

Contradictory Representations of Diversity: Gender Treachery and the Color-Blind Gileadean Society

Keywords: color-blindness, racial diversity, systemic racism, queer representation, white privilege

Abstract: When speaking of the Hulu adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Bruce Miller's decision to expand the narrative of Margaret Atwood's work was not restricted to expanding the overall plot of the novel. In his version of the famous dystopia, Miller's adaptation offers its audience the (apparent) diverse representation that the original novel lacks: characters who were clearly written as white by Atwood have been racially diversified, while one particular character whose storyline is cut short in the novel is given an entire new arc and consequently becomes the show's second openly lesbian character. While this should be seen as a positive change, the purpose of this paper is to argue that the Hulu adaptation has a diversity problem: the way it depicts its racial minorities, or rather the way it does not actually depict them as racially diverse characters. In order to prove that the adaptation's representation of its diverse characters is contradictory, I take a look at how homophobic and racist discourses have been interlinked throughout the centuries; this highlights the illogicality of the show's decision to depict Gilead as color-blind, all while retaining the brutal discrimination against its sexual minorities. However, the adaptation's apparent color-blindness seems to be performative: although it wishes to present Gilead as post-racial, the series' non-white-character continue to fall prey to racial discrimination, which can be clearly seen in the characterization of Moira, the show's best represented non-white character, when compared to the show's white characters, heterosexual or not.

Bruce Miller's decision to expand the narrative of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* was not restricted to solely providing the show's characters with a more complex story, or to developing the overall plot of the novel. In his version of Atwood's famous dystopia, Miller's adaptation offers its audience the (apparent) diverse representation that the original novel lacks: characters who were clearly written as white by Atwood have been racially

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diversified, while one particular character whose storyline abruptly and tragically ends in the novel is given an entire new arc and consequently becomes the show's second openly lesbian character. While this should be seen as a positive change, the purpose of this paper is to argue that the Hulu adaptation has a diversity problem: the way it depicts its racial minorities, or rather the way it does not actually depict them as racially diverse characters. While I do acknowledge my preference for the television show with regards to its (more) diverse representation, the rather poor and selective representation has attracted the critique of the audience, and not without reason. This paper analyses the way in which the show, in a rather illogical line of thought, depicts its minorities¹ and their treatment, which seems to contradict one's expectations from a state like Gilead, a highly theocratic, extremist, conservative Republic.

In my attempt to analyse the depiction of its diverse characters, my analysis takes a look at how homophobic and racist discourses have been interlinked throughout the centuries. I wish to demonstrate that, by presenting Gilead as a colour-blind society, all while maintaining the brutal homophobic behaviour towards its sexual minorities, the show seems to be disregarding what history is telling us: that racial and sexual discrimination are intrinsically connected, as well as overestimating American society by judging that a fertility crisis could possibly put an end to America's centuries-old tradition of racism. Thus, the first part of this paper provides the historical background necessary for the linkage between racism and homophobia. Additionally, this paper explores the concept of "color-blindness" and poses the question of whether a colour-blind society, which is how the society of Gilead is presented in the Hulu adaptation, would even be beneficial to racial minorities. Consequently, could Bruce Miller's color-blindness be seen as a good strategy of bypassing the exclusion of racial diversity in Atwood's novel? By pointing out the contradiction of its diverse representation, the second part of this paper takes a look at how Atwood's own depiction of racial minorities is rooted in the politics of her contemporary society in order to prove that Atwood's treatment of minority groups is indeed a reflection of the historical context in which the novel was written. It is necessary to prove the relevance of Atwood's own historical context to her narrative because adaptations are, among others, a means through which the original work manages to survive and adapt to new environments. Thus, the television adaptation is judged in this paper as a product of its time; however, it seems that Atwood's novel, as seen through Bruce Miller's eyes, has not managed to adapt to the current socio-political context, at least not fully. The third part of this paper analyses the show itself and the decision to keep Atwood's

original treatment of its non-heterosexual characters (and further detail it by depicting the brutality to which these characters are submitted), while apparently abolishing racial discrimination altogether, despite the fact that racism is part of the novel's Gileadean ideology.

In order to link the discourse of homophobia to that of racism, it is crucial to be aware of the context in which the term "homosexuality" emerged. Although sexual acts had long been punished by law, as well as by God's law, the individuals engaging in such acts were not necessarily defined as homosexuals, not until the "invention" of homosexuality in the nineteenth century, a time marked by the revision of racial questioning, particularly in the United States (Somerville 243-244). While this may have been a coincidence, the fact that "the classification of bodies as either 'homosexual' or 'heterosexual' emerged at the same time that the United States was aggressively policing the imaginary boundary between 'black' and 'white' bodies," the matter should not be disregarded, as it represents yet another attempt to group the population into the two very well-established categories: the normal, i.e. the white and heterosexual population, and the abnormal, i.e. the non-white groups, as well as the non-heterosexual groups. As Tim McCaskell notes, each race was attributed specific characteristics; for instance, "'White' Europeans were gentle and inventive, 'Red' Americans obstinate, 'Yellow' Asians melancholy and covetous, and 'Black' Africans indolent and negligent" (Sullivan 57). Alongside these beliefs, the concern with racial purity and the fear of miscegenation were increasing and, as a result, many American states ruled interracial marriages as illegal acts, as this classification of people based on their race triggered the "imperative not to mix genres" (Sullivan 58). These beliefs were further reinforced by theorists such as Charles Darwin, Ernst Haeckel, and Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, who argued in favour of the survival of the fittest, stating that some races would inevitably dominate other inferior ones (Sullivan 58). The entire eugenics movement, then, "concerned itself with the task of (re)producing racially 'good stock,' and, naturally, "these discourses were drawn on to justify a whole range of atrocities such as slavery, physical abuse, and even genocide" (Sullivan 58). In other words, the eugenics movement supported what we have come to know as the white supremacist ideology.

This scientific attempt that concerned itself with maintaining race purity was strongly linked to the construction of gender and sexuality as well, and, as Foucault stated, "a whole politics of settlement, family, marriage, education, social hierarchy ... received their colour and their justification from the mythical concern with protecting the purity of the blood and ensuring the triumph of the race" (qtd. in Sullivan 58). As a consequence, Nicky Sullivan states

the figure of the woman was seen as this “pure” being, “whose role in life was to reproduce within the ideal bound of heterosexual marriage,” and choosing not to do so was read as “impure,” as a “danger to the health and well-being of the human (read white) race,” similarly to the way in which homosexuality was seen due to its non-reproductive social practices, which were “akin to treason” (58). This ideology is perfectly exemplified later in this paper through the discussion of Gileadean politics. Therefore, what we can see here is the inextricable link between racism, sexism, and homophobia, and, as a result, we come to understand that in order to undermine heteronormativity, one must “necessarily tackle issues of race and its historically and culturally specific relation to sexuality and gender” (Sullivan 59); therefore, an intersectional approach must be employed.

Homosexuality “as the condition, and therefore identity, of particular bodies,” is a social and historical construct (Somerville 244). Homosexuality as a term was introduced in 1892 with the English translation of Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis*, “stimulat[ing] a great deal of uneasiness” (258). In trying to establish the supremacy of the white population, key was the nineteenth-century fascination with the measurements of the human body: what these measurements were meant to disclose were the inner workings of the body, and thus, the “surface and interior of the individual body rather than its social characteristics, such as language, behavior, or clothing, became the primary sites of its meaning” (Somerville 250). Edward Dinker Cope argues that each and every oddity of the body must correspond to something that can be identified in the individual’s mind, while “the causes of the former are the remoter causes of the latter” (qtd. in Somerville 250). While the debate regarding which particular anatomic features helped determine significant racial meanings, “the theory that anatomy predicted intelligence and behaviour remained remarkably constant” (Somerville 250). In turn, this increasing need to prove the existence of a factor that distinguished the whites from the blacks “became a powerful instrument for those seeking to justify the economic and political disenfranchisement of various racial groups within systems of slavery and colonialism” (Somerville 250); and while these scientific methods were not actually involved in the political and economic climate, still, the circulating ideologies of the time undeniably influenced these scientific pursuits (Somerville 250).

Racial ideologies undoubtedly contributed to the shaping of the understanding of gender, and, as Sander Gilman has argued, “any attempt to establish that the races were inherently different rested to no little extent on the sexual difference of the black,” this difference being not rarely identified “through the sexual characteristics of the female body”

(qtd. in Somerville 250-251). Seen in the studies of W.H. Flower and James Murie is the fact that the racial difference between white and African-American women lay in the latter's "literal excess, a specifically sexual excess that placed her body outside the boundaries of the 'normal' female" (Somerville 252). This technique of analysis and comparison resembles the one employed by nineteenth-century sexologists in their endeavour to find a physical justification for the condition of "invertedness," the preferred term at the time for homosexuality. For example, Siobhan Somerville refers to Havelock Ellis's focus on the bodies of female "inverts," and not on those of the homosexual male (Somerville 253). While the areas they inspected differed, "the underlying theory remained constant: women's genitalia and reproductive anatomy held a valuable and presumably visual key to ranking bodies according to norms of sexuality" (Somerville 253). Just as female anatomy served as a means to situate the black woman on the side of "abnormality" when compared to the white woman, the body of the female "invert" was used to prove its peculiarity in relation to the body of the heterosexual female. As this period came to be marked by Darwinism, gender, too, was crucial to the Darwinist ideas, since one of the basic assumptions within the Darwinian model was "the belief that, as organisms evolved through a process of natural selection, they also showed greater signs of differentiation between the (two) sexes" (Somerville 255). Following this logic, sexual characteristics were used as "indicators of evolutionary progress towards civilization" (Somerville 256), and, if lesbians' or African-American women's bodies were found to be less sexually differentiated than the norm (the norm always being the white heterosexual woman's body), drawing upon notions of "natural selection," sexologists dismissed these body as anomalies, as mere "throwbacks" in the grand scheme of anatomic progress (Somerville 256).

The emergence of eugenics in the US served as both a political and scientific response to the popularization of the challenging of the dominance of white political interests, with the movement encapsulating "nativist fears about a perceived decline in reproduction among white Americans," these individuals fearing the inevitable "(white) race suicide" that would inevitably occur (Somerville 257). What eugenics offered was the justification that "racists and immigration restrictionists" needed in order to maintain their beliefs that heredity shaped man's personality and that all these were actually biologically proven facts (Somerville 257). As an advocate for the movement, Ellis wrote, among others, *The Problem of Race Regeneration*, which advocated for "voluntary" sterilization of "the unfit," evidently the non-white population, "as a policy in the best interest of 'the race,'" the race, of course, being the white race (Somerville 258).

Later on, by the early twentieth-century, this focus on the body was replaced by a psychological focus which was to be the new means of examining homosexuality, using, this time, theories of desire (Somerville 260). Once again, it is interesting to note that this shift took place at a time that also “saw a transformation of scientific notions about race” (Somerville 260). While the early twentieth-century started to undermine the “scientific claims for exclusively biological models of racial difference,” of course, these models continued to be used (Somerville 260). Still, the fact that both areas suffered a shift goes to prove, yet again, that the discourses of race and sexuality (and of course, that of gender) continue to be linked.

Undoubtedly, the 1980s saw a resurgence in racism across the United States (Lowy 446). Richard Lowy coined the term “yuppie racism,” a term which “conceptually recognizes the interaction of individual prejudice, institutional and cultural practices and structural inequality” (446). He argues that it is because individuals do not strive to rid themselves of their ignorance of ethnic experiences and civil rights history that racism has remained a crucial issue in American society (Lowy 447). Additionally, institutional racism plays a huge role when it comes to preserving the racist practices and ideology of the United States (Lowy 447). Lowy further states that the prejudices towards racial minority groups only increased in the 1980s, during Reagan’s presidency: “structural inequality has increased during the Reagan years at the very time when civil rights legislation and social programs have been eroded” (447). The concept of “yuppie racism” focuses on recognizing the changes that occurred within the American social system, a system which makes everything available to the white population, while the same things are “disproportionately unavailable to Blacks and other ethnic minorities” (Lowy 449). Lowy, then, links the re-emergence of racism in 1980s to the American society’s failure to deal with the exact same issues in the 1960s (449). In a nutshell, what the notion of yuppie racism does is draw attention to the fact that the increase in Black inequality is linked to “the coming of age of the baby boomers and yuppies²,” thus showing that “the emergence of yuppies and a Black underclass following the failure of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement should not be viewed as coincidence or social anomaly” (Lowy 449). On the contrary, the re-emergence of racism in the 1980s is linked to the twenty years period following the 1960s, period marked by “white indifference, of hostility toward progressive civil rights policies, of the massive incorporation of women into the American labor force in response to the demands of the feminist movement, as well as changed conditions in labor markets and the structure of American occupations” (Lowy 449). With regards to the ignorance or unawareness of the young generation as far as the civil rights battles are concerned, Lowy points out that

these young people are formed in a “decidedly more conservative” society, which, despite its shortcomings, had previously “produced landmark civil rights legislation” (450). Speaking of the racial situation on college campuses across the United States, Frederick A. Hurst remarked that it was frightening to see the young generation starting to show the same racist behaviour of their predecessors, after all the years of efforts to “turn around civil rights in this country” (qtd. in Lowy 451). Therefore, while progress was made in the decades preceding the 1980s, there is a dichotomy that is impossible to ignore “between the rhetoric of U.S ideals and the reality of its black population,” and it looks like the status of “Black America” was worse in the 1980s than it was in the 1960s (Jefferson qtd. in Lowy 454).

While it would be easy to blame the presence of racism on the lack of awareness and education, or “limited exposure to the members of other cultures and ethnic lifestyle,” the matter cannot be settled this easily (Lowy 456); the 1980s, in this case, should have not seen a resurgence of racism because the 1960s were marked by an increase in activities and educational campaigns which sought to spread information among the public, and to “objectively report on matters of race, and to expose and condemn instances of racism in public life and discourse” (Lowy 456). While ignorance and lack of education do contribute to the everlasting presence of racism in the American society, the societal inequalities “through which specific racial and ethnic groups continue to find themselves disproportionately excluded from mainstream opportunities for housing, education, occupational mobility, and other lifestyle options” surely contribute to the matter (Lowy 456). In other words, while not insignificant, the general population was not the root of the problem, but rather what contributed to this resurgence of racism was the continued support that such politics received, which only led to the perpetuation of institutional racism. Then, the 1980s were marked by an administration which, despite its apparent enforcing of a “race neutrality,” was marked by policies which were discriminatory against the black community (as well as other racial and ethnic groups) (Lowy 457).

With this background in mind, it is easy to affirm that Margaret Atwood’s treatment of racial minorities in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is indeed rooted in the context of her contemporary society. While Atwood herself does not dwell on this matter and chooses to instead focus solely on her main white female character, the reader is informed about some of these groups’ fates within Gileadean system: “‘Resettlement of the Children of Ham is continuing on schedule,’ says the reassuring pink face, back on the screen. ‘Three thousand have arrived this week in National Homeland One, with another two thousand in transit’ (Atwood, HT 93-94). Offred

hears about the black community's fate on the television: the "Children of Ham" are being relocated far away from Gilead. However, about the "Sons of Jacob," that is, the Jewish community, were deemed special and were given the choice to either convert to Christianity, or to return to Israel. Despite this apparent possibility to choose, in "Historical Notes," we learn that the idea of "privatizing the Jewish repatriation scheme" (Atwood, HT 319) led to "more than one boatload of Jews [being] simply dumped into the Atlantic, to maximize profits" (320). As we can see, the information is brief at best. While it could be argued that Atwood wishes to focus on gendered oppression, her methods and execution left out a large portion of the female population when she decided to focus solely on the fates of white women inside Gilead. Still, despite the scarcity of information, it is crystal clear that the Republic of Gilead, as Atwood depicted it, is an all-white society. Thus, this massive deportation of its racial minority groups (because of the lack of information about other racial groups, one could assume that similar methods were used in the handling of other racial and ethnic groups) could very well represent the climax and the resolution of what was discussed previously in this paper, namely the violent re-emergence of racism in the United States in the 1980s.

The difference between the novel and the TV series lies in the fact that Atwood seems to be aware of "the racial implication of control of reproduction" (Moffett 158), as we are told, in the "Historical Notes" section of the novel, that the build-up to Gilead was "an age of plummeting Caucasian birth rates, a phenomenon observable not only in Gilead but in most northern Caucasian societies of the time" (Atwood qtd. in Moffett 158); there is also a mention about "the differing statistics among Caucasian and non-Caucasians," which ultimately explains the "need" for the creation of this all-white society (Atwood qtd. in Moffett 158). This rapid decrease in Caucasian birth rates only reinforces the white supremacist rhetoric present in the United States, which ends up culminating in the establishment of the Republic of Gilead (Moffett 158). This is what is meant by "white genocide": a decrease of "Caucasian birth rates and a consequent shift in the demographic makeup of the United States," and not the literal murder of the white population (Moffett 158). We are speaking about a metaphorical death, or the endangering of the white race, which is caused mainly by immigration and less by the decrease in fertility in a fraction of the white population (Moffett 158). Thus, Atwood does acknowledge the racial component of the creation of Gilead, and Pieixoto refers to Gilead's "racist policies" as having been "firmly rooted in the pre-Gilead period" (qtd. in Moffett 158), something which I have shown previously in this paper. According to Pieixoto, these "racist fears," evidently contributed to the ultimate establishment of Gilead, as it "provided some of

the emotional fuel that allowed the Gilead takeover to succeed as well as it did” (Atwood, HT 317). Then, it can be argued that Gilead is not an *accidentally* all-white society, but that it is purposefully so (Moffett 158). The Republic of Gilead was always meant to be exclusively Caucasian and it is precisely this characteristic, “the whiteness of the book’s world,” that contributes to its categorization as a dystopian world (Moffett 158).

Having this in mind, it is not only desirable but mandatory that a cultural shift of the narrative requires a re-evaluation of the representation of race. In other words, in order to transpose the world of Gilead into another cultural and historical setting, some elements needed to be altered, and race is definitely one of them. Bruce Miller, the creator of Hulu’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, posed the following question in a *Time* magazine interview: “What’s the difference between making a TV show about racists and making a racist TV show where you don’t hire any actors of colour?” (Dockterman). While Miller did make the right decision in casting actors of colour, the question of how one should handle this representation remains (and it is in this respect that the adaptation of Atwood’s novel lacks).

In an attempt to correct Atwood’s disregard of non-white people and particularly that of non-white women, Bruce Miller’s adaptation of the novel took some liberties: certain characters, such as Moira (and Luke) have been racially diversified in an attempt to offer the audience a more diverse cast. As Margaret Atwood herself has stated,

In the original novel, [Gilead does] the South African [method of segregation] of years past. They ship people to a “national homeland” - you’re told it’s happening but you don’t see it happening. Bruce made the decision that there would be many more multiracial relationships than there had been, since it was in the present time. June’s partner is black, and that wouldn’t have happened in the original novel because they were segregationists. (Menta)

Thus, while the novel’s white-supremacist tones are evident, the adaptation attempts to distance itself from this by “integrating multiple people of colour as active characters in the series” (Van Zanen 49). However, it seems that even the show’s diverse representation is limited, seeing that the series’ most racially diverse characters are still among those groups who are inferior to the ruling class of Gilead. It would be difficult to recall any instance of a Commander or a Wife of colour on screen. Justifying the producer’s decision to racially diversify the narrative, actress Samira Willey – who portrays Moira on the show – states that “audiences do not want to see some ‘ideal woman,’ they want to see women who look like themselves, or look like their

friends, their aunts, their mothers, their children” (Wiley, interview by Mulkerrins). Thus, we reach the conclusion that these changes were made in an attempt to better portray the actual population of the United States, in a way which makes it possible for a wider range of individuals to see themselves represented on screen. Additionally, justifying the incorporation of non-white groups, and the fact that their presence does not negate the ideologies of a state such as Gilead or take away from the realist element of the narrative, Bruce Miller’s remarks the fact that “the evangelical movement has gotten a lot more integrated in the decades since the book was published” (Mitovitch).

However, the fact that these characters are played by black actors seems to have no effect on the newly adapted narrative because, in the first three seasons of the show, there is one single mention of race which implies a somewhat racist prejudice held by one of the ruling families in Gilead: as they are looking to find new postings for a number of handmaids, Aunt Lydia mentions that one family “doesn’t want a handmaid of color” (“Unfit”), a statement which begs the question: would it be that easy to reduce America’s tradition of systemic racism to this mere “personal preference”? The question then, is: why racially diversify a previously all-white cast if race is not among the issues you want to explore in your adaptation? The answer is both simple and complicated. The simple response would be that, quite frankly, it would have been impossible for Hulu to get away with creating and airing “such a high-profile series with no women of colour in consequential roles” (McDonald). According to a study titled “Hollywood Diversity” carried out in 2019 with regards to the 2016-2017 season, 70.3% percent of the roles in digital scripted shows were played by white actors; 12.7% percent of the roles were cast as Black, 7.2% as Latino, 4.9% as Asian, 4.7% as Mixed, and only 0.2% percent of the roles went to Native actors (Hunt *et al.*). Keeping these statistics in mind, the situation is quite dire already, and the audience would have most likely dismissed and rejected the production, had it featured an exclusively white cast. Despite Miller’s decision to racially diversify his cast, his execution remains an issue. The idea of a utopian society in which the concept of race truly holds no meaning anymore is quite literally not within our grasp, nor will it ever be, and nor should it be the goal. Its refusal to acknowledge that race plays a crucial part in the way that an individual, especially a woman, is treated in society, and even more so would be treated in a society like Gilead, is the show’s biggest failure, and so far, this aspect has attracted the most criticism. Ellen E. Jones in an article for *The Guardian* states that: “it wasn’t just that Miller and his team didn’t want to make a racist TV show; it was also that they didn’t want to make a TV show about race.” As proven earlier in this chapter, it is impossible to speak

of sexism or homophobia while excluding the matter of race altogether. In the same article, Bruce Miller is quoted as saying that “it just felt like in a world where birth rates have fallen so precipitously, fertility would trump everything,” which, frankly, negates the very history of the United States. The fact that a fertility crisis, as well as an environmental crisis (which is mentioned by Serena Joy in season one) would put an end to centuries-old bias, prejudice and hate crimes against America’s racial minorities seems hard to believe.

Moving forward, Moira is the show’s best represented non-white character. While Moira is a lesbian both in the novel and on the show, the adaptation further portrays her as a black woman, which should, logically, have some additional implications. However, although her race should matter, whether “used as the justification for her slavery or as a rationale for excluding her as a suitable parent,” the topic of race remains uncommented on throughout the series (Moffett 159). Paul Moffett argues that what Gilead is actually trying to solve through the use of handmaids is not the problem of fertility, but actually the “distribution of fertility and of children along biological rather than classed lines” (159). Commander Waterford is thought to be sterile both in the novel and on the show, and thus, leaving aside the morality of the Ceremony, the ritualized rape occurring once a month in the house of the Commanders, “no amount of legal or social permission for him to rape anyone is going to solve [his infertility] problem” (Moffett159). Following this line of thought and the idea that what Gilead is actually trying to fix is not the actual overall decrease in fertility, but the distribution of this fertility, Moffett question the show’s depiction of race: if Gilead does not seek to fix the low birth rate issue exactly, then the Gileadean society’s willing to overlook the race of its handmaids is not justifiable (159). In other words, the crisis that Gilead wishes to resolve is not as grave so as to justify the abolishment of centuries-old systemic racism.

The decision to depict the Republic of Gilead as color-blind has proven to be one of the show’s weakest points because it purposefully disregards both the history of the United States, as well as the logical consequences that the establishment of Gilead-like state would imply. Angelica Jade Bastién, writer for *Vulture*, has remarked that the adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale*’s “rings false because in time of strife, divisions don’t dissolve – if anything, they become more ingrained (which proves true for gender on the show).” Along the same lines, Soraya Nadia McDonald writes: “In a hierarchical society propelled by religious fundamentalism, just about everything in this history of this country suggests that racial divisions would become far more deeply entrenched.” This idea that ethnic and racial minority groups would have it worse in a totalitarian society seems obvious, and yet this is supposedly not the case in Gilead.

However, this same idea does apply when it comes to Gilead's other minority groups, namely its non-heterosexual population. This is reflected in the treatment suffered by the show's queer characters because, while harsh prejudices and discrimination against queer groups do exist in today's society, Gilead reverts part of the US to a time in which such crimes were punishable by death and severe bodily mutilation. Basti3n further critiques Miller's decision by referring to the aforementioned supposed integration mentioned by Bruce Miller by explaining that,

[T]he evangelical movement continues to twist scripture in order to support virulent racism – a practice that goes back to [the United States'] founding, when slaves were stripped of their own practices and forced into Christianity while being barred from reading the same Bible slave masters used to assert their superiority as not just [a] biological fact, but a spiritual imperative. (Basti3n)

Thus, while perhaps more integrated, the evangelical movement still supports the racist agenda of the United States and the possibility that such a movement would be willing to disregard race entirely does not exist.

McDonald criticises the changes undergone by the show by presenting the show's racial representation as “[an] area that suffers from a lack of deep interrogation of how to make such a change realistic in a series that has been commended for, and that prides itself on, a vision of the world that feels all too possible”; the underlying idea here is that by depicting Gilead as a color-blind society, the show loses its previously acclaimed credibility because such a society could not be achieved in such a short amount of time, or ever, no matter what crises were to arise. Equally, Basti3n explains the fact that Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* relinquishes “America's greatest sin: slavery. Black women were brutalised, raped, separated from their children and family, forced into servitude, and not allowed to enact the cultural practices that reminded them of the homes they were stolen from solely for the profit of white people.” The practice of rape and that of separating mothers from the babies is not at all new, since it recalls the tragic histories of countless women who were enslaved on white masters' plantations all over America (Moffett 161). Thus, Atwood consciously appropriates this by putting into practice what Noah Berlatsky refers to as the age-old question, “What if this atrocity had happened to white people instead?” (qtd. in Moffett 161). Therefore, while the novel willingly depicts such this reality, because it chooses to leave the race matter unaddressed despite the fact that non-white characters are represented on screen, the story depicted by the television

adaptation builds itself on the question of “what happens when a white person experiences the atrocities that have historically happened to nonwhite people” (Moffett 161).

I would argue that it is quite distasteful that, even though Moira’s storyline is expanded in the show (when compared to her novel’s story), she continues to remain secondary to June, the white protagonist. While Moira does manage to escape Gilead, which ultimately leads to her living a better life than June (although June herself could have escaped Gilead multiple times, had she chosen to do so), one cannot help but feel that by removing Moira from the centre of the action, that is from Gilead, her character becomes even more secondary: she is hidden away in Canada and the audience rarely gets a glimpse of her anymore. Despite a brief acknowledgement of what seems to be a hint of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, no doubt acquired in Gilead, in “Baggage,” Moira is reduced to being someone who escaped Gilead and not much else. In Canada, Moira lives with June’s husband, Luke, and helps him raise June’s daughter, a baby born inside Gilead’s walls, brought to Canada by Emily at the end of season three. Moira, then, once in Canada, no longer has a clear-cut storyline of her own. Out of thirty-nine episodes³, Moira only appears in twenty of them. “Nightshade” introduces the audience to Moira’s new girlfriend, and while this may come across as a sweet but rather insignificant detail, I would argue that it further supports the argument that the show is not really interested in depicting Moira as an actual protagonist (alongside June). While “The Crossing” features the quite lengthy and heartfelt reunion of June and Nick, we never learn, prior to episode two, that Moira even has a new love interest. This could have been justified had the show announced a time-jump in between the end of season three and the beginning of season four, but we are promptly informed that only two weeks have passed since we last saw our characters at the end of season three. Additionally, we get the idea that Moira’s relationship is not quite that recent. Thus, whether this is mere negligence or not, it is yet another example of the disinterest with which Moira is written as a character. Bastián noticed yet another difference in the manner in which she is treated when compared to other (white) characters: “in particularly complex emotional moments for June, Janine, and even Serena Joy, they are framed in extreme close-up... Moira gets no shots like this. There is an emotional removal in regards to how the camera interacts with her compared to the aforementioned white women” (Bastián). Therefore, we can see a recurring “theme”: although it prides itself with being post-racial, Miller’s show still depicts its most represented non-white character differently, and although race remains unmentioned, it is impossible not to question whether race is, after all, taken into consideration when such decisions are made. Similarly, as I have previously mentioned, in spite of its color-

blindness, Gilead hardly presents its audience with people of colour who hold positions of power within the Gileadean system. If race truly does not matter, where are all the non-white Commanders and their Wives?

Having said this, however, it must be reiterated that it is not the decision to racially diversify the cast that has been subjected to criticism, but the way in which this modification has been handled; ultimately, it is the job of the writers and producers to find a way to address the consequences that being a non-white person would have in a world like Gilead, “especially in a work that’s being sold as a glimpse of a possible future” (McDonald). What the show achieves by ignoring the implications of race is the undervaluing and invalidation of the realities lived by people of colour and the effects that these injustices have had on entire generations.

Clarence H. Braddock defines a “colour-blind” society as “a society in which the skin color and physical attributes that constitute what we refer to as race wouldn’t matter in terms of all the rights and privileges in our modern society” (1). The idea that the achievement of such a society is the ultimate reward to be obtained in the battle against racial prejudice and discrimination has invoked the words of Dr Martin Luther King: the famous “I have a dream” speech is used “to infer that his vision was a time in the future where it wouldn’t matter what the colour of a person’s skin was in terms of their opportunity, or more importantly their lives experience” (Braddock 1). Thus, when King said, “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character” (King qtd. in Braddock 1) many individuals thought that what he was referring to a future colour-blind society (Braddock 1).

In his critique of the concept of a colour-blind society, Braddock further states that such a society would have at its foundation the suggestion that racial labelling and “the associated implicit and explicit biases to a hypothetical and almost mythical post-racial stance in which the individual no longer sees race but only sees the person for the other attributes and qualities of their existence” (2). The problem that arises in this case is the fact that a non-white person’s life experience “has been altered by a lifetime of exposure to racism,” and thus in refusing to acknowledge these lived experiences, one actively chooses to negate that the other person’s entire existence has been shaped by the fact that their “skin is of that colour, and that [they] have been categorized in a racial group” (Braddock 2). To ignore race, then, is to ignore the person entirely, to ignore their experiences, because a person’s race and identity cannot simply

be disregarded (Braddock 4). By ignoring race, one also ignores the white “racial framing” (DiAngela qtd. in Braddock 4) that “permeates the lived experience of people of colour” (Braddock 4). White ‘racial framing’” makes reference to those specific attributes (language and behaviour) that are used to reinforce and justify the discourse of white supremacy (Braddock 4).

While to many the achievement of a colour-blind world means reaching the post-racial society that everyone is supposedly awaiting, research shows that colour-blindness could actually be linked to the perpetuation of already existing racial inequities (Apfelbaum *et al* 207). When race becomes invisible, “many Whites shift from viewing color blindness as a distributive principle . . . to viewing it as a procedural principle” (Apfelbaum *et al* 207); in other words, there is a shift from the idea that everyone should simply benefit from equal opportunities, to the idea that, despite the existence of “race-based inequalities,” these people should, too, be given the same opportunities. This is related to the very popular belief among white people according to which they are the ones who are actually racially discriminated against in today’s society. In a study conducted by Michael Norton and Samuel Sommers, it was shown that “although both Whites and Blacks agree that anti-Black bias was pervasive in previous eras, the average White American now believes that Whites are *more* victimized by racial bias than Blacks are” (Apfelbaum *et al* 207). Thus, while colour-blindness appears at first glance to be a utopian principle, in reality it does not hold any real benefits, on the contrary, it leads to the conscious and voluntary invalidation and ignorance with respect to centuries-old battles for civil rights among racial and ethnic groups.

While it could be argued that in its depiction of racial minority groups Hulu’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* wishes to present itself as a society in which racial discrimination does not exist anymore, this, simply put, is nothing more than wishful thinking. As I have shown in this paper, the creation of a post-racial society is impossible, and as a result, what the show actually accomplishes is the creation of an ethnic utopia (Lowy 453), which is, quite paradoxically, situated within a dystopian-like society. Although made with regards to the 1980s, Benjamin P. Bowser’s statement that “despite declines in survey-reported racial prejudice and the elimination of legally sanctioned and over discrimination, blacks are still experiencing racially motivated restriction (qtd. in Lowy 454) still stands true in today’s American society, and in its decision to refuse to acknowledge the race of its characters, *The Handmaid’s Tale* seems to distance itself from our present-day racism issues, consequently becoming a less realistic, less likely scenario for our society, despite its desire to present itself as such.

Although it wishes to present itself as being post-racial, white privilege still exists in Gilead, and unlike straight privilege which is easily justifiable, there is no explanation as to why racial privilege still exists in a society which is supposedly color-blind. According to Charles Gallagher, “embracing color-blind egalitarianism as a way of understanding racial hierarchy allows individuals to inhabit a skin color but to view race as not conferring any relative social privilege or disadvantage. Within this [colour-blind] perspective, there is no such thing as white privilege” (qtd. in Moffett 161). Privileges and liabilities that one might hold are “stackable and magnify one another,” in other words, a black gay woman such as Moira suffers from a triple oppression: she “experiences the negative social effects of being a woman, of being gay, and of being black, but also the social effects of being a gay woman, of being a black woman, and of being gay and black, and finally the effect of wearing all those social identities at once” (Moffett 161). What makes matters worse when it comes to this faulty representation and acknowledgement of privileges and discriminations is the fact that Hulu’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* is capable of accurately depicting its characters, as it can be clearly seen in the portrayal of Emily, but it simply refuses to do so when it comes to Moira. As a lesbian, Emily’s “experience in Gilead is comparatively worse than June’s because Emily experiences all the oppression is comparatively worse than June’s because Emily experiences all the oppression of being a white woman in Gilead *as well as* all the oppression of being a lesbian in Gilead” (Moffett 161). Moira does experience this too, to a certain extent, as she, too, is a “gender traitor”; however, her race holds no additional repercussions. The show highlights Moira’s sexual orientation at various moments throughout the series: we are presented with a sexual encounter between Moira and another woman after the former manages to flee from Gilead (“Baggage”), flashbacks of Moira and her pre-Gilead fiancée are included, and, after Emily’s escape from Gilead, the two women become friends in Canada. Thus, “while it’s easy to cast people of color in a variety of roles, it’s far harder to meaningfully evoke the ways race affects our lives – *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a classic example of the problem with settling for diversity that exists out of a desire to be ‘color blind’” (Bastién); by refusing to have these conversations, the series focuses on “gender, sexuality and resistance at the expense of race, politics and history (Crawley 335-336), and depicts a feminism that, out of the desire to illustrate a post-racial society, leaves out women of colour and focuses solely on the white female characters and their experiences, including those characters who are the actual “villains” of the story.

Audre Lorde addresses the lack of intersectionality in feminism and this is precisely what we see in Miller's *The Handmaid's Tale*: "By and large within the women's movement today, white women focus on their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class, and age. There is a pretense to homogeneity of experience covered by the word *sisterhood* that does not in fact exist" (116). Thus, by trying to present its audience with a united sisterhood, the show disregards the fact that the female experience is not singular and that white (as well as straight) privilege does indeed exist. Karen Crawley explains the effect that this universalization has: "in universalizing the white experience, *The Handmaid's Tale* prioritizes a particular strand of feminist critique that assumes all women suffer equally under patriarchal systems" (351); in other words, although the series chooses to focus instead on gender and "addresses how culture is grappling with sexual assault, harassment, and subjugation," (Gallant 21) this approach voluntarily chooses to leave unnoticed the supplementary consequences that being anything other than white would have for a woman living in the Republic of Gilead.

As previously mentioned, Moira is not the only character who undergoes diversification, and neither is racial diversification the only kind that can be observed in Miller's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Emily, Ofglen in the novel, as her real name is never revealed in the original narrative, was not only upgraded to the status of a protagonist in the show, but the series also depicts her as an openly lesbian woman. In doing so, the show makes it possible to present its audience with the direct consequences that her identity has in Gilead. Emily is given a backstory in the series: pre-Gilead, Emily was a university professor, she was married, and had a young son. While Gilead was gaining traction, the new Gilead-approved board at Emily's university feared that she was not maintaining a healthy learning environment, clearly because of her sexual orientation. Although Gilead had not yet taken over, not officially at least, its influence and effects can already be felt: Emily's superior, a gay man himself indirectly advises Emily to keep her family a secret just as he was trying to do under the new board, but Emily wants to fight, "they cannot scare us back into the closet," ("Unwomen"), she says. Later, Emily finds her colleague hanging from the rafters, in a scene which hauntingly resembles the Salvagings that Emily will be all too familiar with later on. When trying to flee to Canada together with her family, Emily is not permitted to go through security with her wife and son, both of whom are Canadian citizens; Emily supposedly needed a "border traffic bypass stamp" in order to do so. The two women are informed that their marriage has been annulled under the newly established Gilead and the three of them have to go their separate

ways. Emily most likely gets captured soon after, as she mentions that she “got caught in the airport” in season three, episode one, “Night.”

In the depiction of Emily’s past, it can be clearly observed that Hulu’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* has adapted itself to modern times. Contrary to Atwood’s own contemporary society, while still controversial and opposed by many political groups, married same-sex couples are fortunately a reality of our today’s society, at least as far as the United States is concerned. The fact that Emily and Sylvia’s marriage certificate is annulled once the Gileadean Republic is established is not only upsetting, but it is infuriating, for Gilead merely stands for the rise of political discourses which are present in today’s political climate. While the actual integration of a system resembling that of the handmaids could possibly be met with more resistance, the series depicts just how easy it would be to strip LGBTQ+ persons of the very few rights they have managed to acquire. The issue becomes even more upsetting when compared to actual attempts that have been made to hurt and alienate the queer community in the United States, as well as across the world, in the past few years, despite the fact that one would want to believe that the worst is not yet to come.

While Emily is used as a handmaid because of her fertility, her rebellious acts throughout the seasons allowed the writers to integrate Gilead’s appropriate punishments for a “gender traitor” who dared to act on her “sinful” impulses. Because she pursues a relationship with a Martha, Emily is punished and forced to undergo clitoridectomy. Gilead figures that lesbianism must be caused solely by sexual desire, and consequently pleasure, and in depriving Emily of the possibility of ever experiencing these feelings again, she would finally obey and become the submissive handmaid that she was always meant to be. Naturally, this does not happen, and Emily’s continual refusal to submit leads to her being sent to the Colonies, only to later on be assigned to yet another household as a result of Gilead’s handmaid shortage. Ultimately, Emily manages to escape Gilead, and just like Moira, she exits the main narrative arc of Gilead. Although the audience gets to see Emily as she struggles to find her place in Canada, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the screen time that both Emily and Moira get, combined, would not even amount to half of the screen time that June gets in the series. It definitely seems like *The Handmaid’s Tale* uses a pattern: while its “diverse” characters do get to escape Gilead and, consequently, to live a better life than our protagonist (though we must keep in mind that it is June’s decision to remain in Gilead), in doing so, these characters are left on the margins of the narrative and the audience is lucky if they get to see glimpses of them every other episode.

Gilead's stance on homosexuality, or "gender treachery" as they see it, is made clear at various points in the novel. The term "gender treachery" is interesting on its own. In 1477, in Germany, a woman faced trial for supposedly being in a relationship with her female housemate (Sullivan 3). What is interesting is that this fact is not once named in the trial notes: the woman is said "to have acted like a husband, to have made sexually aggressive advances towards other woman, to have sometimes dressed in men's clothing" (Sullivan 3). The woman was hanged for committing what they called a "crime against nature," because she acted like a man, and thus she transgressed the gender norms of the time (Sullivan 3). This definitely resembles Gilead's concept of "gender treachery," as, after all, in choosing to use a more general term, one is inclined to believe that gender treachery does not exclusively refer to homosexuality. For example, it would be logical to assume that a woman who denied to perform her sacred duty, having children, would have also been deemed a "gender traitor" in Gilead's eyes. Thus, homosexuality, in true Judeo-Christian tradition, is seen in Gilead as a transgression of the very tradition that has maintained the idea that the sex act is solely intended for procreation purposes (Berliner 138), and any act which endangers procreation is severely punished.

The consequences of gender treachery are particularly articulated in season one, episode three, "Late." Because of her illegal relationship with a Martha, Emily is to stand trial before Gilead's officials and answer for her crimes. I use the word "trial" lightly here, because, as one would expect, Emily is not represented by a lawyer, and neither does she get the chance to speak for herself. To stand trial in Gilead, then, is a mere formality, a performance that Gilead has decided to keep despite the fact that they strip it of all its functions. Emily is thus charged with gender treachery and it is enough for the judge to ask the prosecutor if he swears by God's word that the report is true for him to find Emily guilty. Her entire existence is "an abomination," and she deserves eternal suffering for her sins; however, God made her fruitful and she must go on as a handmaid, so as to fulfil her divine duties. Emily's fertility is what "saves" her in the end, as she is sentenced to "redemption." Meanwhile the Martha is not so lucky: because Gilead cannot use her in the same way that they can use Emily, she is killed, and Emily is forced to watch as the guards hang the woman. Redemption, of course, means being able to have children for Gilead; still, in order to make sure that such sinful acts do not happen again, Gilead makes sure that things will be much easier for Emily. Aunt Lydia truly believes that after the clitoridectomy Emily "won't want what [she] cannot have" anymore. With this in mind, while the experiences Emily undergoes withing Gilead are horrific, the series

still focuses more on the consequences that Emily's, a white woman's, sexual orientation has on her life in Gilead than it focuses on Moira's experience, both as a lesbian, and more specifically as a black woman, an aspect which is ignored altogether (Gallant 45).

This article argues for a closer examination of *The Handmaid's Tale's* decision to not only maintain the novel's treatment of its non-heterosexual characters, but to further explore the brutality to which queer characters were subjected to in Gilead, while completely abandoning the racism and racial bias of the novel. It may seem simple, at first, to determine why race suddenly does not matter in Gilead, although it surely used to matter in the pre-Gilead American society. However, as I have shown, in choosing to present Gilead as both a post-racial, color-blind society, as well as a future American society, the show quite literally undermines its own purpose. Still, despite its attempt to really pay race no mind, the show, whether consciously or not, perpetuates all too familiar tropes to which non-white characters have fallen prey. Although their race should not matter in this dystopian world, their race does not go unnoticed when it comes to the way they are represented on the small screen, and this is obvious when taking a look at how Moira, as well as Emily, as a white, albeit non-heterosexual character, are treated when compared to their white, straight counterparts. While the treatment of its queer characters could be explained through the simple fact that their relationships would not be beneficial to Gilead's purpose, that of producing children, we have seen that in reality, Gilead's desire is not all that simple. While on the surface it claims to wish to rid itself of the fertility crisis which overtook the US prior to Gilead, in choosing to cast exclusively white actors to portray the people who hold the power in the new Republic, the show seems to better align itself with the novel's depiction of race. Keeping these casting decisions in mind, it would seem that Paul Moffett is right when arguing that what Gilead actually wants to solve is not the decreasing birth rates among the general population, but rather the distribution of healthy babies. Gilead, then, wants to solve the ruling class's fertility crisis, that is, the white class's baby problem. In this case, the refusal to acknowledge race and to have it hold any meaning at all seems even more confusing, as the show would want its audience to believe that these far-right politicians, the Commanders of Gilead, would happily renunciate the centuries' old tradition lying at the foundation of the US: the white supremacist and nationalist ideology which is impossible to separate from the concept of race purity. Thus, what Bruce Miller wants to depict would better be described as an ethnic utopia, despite the fact that it has been established earlier in this paper that color-blindness is not what we should strive for as a society.

Still, for lack of a better word, this post-racial world seems like a step-up from where we currently are as a society, and while we have seen that the disadvantages far outweigh its advantages, it is my assumption that Miller sees this post-racial society as a positive advancement. Fortunately, there is still time for the issue of race to be addressed. Still, it is quite unlikely that this will happen: in an interview from 2018, speaking of season two, Margaret Atwood stated that Miller would deal more with Gilead's racial politics, saying that "he [Miller] listens to feedback" (Menta). However, as I have argued in this paper, this has yet to happen, at least in a real meaningful way. It is, after all, the writers and producers' decision to depict Gilead in whatever manner they wish; still, as I hope I have shown in this paper, this approach is more hurtful than it is beneficial. While the revival of *The Handmaid's Tale* has reopened, or rather intensified among some groups the discussions surrounding women's rights, the show could have a much greater legacy, were it to shift to a more intersectional approach. There is no doubt that a single television show cannot address each and every issue of our current society; however, the problematic politics of race, to say the least, are ingrained in America's society. To present a futuristic America as being truly post-racial quite literally invalidates America's own past, as well as millions of people's experiences and results in an inaccurate and inadequate representation of what such a society would stand for.

¹ By "minorities," I refer in this article to the lesbian (Emily, Moira) and black (Moira) characters, as these are the only female non-heterosexual, respectively non-white characters, whose storylines make it possible to provide an analysis.

² The term is a "1980s acronym meaning young urban professional" (Lowy 448).

³ As of April 29th (counting the first three episodes of season four).

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