost identical language to J.D. Vance and it stems from the religious precedent that life starts at conception, and that God knows and loves each person before they are born. What is problematic about this view held by so many is that so much personhood and emphasis goes to the unborn fetus, that people neglect the rights and the needs of the mother. In the next subsection I will argue why placing so much emphasis on the fetus is problematic for women.

"Bounty-Hunting Laws" as the New Surveillance of Women

Since the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022, there has been an influx of laws that call for the surveillance of pregnant women. Texas was one of the first states to take action after the *Dobbs* decision, creating one of the strictest abortion bans in the country (Bowman, 2022). The Texas Health and Safety Code Section 245.001 defines abortion through Texas Abortion Facility Reporting and Licensing Act as the "means the act of using or prescribing an instrument, a drug, a medicine, or any other substance, device, or means with the intent to cause the death of an unborn child of a woman known to be pregnant" (1989). According to the Associated Press, "Texas law currently prohibits abortions except when a pregnant patient has a life threatening condition" (Lathan, 2025).

One of the most striking laws to come out of Texas has been Senate Bill 8, which has gotten a lot of attention in the media for its extremism (Bowman, 2022). SB8 also known as the Texas Heartbeat Act, took effect in September 2021, and it allows for citizens to sue anyone who has assisted a person in getting an illegal abortion" (Bowman, 2022). Emma Bowman with NPR says "it relied not on the government but on private citizens to enforce...some have couched it in terms like the 'vigilante abortion law' or the 'bounty hunter law'" (Bowman, 2022). Not only does the state allow for citizens to sue someone who helps a person get an abortion, but the law incentivizes citizens to do so, by offering them a cash "bounty" if they successfully sue someone who has helped another person get an illegal abortion (Bowman, 2022). Senate Bill 8, and similar "copycat" laws in other states like Idaho and Oklahoma, have extremely dangerous implications for pregnant women and citizens that help them (Bowman, 2022). By giving citizens incentives for knowing the personal details of a woman's pregnancy, it certainly allows and even calls for the surveillance of women—which is pretty similar to surveillance in *The Handmaid's Tale* but even worse since there are financial incentives involved.

In *Gilead* and in *Killing the Black Body*, I showed examples of the government surveilling women, or agents of the government such as doctors or welfare workers (Atwood, 1985; Roberts, 1997). However, SB8 shows us a different kind of surveillance which is facilitated through other citizens being able to benefit from how much they know about women's reproductive choices (Bowman, 2022). This an example of Foucault's notion of hierarchical observation and its combination with biopower, because in this case, this surveillance is diffused all throughout society, and it is inconspicuous because women will not be able to identify who the "watchers" are in this case. SB8 encourages citizens to turn their backs on women, but also to watch and surveil them, instead of being supportive and communal.

Since this law is targeted at suing the “helpers” of women who get an abortion, rather than the women themselves, it also discourages people from helping women get abortion care that they are seeking (Bowman, 2022). People will realize that by helping a pregnant woman get an abortion, they are at risk of a lawsuit, and it may change their minds about helping in the first place (Bowman, 2022). Friends, family, partners, doctors, hospital staff, traveling staff, anyone that knows a woman is seeking out an abortion whether it is in her state or if she is traveling, can be sued for knowing this information and helping her receive this care (Bowman, 2022). In this case, it is not only the pregnant woman’s privacy that is being violated, but any of these actors are also involved and are also subject to surveillance (Bowman, 2022). Clearly, SB8 is a result of hostility toward women, and refusing us to let us make our own decisions governing our bodies and our futures. I argue that this law is encouraging and calls for the surveilling of women, to turn them into docile, disciplined bodies.

Surveilling Women Through Phone Data

Another troubling way that women’s lives and particularly their reproductive health has been surveilled in a post-Roe world, is through period tracking apps (Torchinsky, 2022). Millions of women use period tracking apps to store and make note of information about their menstrual cycles, their sexual activity, pregnancy, etc. (Torchinsky, 2022). Some of the most popular apps are Flo with 43 million active users each month, and Clue with over 12 million active users each month (Torchinsky, 2022). These apps offer women the ability to keep track of when their sexual patterns, the dates of their menstrual cycles, as well as signs of pregnancy or other symptoms related to reproductive and bodily care (Torchinsky, 2022). Rina Torchinsky argues that the information stored in these apps are highly personal details of a person’s health

that can be indicative of whether or not a person has been pregnant and for how long (Torchinsky, 2022). She says “that has privacy experts on edge because this data — whether subpoenaed or sold to a third party— could be used to suggest that someone has had or is considering an abortion” (Torchinsky, 2022). Torchinsky is expressing the fear that many women have had in a post-Roe climate, given that many women have deleted their apps and are now finding other means of keeping this information as private as possible (Torchinsky, 2022). This speaks to a much larger issue about women’s privacy when it comes to her life and her health. Every aspect of our lives are subject to surveillance, even in our own phones where we assume all of our personal information is safe (Torchinsky, 2022). This poses major threats to women’s health data and privacy because it means that information about our health and lifestyle can be accessible at any moment, and used against us. This is yet another way that women’s health and women’s lives may be surveilled by the government and used to punish women.

However, Rina Torchinsky argues that the loss of privacy may not stop there (Torchinsky, 2022). Search histories in people’s phones may become a way that the government detects if a woman is seeking out abortion care if she is in a state where it is illegal; a person’s search history may also be purchased by someone, and sold to another (Torchinsky, 2022). This is an example of technological surveillance that has become a reality in our digital world. In addition, Torchinsky explains a scary scenario regarding surveillance, where a person is sitting in the waiting room of an abortion clinic and opens an app on their phone, but they don’t know that the app may be collecting data about the phone’s location (Torchinsky, 2022). Thus, if a person is simply on their phone at all and especially if they go on apps, then their location may be tracked by someone else. Torchinsky argues that “this information can be used for predatory advising and it could also offer a way for private citizens to report another person for seeking an abortion”

Protecting the Unborn: Surveilling Women in Order to Protect the Fetus Protecting the unborn is a common justification given for surveilling and scrutinizing the behaviors of pregnant women. With the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, I argue that the intensity and the frequency in which women may be surveilled has increased, since we no longer have the basic protection of the federal right to an abortion. However, this is not new, all throughout American history, women have been subject to surveillance over their bodies, whether that be from the government or from other citizens (Dellinger and Pell, 2024). In their essay about the criminalization of abortion, Dellinger and Pell argue that the language used in the LIFE Act passed in Georgia in 2019, which argues that the state of Georgia should be able recognize unborn children as “natural persons under the law” is extremely problematic for women, and it will justify intense surveillance over women while they are pregnant (Dellinger and Pell, 2024). Dellinger and Pell explain that “by including the language of unborn child in the definition of a natural person, the LIFE Act raises the possibility that a woman who obtains or self manages an abortion after six weeks could be charged with murder” (Dellinger and Pell, 2024). There are no exceptions from prosecution listed in the LIFE Acts, meaning that every person who engages in ending a pregnancy or is accused of self-inflicting an abortion, could be prosecuted for murder in the state (Dellinger and Pell, 2024). Georgia is not the only state to have extreme laws such as this one, but actually others such as Alabama and Mississippi have similar laws (Dellinger and Pell, 2024). While a woman being criminally prosecuted for an abortion is deeply troubling, what I take the most issue with for the sake of this paper, is the fact that these kinds of laws necessarily call for the surveillance of women’s bodies and their decisions. The LIFE Act and laws similar to it, put so much emphasis on the personhood of the fetus, that the government and

other agents feel the responsibility to protect it even inside a mother’s womb. This has serious implications for the privacy of women.

Laws that allow for the criminalization of women who have “attempted self inflicted abortions” are extremely murky, and never turn out well for women. This is dangerous because 1 in 4 women have miscarriages, and that rate is even higher for women of color (Baldwin 2022). This means that women of color might disproportionately be affected by surveillance mechanisms, when used to track women who have had miscarriages (Baldwin, 2022). Dr. Harvey Killman, the director of the Reproductive and Placental Research Unit at Yale School of Medicine, explains that 90% of miscarriages are caused by genetic abnormalities, and have nothing to do with the mother’s actions (Baldwin, 2022). Lawmakers and government agents may look at the actions of a pregnant woman to show that they led to a miscarriage, and it may be completely untrue (Baldwin, 2022). The story of Christine Taylor from Des Moines, Iowa was pregnant in the third trimester at 22 years old when she became dizzy and fell down the stairs in her home (Hayes, 2010). The day before she had been at the doctors and was confiding in her physician, explaining that it was going to be hard to have this baby because her partner had just left her (Hayes, 2010). The next day, she fell down the stairs and the doctors told the police what Christine said, insinuating that her fall might have been on purpose (Hayes, 2010). Police arrested and jailed Christine, but the charges were later dropped because the fetus was not harmed inside the womb (Hayes, 2010). This case, while it happened back in 2010, shows how women’s actions are constantly being observed and surveilled even from doctors. Christine was confiding in her doctor and other hospital staff, and they went to law enforcement with information she told them and could have been criminally prosecuted because of it (Hayes, 2010).