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Comply to Resist: Agency in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Feminist Dystopian Texts

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COMPLY TO RESIST: AGENCY IN TWENTIETH AND

TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY FEMINIST DYSTOPIAN TEXTS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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Indiana University of Pennsylvania

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Indiana University of Pennsylvania
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Title: Comply to Resist: Agency in Twentieth and Twentieth-First Century Feminist Dystopian Texts

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This dissertation investigates the representation of agency in twentieth and twenty-first-century feminist dystopian novels, television, and video games. Through drawing on media theory, feminism, agency theory, and feminist dystopian theory and criticism, I examine Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Octavia Butler's *Dawn*, HBO's *Westworld*, Double Fine Production's *Broken Age*, and Ubisoft's *Beyond Good and Evil*. Specifically, I consider how the representation of agency changes depending on the medium because novels, television, and video games have disparate affordances and limitations, which shape how the reader, viewer, or player understands agency. These particular feminist dystopian texts demonstrate how female characters often comply with gender-based oppression in order to resist it, which novels, television, and video games convey in disparate ways that are unique to the medium. I term this pattern in twentieth and twenty-first-century feminist dystopian texts a Subversive Narrative Structure, which is defined by a female protagonist who complies with gender-based oppression in order to resist it in ways that depend on the medium and the situation that the protagonist finds herself in. This project seeks to expand scholarship's understanding of agency through exploring how women resist gender-based oppression in feminist dystopian novels, television, and video games in exceedingly complex and nuanced ways, which is supposed to empower real-world women to resist patriarchal corruption in individualized ways as well.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

"Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm" – Ralph Waldo Emerson

This has been my favorite quote for as long as I can remember. When I first expressed interest in graduate school as a senior undergraduate, I was told that if I wanted to attend graduate school, then I *really* had to want it because grad school is hard. As I processed those words, I remember feeling a great surge of determination because I knew my Olympic-sized work ethic would help me succeed no matter the challenge. Interestingly enough, it is not my natural inclination to work hard that carried me through the process of earning my PhD. Instead, it is actually my unwavering commitment to nerdy enthusiasm: the sheer and unadulterated love and obsession of what I was studying, which guided me through all the difficult moments I had no idea were coming on the day of our first-year orientation. As Dr. Downing handed us a yellow piece of paper, which had a list of all the requirements we had to meet to complete the program, I remember vibrating with excitement. "It's all about that dissertation defense date here at the bottom," Dr. Downing said, and I remember thinking, *Holy crap*, but then, *I can do this*! And, here we are, almost five years later, still enthusiastic, still completely obsessed with my topic, and as a bonus, I've eagerly filled out every single inch of that yellow piece of paper, which included a vivacious scribbling of the date and time of my dissertation defense date.

It's important to note that my enthusiasm may have emanated from within me, but it was also encouraged and tested by many special people who have all had an integral role in my journey, who I must now thank profusely.

To begin, I am indebted to the entire English Department at the University of North Dakota, whose BA and MA in English programs prepared me for everything that I have done since I graduated. Specifically, I need to thank Xavier Pastrano, my English 110 instructor at UND, who taught me how to have an opinion and compelled me to want to declare my major in English. After switching my major to English, I took an introduction to an English major class with Dr. Mike Flynn, whose class was ridiculously difficult at the time, but instead of making me want to quit, he had this uncanny ability to just make me want and love to try harder. While I rely on everything he taught me about British Literature to this day, it was his Coen Brother's film class that first introduced me to the idea of mediums, which become integral to my dissertation and future research. If it weren't for Dr. Adam Kitzes, I would not have fallen in love with Shakespeare, which I did not end up specializing in, but studying his plays is what made me want to go to graduate school in the first place. It was in his classes that I learned to write fast and to make nuanced arguments that I was indelibly passionate about, a lesson that served me well in selecting a dissertation topic. Even though I will never ever understand Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, I am grateful for Dr. Crystal Alberts's postmodern fiction class because it introduced me to the concept of use to subvert, which became the heart of my dissertation. And, finally, I am thankful for Dr. Sherry O'Donnell, Dr. Kim Donehower, and Dr. Eric Wolfe, my MA portfolio committee, for encouraging me to pursue my interest in popular culture and whose feedback helped me produce a writing sample on Edgar Allan Poe that got me into IUP's Literature and Criticism PhD Program.

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And, last but not least, this graduate school journey would never have been possible without my family, who have also supported me in unique and individual ways.

To my grandma and grandpa Lundin, who are unyieldingly supportive, thoughtful, and wonderful. Whenever I hit a large milestone in the program, they called, emailed, and prayed for

me. When I was ABD—a.k.a.: all but done[1]—they celebrated with me. And even when there was nothing going on, they'd call and check in. They have been there for me my whole life; "twin-pillars," if you will, of grace, love, and support. In summer of 2018, my grandpa passed away, which was devastating, but he was always supportive about me pursuing a PhD, and never did he ever let me forget—in the best way possible— he would always, no matter what, know more about Chaucer than I do. I love you two so very, very much.

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 And, finally, to Roger, my love and husband (as of 6.7.19). You have been with me since day one of grad school, the cute boy with the blue shirt and matching blue eyes, who sat across the room from me during teaching orientation. I am so happy that you were gutsy enough, and I was gullible enough, to give you my phone number when you asked for it—"you know, homework purposes." I'm not your better half, nor are you mine. That's because we're two complete and ambitious people who shine bright on our own, but when brought together, we are blinding. I am grateful for you always, but particularly within the last several weeks of dissertation revisions because you picked-up the slack, held my sanity together with chocolate and encouragement, and kept me fed and caffeinated, but most of all, you endured an exceedingly grumpy version of myself that was profoundly unlovable. I love you more than words can say. You are everything. Thank you for being you.

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[1] When my mother told my grandparents I was ABD, she didn't know it stood for All But Dissertation, so she said I was All But Done.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

THE MEDIUM MATTERS: REPRESENTATIONS OF AGENCY IN FEMINIST

DYSTOPIAN NOVELS, TELEVISION, AND VIDEO GAMES

"two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" – Atwood, *The Handmaid's*

Tale

"'How long did it take you to find that out?' I said. You can see from the way I was speaking to

him that we were already on different terms" – Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*

"I went back to Nick. Time after time, on my own, without Serena knowing. It wasn't called for,

there was no excuse. I did not do it for him, but for myself entirely. I didn't even think of it as

giving myself to him […] I did not feel munificent, but thankful […] feel more in control" –

Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*

Agency is a thoroughly debated and highly contested concept that is implicitly and

explicitly explored in myriad ways by sociologists, philosophers, creative writers, film and

television directors, and even video game designers. Barry Barnes, a sociologist, explicitly

defines agency in his book, *Understanding Agency: Social Theory and Responsible Action*, as

"an individual [who] possesses internal powers and capacities, which, through their exercise,

make her an *active* entity constantly intervening in the course of events going on around her"

(25, original emphasis). In his view, a person has agency if they have the mental and physical

ability to perform an active role in the events in their life, which also means that if a person is

unable to take an active role in their own life, they do not possess agency because they cannot

make their own conscious decisions about events that affect them. Barnes' definition is

representative of the larger scholarly debate about agency, which permeates disciplinary lines

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and seems to divide it into two primary views: a person either has agency, or they do not. This dissertation is interested in not only challenging the notion that agency is a binary, but also extending and expanding the definition through examining the representation of feminist agency in feminist dystopian novels, television, and video games.

While sociologists and philosophers are the predominant theorists regarding the definition of agency, it is equally important to consider how literature—a perpetually growing field of study because of the constant production of new texts and mediums[2]— explores and defines agency as well, especially since literary texts have captured the depth, breadth, and complexity of the human experience for generations. This dissertation posits that the feminist dystopian genre, defined as "a bad place for women" that thrives on the "suppression of female desire" (Cavalcanti 49), is particularly crucial to extending and expanding the definition of agency for two reasons: one, agency is a ubiquitous theme that is deeply embedded within the feminist dystopian genre; and two, the way that agency manifests within myriad twentieth and twenty-first century feminist dystopian texts complicates scholarship's binary-based definition.

Agency, as the quotes in the epigraph from Margaret Atwood's feminist dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* suggest, is highly complex, nuanced, and most importantly, dynamic because it actively shifts throughout the text and depends on the situation that the protagonist, Offred, finds herself in. In the first quote, Offred does not have considerable agency because her body is appropriated by the government against her will to produce children during a global fertility drought, which reduced her to a "two-legged womb" (Atwood 136). However, in the second quote, which occurs later in the novel, it seems as though Offred does have agency

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[2] During the writing of this dissertation, Netflix's *Black Mirror* released a groundbreaking film in 2018 called, *Bandersnatch*, which requires those who chose to watch the film to also make choices that impact the trajectory of the film, and as such, successfully combines together two mediums—film and video games—to make an entirely new medium: interactive film.

because she consciously chooses to sarcastically admonish the Commander about his selfish misgivings about the ceremony, which demonstrates that she is not a complicit and compliant participant in Gilead's regime. Clearly, agency is not only intermittent within the novel, but it also manifests in exceedingly nuanced ways as well, which is established in the third quote, where Offred seems to intentionally *comply* with gender-based oppression so that she can later *resist* it. This is demonstrated when she complies with Serena's order to have sex with Nick, and then, decides to return to him again for her own pleasure, which is a way of exercising agency because she made this choice intentionally and of her own accord. This pattern, which I term a Subversive Narrative Structure, is representative of myriad feminist dystopian texts in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but it has not: one, been explicitly identified as a genre definer of feminist dystopia; and two, been explored by scholars in different mediums, such as novels, serialized television, or video games.

This dissertation argues that the Subversive Narrative Structure in feminist dystopian texts is important because it reveals that agency for female characters is neither fixed, nor is it a binary, but highly complex, incredibly nuanced for each individual woman, and represented differently within each medium. In her book, *Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon explains that it is important to consider the medium-specific differences between novels, film, television, and video games because "being shown a story is not the same as being told it—and neither is the same as participating in it or interacting with it, that is, experiencing the story directly and kinesthetically. With each mode, different things get adapted and in different ways" (12). The experience of reading a novel will be different than the experience of viewing a television show, which is also different than playing a video game. This dissertation will broadly argue that feminist dystopian novels, television, and video games shape the representation of agency in

different ways, which I will explore in three parts: Chapter One focuses on two novels: Octavia

Butler's *Dawn* (1987) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985); Chapter Two

focuses on a television show: HBO's *Westworld* (2016-present); and Chapter Three focuses on

two video games: *Broken Age* (2015) and *Beyond Good and Evil* (2003). In Chapters One and

Three, I will juxtapose two texts and two characters, whereas in Chapter Two, I will explore one

text and one character, and investigate how each medium explores gender-based oppression and

feminist agency in different ways. To make this argument, I will draw upon media theory,

agency theory, feminism, and feminist dystopian theory. When interconnected, these theoretical

foundations demonstrate that agency is shaped by the medium, which shifts and enriches a

reader, viewer, or player's understanding of feminist agency, and ultimately, how women resist

gender-based oppression in exceedingly subtle, nuanced, and individual ways.

Media Theory

With the production of new mediums over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, media

theory has become a necessary entity to understand the different ways that novels, film,

television, and video games operate as texts and how they affect the user. In her book, *Avatars of

Story*, Marie-Laure Ryan argues that "the materiality of the medium—what we may call its

affordances, or possibilities" have specific "types of meanings that can be encoded" (17).

Novels, television, and video games each have a unique way of exploration, user interaction, and

a series of unique characteristics that must be considered to comprehend and interpret the

narrative, themes, and characters. To explicitly illustrate her point, Ryan draws on a radio, which

is a "distinct narrative medium" and, as such, "offers different narrative possibilities from those

of television, film, or oral conversation" (26). She seems to juxtapose the radio with television,

film, and a conversation with another person to demonstrate that all four mediums not only have

distinct ways of telling stories, but also that each medium has strengths and weaknesses: a radio

show records and broadcasts a conversation to a large audience, which also means that it can be

replayed; however, considering that the radio only features a host's voice, their inflection and

tone must be distinct. Ryan's point is that it is important to be conscious of the 'medium-

affordances and limitations' with each individual medium because they function in different

ways and shape a user's understanding of the novel, film, television show, or video game, and its

themes and characters.

Similarly, in the Introduction of *Storyworlds Across Media: Toward a Media Conscious*

Narratology, Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon pose a much more explicit question about mediums,

which is, "What can medium X do in terms of storyworld creation or representation that medium

Y cannot?" (3). Their question reinforces that one medium, such as a novel, can do something

that another medium, such as a television series, cannot and vice versa. Furthering this notion,

André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion argue that "technical constraints of different media will

inevitably highlight different aspects [of a] story" (10, quoted in Hutcheon). By "technical

constraints," they mean the technology that it takes to produce the medium— such as the printing

press, cinematic equipment, and interface for video games— are a significant part of how a

medium operates and shapes the user's experience of that particular text. To briefly demonstrate,

in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* novel, Offred *describes* her unhappiness in great detail, but in

Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred's unhappiness is conveyed through the actor, Elizabeth

Moss's, somber facial expressions, pale make-up, and defeated body language. Both renditions

of *The Handmaid's Tale* focus on Offred's unhappiness, but do so in different ways, which

indicates that her unhappiness at her lack of agency is conveyed and understood in slightly

different terms in the novel and the television show, reinforcing that the medium matters and

shapes a reader and viewer's perception of agency.

While the medium is arguably an important concept to be aware of in exploration and examination of texts, scholars also investigate the operation of medium by theorizing the way in which a user interacts with different mediums. Ryan argues that "interactivity is an umbrella category that covers a wide variety of relations between a user and a text" (107). In other words, all texts have a different way to interact with them, which means that no medium is better than another, but it does explore a theme, like agency in the scope of this dissertation, differently depending on what the user is required to do to engage with the text. Unlike Ryan, Hutcheon does not use the word "interactivity," but instead, coins the phrase, "modes of engagement" to discuss that readers, viewers, and players interact or engage with mediums in different ways. Specifically, she argues, "different modes of engagement permit us to think about how [texts] allow people to tell, show, or interact with stories" and "all three modes are arguably immersive though to different degrees and in different ways" (Hutcheon 23). Hutcheon seems to concur that novels, film, television, and video games require the user to interact or engage with the different mediums through reading, viewing, or playing; however, she furthers this notion by arguing that the level of immersion with the story also shifts depending on the medium. She goes on to explain the levels of immersion in detail:

> In the telling mode— in narrative literature, for example—our engagement begins in the realm of imagination which is the simultaneously controlled by the selective directing words of the text and liberated that is on constrained by the limits of the visual or oral. We can stop reading at any point; we can re-read or skip ahead; we hold the book in our hands and feel as well as see how much of the story remains to be read. But with the move to the mode of showing, as in film and stage adaptations, we are caught in an

unrelenting forward driving story. And we have moved from the imagination to the realm of direct perception with its mix of both detail and brown focus. The performance mode teaches us that language is not the only way to express meaning or to relate stories. Visual and gestural representations are rich and complex associations. (Hutcheon 23)

Novels, in Hutcheon's view, rely much more on the reader's imagination to process the words on the page by summoning images in their mind's eye: what is happening, what characters look like, and what something must feel like based on what the author has described, whereas film or television produce the images for the viewer, but as such, it is up to the viewer to then interpret gestures, body language, set design, costumes, and music, which creates a vastly different experience compared to reading. This is not to suggest that a novel is limited, whereas television has open and endless possibilities; instead, Hutcheon reinforces that different mediums can accomplish and emphasize different ideas and themes in new ways. To briefly demonstrate, in *The Handmaid's Tale* novel, after her clandestine meeting with the Commander at his request, Offred is coerced into kissing him "as if [she] meant it," and then, sits in her room to reflect on "perspective" (Atwood 143), which encourages the reader to imagine how she kissed him, how she felt, and what she looked like as she reflected because the text is void of descriptions that reveal exactly how Offred feels. However, in Hulu's television adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale*, after Offred is told to kiss the Commander, she smiles, and genuinely acts as though she is enjoying herself; however, the next scene shows Elizabeth Moss furiously and vigorously brushing her teeth until her gums bleed in her bathroom, which is demonstrated by her spit that is tinged red in the blindingly-white, porcelain sink. Both renditions of *The Handmaid's Tale* explore the kiss between Offred and the Commander in different ways: in the novel, the reader must interpret Offred's lack of description of her feelings at this moment, whereas in the

television show, the viewer must interpret Elizabeth Moss's performance and body language to make meaning of this moment in the narrative. Hutcheon's point, which is reinforced through this brief juxtaposition of two renditions of *The Handmaid's Tale*, demonstrates that the medium shapes the user's interaction, level of immersion, and understanding of a character, theme, or moment in a narrative.

In addition to the different ways that novels, film, television, and video games lend themselves to unique user interaction and different kinds of immersion, it is also important to consider how medium and genre intersect. In *Avatars of Story,* Ryan argues that "Both medium and genre exercise constraints on what kinds of stories can be told, but while genre is defined by more or less freely adopted conventions chosen for both personal and cultural reasons, medium *imposes* its possibilities and limitations on the user" (27). She suggests that genre and medium both have characteristics that define and limit them because they are designed to operate in certain ways, and while they share this notion, they are also fundamentally different because the medium forces the user to engage with its affordances and limitations. In comparison, "Genre conventions are genuine rules specified by humans, whereas the constraints and possibilities offered by media are dictated by their material substance and mode of encoding," which suggests that a genre can be adapted or hybridized, if necessary, whereas a medium cannot because it has technology that shapes its operation (Ryan 27). While Ryan's claims certainly ascertain the difference between medium and genre, this is not the focal point of her project, which then risks simplification of the complex relationship between medium and genre. Building on what Ryan has established, I would argue that the individual genre in question, such as feminist dystopia, is also shaped by the medium. Therefore, I will further explore how the medium shapes the portrayal of the genre, which then shapes how a user understands a specific theme and gender:

agency in feminist dystopias. While it is important to generally examine how medium and genre converge and diverge, I would also argue that it is equally important to delve into a singular genre and theme, like feminist dystopia and agency, to explore how that particular medium shapes the user's understanding.

Agency

Agency, as indicated earlier in this introduction, is a thoroughly debated term that has been defined, conceptualized, and explored in many different disciplines as a binary: a person can either have agency or they cannot. In *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, Janet H. Murray argues that "Agency is the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices," which insinuates that an individual knows that they exercised agency by the emotional catharsis they experience after they make a conscious decision (159). For Murray, agency is not only a conscious and significant choice that an individual makes, but it is also defined by the success of that choice. In other words, a person can feel only gratified with their conscious choice when they can see their choice is tangible or has come into fruition, which implies that a person either has agency or they do not. Similar to Murray, Barnes—mentioned earlier in this introduction—also suggests that to have agency, a person must be able to make choices about their life, which implies that if an individual is unable to do so, they do not have agency; however, unlike Murray, he does not seem to associate agency with success. Instead, Barnes seems interested in whether the conscious choice an individual makes is or is not their own. He argues, "voluntary action involves free will; free will produces voluntary action. Again, that which is free, or voluntary, or willed, involves a lack of constraint. A free agent acts without restrictions upon her will: she acts without compulsion or coercion," which suggests that a person who has agency is acting on their own desire and of their own

accord without any influence from another entity or institution (1-2). If an individual's actions are coerced in any way, it deprives them of their ability to truly act or make a choice because "coercive people and physical dangers engender fear, and it can be said that fear suppresses will and results in caused rather than free action" (Barnes 10). When an individual is coerced in any manner— but, in particular, by another entity and/or potent emotion, like fear— they are not really acting of their own free will; instead, they are merely following their first inclination in the moment, which is a product of the unfortunate or serendipitous circumstances, and thus, not considered a conscious or voluntary choice of action (Barnes 10).

While Murray and Barnes seem to conceptualize agency as a binary, Michel Foucault has a slightly more complex theorization of agency. In his book, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* (1975), Foucault seems to suggest that people do not have agency because society has "mechanics of power," which are designed to "[…] have a hold over others' bodies not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes" and that "produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile bodies'" (138). Society imbues certain entities and institutions with authority that constantly monitor to ensure that society behaves in certain ways, and as such, it is the threat of surveillance from these particular entities and institutions that signify to the citizens in a society that these authority figures are associated with greater power and control, which is then supposed to render each individual person's behavior compliant, and thus, "docile" (Foucault 138). Since a person's behavior and even subjectivity is shaped by their society, Foucault seems to suggest that a person does not have agency because they are controlled by the larger social system and its values.[3]

Although, in *The History of Sexuality: Volume I* (1976), Foucault also claims that "where

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[3] Foucault's theory of societal discipline was inspired by "Jeremy Bentham's design for the Panopticon, a model prison" (Bartky 63).

there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. Should it be said that one is always 'inside' power, there is no 'escaping' it, there is no absolute outside where it is concerned, because is subject to the law in any case" (95). Even though certain entities and institutions are imbued with power, and individuals are rendered compliant because they know they are under surveillance, it does not mean that resistance—or agency—is impossible. While power and authority, as well as resistance and agency, *seem* to be mutually exclusive, Foucault argues that they are not; instead, power and agency exist simultaneously because it is impossible for an individual to live outside of a power structure. In other words, if an individual leaves one community, and migrates to another community, they are not outside the structure of power, but have merely moved from one to another because social structures are not without power. In "The History of Sexuality: An Interview," Foucault reinforces that it is possible to consciously exercise agency and authority within power structures when he claims, "I'm simply saying: as soon as there's a relation of power there's a possibility of resistance. We're never trapped by power: it's always possible to modify its hold, in determined conditions and following a precise strategy," which means that power and agency are not necessarily mutually exclusive (qtd in Sawicki 25).[4] Once power is identified, it is possible for a person to choose to work against it and change the terms of their oppression, but that person must do so *strategically*, which implies that "there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case" (96). A person can exercise agency in individual and multiple ways, but only under the right circumstances.

The scholarly debate about agency is at an impasse because myriad theories and conceptualizations of agency seem to: one, reduce it to a binary-based definition, which insists

[4] See Jana Sawicki's *Disciplining Foucault: Feminism, Power, and the Body*.

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that a person can either exercise agency or they cannot; two, neglect to engage with Foucault's

assertion that agency—under the right circumstances— can manifest in different ways; and

three, fail to consider how the social construction of gender affects and shapes an individual's

agency. While feminist theorists and scholars have explicitly and implicitly explored the

connection between agency and gender, critical attention remains trained on the ways that

women's agency is denied because of her subservient gender.[5] Responding to Foucault's

inattention to gender in his theorizations about agency, Susan Bordo argues in "The Body and

the Reproduction of Femininity: A Feminist Appropriation of Foucault," that women and their

bodies are "trained, shaped, and impressed" by the patriarchal values within a society (13).

Society places gendered expectations on women to look and act in certain ways, which not only

prescribes their subjectivity, but also oppresses them in ways that do not affect men (13). Like

Bordo, Sandra Lee Bartky explains that the "female figure" has always been forced to adapt to

what patriarchal culture expects in her essay, "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of

Patriarchal Power." Women "over time and across cultures […] reflect cultural obsessions and

preoccupations in ways that are still poorly misunderstood," which suggests that women in

myriad cultures and time periods physically—and even psychologically and emotionally—are

coerced to conform to what patriarchal culture tells them is beautiful or acceptable (Bartky 64).

As a result, women internalize these gendered-expectations and their bodies reflect, as Bordo

argues in *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, a "surface on which

the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments of a culture as inscribed and

thus reinforced" (165). Similarly, in *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power, and Corporeality*, Moira

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[5] In other words, when feminist theory and criticism discusses the connection between gender and agency, they do not seem to engage with Foucault's acknowledgment that there is no set definition or limitation to how a person can resist, which I argue has implications for theorizing a feminist definition of agency.

Gatens explains that she is "concerned with the (often unconscious) imaginaries of a specific culture: those ready-made images and symbols through which we make sense of social bodies and which determine, in part, their value" and subjectivity (viii). Gatens, like many other feminist scholars, also indicates that there are images within society that perpetuate certain values about the female body that women unconsciously digest, and as such, negatively shapes their subjectivity, and ultimately takes away their agency because they feel trapped in conforming to what patriarchal society wants, rather than what they want.

These pervasive attitudes about women that take away their subjectivity and agency seem to derive from a primitive, socio-biological hierarchy. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir argues that women are secondary to men in myriad social structures because "humanity is male" and patriarchy "defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being," which suggests that by the sheer nature of biologically and socially being labeled a woman lends itself to fewer rights and privileges (xxii). In addition, women are not only defined in opposition to men as the inferior sex and gender, but also only valued for their reproductive properties, which then "imprison[s] her in her subjectivity" (xxi). Patriarchal society praises women for their inherent ability to reproduce, but ironically, that ability to reproduce is simultaneously an aspect of the female sex that limits a woman's subjectivity and robs her of her agency. This indicates that patriarchal society has gender-based mechanisms embedded within it to oppress women for being women. As myriad feminist theorists and scholars contend, feminism has always been concerned with the ways that women are robbed of the right to their own bodies and subjectivity by gender-based mechanisms of oppression that are deeply embedded in society and culture.

While women certainly experience agency—both exercising and not exercising it, using

it and refraining from using it—differently than men[6], feminist theory does not seem to offer its

own definition of feminist agency. This why it is important to turn to feminist dystopian novels,

television, and video games that have the Subversive Narrative Structure to theorize the complex

and nuanced ways that women can exercise agency against gender-based oppression by

complying in order to resist. In *Storyworlds Across Media*, Thon argues that "narrative

representations across media may employ a number of different strategies to represent the

consciousness of characters," which suggests that consciousness or awareness is represented in

disparate ways across novels, television, and video games because each medium functions

differently (67). Considering that consciousness is an aspect of character and characterization, it

also stands to reason that there are other themes— like agency— that can be represented in

disparate ways in different mediums.

User Agency

Of course, the user of any medium has the agency and capacity to ignore the critical

underpinnings of a text. However, according to Bertolt Brecht's *Short Organon for the Theatre*,

where he conceptualized the idea of "*Verfremdungseffekt*," art[7] has the unique ability to almost

make the user think because "a representation which estranges is one which allows us to

recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar" (qtd in Suvin 374).[8] When

a user engages with a text, they might not expect that it will make them think, but they will likely

recognize the aspects of it that are familiar, which inevitably catches their attention and forces

them to think. In other words, users have agency, but the way in which a text is constructed

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[6] I am not suggesting that there are only certain types of agency that men or women can exclusively choose to
exercise.
[7] He applied this term primarily to theater.
[8] See Suvin's "On the Poetics of Science Fiction"

might make that difficult to ignore critical underpinnings. Furthermore, in his article, "Brechtian Alienation in Video Games," Daniel Dunne explains that

> Alienation refers to the events or sections of media that break the audience away from the emotional impact, or immersion, breaking the suspension of belief. Alienation is often done in order to draw attention to an overarching theme, or movement that would otherwise be ignored in the medium. Alienation allows the audience to not simply empathise[9] with the character or situation, but to critically analyse[10] the overall media construction and message. (85-86)

When a reader, viewer, or player's immersion in a text is disrupted, it is for the specific purpose of drawing attention to the deeper message or implication within a text, which is accomplished in different ways depending on the medium. The reader, viewer, or player's concentration is broken, which causes them to disassociate with the character, and to consciously consider what the text is doing, how it is doing it, and what it means. This notion— along with "cognitive estrangement" (Suvin 372) and "feminist fabulation" (Barr 10), concepts I will discuss in the next section— is particularly crucial for understanding how the feminist dystopian genre functions to engage the user in the critique of gender-based oppression and to explore complex and nuanced agency in different mediums. In other words, my dissertation will expand the scholarly discussion by providing an alternate understanding of agency that is not fixed, but complex and nuanced *because* it is determined by the medium and prompts readers, viewers, and players to consider what it means to comply in order to resist through language and imagination

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[9] Original spelling.
[10] Original spelling.

in novels, acting and camera angles in television, and environment and mechanics in video games.[11]

Feminist Dystopia

Feminist dystopian scholarship predominantly focuses on examining feminist dystopian novels because it is considered *the* medium that women writers used if they wanted to ensure that their ideas about gender-based inequity and oppression reached a wide readership. In her book, *Feminist Fiction: Feminist Uses of Generic Fiction*, Anne Cranny-Francis explains that the public already "enjoy[s] genre fiction" because "it sells by the truck load," which means that "it makes sense [for women writers] to use a fictional format [that] already has a huge market" to express their progressive and subversive ideas about gender-based oppression in the real-world (1-2). In other words, women writers utilized speculative genres, like utopia, dystopia, and science fiction, and wrote them "from a self-consciously feminist perspective, consciously encoding an ideology which is in direct opposition to the dominant gender ideology of Western society, patriarchal ideology," which means that women writers wrote their short stories, novellas, and novels from a woman's point of view in order to challenge and critique patriarchal gender-based oppression in the real-world (Cranny-Francis 1). Thus, these women writers told "slightly different kinds of stories" that placed women at the center of the written narratives,

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[11] While it is evident that the medium matters and shapes a user's understanding of a novel, television show, or video game, it is important to acknowledge the user's agency. In other words, if an individual is reading a novel, they have the agency to ignore certain chapters, to skip around the narrative, or to even choose to stop reading, which shapes still shapes the user's understanding of the novel and its themes, but also prevents the user from fully accessing the critical underpinnings and overall critique of gender-based oppression. Similarly, if a viewer is watching a television show, but they choose to watch it with the sound off, or if a player chooses to watch their friend play a game, rather than play themselves, both scenarios demonstrate that the individual's in question will have an entirely different, and even incomplete, understanding of the text than if they watched it with the sound on or played the game themselves. This also means that users have the agency and capacity to ignore the critical underpinnings of a novel, television show, or video game if they choose to believe that the text in question is merely entertainment and nothing more. Although, as demonstrated above, some art makes this very difficult.

which intentionally "*function[ed]* differently" than the utopian, dystopian, and science fiction texts written by their male counterparts in order to render "invisible" gender inequities "visible" (Cranny-Francis 1-2, my emphasis). Likewise, in *Feminist Futures: Contemporary Women's Speculative* Fictions, Natalie M. Rosinsky argues that these female "authors are not merely writing light, diversionary, or 'escapist' fiction but are analyzing and responding to vital contemporary issues" (3). By using the utopian, dystopian, and science fiction genres that were predominantly utilized by male writers, women writers used gender inequities to subvert them, which empowered them to create a genre and discipline of feminist utopian, dystopian, and science fiction that was all their own because their written texts functioned to achieve a unique social purpose that was separate from the other male authors of the time. In other words, women writers utilized these genres to enact social change and promote critical thinking in the real-world to combat patriarchal power and gender-based oppression.

While Cranny-Francis's scholarship focuses on the historical relevance of feminist utopian, dystopian, and science fiction, later feminist scholars, like Marlene S. Barr, redirected her focus more toward the narrative structure, and why it should be included in the postmodern canon, rather than relegated to the sidelines in her book, *Feminist Fabulation: Space/Postmodern Fiction*. Barr, like Cranny-Francis wrote her book during a time when written texts were the prevailing medium of choice for women writers to critique gender inequities, which means that she based her argument and critical analysis of how feminist utopian, dystopian, and science fiction texts function by examining authors, such as Marge Piercy and Joanna Russ. To demonstrate the legitimacy of feminist utopian, dystopian, and science fiction texts, Barr created a term, "feminist fabulation," which she defined as "feminist science fiction that offers us a world clearly and radically discontinuous from the patriarchal one we know, yet returns to

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confront that known patriarchal world in some feminist cognitive way" (10). Her term is a

feminist revision of Darko Suvin's term, "cognitive estrangement," which he coined twenty

years earlier in his article, "On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre," to demonstrate how

science fiction and other speculative texts, novels, and short stories operated (372). Similar to

Suvin, Barr contends that the world of a feminist utopian, dystopian, or science fiction text is

exceedingly different from the world of the reader, but unlike Suvin, Barr asserts that the gender-

based oppression that female characters' experience is exceedingly familiar to readers, which

then encourages readers to think critically about mechanisms of gender-based oppression in the

real-world. Similarly, in *Utopian and Science Fiction by Women: Worlds of Difference*, Jane L.

Donaworth and Carol A. Kolmerten argue that "one of the reasons women's utopian and science

fiction has become so popular in the last twenty years is that gender roles can be more easily

revised when the reader is estranged from her ordinary world," which suggests that the fictional

context of this genre allows for critical exploration of gender and gender-based oppression in

ways that the real-world might not allow (1-2). This is because in feminist utopian, science

fiction, and dystopian texts, the writer can construct worlds that defy real-world rules for the

sake of making a critique about gender-based oppression, which Octavia Butler accomplishes in

her novel, *Dawn*, where she replaces men with aliens, who force the protagonist, Lilith to

perform a strictly reproductive role. By replacing men with aliens, Butler's argument cannot be

conflated with, as bell hooks argues, "man-hating" (93). For myriad scholars, it seems as though

representational distance from reality, while still dealing closely with real-world issues, allows

myriad women writers to critique the real-world in a way that is entertaining, philosophical, and

exceedingly political.

Indeed, in "The Persistence of Hope in Dystopian Science Fiction," Raffaella Baccolini

argues that feminist dystopias have "become the preferred form for an expression of struggle and resistance," which enabled women writers to argue for real-world change for women by placing female characters in subjugated positions, and as such, allows them to resist against the patriarchal structures that oppress them (520). Baccolini also argues that feminist dystopian fiction is "transgressive," provides "a critical perspective that can push toward change," and empowers readers and writers to "recognize a subversive and oppositional strategy against hegemonic ideology" (519). She suggests that feminist dystopias are not only designed to question and challenge the mechanisms within society that keep female characters oppressed, but to also inspire real world women to fight for change in their society. Likewise, in "Writing to Speak: The Feminist Dystopia" (1996), Elisabeth Mahoney argues that the feminist dystopia "offers a potentially radical fictional space in which women can unravel and re-imagine existing power relations," which implies that the genre encourages real-world women to consider ways that they can dismantle gender-based mechanisms of oppression in their society with the hope of creating a more equitable future for all women (29). Scholars suggest that the feminist dystopian genre, itself, exists to critique gender-based oppression, but scholars have not yet discussed how the "transgressive" function of a text changes depending on whether the feminist dystopian text is a novel, television show, or a video game (Baccolini 520).

Considering that feminist dystopian novels were the preferred genre and medium for critiquing gender-based oppression in patriarchal society, feminist dystopian scholarship conceivably built their criticism and theory based on one primary medium: novels. Since the majority of this foundation feminist dystopian criticism occurred from the 1970s to the early 2000s, the importance of media and medium did not necessarily enter the discussion until 2006, this dissertation will update the current discussion in scholarship about feminist dystopias in

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multiple mediums *and* extend the binary-based definition of agency. The importance of this dissertation is reinforced by Ryan and Thon in the Introduction to *Storyworlds Across Media*, where they argue that the "explosion of new types of media in the 20th century […] has led to a strong sense that understanding the dynamics of culture and society […] media's ability to transmit stories that shape our view of the world and affect our behavior" (2). This suggests that new media provides scholarship with a different and unique way of understanding the world, which is why it is important to consider the ways these feminist dystopian texts in different mediums represent agency in subtle and nuanced ways.

Subversive Narrative Structures: Feminist Agency in Feminist Dystopian Novels, Television, and Video Games

Since this dissertation posits that the medium shapes the representation of agency, along with how the Subversive Narrative Structure is conveyed to the reader, viewer, or player in various feminist dystopian novels, television, and video games, each chapter will examine one medium at a time. The first chapter, "Reading Feminist Agency in Octavia Butler's *Dawn* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*," begins with an examination of Octavia Butler's *Dawn* (1987), as well as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), two twentieth-century novels for adults, which center on Lilith and Offred, two female protagonists, who are reduced to the function of their female reproductive organs and unwillingly sacrificed for patriarchal social prosperity. For example, in *Dawn*, an alien species, the Oankali, rescues the human race from committing mass suicide, but only so that they can use the humans for their own reproductive purposes, which is to trade genes and create a new hybrid species. In comparison, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, an extremely conservative religious organization overthrows the United States government, and in its wake, they establish The Republic of Gilead, a regime that not only insists

its citizens practice traditional gender roles and conservative morals, but also attempts to combat widespread infertility by systematically raping fertile women to yield children. The society is broken into different color-coded sects to determine each individual's function, and in this society, women who are handmaids are required to wear bright red. While most scholarship contends that Lilith and Offred have no agency, I will conversely argue that these two feminist dystopian novels reflect subtle and nuanced agency by utilizing the unique affordances of the novel as a medium: language, description, and imagination. Both Butler and Atwood bifurcate their respective narratives in order to distinguish between who Lilith and Offred are, and who they have to be, to survive the gender-based mechanisms of oppression on the Oankali ship and in Gilead.

Specifically, there are myriad moments in both texts where Offred and Lilith *act* in ways that are complicit with their oppressors; however, I argue that the way the respective narratives are constructed indicates that they are *thinking* something along more rebellious and oppositional lines, which indicates that they are not completely complicit with the gender-based mechanisms of oppression that subjugate them. In other words, their respective situations are too complicated and delicate to be reduced to a binary understanding of agency; instead, I will demonstrate that their agency is subtle and nuanced because they have to comply in order to resist. For example, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, when Offred's Commander takes her to a club, she must *pretend* to be having a good time, which is why she makes an excuse to go to the bar to get a drink. While her action seems complicit with his desires, her rationale for playing along is to get close to Moira, who is working at the club, to set up a meeting to talk in the bathroom to exchange information. Similarly, in *Dawn*, when the Oankali modify Lilith's body, without consent, to be able to access the organic walls and move freely around the ship, she *acts* grateful. While her action seems

complicit with the desire of the Oankali, her rationale for not problematizing what they did to her body is so that she learns as much as she can about her captors in order to plan and organize a rebellion, which she can only accomplish by moving freely around the ship. The value of the feminist dystopian imagination in both novels is demonstrated through Offred and Lilith's challenge of the mechanisms of gender-based oppression on the Oankali ship and in Gilead by either telling their side of the story or speaking out against gender-based oppression, which encourages real world women to reflect on the idea of speaking up to resist gender-based oppression in the real-world.

After establishing how a Subversive Narrative Structure functions in novels in Chapter One, I will build on that notion in Chapter Two, "Watching Feminist Agency: HBO's Adaptation of Crichton's *Westworld*," by examining a feminist dystopian television show, HBO's *Westworld*, which narratively and visually explores gender-based oppression and agency through complying to resist. Unlike Michael Crichton's *Westworld* (1973), HBO's *Westworld* (2016-Present) explores how women are oppressed by the hypermasculine space of the Wild West by switching the primary perspective of the narrative from two male guests to two female hosts. These female hosts are Dolores, played by Evan Rachel Wood, and Maeve, played by Thandie Newton, who are introduced to viewers as objects of desire and violence, rather than subjects who do the desiring and violent behavior, which is narratively and visually demonstrated through their prescribed gender-based roles as a damsel and a madam. However, in this chapter I will only focus on Maeve, who is the madam at the Mariposa saloon. She is trapped in a narrative loop that forces her to sell her body to maintain a living, which is narratively and visually conveyed to the viewer through close-up shots that linger on her often-exposed chest and female figure clad in magenta lingerie, and as such, takes away her agency. While most scholarship

contends that Maeve only makes one true decision in season one, I will conversely argue that by focusing on just that one decision ignores the other subtle and nuanced ways that she exercises agency narratively and visually through unique affordances of television as a medium: acting, and camera angles and movement.

Over the course of ten episodes, Maeve narratively and visually demonstrates that in order to become who she wants to be, she must comply with gender-based oppression in order to resist her subjugation in the Westworld park. While a novel can draw attention to the rebellious thoughts a character mulls over in their head, the television show must demonstrate the bifurcated subjectivity in different ways. For example, Maeve is frequently naked and exposed on maintenance tables, which makes it narratively and visually seem like she does not have agency. However, the television show also visually represents Maeve's resistant nature through the actor's inflection and body language, as well as through the camera angles and movement, which is subversive because it is in tension with her prescribed role as a prostitute in the Wild West. In other words, in one moment the camera lingers on her naked body, whereas in the next, the camera captures her from the shoulders up, which narratively and visually demonstrates that she complied with her role as a female host in order to put herself into a position so that she could resist. Through watching Maeve comply to resist, viewers are asked to consider the complexity and nuances within camera angles and movement, acting, and wardrobe in a way that is only possible in a feminist dystopian television series. Thus, the value of the feminist dystopian imagination in a television series is to narratively and visually demonstrate that agency does not have to be defined by just open and obvious violence, but also can be subtly asserted through subversive body language within a hypermasculine space. This may encourage real-world women to reflect on the notion that the female body is a political impetus that can resist

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gender-based oppression in the real-world within a patriarchal space.

In Chapter Three, "Playing Feminist Agency in *Broken Age* and *Beyond Good and Evil*," I will examine how agency manifests in the Subversive Narrative Structures of two feminist dystopian video games, which center on young female player characters (PCs), Vella and Jade, who are objectified by the societies that they live in. For example, in *Broken Age*, Vella lives in a seaside village in the badlands, a community that is annually ravaged by a sea-dwelling beast, Mog Chothra, which requires the sacrifice of five young women at the Maiden's Feast so that he does not destroy the whole village. Since she fits the criteria for the Maiden's Feast, Vella is chosen to be sacrificed by the community, who wants her to view her unwilling sacrifice as an honorable duty. In comparison, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, Jade lives in an orphanage in the war-ridden country of Hillys, which has been invaded by aliens that abduct people to either use their life force as energy, or inject them with spores, and as such, turns them into slaves to serve the new alien empire. With Pey'j, her pseudo-uncle, Jade tries to protect the orphanage from war-fodder, which proves difficult because they do not have sufficient funds. When Jade takes a job as a photographer to earn money, there are many non-player characters (NPCs) in Hillys who tell her that she is talented and impressive for a girl.

Unlike other mediums, I argue that the video game as a medium utilizes two primary features: one, environment; and two, game mechanics, which represents agency and critique of gender-based oppression in a way that is dissimilar to other mediums because players have to interact with the narrative through the female PC. For example, in *Broken Age*, the game environment is patriarchal, which is conveyed to the player through the Maiden's Feast that sacrifices young women and through the brainwashed NPCs in Vella's community who encourage her to view her unwilling sacrifice as honorable. The game environment is built on

sexist beliefs about women, which is reflected in the community's traditions and through NPCs who also embrace gender inequity. Likewise, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, the patriarchal game environment is conveyed through NPC's who make snide claims about Jade being a self-sufficient and autonomous woman. In these two games, the patriarchal game environment works in conjunction with the game mechanics—the rules for how players can interact with the game—to explore complex and nuanced agency, which subverts gender-based oppression. For example, in *Broken Age*, when Vella is about to be sacrificed at the Maiden's Feast, and in *Beyond Good and Evil*, when Jade is captured and stuck in a net, the mechanics allow both of these women to save themselves through problem-solving game mechanics. Through playing these games, players can learn that the value of the feminist dystopian imagination in the video game medium is to reflect on the innovative and empowering processes of resisting gender-based oppression through intellectual talents, like problem-solving, to challenge a patriarchal oppressor.

Finally, I conclude my dissertation with a transmedia analysis of Atwood's original *The Handmaid's Tale* novel, the 1990 film adaptation, and the 2017 Hulu television show. Since the purpose of my dissertation was to examine how feminist dystopian texts in multiple mediums employ Subversive Narrative Structures, a brief exploration of how agency operates within the same basic narrative, but across different mediums, demonstrates that the medium matters significantly for the feminist dystopian genre. In other words, readers and viewers are able to understand the central *Handmaid's Tale* narrative in different ways than they would if they just read the novel, watched the film, or watched the television series. When juxtaposing the novel, film, and serialized television adaptations of *The Handmaid's Tale*, I argue that two things are revealed: one, agency is portrayed differently in each adaptation because of disparate medium affordances; and two, intersectional feminism has a greater emphasis within each adaptation,

which reinforces that all women are oppressed by conservative politics and legislation, but not all women are oppressed equally, a fact that is emphasized more in the Hulu adaptation rather than in the original novel. And, to briefly demonstrate the continuing relevance and impact of the feminist dystopian genre, I provide an Afterword to my dissertation, exploring the true value of the genre with real-world implications.

CHAPTER 2

READING FEMINIST AGENCY IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

AND OCTAVIA BUTLER'S *DAWN*

Women writers utilize the feminist dystopian genre to resist gender-based oppression by intentionally placing their female characters in subjugated positions. Although it seems counterintuitive to do so, subjecting their female characters to gender-based oppression enables women writers to actually critique patriarchal societies that thrive on the unwilling sacrifice of women's bodies, subjectivity, autonomy, and agency. As established in the Introduction, agency is one of the most prevalent and controversial themes in the discussion of the feminist dystopian genre because there is no consensus in the way it is defined. Naomi Jacobs, literary scholar, describes agency as "both the capacity to *choose* for oneself and the capacity to *act* upon one's choices," which means that a person who has agency is free to take action, make choices, and able to follow through with their choices about their life, body, and subjectivity (92, my emphasis). Jacobs, like the critics discussed in the introduction, subscribes to a binary-based definition of agency, which assumes that a woman either has agency or she does not (92). However, unlike other critics, Jacobs explores agency within the specific context of the feminist dystopian genre, where "capacities [to choose] are compromised" because "the spheres of thought and action are so severely constrained" (92). Even though a woman might try to be an active agent in a dystopian society, she ultimately cannot because her efforts to think, act, and make choices of her own accord are extremely restricted or even rendered impossible because of systemic gender-based oppression. This chapter will challenge the notion that agency is a binary by focusing on how the narratives of two feminist dystopian novels, Octavia Butler's *Dawn* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, critique the gender-based oppression of women

through female characters who exercise agency in subtle and nuanced ways. I will examine these two authors and novels because they both employ what I call, Subversive Narrative Structures, which are defined as: one, using gender-based oppression in order to subvert and critique it; and two, featuring a female protagonist who complies with gender-based oppression in order to resist it in exceedingly complex and nuanced ways that depend on the medium and the situation that the protagonist finds herself in.

Critics have thoroughly discussed Butler's and Atwood's novels separately, but they have never been examined in tandem for their similar Subversive Narrative Structures, which reveals a more complex and nuanced understanding of agency that extends beyond a binary-based definition. When critics examine Butler's *Dawn* and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, discussions broadly focus on whether the female protagonists, Lilith and Offred, do or do not exercise agency, which not only reinforces a binary-based definition, but also assumes that agency and a lack of agency are mutually exclusive. Jacobs, referenced above, contends that in Butler's *Dawn* the "posthuman[12] [is a] form of agency," which means that as a human woman, Lilith does not have agency; however, if Lilith embraced her posthuman body, she would have agency (91). Unlike Jacobs, Shannon Gibney argues that readers are actually supposed to "feel extremely uneasy" by "the idea of genetic interbreeding with aliens […] even though it's probably the only hope that humankind has of surviving," which suggests that neither Lilith, nor the reader, should feel comfortable with her posthuman body because she was not allowed to choose whether she wanted her body to be augmented (105). Since Lilith's situation is inevitable,

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[12] In *Posthumanism*, Nyar argues that posthumanism "merely refers to an ontological condition in which many humans now, and increasingly will, live with chemically, surgically, technologically modified bodies and/or in close conjunction with machines and other organic forms" (2). To be posthuman is to be more than human by some opposing force, and in this case, it is referring to augmented abilities, something that a human being literally cannot possess on their own.

along with the fact that her choices are actually coerced, demonstrates her lack of agency. While *Dawn* has an entirely different premise, discussions of agency in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* are very similar. In his examination of agency, Allan Weiss asks a series of questions about Offred: "Is she a valiant rebel challenging the regime's domination and oppression? Or is she a powerless victim of Gilead's oppression? Or is she instead a willing or unwitting participant in the regime?" (120). His questions assume that Offred can *either* be labeled a rebel, *or* a victim, *or* an inadvertent participant in Gilead's regime, and as such, implies that her subjectivity and agency (or lack thereof) is one-dimensional. Unlike Weiss, Libby Falk Jones argues that Offred is "objectified and repressed […] However, as [utopian] narratives are not purely ideal, neither are these dystopian visions intimidatingly bleak," which means that she is oppressed, but not as much as it might originally seem (7). Furthering this notion, Falk Jones posits that in a feminist dystopian society, women can exercise agency through deciding to "break [their] silences," which creates a peripheral narrative to complement the patriarchal narrative, ultimately giving voice to the gender-based oppression she experiences (7). While attention has been (in)directly devoted to examining agency in these two feminist dystopian novels, I posit that Lilith's and Offred's agency, or lack thereof, should not be discussed as mutually exclusive events.

In this chapter, I will move beyond a dichotomous examination and conceptualization of agency by arguing that agency, *and* a lack thereof, exist simultaneously because Lilith and Offred must comply with the gender-based oppression they are subjected to in order to resist it, which means that they work within the corrupt patriarchal societies that thrive on the oppression of women in order to resist them. To accomplish such a complex and nuanced exploration of agency, Butler and Atwood bifurcate their narratives, which is a narrative technique— or unique affordance of the novel as a medium— that allows them to make a subtle separation between

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who their protagonists are and who they have to be in order to survive gender-based oppression. Throughout both novels, there are myriad moments when Lilith and Offred explain that their compliant behavior has ulterior motives, which indicates that to exercise agency in a feminist dystopian regime, because they *are* incredibly restrictive, a woman must comply in order to resist because open and obvious agency[13] is impossible. To make this argument, I will do the following: first, I will discuss how women writers utilized the feminist dystopian genre to critique gender-based oppression and explore feminist agency; second, I will provide a context for the authors to demonstrate how they both have Subversive Narrative Structures, but accomplish different objectives with their texts. Then, I will examine the converging and diverging ways that Butler and Atwood use gender-based oppression in order to subvert it, which reconceptualizes feminist agency as exceedingly complex and nuanced; and finally, I will conclude this chapter by examining how the novel, as a medium, contributes the value of the feminist dystopian imagination in ways that a television show or a video game cannot.

How Feminist Dystopian Novels Function

The feminist dystopian genre endures as a way to empower women writers to share and explore female-centered anxieties and critiques of patriarchy. In *Partners in Wonder: Women and the Birth of Science Fiction 1926-1960*, Eric Leif Davin delves into the number of women who were writing dystopian (and science fiction) early on, which he estimates to be around "203 known women" (Kindle 21).[14] In Davin's view, when women writers started to craft feminist dystopian (and science fiction) texts, it rendered these genres "a battleground where

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[13] By open and obvious agency, I mean acts, such as overthrowing the guards or trying to escape under the cover of night. These actions are impossible for these women because they are subjected to near constant surveillance. If they attempt open rebellion, they will be apprehended and punished or killed.
[14] Of course, not all 203 of these women writers were progressive, some producing "stories exactly like those written by men," while others were "trivial little domestic stories not worth reading" (Davin 2).

representatives of dominant groups and traditional values were jostled by 'outsider' groups,'"

which seems to imply that when women utilized or appropriated the dystopian and science

fiction genres from their male counterparts, it resulted in tension between the "dominant" male

writers and the "outsider" female writers (2). While women were already writing various

feminist texts at this time, Davin insinuates that these women writers recognized these genres,

specifically, could serve as a unique "forum for their concerns" (2). In other words, when women

writers ascertained that these genres could give voice to their female-centered concerns in new

and accessible ways, which were not currently explored in male-authored texts, they started

producing an enormous number of feminist utopian, dystopian, and science fiction texts. As a

result of women utilizing these genres to explore their female-centered concerns, "culture

between 1926-1965 [became] more liberal, tolerant, and progressive" (Davin 2). This not only

suggests that women writers were achieving their progressive socio-political ideas through their

dystopian and science fiction novels and short stories, but they were actively and successfully

extending the range of what these genres could do by giving voice to female-centered concerns.

While Anne Cranny-Francis agrees that women writers did change these genres by

crafting their stories from the perspective of the woman, she also argues that by placing female-

centered concerns at the heart of the narrative, it challenged the very "conventions of 'past

literature'" that "place[d] women, or female characters, in unremarkable roles" (43). In her view,

women writers challenged the ostensible notion that female characters in literature were limited

to uninteresting and uninspiring roles. Through doing so, they proceeded to create an entirely

new feminist dystopian genre, which was solely dedicated to exploring and critiquing real-world

issues of sexism, misogyny, sexuality, gender, and various other forms of gender-based

oppression. As time continued, and more texts were produced, the original premise of the

feminist dystopian and science fiction genres remained the same; however, there were historical events, such as the 1960s Women's Movement, which created "a greater awareness of not only the kinds of roles which women and men are induced to adopt, but also the *mechanisms* by which those roles are structured and maintained," which suggests that women writers were indelibly influenced by empowering historical events that shifted what they wrote about and how they wrote about it (Cranny-Francis 72, my emphasis). Instead of focusing solely on the roles that women were prescribed in patriarchal society, women writers started to examine the specific patriarchal laws and practices, especially regarding issues of female reproduction, that subjected women to gender-based oppression.

As a result, feminist dystopian narratives seemed to follow a particular structure, which Cranny-Francis describes as an "allegorical description of social injustices displaced in time and/or place from the reader's own society, but still clearly recognizable as a critique of that society" (9). Women writers set their narratives in a completely different time and place, but the issues at the heart of the narrative were directly related to the society the writer was in. Even though Cranny-Francis describes this narrative structure and technique that women writers had been utilizing for years, it was not until 1992, when Marlene S. Barr published her book— which coined a feminist revision of Darko Suvin's term 'cognitive estrangement,'— that the feminist dystopian narrative structure and technique finally had a name: feminist fabulation. Women writers would intentionally create a "bad place for women" that was "characterized by the suppression of female desire […] and by the institution of gender-inflected oppressive order" (Cavalcanti 49), as well as "paint an exaggerated picture of the existing power relations between the sexes, as if they were placed under a magnifying glass," which served as "the main catalyst of narrative conflict" (Cavalcanti 53). In other words, women writers would create a patriarchal

social structure in another world or reality that was intentionally designed to oppress women in gender-based ways that did not affect men, which would enable them to critique and interrogate female-centered anxieties in the real-world. Through setting the narrative in a different world or reality, women writers could reach a wider readership, who was more receptive to considering their critiques of patriarchy and gender-based oppression than they were if the setting was more realistic.

While I agree that this is a predominant narrative structure and technique in the feminist dystopian genre, which has empowered myriad women writers to critique gender-based oppression, I posit that there is an additional narrative structure and technique in the late twentieth and twenty-first-century feminist dystopian novels that scholarship has yet to explore. My term, Subversive Narrative Structures, demonstrates that female characters in feminist dystopian novels can exercise agency by complying with gender-based oppression in order to resist it. In the following sections, I will: first, explore how Octavia Butler and Margaret Atwood are influenced and inspired by different socio-political objectives; and second, how they both accomplish these objectives in *Dawn* and *The Handmaid's Tale* through featuring two female characters who comply with the gender-based oppressive system in order to resist it.

Butler's and Atwood's Influences and Purpose

In the latter half of the 1970s and 80s, there were myriad women writers, such as Suzy McKee Charnas, Marge Piercy, Joanna Russ, and Ursula K. LeGuin, who utilized the feminist dystopian—as well as utopian and science fiction— genre to respond to similar gender-based issues that predominantly affected women, such as rampant sexism, misogyny, and gender roles. Since these women were writing at the same time about congruent themes that affect women, critics often juxtapose several of the aforementioned authors and their works to discuss their

narrative structures and what they were trying to accomplish with their novels. Even though Octavia Butler and Margaret Atwood were writing in the same timeframe, scholarship has never directly juxtaposed *Dawn* (1987) and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), which were not only published a few years apart, but also have similar narrative structures that feature female protagonists who comply in order to resist. Of course, as Cavalcanti argues, the way a woman writer chooses to explore gender-based oppression, as well as resistance to it, will "vary in intensity and approach," which suggests that not all women writers will explore gender-based oppression and agency in the same way because they have their own individual goals that contribute to feminism, female empowerment, and the feminist dystopian genre in different ways (48). While both *Dawn* and *The Handmaid's Tale* share a currently under-discussed narrative structure, each individual author is also still trying to accomplish their socio-political objectives in unique ways.

To demonstrate, Butler is acclaimed for her distinct genre-blending technique in most of her writing. She draws on different genre characteristics from the utopian, dystopian, and science fiction genres, and then blends them to create a novel.[15] Her work, like many other science fiction texts from 1960 through the 1980s, also seems to redirect society's fears into impossible fears of "monsters, horrific transformations, and alien invasion" (Broderick 48). Specifically, in *Dawn*, Butler draws on the alien invasion narrative from science fiction because the novel begins with a group of aliens, termed Oankali/ooloi, who rescue humanity from committing collective suicide. This is not only happenstance for the Oankali/ooloi, but also providential because their existence depends on gene trading with other species, and as such, when they discover and save humanity from self-destruction, they are long overdue for a trade as well. In exchange for their

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[15] Most of Butler's works reflect this 'genre-blending' technique. Through blending-genres, Butler is able to achieve something new or something else that she could not by employing a singular genre as I demonstrate in this chapter.

unsolicited rescue, the Oankali/ooloi trade genes against humanity's will, which entails operating on the individual humans they salvaged while they are in suspended animation. Not only do they harvest genes from individual humans when they sleep, but they also coerce a select few patrons that they consider non-violent to integrate into their society and carry out their reproductive initiative, which is to require human women, like Lilith, to bear construct children—a hybrid of Oankali/ooloi and human—against their will.

While Butler uses an amalgamation of genres to create an oppressive regime that thrives on the gender-based oppression of women, as well as how women can exercise agency against this oppression, critics also discuss her significance within the discipline of feminist dystopian/science fiction women writers at the time. Jim Miller argues that Butler was a part of "the tradition of feminist [dystopian] writing, and at the same time, [sought] to contest it" because she is "an African American woman writing within a largely white women's tradition" and "her works often questions the assumptions shared by many white feminist utopian [and dystopian] writers" (337). Butler was one of many women writers who utilized the feminist dystopian and science fiction genres in order to critique society; however, at the same time, because of her influences and interests as an intersectional feminist, her work also pioneers intersectional critiques through focusing on "issues of racial, political, and sexual stratification and oppression," as well as "sociological underpinnings of society and definitions of humanity" (Gibney 100). Unlike many white women writers of the 1970s and 80s, Butler focuses on the intersection of race, class, gender, and even sexuality, which all converge to oppress her female characters, who are usually "strong, emotionally rich" women "existing in multicultural worlds" (Gibney 100).[16] In an interview, Butler even notes, "'When I began to read science fiction, I was

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[16] Marge Piercy focuses on intersectional oppression in her novel, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, which is classified as more of a feminist utopia, which is why it is not thoroughly examined in this chapter or dissertation.

disappointed at how little… creativity and freedom was used to portray the many racial, ethnic, and class variations," which implies that she noticed a serious gap in feminist dystopian/science fiction and sought to bring more diverse female-centered concerns into the genre (Meltzer 35). Through doing so, Butler indelibly changed the feminist dystopian and science fiction genres and "made this genre more accessible to a wide range of Americans by showing that questions of power and agency can be explored meaningfully through the brown female body not just white male ones" (Green 109). Butler's work empowers a more diverse female readership by giving voice to intersectional oppression, which is also a concept that will I discuss later in this chapter.

While Butler is influenced by genre-blending, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is firmly rooted in a singular genre: feminist dystopia. The novel begins with the aftermath of a religious organization's takeover of the United Stated of America, which erected the Republic of Gilead, a theocracy that is predicated on the systemic gender-based oppression of women. In this society, women are broken into categories— Wives, Marthas, and handmaids—and must wear certain colored clothing and perform duties that depend on their role. Offred, the narrator, is a handmaid, who is required to wear a red cloak, white wings (that prevent her from seeing and easily communicating with other women), and to have sex during a monthly ceremony with a Commander and his wife in attempt to solve the national fertility epidemic. Rebecca Mead, who wrote about Margaret Atwood in the *New Yorker* in April 2017, discusses how Atwood was very "scrupulous about including nothing that did not have a historical antecedent or modern point of comparison" in *The Handmaid's Tale* ("Profit of Dystopia"). Atwood, unlike Butler, was more interested in writing about patriarchal and religious ideologies that stemmed from reality, rather than writing about technology or aliens, "not because [she] does not like Martians… they just don't fall in [her] skill set" ("Profit of Dystopia").

As a result of her writing preferences, Atwood is popularly conceptualized in literary criticism as a critic of "moral conservatism in the USA in the 1980s" (Lefanu 73). By setting *The Handmaid's Tale* in the Republic of Gilead, Sarah Lefanu argues that this allowed Atwood to explore "sexual politics" and "expose [the connection] between gender hierarchy and class structure" (71-72). In an article that Atwood wrote for *The Guardian* in June 2013, called, "My Hero: George Orwell," she noted that Orwell's novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, "became a direct model for me much later in my life—in the real 1984, the year in which I began writing a somewhat different dystopia." Inspired by the compelling dystopia Orwell produced, Atwood employed similar tenets, such as creating a hostile world where surveillance, violence, control of subjectivity, and open or obvious rebellion is unattainable; however, unlike Orwell, Atwood was writing a very different kind of dystopia in *The Handmaid's Tale*. She explains that when she started to write her novel, "The majority of dystopias—Orwell's included—have been written by men and the point of view has been male," which not only suggests that the dystopian genre was inadvertently privileging male-centered concerns, but also that the exploration of oppression did not seem to capture the experiences of women ("My Hero George Orwell"). As she wrote, Atwood also noticed that the presence of women in dystopia was previously limited to "sexless automatons or rebels who've defied the sex rules of the regime," which is why she wanted to "try a dystopia from the female point of view—the world according to Julia, as it were" ("My Hero George Orwell"). Through writing her novel from the point of view of a woman, Atwood could critique gender-based oppression and explore anxieties that affected women as women in a patriarchal society, such as responding to "the fragility of the newly acquired rights and inequalities of women," which empowers her female readership to protect and fight for their rights (Neuman 858-859).

Even though Butler and Atwood were writing at the same time, they are clearly influenced by different socio-political objectives that they endeavor to explore in their respective novels, and as such, they contribute to feminism, female empowerment, and the feminist dystopian genre in different and important ways. While they seem to ascribe to different socio-political objectives, both of their novels also possess what I call, Subversive Narrative Structures, which allow them to provide a more complex exploration of gender-based oppression, and especially, how women exercise agency against it in subtle and nuanced ways. In the sections that follow, I will: first, demonstrate the ways that Butler and Atwood use gender-based oppression to subjugate their female protagonists; and second, explore how these authors also subvert gender-based oppression through crafting female protagonists who comply in order to resist in converging and diverging ways, which ultimately provides a complex exploration of feminist agency that empowers female readership.

Using Gender-Based Oppression

From the beginning of *Dawn*, Butler establishes the general dystopian context of the world that Lilith resides in when she was Awakened—taken out of suspended animation—through words and phrases that convey oppression, such as "confined," "helpless," and "she did not own herself any longer" (Butler 3 and 5). Through third-person narration, it is revealed that Lilith, who slowly realizes that she has been saved from humanity's mass suicide attempt, feels as though she has lost complete control of her autonomy and agency, which is why she vehemently tries to negotiate with her alien captors, the Oankali/ooloi. However, they rebuff her pleas for basic information, such as what has happened, where she is, and what they have or have not done to her. Right away, Lilith realizes that "her only currency was cooperation," which means that the only way to get the answers she desperately craves about her situation is to

comply with what the aliens want (Butler 6). In other words, she consciously decides to allow the

Oankali to co-habitat with her in the cage she has been residing in for an unknown amount of

time in exchange for information, which they eventually make available very slowly. With time,

Lilith becomes more accustomed to Jdahya, the Oankali who she co-habitats with, and as such,

realizes she is becoming too reliant on him. She wonders, "How had she become so dependent

on him? She shook her head. The answer was obvious. He wanted her dependent" (Butler 38).

By entering her cage and coercing her to accept him in exchange for information, Jdahya became

familiar in an unfamiliar world, which pushed Lilith to draw on him for information and

guidance because without him, she would not be able to navigate the new world. From the outset

of *Dawn*, Lilith is painfully well-aware that Oankali/ooloi hold all the information and power,

which renders them superior and her inferior, and there is nothing she can do about it. She is

immensely and immediately frustrated by this because she is denied choices in every aspect of

her life, which robs her of her agency: the ability to choose on her own who she is, where she

goes, and what she does and knows. It seems as though Butler crafted *Dawn* to immediately

accentuate the confining nature of the world that Lilith now lives in, which is constantly

reinforced through two means: one, through words and phrases that characterizes the world as

oppressive; and two, through Lilith, who is often positioned as an inferior object, which robs her

of agency and autonomy in myriad interactions with the Oankali/ooloi.

Similarly, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood also establishes the dystopian context of the

world from the very beginning of the novel; however, unlike *Dawn*, Atwood writes a first-person

narrative through the eyes of Offred, a handmaid, who reports the oppressive conditions of

Gilead through simple observations, such as "the guards weren't allowed inside the building

except when called, and we weren't allowed out, except for our walks, twice daily, two by two

around the football field, which was enclosed now by a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire" (Atwood 4). The presence of guards, regimented routine, strict rules, the barbed wire, and confined space women are not allowed to leave unsupervised all establishes this world as a hostile one that is impossible to escape. From Offred's descriptions, readers glean that where the women are confined was once a school, a place of empowerment and education, but now functions as a prison that keeps women oppressed. Not only are the women oppressed, but the government also pressures women to view their role in Gilead as an esteemed position. Offred makes this clear when she states, "Where I am is not a prison but a privilege, as Aunt Lydia said, who was in love with either/or" and "Yours is a position of honor," which suggests that Offred was told that her position in Gilead's regime as a handmaid is a special right or rare opportunity that is revered and greatly respected (Atwood 8 and 13). It seems that Aunt Lydia, the woman who presides over the handmaids, was propositioned by the Gileadean government to purport the handmaid's position as something to be celebrated, rather than feared and abhorred, in order to coerce fertile women into embracing the gender-based role that oppresses them. By affixing words like "honor" and privilege" to the duty of a handmaid, the Gileadean government attempts to distort the hostile and violent reality of what they are doing to these women with specious descriptions, which are supposed to convince women like Offred that her role might be unpleasant, but it is a worthy sacrifice. Like *Dawn*, the narrative of *The Handmaid's Tale* is constructed to foreground the oppressive nature of the world Offred is living in, which is demonstrated through emphasizing the ways that her agency is taken away because the society does not allow her to make choices about her body and subjectivity.

Subverting Gender-Based Oppression

In her groundbreaking article, "The Persistence of Hope in Dystopian Science Fiction," Raffaella Baccolini discusses how feminist dystopian fiction is "transgressive" and provides "a critical perspective that can push toward change," which empowers women readers and writers to "recognize a subversive and oppositional strategy against hegemonic ideology" (519). She suggests that the feminist dystopian genre is designed to question and challenge patriarchal mechanisms of gender-based oppression, which is supposed to inspire real-world women to fight for change in their society. Similarly, Elisabeth Mahoney asserts that feminist dystopia "offers a potentially radical fictional space in which women can unravel and re-imagine existing power relations," which implies that the genre encourages real-world women to consider ways that they can dismantle gender-based mechanisms of oppression in their society with the hope of creating a more equitable future for all women (29). The patriarchal worlds that female protagonists occupy in feminist dystopias are exceedingly bleak and devastating, but they are also designed that way for a specific purpose—that is, women writers must first create worlds that thrive on gender-based oppression in order to critique and subvert it in complex and nuanced ways later.

While I agree with Baccolini and Mahoney, I also argue that the subversive potential of the feminist dystopian genre extends beyond simply using gender-based oppression to subvert it. Building on Baccolini and Mahoney, I argue that there is another level of narrative subversion that occurs simultaneously in *Dawn* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, which is that the female characters must comply with their oppressors in order to resist them. The definition of agency, as established in the introduction to this chapter and dissertation, assumes that a person can either have agency or they cannot, which is a binary-based definition that does not capture the extremely complex and nuanced types of agency Butler's *Dawn* and Atwood's *The Handmaid's*

Tale. Even though Butler's and Atwood's female protagonists are constantly denied choices in many ways, they are still able to make decisions about the subtle and nuanced ways that they choose to resist their subjugated positions and gender-based roles. In other words, agency is largely dependent upon the situation that the character is in; both Offred and Lilith do have more agency in some situations, but have less in others, which means the ways women choose to exercise agency against patriarchal oppression is more complex and fluid, rather than fixed.

In *Dawn* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, Lilith and Offred are placed in situations that present both women with an impossible choice, which forces them to choose between survival or death. For Lilith, this means choosing to integrate into Oankali/ooloi society and becoming, essentially, a liaison between the species, which also forces her to integrate other humans into the Oankali/ooloi society to bear children, or she can choose to return to suspended animation forever. Conversely, for Offred, this means choosing to be a reproductive vessel for the government, giving up her rights to read, and living by the terms and traditions of the Republic of Gilead, or going to the Colonies, which is described as eradiated land where she will surely die a slow and painful death. Regardless of what Lilith and Offred choose, the decision is not easy or fair because it requires them, like many other women throughout literature, to choose between two extremes. *The Awakening*, a classic nineteenth-century feminist novel, written by Kate Chopin, explores the notion of a female character, who must make a choice between survival or death. In Chopin's novel, the female protagonist, Edna, becomes increasingly aware that she cannot perform her duties as a wife and mother because she refuses to sacrifice her newfound individuality and sense of self for her husband and children. At the end of the novel, Edna successfully escapes patriarchal pressures and expectations by shedding her clothes, swimming out into the ocean, and drowning because it is the only way she can be free. In other

words, knowing that she cannot be who she wants to be in a society that ostracized her for wanting to be more than a wife and mother, Edna commits suicide because she would rather die than live a life that oppresses her as a woman.[17]

While Edna's choice to commit suicide to refuse to play the gender-based roles that oppress her is the ultimate act of agency for her, Lilith and Offred exercise agency through making the conscious choice to survive. In her book, *Living a Feminist Life*, Sara Ahmed draws on a poem by Audre Lorde called, "A Litany for Survival," and specifically, examines the line, "those who were never meant to survive," which she interprets as "those for whom survival requires creativity and work; those for whom survival is politically ambitious" (236). In her view, there are countless women who were not meant to endure but endure anyway and tenaciously through alternative and innovative ways. Ahmed also claims that "coming into full view would be dangerous, those for whom survival might require not coming out of the full light of day […] survival can be protest" (237). For some women, it is impossible to be fully assertive and visible because the situation she is in might make assertiveness a dangerous behavior. While this might make the woman seem like a coward, or in the context of my dissertation, seem as though she is compliant and complacent, I argue when a female character makes the conscious choice to survive, the woman can then choose to resist in other ways that are more nuanced and not as obvious. This insinuates that a woman might be oppressed, and cannot escape her gender-based oppression, but choosing to survive as a political act means that she is not completely compliant.

This notion is demonstrated in *Dawn* when Jdahya offers Lilith freedom through death: "'Touch me here now,' he said, gesturing toward his head tentacles, 'and I'll sting you. You'll

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[17] This is just one of myriad interpretations of this highly complex ending to *The Awakening.*

die,'" but she does not take it because "She jerked her hand away" (Butler 42). Even though she abhors her situation, Lilith does not accept the offer to end her life not because she would die with the help of an Oankali but because she really does want to survive. When she realizes how tremendous her desire to live is, she dedicates her life to a greater cause, which is to actively resist the aliens in any way that she can, rather than submitting to their desires and corrupt ideology. Unlike *Dawn*, readers are not privy to the scene when Offred actually makes the decision to be a handmaid in *The Handmaid's Tale*; instead, Offred explains that once she "heard Rita say to Cora that she could not debase herself like that," which means that Rita felt that she could not have made the same choice that Offred did to become a handmaid because it is degrading and demoralizing (Atwood 10). In response, Cora says, "Nobody asking you […] Anyways, what could you do, supposing?" and Rita retorts, "Go to the Colonies […] They have the choice," and Cora responds once more "With the Unwomen, and starve to death and Lord knows what all?" (Atwood 10). When Cora asks Rita what she would do if she were in Offred's position, Rita explains that she would have elected to go to the Colonies; in Rita's mind, a woman has more self-respect and integrity to go to the Colonies rather than subjecting herself to be a handmaid, but as Cora indicates, the choice to go to the Colonies would also mean certain death. The only other time that Offred brings up the decision she had to make between life or death is during the ceremony when she admits that "nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for. There wasn't a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose," which reinforces that she was presented with a set of severely limited choices (Atwood 94). Offred, like Lilith, still ultimately chose to survive and this allowed her to use her life to resist gender-based oppression in every way that she can.

Of course, the repercussion of choosing to survive physically and emotionally traps Lilith

and Offred in their subjugated roles as reproductive vessels; however, once Lilith and Offred

chose to survive, they do not just follow orders but find different ways to resist in subtle and

nuanced ways, which is demonstrated when they protest their subjugation by asserting their

subjectivity to their oppressors. This occurs in *Dawn* when Lilith is being displayed and paraded

to Nikanj's friends like an object, rather than being introduced to them like a subject. When she

realizes that "She was nothing more than an unusual animal to them. Nikanj's new pet. Abruptly

she turned away from them" (Butler 55). Once Lilith realizes that she has control over this

particular moment and does not have to be a powerless object, she removes herself from the

situation, which denies the Oankali/ooloi the chance to question her, touch her, and treat her like

a toy. The simple act of turning her back and denying the Oankali/ooloi allows Lilith to assert

herself as a subject, which presents her to them as an active agent because she makes the

conscious choice not to allow them to treat her like an object. Even though she cannot overthrow

the Oankali/ooloi, and fight her way off the ship, the act of reclaiming her subjectivity in a

moment where it is denied is a subtle and nuanced form of agency.

 Similarly, in *The Handmaids Tale*, Offred complies with the Gileadean government

because it is essential to her survival, but there are also moments where she is more resistant.

Considering that Offred is oppressed by a theocracy, which relegates her to the role of a

reproductive vessel, Offred exercises agency by choosing to flaunt her sexuality, which she

usually has to suppress, but clearly refuses to give up. She explains,

> As we walk away I know they're watching, these two men who aren't yet permitted to
>
> touch women. They touch with their eyes instead and I move my hips a little, feeling the
>
> full red skirt sway around me. It's like thumbing your nose from behind a fence or
>
> teasing a dog with a bone held out of reach, and I'm ashamed of myself for doing it,

because none of this is the fault of these men, they're too young. Then I find I'm not

ashamed after all. I enjoy the power; power of a dog bone, passive but there. (Atwood 22)

At this moment, Offred knows that the two guards are not allowed to touch women, which means

that they have restrictions on what they are or are not allowed to do. She takes advantage of their

mandated paralysis and teases them, which gives her some power over these men because they

are consumed with sexual desire and longing that they cannot satiate through her body. At first,

she reports that swaying her hips makes her feel ashamed, but she quickly discards this idea,

which indicates that she is capable of her own thought and embraces the sensual transgression

even though it does not result in escape. Conversely, Shirley Neuman argues that Offred's

"sexual teasing of the Guardians at the checkpoint" is "a small exercise of power, however

ignoble," which suggests that Offred's sassy hip sway is not a substantive demonstration of

resistance or agency (863). While this act does not gain Offred any substantive power, I still

maintain that she has control over her sexuality and body that she is otherwise denied in this

moment, which is important because agency does not need to be incumbent upon success or

escape. Even though her power is nonactive, it is still a display of agency because Offred

chooses to flaunt her female sexuality that a man who watches cannot have. This is a crucial

moment because embracing her sexuality allows her to reclaim a small part of her subjectivity

and even encourages her to keep surviving in this oppressive regime.

Since Lilith and Offred cannot physically escape the places that confine them, they are

goaded into finding other ways to resist gender-based oppression. In *Dawn*, Lilith cannot escape

the Oankali ship, so she uses her voice to push back against the Oankali's oppressive behavior.

One day Lilith decides to resist by venturing far from the area of the ship that she is familiar with

to have some time away from the Oankali/ooloi, but she ends up getting lost. When

Kahguyaht—a member of her adopted Oankali/ooloi family— appears to aid her, he is

condescending, rude, and cuts Lilith off when she tries to speak. Rather than complying and

submitting to his admonishment of her behavior, she vehemently refuses to remain silent,

insisting, "We're an adaptable species,' she said, refusing to be stopped, 'but it's wrong to inflict

suffering just because your victim can endure it'" (Butler 68). At this moment, she chooses to

inform Kahguyaht that their behavior is cruel to the humans; by refusing to let this moment pass

by and allowing the Oankali to believe that their behavior is justified, Lilith actively protests

Kahguyaht's words and behavior. Even though speaking out does not grant her freedom from the

Oankali/ooloi, she is able to use her inferior position to educate Kahguyaht. After this moment,

Lilith does comply by following him back to their abode, but it is clear that she refuses to be

completely complicit with her position on the ship by occasionally doing what the Oankali/ooloi

want, *while* she constantly quarrels with them.

Like Lilith, Offred uses her voice to resist as well in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Falk Jones

discusses how in feminist dystopian texts, "women are objectified and oppressed; the dominant

metaphor is that of silence," but women "have begun to break silences, to find their individual

and collective voices" (7). This suggests that female subjugation functions through the silencing

of women, which purloins their ability to express themselves and their individuality. To reclaim

this, and break silences, Falk Jones implies that they "must capitalize on their otherness," which

means that they have to leverage their othered or marginalized position and "make herself

present" (8). While I agree with Falk Jones, she tends to discuss Offred's narrative in

retrospective terms, or as a document that "has been preserved some two hundred years past the

time of the story," which makes it difficult to track and examine the nuanced moments of

agency, and especially, how Offred uses her voice in different moments throughout the narrative

(10). Instead, I argue that Offred uses her voice to resist, but in order to reach that point, she

must comply with what the Commander wants in order to use her voice to resist. After the

Commander and Offred have started their side relationship without Serena Joy's knowledge, the

Commander seems to develop a twisted longing for Offred in a different capacity than he has her

in during the ceremony. During a particular ceremony, "he reached his hand up as if to touch

[her] face," which is not only forbidden, but also extremely dangerous and incautious because

Serena Joy is present (Atwood 162). When Offred complies by agreeing to meet the Commander

in his office later that night, she chooses to address his illicit behavior when she gets there by

telling him, "Don't do that again" (Atwood 162). Her pugnacious demeanor and statement sparks

a larger conversation with the Commander:

> 'I'm sorry,' he said. I didn't mean to. But I find it…
>
> 'What?' I said, when he didn't go on.
>
> 'Impersonal,' he said.
>
> 'How long did it take you to find that out?' I said. You can see from the way I was
>
> speaking to him that we were already on different terms. (Atwood 162)

In this conversation, readers discover that the Commander wanted to touch Offred's face because

he longs for her in a sexual way that is not so clinical or ceremonial. Of course, she chose to

deny him in the moment not just because it is a breach of protocol, but also because intimate

touches will get her in serious trouble. In this moment, Offred uses her voice to protect herself,

which emphasizes that she is not complicit with whatever the Commander wants to do, and as

such, is an active agent because consciously chooses to admonish him to ensure her own safety.

In addition, when the Commander expresses his discontent with how the ceremony operates,

Offred uses his desire for her, and his complaints about a system that he helped build, against

him with sarcasm and a rhetorical question that draws attention to the heart of inequity within this theocracy that benefits men at the expense of women. After she draws attention to his hypocrisy, the Commander does not respond, which indicates that Offred has made him silent *while* she speaks. However, to reach this point, Offred had to comply by agreeing to be in this illicit relationship with the Commander in order to resist by refusing to comfort him or assuage his doubts about the Republic of Gilead. In other words, Offred could have let the Commander get away with his illicit behavior, but she did not, which is why speaking out is a form of nuanced agency, especially since it empowered Offred to be her own advocate in a patriarchal world that usually denies her that right.

While there are many similarities between *Dawn* and *The Handmaid's Tale* in terms of the subtle ways that Lilith and Offred exercise agency against gender-based oppression, there are also some unique representations of agency that each author explores as well, which suggests that agency is also specific to each individual woman in the dystopia she is living in. For example, in *Dawn*, Lilith demonstrates agency by choosing to show humanity toward Nikanj when it[18] is going through its metamorphosis. Prior to metamorphosis, Nikanj modifies Lilith's body with her begrudged consent— "Wake up and do whatever it is you claim you have to do. Get it over with"— which allows her to open the walls of her abode (Butler 76). Even though she did not want her body to be modified, she realizes that complying with the modification allows her to leave the Oankali/ooloi abode whenever she chooses. Since she can leave whenever she wants, she can also choose not to tell anyone when she leaves, which allows her to decide when and where she explores the ship on her own terms. As she watches Nikanj begin its metamorphosis, Lilith is "angry, bitter, and frightened," but when she sees Nikanj struggling, she

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[18] Nikanj does not have a male or female gender; instead, it is considered to be neuter or neutral, constantly referred to as 'it' throughout *Dawn*, as well as the other books in the series, *Adulthood Rites* and *Imago*.

makes the conscious decision to "come back. She had not been able to leave Nikanj trembling in

its bed while she enjoyed her greater freedom" (Butler 102). Lilith put her own reservations and

desires aside to tend to the ooloi that needed her even when she was not asked to stay and tend to

it; in other words, she chooses to do this on her own, which allows her to maintain a sense of

humanity that she desperately wants to protect and preserve because it is an integral part of her

identity and subjectivity. The Oankali/ooloi immediately recognize and even respect Lilith for

this choice that she made entirely on her own; they seem to realize that she could have left

Nikanj to suffer alone, which is why they reward her with pens and books, something that she

was previously told was contraband. Through this entire interaction, Lilith learns early on in the

novel that if she complies with what the Oankali/ooloi want her to, she is actually awarded more

freedom and privileges. Miller points out that "Even Lilith, whom the Oankali think they have

one over, is secretly in sympathy with the rebels" (341). Even though complying with the

Oankali/ooloi maintains an inequitable power dynamic between them, these early experiences

are the impetus for Lilith's resistance strategy she shares with other humans later in the novel:

comply to resist.

        After Lilith begrudgingly integrates into Oankali/ooloi society, she is tasked with the

responsibility of Awakening more humans and integrating them into the Oankali/ooloi way of

life on the ship. Since she is required to do this, and cannot refuse or decline the position, Lilith

consciously decides that she will leverage her complicit position to resist:

        There was no escape from the ship. None at all. The Oankali controlled the ship with

        their own body chemistry. There were no controls that could be memorized or subverted.

        Even the shuttles that traveled between the Earth and the ship were like extensions of the

        Oankali bodies. No human could do anything aboard the ship except make trouble and be

put back into suspended animation—or be killed. Therefore, the only hope was Earth.

Once they were on Earth […] they would at least have a chance. That meant they must

control themselves, learn all she could teach them, all the Oankali could teach them, then

use what they had learned to escape and keep themselves alive. (Butler 117-118)

Through her experiences with the Oankali/ooloi, Lilith has learned that the concept of holistic

escape and obvious rebellion are impossible on the ship because the humans cannot manipulate

Oankali/ooloi biology or physically overpower them to take command of the ship. She also has

witnessed how threatening behavior will result in being drugged or returned to suspended

animation, which means that the person will sleep forever and not get another chance at survival

and resistance. Relying and reflecting on her own experience and knowledge she has gleaned

from living with the Oankali/ooloi, Lilith concludes that the only way to escape the

Oankali/ooloi is to play their game and lull them into a false sense of security until they return to

Earth, which means that they must comply in order to resist at a later date. Lilith understands that

the humans must be patient and learn all that they can in order to survive on the changed Earth's

surface in the Amazonian basin before they make their escape. Through complying with the

Oankali now, and then resisting on the surface of Earth later, Lilith knows that the humans have

a better chance at attaining their ultimate goal of escape.

Similarly, Gilead is equally as confined and threatening as the Oankali/ooloi ship, which

makes overt resistant behavior impossible for Offred. Unlike Lilith, Offred does not exercise

agency through learning, but through contrasting interpretations of the world, self-composition,

and memory, which critics posit are some of Offred's most notable subversive acts. Debrah

Raschke argues that "Offred's way of reading and interpreting stands in direct contrast to the

Gilead mode of representation," and more specifically, she "reads metonymically, focusing on

the slippage and the gaps, thus exposing weaknesses in the Gilead regime" (264). The way she understands the world is very different than how the government wants it to be understood, which means that Offred brings nuance to a world that has tried to erase it, and as such, a difference in perception can be understood as a subversive act. Furthermore, Raschke argues that the presence of "reconstruction [...] allows Offred to challenge" and "resist the negative representations imposed on her" (266). Through recreating and recounting her experiences, Offred can offer counter-depictions and representations that challenge the power dynamics of her reality, such as reducing the Commander, who has all the power in Gilead, to a "Midwestern bank clerk," which renders him unimportant and insignificant (266). In contrast, Hilde Staels points out that "personal discourse [in Gilead] is disallowed because it is considered too dangerous," which means that anything personal or individual, like a handmaid's name, is rendered illegal and systematically erased. Thus, to push back against this, Offred does everything she can in order to make herself a subject, such as "speak[ing] her own name" (Staels 459). By constantly (re)connecting with and reconstructing her past, Offred is able to survive because she has the ability to "liberate herself from the trap of 'here and now'" (Staels 459) and ultimately remind herself that she is not an object that exists for the Gileadean government, but a subject who had a husband, a daughter, an education, a job, hobbies, and countless memories and experiences.

While I absolutely agree with Raschke and Staels that Offred exercises agency through contrasting interpretations of the world, self-composition, and memory, Offred's penchant for narrative is also a subtle and nuanced form of agency. Building on Staels' argument that remembering and reconstructing her past memories allow Offred to transport herself to another time and place, I also argue that Offred exercises agency through constructing the narratives of

others, specifically, her friend Moira's transgressive stories, because it imbues Offred with hope and fuels her choice to keep surviving. When Offred is at the club, Jezebels, with the Commander on an illicit visit, she spots her friend Moira, and they meet up in the bathroom to swap stories. When Offred tells Moira, "'Tell me everything,'" Moira says in return, "'What's the point?'" but then, Offred reports, "But she knows there is a point, so she does" (Atwood 243). This exchange demonstrates that women are not only separated from each other, but that telling stories and sharing experiences *seems* worthless because it does not allow them to overthrow the government and escape. However, it is important because it gives voice to their experiences with gender-based oppression, as well as how they try to resist it, which disallows the injustice they experience to go unspoken, unrecognized, and ultimately undocumented. Since *The Handmaid's Tale* is Offred's narrative, she reports that the story she is about to relay is Moira's and that she "can't remember exactly, because [she] had no way of writing it down" and that Moira told her this "in two sessions" (Atwood 243). She recounts the story as best she can from her memory because she wants to do the story justice, which is reflected in Offred's decision to "make it sound as much like [Moira]" as she can (Atwood 244). The narrative Offred constructs about Moira is the opposite of Offred's narrative: it is aggressive and exceedingly clever because Moira dressed up as an Aunt and found some compassionate Quakers to aid her attempted escape. Even though she was not successful in her escape, the narrative Offred chooses to tell is centered around resistance and resilience, which seems to give her hope and a reason to keep surviving. At the end of the recounting, Offred notes:

Here is what I'd like to tell. I'd like to tell a story about how Moira escaped, for good this time. Or if I couldn't tell that, I'd like to say she blew up Jezebel's, with fifty Commanders inside it. I'd like her to end with something daring and spectacular, some

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outrage, something that would befit her. But as far as I know that didn't happen. I don't

know how she ended, or even if she did, because I never saw her again. (Atwood 250)

Offred cannot weave a narrative of victory and destruction of corrupt patriarchal power because

she does not know if it happened or not; however, in between the lines, it is implied that even if

these brave feats are not possible, or even remotely true, it still brings Offred some solace and

comfort to entertain the possibility that Moira escaped or caused irreparable damage to the

Gileadean government. Crafting Moira's narrative inspires Offred to make an even greater, more

important point, which is that it is crucial for women to resist in the ways and means that they

can because there is no correct way for a woman to choose to resist. For Offred, dressing up as

an Aunt and actively trying to escape was not possible for her, but it was for Moira; therefore,

Offred relies on other ways to resist, such as choosing to gain strength from memory,

interpreting the world differently, and through fabricating narratives about other strong women

to help her maintain her sense of self. By doing so, Offred refuses to disappear and become a

completely complicit object with the Republic of Gilead.

The narratives of *Dawn* and *The Handmaid's Tale* are constructed in a way that creates

space for a simultaneous narrative of complicity and resistance, which demonstrates that agency

is more complicated than a binary. Throughout these novels, the protagonists are in various

situations that require them to comply in order to resist because open and obvious rebellion is not

possible. This juxtaposition of Butler's and Atwood's texts seem to suggest that a woman who is

severely confined like Lilith and Offred, can still exercise agency by choosing not to accept or

condone what is happening to them. When agency is understood as more fluid and contextual,

rather than a binary, resistance and agency becomes capacious and nuanced, which is crucial for

female readership because there is no correct way to exercise agency.

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Reproductive Control and Sexual Pleasure as Resistance

While *Dawn* and *The Handmaid's Tale* both share Subversive Narrative Structures, which feature female characters who comply with gender-based oppression in order to resist, they also share a predominant female-centered concern: patriarchal control of reproduction. Simone de Beauvoir, as discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, argues in her book, *The Second Sex*, that humanity often reduces and limits women to their biological function, which is to produce children. In *Dawn* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, the narratives are permeated with not only the fear of coerced reproduction, but also with the specific patriarchal mechanisms, such as the belief that it is a woman's biological duty to produce children, which is reinforced with propaganda and scare tactics.

In *Dawn*, when Lilith is Awakened, she immediately tells Jdahya, "I want to know the price of your people's help. What do you want of us?" (Butler 14). Already, Lilith knows that the act of saving the human race from collective suicide must have a hidden cost, but Jdahya keeps that a secret; however, several pages later, after Lilith has left her chamber and is forced to integrate into the Oankali/ooloi society, he tells her that the Oankali/ooloi are "gene traders" (Butler 39). Jdahya explains that his species "acquire new life—seek it, investigate it, manipulate it, sort it, use it," which means that when they discover a new species, like they did with the humans, they colonize them and utilize the new DNA by adding it to their own (Butler 39). When Lilith asks again, "Do you have all you want from us?" Jdahya claims, "You know it isn't," and then proceeds to explain that there will be a mandatory "crossbreeding" between the humans and Oankali: "the ooloi will make changes in your reproductive cells before conception and they'll control conception," which means that Lilith—because she is a woman—is forced to use her reproductive capacity to serve the Oankali/ooloi and give birth to a new species of

human-Oankali/ooloi children (Butler 40). Thoroughly repulsed by this prospect, Lilith replies,

"if this is what they found me for, I wish they'd left me," which suggests that she does not want

to be reduced to a reproductive vessel, especially without her consent (Butler 41). Despite the

bleak future that awaits her as a reproductive vessel for the Oankali/ooloi, Lilith still chooses to

resist by becoming the spokesperson for human women to draw attention to the injustice of being

forced to reproduce against her will, especially after Jdahya explains to her, "Your people will

change. Your young will be more like us and ours like you […] [t]he ooloi will make changes in

your reproductive cells before conception and they'll control conception," and in response, Lilith

says, "No […] No. I don't care […] Just let us go" (Butler 38). Jdahya makes it clear that the

humans, especially the women who have to bear the children, do not have a choice: women's

reproduction will be controlled, and they will have human-Oankali/ooloi children. Lilith

vehemently disagrees with the Oankali/ooloi plan to "control conception" and to force human

women to bear children, which she makes clear when she begs for her freedom and refuses to

stop pointing out how unjust their actions are to human women (Butler 38).

Unlike Lilith, who has just found out that she will be used as a reproductive vessel,

Offred is already reduced to a "two-legged womb, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices"

in *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood 136). By referring to her reproductive duty as a "two-legged

womb," it suggests that her only function in society is to try to produce children (Atwood 136).

The image of "vessels" and "chalices" (Atwood 136) evokes what Luce Irigaray discusses in

"The Sex Which is Not One," where she mentions that "the vagina is valued for the 'lodging' it

offers the male organ when the forbidden hand has to find a replacement for pleasure-giving"

(248). She implies that in society, male biology is conceptualized as superior, whereas female

biology is inferior and exists for male pleasure; the female genitalia is, essentially, a space for the

man to fill, which suggests that Offred is empty and exists purely for producing children. This notion is reinforced and propagated at the Red Center, a facility that trains and ultimately attempts to indoctrinate handmaids. During the pre-ceremony where scripture is read, these teachings are reinforced: "It's the usual story, the usual stories. God to Adam, God to Noah. *Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth.* Then comes the moldy old Rachel and Leah stuff we had drummed into us at the Center. *Give me children, or else I die*" (Atwood 88). Offred has heard this scripture and these specific stories many times, which are intentionally chosen and designed to tell her that her purpose in life is to be to bear and populate the world with children; for a woman to be barren, or to not fulfill her purpose as a vessel for life, is the equivalent of death. Not only do Aunt Lydia's lessons in scripture reinforce that the women exist purely for reproduction, but the orchestrated psychological torture also tries to control how the women see themselves sexually. Offred recalls one moment, in particular, at the Red Center when Janine, a fellow handmaid, shared "how she was gang-raped at fourteen and had an abortion," and the rest of the handmaids were forced to condemn Janine for her 'sinful' behavior, which involved an Aunt asking, "But *whose* fault was it? […] *Who* led them on? […] Why did God allow such a terrible thing to happen?" and the handmaids must reply, "*Her* fault, *her* fault, *her* fault […] *She* did. *She* did. *She* did […] Teach her a *lesson*. Teach her a *lesson*. Teach her a *lesson*" (Atwood 72). It is clear that the Aunts are using psychological torture to limit women's subjectivity.

While Lilith and Offred are reduced to reproductive capacities, they are able to resist this object position and exercise agency through their own desire and sexual pleasure. Discussion of sex for women in dystopian texts predominantly indicates that it is a mechanism of escape rather than agency. For example, when discussing sexual pleasure as liberation, Weiss draws upon Julia in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and argues that "Julia is anything but a revolutionary;

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she only cares about the personal and immediate" (131). He believes that sex and sexual pleasure for Julia is not an act that garners her agency because she uses sex for personal fulfillment, rather than to change the world or confront the government, implying that sex is an escape or distraction from her oppression. Likewise, in another analysis of Julia, Sargent and Sargisson argue that "Winston Smith wants Julia, whom he describes as a 'rebel only from the waist downward,' because Julia enjoys sex and, with her, so does Winston" (305). This also suggests that Julia is a sexual deviant who uses sex to give herself the illusion that she is rebelling, which does not result in anything more. They conclude that "sex can take us a long way, but it cannot get us where we want to go," and as such, sex is not a means to becoming an active agent because it does not make a difference in challenging society (Sargent and Sargisson 316).

However, I would argue that in a feminist dystopian text, which Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is not, it is an incredibly feminist and empowering notion when female protagonists seek out sexual pleasure and assert their sexuality, which liberates them emotionally and even physically from the reproductive function they are being asked to perform. While sexual pleasure and sexuality does not enable these women to escape from the dystopian regimes that oppress them, I argue that it provides them with an emotional and physical catharsis from the oppression and subjugation they experience, which empowers them to survive gender-based oppression, reclaim their sexuality and subvert the patriarchal expectation that they only exist for reproduction. For example, in *Dawn*, Lilith engages in "interspecies sex," which "goes beyond the traditional notions of sex and gender" and literally allows her to experience the limitations of human sex (150 Nayar). The physical aspect of posthuman sex "requires a male, a female and a neuter partner [and] involves the penetration of both male and female by the neuter ooloi" (151 Nayar), while the sexual pleasure is contained within the human male's and female's minds.

Nikanj explains to Lilith, "You had your own experiences and [Joseph's]. He had his and yours

[…] It was a neurosensory illusion [where each person] remembers or create experience to suit

the sensations" (Butler 160 and 166). Posthuman sex is selfless and equal because all partners

provide the same number of sexual memories and experience the same amount of pleasure. She

even says to Joseph, who is her partner and skeptical of posthuman sex, she "liked it" and

"refus[ed] to defend herself" against this choice, which means that she not only revels in this

sexual pleasure but refuses to apologize for enjoying it (Butler 170). This allows Lilith to extend

beyond the perfunctory reproductive role that she must play.

Offred, like Lilith, also utilizes sexual pleasure to extend beyond the mandated

reproductive role she must fulfill by continuing her sexual relationship and emotional affair with

the Commander's servant, Nick. After Serena Joy prompts Offred to have sex with Nick to

increase her chances of conceiving a child, Offred explains, "I went back to Nick. Time after

time, on my own, without Serena knowing. It wasn't called for, there was no excuse. I did not do

it for him, but for myself entirely. I didn't even think of it as giving myself to him […] I did not

feel munificent, but thankful" (Atwood 268). As an act of defiance and resistance, Offred visits

Nick again and again to have sex without the permission or knowledge of Serena Joy; this

decision to have passionate and consensual sex is a choice she makes entirely on her own and for

her own sexual pleasure. Offred is very explicit about not feeling like an object or a gift in this

sexual exchange, but thankful that she can choose to have consensual sex, which makes her feel

like a person and "feel more in control" (Atwood 269). This directly defies her duty and role as a

handmaid because she is only supposed to have sex with the Commander and strictly for the

purpose of producing a child. When discussing this illicit relationship during a roundtable

discussion at the Université de Rouen, Atwood mentions, "if the regime forbids love affairs, the

none of the most rebellious things that you can do is *have* one," which suggests that by having sex with Nick when she is not supposed to, Offred is trying to extend beyond her role as just a reproductive vessel (qtd in Weiss, 122-123).

Diverging Subversive Narrative Function

In the last two sections, I examined how Lilith and Offred comply with their oppressors in order to resist, along with ways that they can exercise agency and experience autonomy through sex, sexuality, and sexual pleasure. In this section, I will discuss how the subversive structures of these novels have an additional layer of subversion that is entirely unique and individualized to each specific author. In *Dawn*, Butler sets out to critique the inequitable way that the Oankali/ooloi try to establish a diverse community, while in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood sets out to critique the moments when Offred does not resist enough and lapses into complicity with her oppressors. For both novels, critics usually mention that the Oankali/ooloi are benevolent dictators, but they do not go into detail of what Butler is doing, or trying to say, about such a community, while critics usually mention that Offred's lapse into complicity demonstrates her failure as a woman and a feminist, they do not address the moments when Offred is critical of herself and what that implies. Thus, in contrast, I argue that the authors are not only highly aware that they created these complex and problematic moments, but also do so intentionally, especially since the purpose of dystopia, as Baccolini and Moyland argue in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, is to warn readers about not making those mistakes in the real world. In order to warn readers, it stands to reason that Lilith and Offred *need* to make the mistakes that the authors are warning against to convince the reader not to follow the same path.

Butler: Intersectional Critique

When discussing the complexity of the Oankali/ooloi as a community, Jim Miller suggests that "Butler's aliens are both colonizers and a utopian collective" (340). Both species, or races of beings, are contradictory: the aliens are benevolent because they live a peaceful life and they protect the humans and do not do them physical harm, but they do great harm to the humans psychologically because they do not let them make many choices. He goes on to discuss how the "Oankali are healing saviors and masters of the humans [...] they are both generous and condescending, admiring and dismissive," which further suggests that the Oankali/ooloi are complicated and contradictory, and as such, are responsible for creating the inequitable power dynamic between the Oankali/ooloi and the humans (340). Miller argues a similar point about the human characters in *Dawn*: they are also "admirable survivors and ugly xenophobes," which means the humans are dedicated to their survival and are not easily deterred, but they are also unwilling to listen and are married to their prejudice (340). As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Butler is committed to the idea of intersectional critique, as well as the idea of difference, throughout her work. Miller suggests that in *Dawn*, "there are no bad guys in the *Xenogenesis* trilogy only bad ways of thinking" (343). His point is that neither the Oankali/ooloi, nor the humans, are the villains in this narrative because both have things that are problematic about them, which is evident in the ways that they think and operate. Building on this notion, I argue that Butler creates two groups of beings that are problematic in nature to critique the ways *not* to incorporate difference and hybridity into society; in turn, Butler prompts readers to consider how the moments of education and communication is how a more utopian community can be established. There are moments throughout *Dawn* where both Lilith and various Oankali/ooloi educate and inform each other about the other's culture, which emphasizes communication and

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highlights the problematic nature of coercion and closed-minded thinking.

At the very beginning of *Dawn*, when Lilith is trapped in the cage with Jdahya, she tries to adjust to the idea of living with and amongst aliens, but when "She tried to imagine herself surrounded by beings like him," she "was almost overwhelmed by panic. As though she had suddenly developed a phobia—something she had never before experienced. But what she felt was like what she had heard others describe. A true *xenophobia*—and apparently she was not alone in it" (Butler 22). Lilith's reaction to living amongst aliens is terrifying to her because it is unlike anything she has ever known, but instead of saying that she was terrified, Lilith identifies her reaction to the aliens as a "phobia," an irrational fear, at their undeniable difference, which she realizes does not make any sense when they have done nothing to physically hurt her.[19] Of course, as Miller notes above, Lilith does have the right to be afraid—as many critics note, everyone would react with horror at first—but, Butler makes it clear that Lilith is persistently terrified by their social structure, rather than by their appearance and stark physical difference from humans. When Lilith says, "God, I'm so tired of this […] Why can't I stop it?" Jdahya responds with a story, "when [a human] first came to our household […] some of my family found her so disturbing that they left home for a while," but eventually, with time, "all my relatives came home" (Butler 24-25). This interaction is important because it demonstrates Lilith's desire to not fear difference, but the Oankali response also demonstrates that fearing what is different is a natural response; however, it can be overcome because it is not rational and perpetuates prejudice. As Miller suggests above, it is not the Oankali or the humans that are evil, but the problematic ideologies that govern them and create their problematic and oppressive

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[19] Lilith is locked up against her will, but it is repeated throughout the novel that the Oankali/ooloi are incapable of harming the humans because they need them for their genetic trading. While it is cruel to put her in a cage and to keep her against her will, the Oankali/ooloi are more psychologically cruel than physically cruel; they will not harm the humans because physical violence is not a part of their genetic code.

social structure. This particular interaction between Lilith and Jdahya subverts the idea that difference should be equated it with danger.

However, what *is* dangerous is the way that the Oankali/ooloi social structure, as Miller indicates, colonizes and oppresses the humans. To resist this notion, Lilith is constantly trying to educate the Oankali/ooloi about humans and problematize the way in which the community of Oankali/ooloi operate. When Lilith meets Paul Titus, a man who is living with and amongst the Oankali/ooloi, he tries to seduce Lilith, but when she refuses his advances, he tries to force himself on her, and when she still refuses, he brutally beats her. When Lilith Awakens[20] from this attack, she wants to know the extent of her injuries, and Nikanj says, "Did you really need to know, Lilith?" and she replies, "'Yes' […] It concerned me. I needed to know," and he then says, "I will remember that" (Butler 98). After this exchange, Lilith "felt as though she had communicated something important. Finally" (Butler 98). This exchange, as well as how Lilith felt about it afterward, demonstrates how important it is to Lilith that humans are not kept in the dark when it comes to choices and information about their bodies. Since Nikanj claims that he will remember this preference, Lilith has made a breakthrough with him. While Lilith educates the Oankali/ooloi, she also eventually tries to educate her fellow humans about more sustainable forms of resistance, such as complying in order to resist. She explains, "If we endure this place, behave as though it's a ship no matter what anyone thinks individually, we can survive here until we're sent to Earth" (Butler 143). By outwardly resisting, as many of the humans Lilith Awakened did, the humans get nowhere because they are perceived by the Oankali/ooloi as too dangerous, and as such, are always returned to suspended animation. Lilith tries to unite the humans, no matter what their individual beliefs are about their situation, in order to get what they

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[20] Butler capitalizes "Awakening" and "Awakens" throughout *Dawn*.

all want: freedom. Through encouraging a different type of resistance that is non-violent, Butler—through Lilith—demonstrates that violence is not a viable option for agency. There is a clear message embedded within *Dawn* about proper ways to express discontent with the social structure, and choosing mindless violence is not one of them.

It is important to remember that *Dawn* is not a standalone novel, but is, in fact, the first book in a trilogy, followed by *Adulthood Rites* (1988), which mostly centers on Lilith's son, Akin, and *Imago* (1989), which focuses on Lilith's neuter son, Jodahs. While the sequels to *Dawn* do not focus entirely on Lilith, but on her male and gender-neutral children, Butler does not abandon Lilith's character; instead, there are intermittent moments where Lilith appears, which continues to add to the reader's understanding of how she exercises agency by complying in order to resist. In *Adulthood Rites*, Lilith is speaking to a man, Tino, who considers joining Lilith in a human-Oankali/ooloi homestead, referred to as Lo, who asks her about Akin, her son. Through the following conversation with Tino, it is clear that Lilith's agency is still challenged by the Oankali/ooloi in some ways, but she also still has agency in other subtle ways:

> […] 'what's he going to be like as an adult?' Tino asked.
>
> 'If Akin is like [the Oankali], he'll be bright enough, but his interests will be so diverse […] and un-human that he'll wind up keeping to himself a lot.'
>
> 'Doesn't that bother you?' [Tino asked].
>
> 'There's nothing I can do about it.' [Lilith replied].
>
> 'But… you didn't have to have kids.'
>
> 'As it happens, I did have to. I had two construct kids by the time they brought me down from the ship. I never had chance to run off and pine for the good old days.' (Butler 24-25)

She speaks about her son's inherent brilliance, but also that his hobbies, proclivities, and behaviors might make him an outcast because they are not what humans like to do or how they act. Tino, who spent many years as a resister of the Oankali/ooloi, seems astonished that Lilith accepts that her son might be an outcast and is curious as to why that prospect does not upset her. Lilith is not bothered that Akin might be an outcast because she has learned to accept that she has no control over the situation; in other words, Lilith chooses not to force Akin to act more or less human, and as such, allows him to choose how he wants to be. Tino, who clearly does not agree, questions why Lilith even decided to have children in the first place; from his perspective, he sees reproduction as a conscious choice that Lilith made, which is why he uses the phrase "have to have" (Butler 24). In using this specific phrasing, Tino suggests that Lilith could have decided not to have kids, but as she points out, having children was not only out of her control, but she was also not even a part of deciding whether or not she wanted them. In other words, she was denied the choice and robbed of agency, which she makes clear by using the phrase "as it happens" to demonstrate that having children did just happen to her without her consent (Butler 24). Lilith further explains what she means a few lines later: "one of [the ooloi] surprised me," referencing the moment in *Dawn* when Nikanj explains that he impregnated her without her knowledge or consent (Butler 25).[21] While Lilith was forced to have children, she seems to have

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[21] In *Adulthood Rites*, it is revealed that Lilith *unconsciously* did want children, but she never vocalized it to Nikanj or any of the Oankali. When Tino asks her, "They forced you to have kids?", Lilith replies, "One of them surprised me […] It made me pregnant, then told me about it. Said it was giving me what I wanted but would never come out and ask for" (Butler 25). Nikanj seems to intuit that Lilith wanted children, but would never ask an ooloi to impregnate her, which is why it went ahead and impregnated her and then told her about it. After Lilith reveals this, Tino asks, "Was it?" and Lilith replies, "Yes […] Oh, yes. But if I had the strength not to ask, it should have had the strength to let me alone" (Butler 25). Lilith admits that she did want children, but it is implied that she was not even aware that she did want children, nor would she have ever asked the Oankali/ooloi outright for them to make her pregnant. In Lilith's view, Nikanj should have left her alone and not violated her body. If she did not ask to become pregnant, it should have been respectful and waited for her verbal consent.

Later, in the novel, Tino brings up this subject again directly to Nikanj, and asks, "Did you make her pregnant against her will?" and Nikanj replies, "Against part of her will, yes […] She wanted a child with Joseph, but he was dead" (Butler 50). Nikanj admits that it did impregnate Lilith without her knowledge or consent, which was against her will and took away her agency because she was not a part of the decision to have a child. Nikanj, an

chosen to be a mother to them, which is why she chose not to "run off" and finally escape (Butler 25). Even though she chooses not to escape the Oankali/ooloi, she makes a significant choice in the rearing of Akin, which irrevocably influences him to be more empathetic to the humans.

Since Lilith chose to sacrifice her own freedom by staying with the Oankali/ooloi, it allowed her to influence her children's lives, which was a choice that contributed to the movement Akin started for human rights. This movement builds in *Adulthood Rites*, and actually comes into fruition in *Imago*, allowing the humans to choose what was previously denied to them: to remain with the Oankali/ooloi or leave for Mars to start over on a purely human planet with the ability to reproduce intact. Akin, the first male construct child born to Lilith, becomes an advocate to the humans because of a choice his mother made. At the end of *Dawn*, the group of humans that Lilith Awakened return to the surface of Earth and immediately start resisting the Oankali/ooloi; eventually, they separated and begin their own homestead, which they call Phoenix, but the Oankali/ooloi made them infertile before they left, so the humans are desperate for children. The resisters are known for stealing construct children who appear human on the outside and attempt to raise them as human. Akin, against Lilith's will, is actually kidnapped and brought to Phoenix, where he learns a great deal about the humans. Through his experiences there, along with the relationship he builds with another human woman, Tate, Akin becomes empathetic toward the humans and their plight. At one point, Akin wonders:

> Who amongst the Oankali was speaking for the interests of resister Humans? Who had
>
> seriously considered that it might not be enough to let Humans choose either union with

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ooloi and a creature that draws on hidden and deeply buried desires, sees within Lilith the desire to have a child with Joseph, her mate who is killed in *Dawn*; since it harvested some of Joseph's sperm, it impregnates Lilith with it in hopes that it has fulfilled a desire Lilith did not even know she had. Even if Lilith did harbor a hidden and unconscious desire to have children with her deceased partner, it is heavily implied that Nikanj should not have violated Lilith without her verbal consent.

the Oankali or sterile lives free of the Oankali? Trade-village Humans said it, but they were so flawed, so genetically contradictory that they were often not listened to […] He was Oankali enough to be listened to by other Oankali and Human enough to know that resist Humans were being treated with cruelty and condescension […] These resisters had to help him learn more. (Butler 159)

This moment is crucial because Akin, a construct child, part-human and part-Oankali/ooloi, is able to see the failings of humans *and* Oankali/ooloi, but particularly in the ways that the Oankali/ooloi have benevolently oppressed the humans. Through spending time with the resisters, Akin has the wherewithal to notice that the Oankali/ooloi were not recognizing, considering, or even trying to empathize and understand the needs of the humans. Akin, pushing back against the notion that the Oankali/ooloi know what is best for the humans, realizes that saving the humans from themselves and their contradictory behavior is not in their best interest after all.[22] Since the humans are genetically flawed, the Oankali/ooloi believe that any arguments or protestations against the way society operates are invalid or ignored altogether because the humans are deemed genetically inferior. Akin realizes that his subject position as a construct child allows him to see the ongoing struggle between the humans and Oankali/ooloi in a way that both groups who are wholly human or Oankali/ooloi cannot, which is why he can empathize with humans and recognize that they are actually oppressed by the benevolent Oankali/ooloi. While it seems like a questionable choice on Lilith's behalf to not rescue her child from the resisters who are deemed dangerous by the Oankali/ooloi, her decision to allow Akin to spend time with

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[22] In *Dawn*, Jdahya explained to Lilith that the Oankali/ooloi intervened in the lives of humans because they believe that humans have "a mismatched pair of genetic characteristics," which are "intelligence" and "hierarchical" behavior (Butler 36 and 37). He also explains that, "Either along would have been useful, would have aided the survival of [the] human species. But the two together are lethal. It was only a matter of time before they destroyed [the humans]" (Butler 36). The Oankali/ooloi believe that the humans' self-destruction was inevitable because they are intelligent, but hierarchical creatures, which lends itself to inherent destruction; alone, intelligence or hierarchical behavior is not a problem, but when paired together, the combination is devastating.

humans, as the above passage demonstrates, indelibly influences and empowers him to become an advocate for the humans and a liaison between both species to broker a more equitable future. Even though Lilith is not the one to free her fellow humans, her decision to allow Akin to spend time with humans, which helped him learn why the humans resisted and felt oppressed, empowered her son to do what neither a wholly human being, nor pure Oankali/ooloi, could do: free the humans.

In *Imago*, the final book of the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, the humans are finally leaving to start a new life and colonize Mars with their fertility intact, which means that they can live apart from the Oankali/ooloi, have purely human children, and live on their own terms. Even though *Imago* is not written from Lilith's perspective, the reader learns from Jodahs, Lilith's gender neutral or ooloi construct child, that Lilith has achieved what she always wanted for the humans: to do whatever it takes to get the humans out from underneath the control and constant manipulation of the Oankali/ooloi. Jodahs explains, "[Lilith] had never been a resister. She had been placed with Nikanj when it was about my[23] age. She did not understand at the time what that meant, and no one told her. Nikanj said she did not stop trying to break away until one of my brothers convinced the people to allow resisting Humans to settle on Mars," which suggests that Lilith had never belonged to the group of organized human resisters, who often resisted in open ways to no avail, but it does not mean that she did not resist in other ways as I have demonstrated throughout this chapter (Butler 49). Jodahs, referring to his older brother, Akin, who fought for the humans' right to reproduce on their own terms on their own planet, indicates that Lilith never stopped fighting in any way that she could for the humans to have their freedom and the ability to choose what they did with their own bodies. It is only after Akin establishes the Mars colony

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[23] This is the only book in the trilogy that is narrated from the first-person point of view.

that Lilith seems to feel as though she has achieved what she set out to do in *Dawn*—to make conscious decisions, such as sacrificing herself, that led to the freedom of humanity: "If she were lost, others did not have to be. Humanity did not have to be" (Butler 248)—which is why she finally stopped trying to "break away," or resist, because she, with the help of Akin, accomplished her goal: humanity's freedom. Since she has achieved the goal she set out to accomplish, she makes the conscious decision to no longer resist because her own individual freedom was never her ultimate goal. When Jodahs confronts Lilith about her life and all that she has been through, it asks, "You didn't have a choice, did you?" and Lilith replies, "I did, oh, yes. I chose to live" (Butler 177). At this point, the trilogy seems to come full circle: if Lilith did not decide to survive, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, she could not rear her offspring to become more empathetic than the Oankali/ooloi, which would mean that the humans would not have their fertility or Mars. Lilith, once again, demonstrates that her choice to live not only made her an active agent in her own life in subtle and more nuanced ways, but that decision was also the initial impetus for humanity's eventual freedom from the Oankali/ooloi.

Atwood: Critique of Complicity

When considering Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale*, many critics argue that she is a complicit and complacent woman. Weiss argues that Offred chooses to be a victim of the Republic of Gilead because "dystopian heroes are never as helpless as they like to believe; they demonstrated desire for happiness over freedom when confronted with a stark choice," which suggests that she would rather be happy and comfortable than risk pain to fight for her freedom (137). Weiss even goes as far as to argue that Offred is an "unwitting participant" in Gilead's regime: she does not even realize that she does not rebel, nor is she cognizant of her complicity or complacency (137). While I agree that Offred does exhibit complicity and complacency at

times, there are three problems with labeling her character as complicit and complacent: one, previous criticism does not consider the contextual repercussions of traditional resistance, such as disregarding an order or trying to overtake the guards, in an exceedingly violent regime like the Republic of Gilead; two, agency is conflated with success, which skews understanding of Offred's character and how feminist agency operates in a dystopian regime that is severely restrictive; and third, it holds Offred to the impossible standard of being perfect and not having any flaws or making any mistakes. Instead of labeling Offred as a coward or character without agency, it is important to consider the Subversive Narrative Structure of *The Handmaid's Tale* to fully understand what is going on, which is what Neuman starts to do when considering Offred's complex relationship with Nick. Specifically, Neuman contends that Offred's "relapse into willed ignorance partly motivates the shame that so strongly marks her narrative at this point," which means that Offred realizes, through reflecting on her relationship with Nick, that it made her more complicit than she wants to admit and that makes her ashamed (864).

Building on Neuman, I argue that Offred's ability to comment on past actions, with the intent of explaining what was wrong with them, is a subversive act that criticism has not considered when discussing Offred's agency. Throughout *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred not only demonstrates that preserving one's experiences and memories, especially when a woman's previous subjectivity is not valued, is an act of agency, but also how reflecting on and critiquing one's actions can also be a mechanism of circumventing complicity:

I don't want to be telling this story.

I don't have to tell it. I don't have to tell anything, to myself or to anyone else. I could just sit here, peacefully. I could withdraw. It's possible to go so far in, so far down and back, they could never get you out.

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Nolite te bastardes carborundorum. Fat lot of good it did her.

Why fight?

That will never do. (Atwood 225)

Offred knows that she does not have to tell her story at all, especially since the narrative she is telling is not happening in 'real time,' but looking back and reconstructing the events with a more critical eye. This is why Offred also realizes that to not tell her story and all of the ways in which she experiences gender-based oppression means that she would be completely complicit with the Republic of Gilead because they would have silenced her experiences. She realizes that if she just sat in her room "peacefully" and "withdr[ew]," rather than remember her past, she would be completely complicit with the government because she would have lost herself and her subjectivity as a woman.[24] Furthermore, in the above quote, she reflects on the meaning of the Latin phrase written in her closet, which is 'don't let the bastards grind you down,' and pessimistically considers how it did not do the other handmaid before her any good; however, she also realizes that in this kind of oppressive regime, it is impossible to resist through explicit or obvious means, which is why she mentions that kind of resistance "will never do" (225).[25] Instead, Offred is consciously aware that she has to find different ways to resist that are not conflated with success, but ways that help her to preserve her sense of self and hope. In a world that objectifies her, and limits her subjectivity to a "two-legged womb," to refuse to let go of who she was in her previous life is an act of resistance and makes her an active agent because

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[24] Of course, choosing to comply with the Republic of Gilead, which entails abandoning one's subjectivity, and embracing a prescribed subjectivity as a reproductive vessel, is a choice if that is what a woman ultimately decides. However, the way in which Atwood constructs the narrative of *The Handmaid's Tale* makes it clear that for Offred choosing to cling to her subjectivity and to not embrace the identity that the Republic wants her to is a sign of resistance: she does not want to be in this position, but she is, and cannot break out of that role, so she does what she can to resist in her own way: she remembers and clings to her subjectivity.

[25] Resistance is a choice and if a woman chooses to outwardly rebel, it is still a choice, but it is a choice that will not result in continued survival, which is what Offred personally wants -- to survive.

she chooses not to let go of her subjectivity, which is extremely important given the surfeit of propaganda she was subjected to that told her to abandoned her subjectivity (Atwood 136).

After Offred makes it clear that she chooses to remember and reflect in order to preserve her subjectivity, she also makes it clear that she chooses to critique herself for some of her actions. In other words, she actively critiques herself for the moments when she slid too easily into complicit and complacent behavior, rather than make excuses for that behavior, Offred claims:

> I wish this story were different. I wish it were more civilized. I wish it showed me in a better light, if not happier, then at least more active, less hesitant, less distracted by trivia […] Nevertheless it hurts me to tell it over, over again. Once was enough: wasn't once enough for me at the time? But I keep going with this sad and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story, because after all I want you to hear it, as I will hear yours too if I ever get the chance […] so I will go on. I will myself to go on. I am coming to a part you will not like at all, because in it I did not behave well, but I will try nonetheless to leave nothing out. (Atwood 267-268)

This is an extremely important moment because there are no other moments like it in the entire novel where Offred almost pauses her story, zooms out of the narrative she is reconstructing, and takes on the role of a commentator, which allows her to critically critique herself for her complicit mistakes.[26] She is not speaking about all women, but of her particular experiences and making a subtle argument about paying attention to the nefarious mechanisms of gender-based

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[26] This is not to say that by being compliant Offred is a 'bad' woman. Instead, it highlights how easy it is in an oppressive regime that keeps filling her head with propaganda and prescribed subjectivity how easy it can be to lose sight of the cause or to keep resisting. There are other women in this regime, such as Jenene, who have lost their minds because the government is trying to erase who they were and it ends up breaking her psyche, which demonstrates how powerful and corrupt and commanding the Republic of Gilead is and how they affect and maliciously shape women.

oppression that steal away her freedom because not all women that Offred speaks about in her narrative ever slip into compliance.[27] The reader is not only privy to Offred's immense struggle between navigating when to be resistant and when to be compliant, but also where she became too careful and complacent, which demonstrates the immense power a woman can (re)gain by telling her experiences so that other women can learn from them and not repeat the same mistakes. Furthermore, in this passage, Offred notes that some of her actions do not portray her as a traditionally active hero, which is why it is difficult for her to tell the story because it has its unfortunate and uncritical moments; however, she then flips her assessment of herself and suggests that *because* her tale is imperfect, occasionally ugly, and most of all, raw, her readers or listeners still need to hear it because "it includes the truth," which is immensely important in a regime that purports lies as truth (268). Not all narratives and experiences are positive, or portray someone as the hero, but Offred demonstrates that it is still important to tell the entire story and to exercise ownership over her inaction in order to prompt other women to tell and own their truths. The ability to be retrospective does not dismiss her complicity and complacency in this moment, but it does allow her to use it as an example to urge other women not to behave in similar ways.

After taking ownership over some of her problematic behavior, Offred then reveals the part of the story that she is so ashamed of, which is not her relationship with Nick, itself, but how the relationship made her too comfortable and complacent. Neuman argues that Offred's "affair with Nick marks a relapse into willed ignorance," which means that Offred ignores the terrible reality of her circumstances and settles into a routine that makes her complicit (865). She is so swept away with her relationship with Nick that she loses interest in the world around her

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[27] Offred's mother and self-identified feminists are some of these women.

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because "when Offred falls under the spell of her rendezvous with Nick, she no longer wishes to escape and she no longer wants to know from Ofglen what is going on" (Neuman 864). This is evident toward the end of the novel when Ofglen asks Offred to gather information for Mayday, which she could gain access to because of her illicit relationship with the Commander, but she refuses, insisting, "I can't […] I'm too afraid. Anyway I'd be no good at that. I'd get caught" (Atwood 271). She declines and refuses Ofglen's offer because Offred is too terrified of the consequences that might befall her if she is caught. She even convinces herself that she does not have the skill or stamina necessary for a task like Ofglen is asking of her; even when Ofglen explains how they could save and protect her, Offred ignores this and admits the truth: "The fact is that I no longer want to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom. I want to be here, with Nick" (Atwood 271). Offred, as Neuman discusses, really has abandoned hope of escaping the Republic of Gilead because she is too comfortable here with Nick.[28] Although, right after admitting this, Offred—taking on that role of a commentator— offers up a critique of her actions, "Telling this, I'm ashamed of myself" (Atwood 271). By critiquing herself for her complicit behavior, Offred takes charge of her narrative and convinces other women not to do as she did, which means that her relationship with Nick is both a mechanism of resistance *and* momentary complicity (Atwood 271). In this way, Offred demonstrates that it can be exceedingly difficult to comply in order to resist when complying becomes easier than resisting. By not making excuses for her behavior, and instead, using her brief complicity as a means to urge women not to let complacency eclipse the desire to resist, Offred empowers real-world

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[28] Again, it is Offred's choice to stay here with Nick, but based on how Offred discusses her decision makes it seem as though it was the wrong decision because it made her complacent. She then uses that experience to warn women to not make that same mistake.

women to not just allow gender-based oppression to happen to them, but to actively fight it in any way they can, which she vehemently urges in the final moments of the novel:

> I've been wasting my time. I should have taken things into my own hands while I had the chance. I should have stolen a knife from the kitchen, found some way to the sewing scissors. There were the garden shears, the knitting needles: the world is full of weapons if you're looking for them. I should have paid attention. (Atwood 293)

Once again, Offred finds herself regretting that she has not been as actively resistant as she could have been; she was faced with moments when she could have been more resistant but was not. By drawing on her experiences, she offers up the best piece of advice she can based on her experiences, which is that she "should have paid attention" (Atwood 293). It is up to the reader to determine the ways in which she (or he) can pay attention in the world in which they are a part of, such as paying attention to government legislation and policy regarding gender or paying attention to the rhetoric of the government. While female readers can learn from Offred's modes of resistance, as well as from her mistakes, what Offred wants all women to do is to not copy her modes of resistance or repeat her mistakes, but to be vigilant because that will enable women to be more proactive, rather than reactive to gender-based oppression.

Conclusion: The Value of the Feminist Dystopian Imagination in Novels

Baccolini argues that one of the values of the feminist dystopian imagination in a novel is the open ending. She suggests that "the ambiguous, open-endings maintain the utopian impulse *within* the work" and "by rejecting the traditional subjugation of the individual at the end of the novel," it "opens a space of contestation and opposition" for women (Baccolini 520). By leaving the conclusion of the novel open, the female characters are not subjugated or oppressed any longer, which suggests that the absence of specificity allows the female character to resist in

ways that are not too sentimental or overly optimistic. Aside from defying closure and evading

subjugation within the narrative, Baccolini also argues that "utopia is maintained in dystopia,

traditionally a bleak, depressing genre with no space for hope in the story, only *outside* the story;

only by considering dystopia as a warning can we readers hope to escape such a dark future"

(520 original emphasis). This suggests that there might not be hope for the women within the

story, but this is supposed to scare and inspire real-world women to fight for change to avoid

such a fate.[29] While Baccolini's ideas apply to a great many feminist dystopian texts, her

argument is not applicable for all feminist dystopian novels, which is made clear by the disparate

endings of *Dawn* and *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Closed Ending

Butler's *Dawn*, albeit book one of a trilogy, concludes in a very concrete note, which

leaves no room for ambiguity and complicates Baccolini's argument. As the novel works toward

its conclusion, Lilith finds out that she will not be joining the other humans in the Amazonian

basin, a detail that the Oankali/ooloi did not previously mention. In the midst of telling Lilith she

must remain on the ship to Awaken other humans, and do the bidding of the Oankali/ooloi,

Nikanj asks Lilith, "Is it an unclean thing that we want, Lilith?" and she responds, "Yes!" (Butler

245). Butler seems to deploy the exclamation point to suggest that, despite her circumstances that

have taken away all control, Lilith chooses not to be silenced or capitulate. After this, Nikanj

adds, "Is it an unclean thing that I have made you pregnant?" (Butler 245). At first, this news

renders Lilith "speechless," but then, as the news sinks in, it also causes her to "stare down at her

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[29] There is the possibility with the release of Margaret Atwood's sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*, called, *The Testaments*, which hits bookshelves on September 10th 2019, that what happens to Offred might finally be confirmed. In addition, the Hulu adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* does confirm what happened to Offred after this, which is that Offred does not escape. However, the rationale for starting season 2 with what first appears to be escape, but is actually psychological torture for the handmaids, is that Offred's story must go on in order to explore more of the Republic of Gilead and what it would be like if Offred did get pregnant.

own body in horror" and to make "a violent effort to get away" (Butler 245-246). In this moment, it is clear Nikanj has raped Lilith because he impregnated her without her knowledge or consent, which is deeply upsetting to Lilith who feels violated and wants nothing to do with the Oankali/ooloi. Butler, it seems, is very careful with how she crafts this moment; she uses the word 'horror,' coupled with 'own body,' to indicate that Lilith's body, despite losing control of it, *is* still her own. In the final lines of the chapter, despite her dire and devastating circumstances, Lilith still finds hope and solace in her strategy of comply in order to resist, but it is not for herself, but for the larger collective of humanity:

> She considered resisting, making it drug her and carry her back. But that seemed like a pointless gesture. At least she would get another chance with a human group [...]
> Another chance to say, '*Learn and run!*' She would have more information for them this time. And they would have long, healthy lives ahead of them. Perhaps they could find an answer to what the Oankali had done to them. And perhaps the Oankali were not perfect. A few fertile people might slip through and find one another. Perhaps. *Learn and run!* If she were lost, others did not have to be. Humanity did not have to be. (Butler 247-248)

Once again, Lilith learns that agency is not synonymous with success, or completely overcoming her circumstances, but with the ability to choose to survive and fight in the best way that she can. In order to resist, or even have the hope of continuing to resist, she must comply so that she is given another opportunity to teach and guide another group of humans; she will learn from her past mistakes and might even try a different strategy to get the next group more on board so that her plan goes better than it did the first time. Even though she will not be granted holistic freedom, she can exercise agency in innovative ways, such as teaching. By maintaining hope, and taking what is happening to her in stride, Lilith is not complicit with what is happening to

her but resists by trying to hope for a better future for humanity. Butler seems to use a more concrete ending to do several things: one, she uses the feminist dystopian imagination to augment the seriousness of corrupt social structures that thrive on the sacrifice of women's bodies; two, readers cannot interpret Lilith's body and her circumstances as any way but unjust; and three, she demonstrates that even in the darkest and bleakest of circumstances, there are ways to fight back. Lilith has agency at the end of *Dawn* because she still chooses to keep fighting even though she knows she will probably never escape.[30]

Open Ending

Unlike *Dawn*, Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* falls into more of that traditional open ending that Baccolini references above. As this novel comes to a close, Offred is faced with a precarious situation that could go one of two ways: "Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing […] And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light" (Atwood 295). In this moment, Offred does not know if she is escaping Gilead, or if she might be getting arrested, which is demonstrated through the contrast of the "end" (or likely termination of her life) and the "beginning" (or perhaps the start of a new life outside the dystopian regime), along with "darkness" (or possibly a metaphor for death) and "the light" (or the prospect of a new beginning and renewed life) (Atwood 295). Raschke argues that the ending of *The Handmaid's Tale* is a "gesture toward fluidity, a different way of constructing a story, and thereby a reworking of how we see the world," which seems to suggest that the ending is

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[30] It is true that Lilith never does escape her fate and she produces many construct children. In fact, she chooses to remain with the Oankali/ooloi, which actually affords the rest of humanity the ability to choose whether they stay on Earth and live with and like the Oankali/ooloi or go to Mars to live as they please in a human way. If it were not for Lilith and her decision to stay with the Oankali/ooloi, have children, and raise them to see that forcing the humans to conform to Oankali/ooloi life is an injustice, humanity would not have the choice and freedom to leave. In other words, Lilith sacrificed her own freedom for the sake of humanity. Even though she never leaves the Oankali, she is an active agent because she chose to stay and never accepts the Oankali/ooloi oppressive behavior. She raises her construct children to not reproduce the oppressive Oankali/ooloi behavior.

intentionally ambiguous and raises more questions than answers them because life does not simply conclude when a person is finished telling their story (265). This interpretation of the ending also aligns more with Baccolini's notion that an open and more ambiguous ending provides the reader with agency: the ability to choose the fate of the protagonist based on their understanding of the character and narrative.[31]

While the ending is certainly ambiguous, the novel that Atwood, herself, is writing does not end with these ambiguous lines, but only concludes Offred's narrative. After the final lines of Offred's narrative, the novel splits into an acting-epilogue called, "Historical Notes on The Handmaid's Tale," which takes place long after, as well as outside of, Offred's narrative, at an academic conference where Professor Pieixoto discusses the history of Gilead by analyzing *The Handmaid's Tale* as a pseudo-diary that allows him to extrapolate what happened during the Gileadean period of American history. Critics often discuss "The Historical Notes on The Handmaid's Tale" as an additional narrative that circumvents and overshadows Offred's narrative. Falk Jones mentions that the professor "questions the authenticity of the handmaid's narrative" and he "proceeds to appropriate her story and dismiss her individual experience" because "to him, the handmaid's experience is not valuable in itself—he sees it only as an object for research" (10). This means that Professor Pieixoto assesses the value of Offred's narrative and spends most of his lecture arguing whether or not the events and experiences in it are true, which he not only seems to doubt, but also takes it so far as to dismiss her experiences, and instead, contorts her tale into one of the many possibilities as to what life was like. Like Falk Jones, Elisabeth Mahoney argues that Professor Pieixoto "knowingly occup[ies] a position of mastery" and his text is "constructed to *perform* this mastery—of history and literature, but also

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[31] There are other interpretations that indicate that since Offred's tale exists, and was recorded in snippets, it is likely that she did survive and escape Gilead at some point to gain access to the tools to record her story.

of the feminine subjects (or objects) of [his] narrative" (31). As the expert on the Gileadean

period, Professor Pieixoto attempts to master Offred's narrative by forcing it to fit his

interpretation of what happened during that particular time in history. Despite the time that has

passed between the end of Gilead and the new world, patriarchal bias and misogyny still exists

since he has completely misunderstood the point of Offred's narrative.

While it seems as though Professor Pieixoto's narrative eclipses Offred's, critics also

read "The Historical Notes" as a farcical and ineffective understanding of Offred's experiences

in *The Handmaid's Tale*. After discussing the ways that his lecture dismisses Offred's

experiences, Falk Jones poses the following question, "Yet how effective is the professor's

dismissal?" (11). She concludes that "the professor can finally neither appropriate nor invalidate

her voice: we can ignore his efforts, but we cannot shut her out," which suggests that just

because he was trying to master her narrative and shape it to fit his agenda does not erase

Offred's words and experiences (Falk Jones 11). Likewise, Mahoney argues that "Offred's

antithetical narrative," which is in opposition or contrast to the professors, provides a

"supplementary perspective and voice" that is designed to posit not only an additional narrative

that is different than the dominant narrative, but to also challenge the dominant narrative with its

own unique perspective and view of what happened (33). Therefore, the "language of the

individual subject, replaces the language of the establishment or institution," which suggests that

the marginalized voice and narrative has more power than the professor's words (Mahoney 33).

Even though Professor Pieixoto seems to get in the last word, his assessment and understanding

of Offred's narrative are not powerful or influential.

Building on previous criticism that discusses the ending of *The Handmaid's Tale*, I argue

that the "Historical Notes on The Handmaid's Tale" do not eclipse Offred's narrative. Instead,

"The Historical Notes" actually serves as an additional critique of misogyny by creating a character, who is supposed to be an expert, and yet, grossly misreads Offred's narrative. Even though everyone in the audience fawns over his speech, the reader knows that it does not matter if he misinterprets her narrative because he admits—in between the lines—that he really cannot access or understand her text. While Offred's actual narrative resists closure through an open ending, something similar can be said of Professor Pieixoto's analysis of her narrative as well because in the final paragraph of his speech, Offred resists closure again:

> Did our narrator reach the outside world safely and build a new life for herself? Or was she discovered in her attic hiding place, arrested, and sent to the Colonies or to Jezebel's, or even executed? Our document, though in its own way eloquent, is on these subjects mute […] As all historians know, the past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes. Voices may reach us from it; but what they say to us is imbued with the obscurity of the matrix out of which they come; and, try as we may, we cannot always decipher them precisely in the clearer light of our own day. (Atwood 311)

He concludes his speech with a series of questions about what happened to Offred, wondering if she escaped, if she was arrested, reassigned, or even killed, because he cannot answer these questions. In other words, Offred's narrative almost refuses to provide him with the concrete answers he wants, which means that the silence of the narrative is empowering because it is incapable of indulging his desires. He also admits that the past is often an abyss, which turns in circles and seems to possess an answer but might ultimately be distorted and create more questions than answers, which no historian—no matter how talented—can interpret or understand. Ultimately, Offred proceeds to slip through his fingers, unable to be pinned down by his misreading of her narrative.

Throughout both *Dawn* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, the reader's attention is constantly drawn toward how the narrative is constructed to: one, use gender-based oppression in order to subvert it; and two, construct situations where the female protagonists must comply with gender-based oppression in order to subvert or resist it. These interconnected narrative techniques are not only sophisticated, but also guides the reader to consider the nuances and complexities of feminist agency, which cannot be reduced to a binary definition. Therefore, the value of the feminist dystopian imagination is not to just compel its women readership to fight for their rights, but to understand that fighting for one's rights can happen in myriad ways and is entirely dependent on the situation at hand. In her essay, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," Audre Lorde argues that there *are* differences between women, but that instead of "recognizing and exploring difference" productively, society often conceptualizes "those differences [as] insurmountable barriers, or that they do not exist at all" (115). Women will continue to myopically universalize each other and fail to practice intersectional feminism if they continue to be intimidated by discussion of difference or ignore it altogether. Lorde examines Virginia Woolf's central claim in *A Room of One's Own*: "A room of one's own may be a necessity for writing prose, but so are reams of paper, a typewriter, and plenty of time," which suggests that a room and money empowered Woolf to write as a white woman, but that is not necessarily true for all women (116). If Woolf was alive today, Lorde would insist that Woolf complicate her assertion about women and writing by acknowledging that not all women have access to the materials to write fiction in the way that Woolf suggests, which is why all women need to be more inclusive of the wider range in women's experiences when they make claims about what women need or want. In this sense, feminist dystopian fiction empowers its female readership to acknowledge that women need to recognize the differences in privilege between

them and to better help each other by creating mechanisms of resistance against gender-based oppression, but also intersectional oppression, in order to create a more equitable world. The first step in fighting for this equality and rights is to reflect on the real-world implications of counter-mechanisms of resistance and female empowerment, which is individualized to each woman in each situation, as demonstrated by the wide variety of feminist agency throughout this chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

WATCHING FEMINIST AGENCY: HBO'S TELEVISION ADAPTATION OF MICHAEL

CRICHTON'S *WESTWORLD*

There were myriad adaptations of several cult classic films and television shows in 2016,

such as *Tomb Raider*, *Ghost in the Shell*, and *Westworld*, which featured significant changes

from the original source texts.[32] HBO gained the rights to Michael Crichton's *Westworld*, a

dystopian film that originally premiered in 1973, adapting it from a film into an enormously

successful television series of the same name, which resurrected the deliciously problematic

Westworld theme park, where guests (humans) can explore, rape female hosts (robots), pillage,

plunder, and murder their way through the capacious Wild West landscape in both side quests

and primary adventures.[33] Similar to the original source text, HBO's *Westworld* explores a robust

and philosophical question that is reminiscent in Crichton's *Westworld*, which is: what does it

mean for man to play the role of God? This question is integral to Crichton's *Westworld*, as well

as HBO's adaptation, but in distinctly different ways— while the original source text reveals

how man, specifically, benefits from playing the role of God, where the rules of the Wild West,

Roman Empire, or Medieval times imbue him with endless choices, HBO's adaptation explores

how women, especially, are oppressed by man's insatiable lust for carnal power and pleasure in

the hypermasculine space of the Wild West. The co-creators of HBO's *Westworld*, Lisa Joy and

Jonathan Nolan, were not only inspired by pernicious gender representation in the Western

genre, but also by video games and specific video game concepts, such as the nearly limitless

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[32] This is a sampling of some of the most popular remakes and reboots in 2016, rather than an exhaustive list, to demonstrate that in this particular year, adaptations of cult classic film and television shows were very popular.
[33] While Westworld welcomes and supports male, female, and entire families to be guests in the park, the intended audience for the park seems to be primarily male, which is reinforced throughout the series with background characters, who comment on how they visit the park multiple times: first, with family, and then, by themselves, which allows them to behave in ways that they cannot when their families are with them.

possibilities a guest/player can have, and what hosts/non-player characters cannot have, in an open-world video game.[34] Considering their conceptual influences in the creation of HBO's *Westworld*, this adaptation seems to ask an additional question that Crichton's *Westworld* does not, which is: in the hypermasculine space of the Wild West, which thrives on rules that empower men and oppress women, what does agency and autonomy for female hosts look like? To explore this question, HBO's *Westworld* enables viewers to experience the park from the perspective of two female hosts[35], Dolores, (the farmer's daughter, played by Evan Rachel Wood), and Maeve, (played by Thandie Newton, the madam at the Mariposa saloon), who are presented to viewers as environmental texture in the Wild West town of Sweetwater. These women are narratively and visually introduced to viewers as objects, rather than subjects, which is reinforced through their prescribed gender-based roles that coerce them into following patriarchal rules that objectify and exploit them as women in order to titillate male guests and earn a profit for Delos Incorporated, the company that financially supports Westworld.

Despite receiving rave reviews and a high rating of 8.8 on the International Movie Database (IMDB), HBO's *Westworld* has been rebuked by critics who challenge the garish and problematic ways Maeve, Dolores, and other female characters are treated as women. Unfortunately, this is not the first time HBO has been admonished for female representation. Jessica Mason explains, "before *Westworld* came on the air, much ink was spilled fretting about how a show about ultra-rich playing X-rated cowboys […] would follow in *Game of Thrones'* footsteps in the worst ways, with sex, rape, violence, and naked women used as little more than

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[34] An open-world video game is a space where players have many choices and do not have to follow a linear or completely prescribed storyline. This concept is important to understanding HBO's *Westworld* because the park clearly resembles an open-world game where the guests can pursue whatever narrative storyline they want to and do not have restrictions on how they play the game. They can choose to be evil or they can choose to be good. Some examples of open-world video games include: *Skyrim*, *Fable*, and *Red Dead Redemption*.

[35] In Crichton's *Westworld*, the plot focused on two eager male guests and their identities as players in the park.

window dressing," which means that HBO has an infamous reputation for sensationalizing

sexual violence as a plot and character development tool, especially for its female characters

("The Subtle Feminism").[36] In many of HBO's television shows, female characters are portrayed

in two ways: one, naked and fetishized by the camera in ways that do not extend to male actors

to provide risqué background texture; and two, innocent or helpless women whose storylines

often involve rape, attempted rape, and brutality, which eventually empowers the female

character to become stronger and more powerful *because of* the sexual violence and brutality she

endured.[37] These problematic representations became the catalyst to a widespread debate on the

world wide web *and* in academic contexts about whether the representation of women and their

agency (or lack thereof) in *Westworld* is or is not problematic. In one vein, critics seem to

suggest that the women in *Westworld* reveal glimpses of complexity, but that complexity is

eclipsed by the hypermasculine space of Wild West; however, in another vein, there are critics

who acknowledge these problematic representations of women, but argue that viewers need to

see *past* that because to focus only on the sexual violence ignores the larger narrative of female

resistance. It would seem that critics are only interested in binary explorations of women in

Westworld, either focusing entirely on the violence, and ignoring the ways that female characters

do have agency or focusing on the ways that female characters have agency but ignoring the

ways that violence also shapes their characters. Not only are violence and agency discussed as

separate entities, but critics also do not examine *Westworld* within the context of its unique

medium, creator influences[38], and genre: one, an HBO television show, which is an additional

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[36] The most notable example is *Game of Thrones*, where Sophie Turner's character, Sansa, is raped on camera by her evil husband, Ramsey. The assault is the catalyst to Sansa's character arc from weak to strong.
[37] I am not suggesting that these are the only portrayals of women in HBO television shows; however, these are the most common.
[38] While correlation does not always equal causation, in this particular case, the co-creators of *Westworld* are explicit in their discussions of how video games heavily influenced their portrayal of the hosts (non-playable characters) and guests (playable characters).

television service that viewers pay for and is known for violence and nudity; two, how the creators are heavily influenced by video games; and three, its hybrid genre, a feminist dystopian Western, which criticism has yet to discuss. In other words, when critics discuss *Westworld*, there is startling lack of critical film and television terminology (as well as a thorough understanding of video game concepts) within myriad analyses[39], which I argue is incredibly necessary to understanding the way a feminist dystopian Western television series explores how female characters are subjected to gender-based oppression *and* subvert it in nuanced ways that other mediums and genres cannot.

This chapter will not only challenge the notion that gender-based violence and agency should be analyzed separately, but it will also build on current scholarship by asserting that *Westworld* is best understood as a Feminist Dystopian Western television series that seems to utilize a Subversive Narrative Structure. As defined in the Introduction to this dissertation, a Subversive Narrative Structure is a highly sophisticated narrative technique in the feminist dystopian genre where a text not only uses gender-based oppression in order to subvert it, but also features female characters who comply in order to resist, which I will argue is achieved in a television series through technical elements that are unique to film and television.[40] To demonstrate, Ed Sikov explains in his book, *Film Studies: An Introduction*, that film and television are unique because they *visually* draw attention to a theme or character through the movement and angles of the camera (cinematography), the way that a set is visually designed (mise-en-scène), and the costumes that actors wear, which contributes to the deeper meaning of a film or television show. Instead of interpreting the words on the page and relying on one's

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[39] I am not suggesting that all criticism is devoid of film and television terminology, but there are many articles that only discuss the narrative implications of these characters without referencing how the television medium factors into their arguments.

[40] Some of these elements that I will discuss overlap with video games, which I will discuss in detail in Chapter 3.

imagination, viewers of *Westworld* must consider film and television elements, such as the camera angles, the mise-en-scène, the background score, and even the actor's body language and the inflection they use to deliver their lines, to fully understand what they are seeing and what it means about gender-based oppression and feminist agency. In other words, authors make distinctive choices in how they craft characters, explore themes, and create images with words, whereas the creators, writers, directors, producers, and actors, etc. also make distinctive choices in how they construct these characters and themes to mean something through film and television techniques.

While the female characters in HBO's *Westworld* are all subjected to gender-based oppression, my examination will only focus on one character, Maeve Millay for two reasons: first, scholarship on *Westworld* is very invested in whether Maeve reaches consciousness at the conclusion of season one, which I argue also coincides with a debate about her agency that requires more attention. Many critics contend that Maeve only makes *one* true decision in the series: in the final episode when she decides not to escape Westworld, which is important, but also ignores the myriad ways she exercises agency in subtle and nuanced ways in other episodes. Second, by focusing only on Maeve, I can conduct an in-depth analysis of her character as a lower-class woman of color, which demonstrates that not all female hosts in *Westworld* experience gender-based oppression in the same way. Similar to the debate about Maeve's consciousness and agency, critics also do not frequently discuss Maeve as a lower-class woman in conjunction with film and television terminology; as such, this reinforces the notion that not all women exercise agency in the same subtle and nuanced ways, as well as that agency is understood by viewers differently in a television show as opposed to a novel. Thus, in this chapter, I posit that Maeve is subjected to gender-based oppression and resists it by complying

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with her role as a prostitute in order to subvert it, which is conveyed to viewers through camera angles and movement, costumes, and acting that makes her seem compliant in one moment, but resistant in the next. To demonstrate how a female character can comply in order to resist in a television series, I will briefly examine episode 5, "Contrapasso" from *Westworld* when Maeve is in the bowels of the park for maintenance. In this scene, the camera pans to the left, showing a maintenance worker, Felix, stroll into the lab. The camera does not follow him into the lab but stops just outside it and peaks in through the glass wall at Maeve's body. In the frame, viewers see how the camera lingers on Maeve's exposed chest, which not only fetishizes her female body, but also visually signifies that she has no agency as Felix *and* the viewer gaze at her exposed, prostrate body.

However, a few minutes later, when Felix is distracted by his attempts to animate a bird he stole from the park, Maeve—off-camera— sits-up, which startles Felix who is on-camera when he pivots to follow the bird and sees Maeve awake. Unlike several moments before, where the camera was fetishizing her naked body, the camera now captures Maeve from the shoulders up and focuses on her face, which wears an expression of slight smugness as she says, "It's time you and I had a little chat" (55:12). The correlation between these two shots, which are mere moments apart, is crucial: in the first, Maeve does not have agency, but in the second, it is revealed that she does, which is conveyed to the viewer through the camera angles and Newton's acting to demonstrate that in this scene, Maeve decides to comply (lying on the table, allowing Felix to ogle her) in order to resist (to sit up and force him to talk with her). Through watching this female protagonist comply to resist, viewers are asked to consider the complexity and nuances within camera angles and movement, acting, and wardrobe in a way that is only possible in a feminist dystopian television series, which ultimately lends itself to a different understanding

of feminist agency that challenges the hypermasculine space of the Wild West through subversive screenwriting and visually subversive images.

To make this argument, I will do the following: first, I will describe the complex history and tradition of female cyborg representation in film and television, which is important to determine how HBO's *Westworld* is a cultural phenomenon; second, I will explore how feminist film theory and criticism discusses how stereotypical gender representation is exacerbated through the lens of the camera; third, I will explore the contextual differences between the time Crichton was writing the original *Westworld*, as well as how some more contemporary contextual factors shape HBO's *Westworld.* After providing a thorough and necessary framework for discussing representations of female cyborgs in HBO's *Westworld*, I will draw on feminist film theory, as well as feminist dystopian criticism, to theorize and apply how HBO's adaptation uses gender-based oppression in order to subvert it narratively and visually to Maeve's character; next, I will briefly examine how *Westworld* also narratively and visually explores moments that seem like feminist agency, but are not; and ultimately, conclude with a narrative and visual exploration of Maeve's ultimate moment of agency, and what the value of the feminist dystopian imagination looks like in television.

Humans, Cyborgs, and Gendered Cyborgs in Film and Television

Science fiction and dystopian film and television seem to have a perennial interest in the relationship between humans and technology, which has varied significantly over time. Tracing the development, LeiLani Nishime explains that "early science fiction was mainly concerned with drawing a line between human and machine," while "contemporary science fiction exploits the figure of the cyborg in order to interrogate and break down the distinctions between the human and the artificial, between machine and nature," which suggests that earlier texts focused

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on the divergences between humans and technology, whereas later texts explore the ways that humans and technology actually converge (35). Not only is the relationship between humans and technology a popular and changing trope, but it is also frequently represented as a contentious and inequitable relationship. In his book, *Posthumanism* (2014), Pramod K. Nayar confirms that in many science fiction and dystopian texts "humans [are positioned] as the dominant species that then controls, domesticates, oppresses, exploits […] non-human[s]," which suggests that humans believe that they are the epicenter of the universe and everything else in relation to them is other, and thus, inferior (Kindle 96). While the contentious relationship between humans and technology varies over time, neither Nishime, nor Nayar discusses how the relationship actually shifts again when the humanoid technology is gendered as female.

In her iconic essay, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," Donna Haraway theorized and coined the term, 'cyborg'— "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism"— as a liberating image and concept for women because it was supposed to eliminate hierarchal and dualistic thinking about gender, humans, animals, and nature (69). Unfortunately for Haraway, theory is often quite different than practice, especially in popular culture where a large body of science fiction and dystopian film and television that portrays the relationship between human males and female cyborgs in stereotypical ways. As a result, these pervasive gender stereotypes oppress female cyborgs in gender-specific ways that do not affect male cyborgs, which scholarship has thoroughly explored. In *My Fair Ladies: Female Robots, Androids, and Other Artificial Eves*, Julie Wosk identifies the source of patriarchal obsession with female cyborgs, which derives from man's fascination with "creating a simulated woman that miraculously comes alive, a beautiful facsimile female who is the answer to all their dreams and desires" (Kindle 314). In her view, the

patriarchy is infatuated with creating the ideal woman, who is intentionally designed to cater to what a certain type of man wants in a woman: a beautiful and passive creature who dotes on him. Not only are these female cyborgs "shaped […] by men's fantasies," but these cyborg women also reflect "men's beliefs about women themselves—their inherent traits or 'nature,' their usual behavior, and their proper (culturally assigned) social roles" (Wosk 328). Female cyborgs reflect both what men want in a woman and what the patriarchy thinks a true woman should be and how she should behave. Instead of forcing a flesh and blood woman to fulfill this passive and prescribed role— because she might have the opportunity or privilege to say no—the patriarchy can fabricate a cyborg woman and require her to conform to man's wants and needs because she is made, rather than born. This implies that a creator is entitled to complete control over his creation, which limits a female cyborg's agency and subjectivity to a housewife, personal assistant, sex slave, or sexualized entertainer, and oppresses her in gender-specific ways that do not affect male cyborgs, who play masculine roles that are imbued with inherent agency, such as warriors, cowboys, or law enforcement officers.

Similar to Wosk, Dànielle Devoss, who examines representations of gendered technology in contemporary culture, argues that

The bulk of images we view—whether on the World Wide Web, in comic books, or in popular science fiction film—are not cyborg images in the way that Haraway and other theorists imagine the political and possibly liberating cyborg. Instead, these images are *cyber* images, drawing upon and reinforcing contemporary notions of masculinity, femininity, heterosexuality, and power. They mesh hegemonic constructions with mechanical possibilities. (838)

Despite the empowering potential of the cyborg that Haraway originally conceptualized, the representation of female cyborgs on the world wide web and in popular culture is actually rendered a disempowering and problematic image. Through the female cyborg body, popular culture seems to reinforce, rather than challenge, problematic representations and stereotypes about gender and sexuality. While Devoss recognizes that the cyborg can be a "liberation from gender," she concludes that it currently cannot be because female cyborgs in film and television "usually serves merely to reinforce the gender dynamics currently at play" and "reproduce norms of sexuality and the sexualization of certain women's bodies, and validate the male gaze" (838). In film and television, the presence of a female cyborg is just another way that the patriarchy can normalize women as objects of desire and exploitation through the lens of the camera, which is demonstrated in film and television titles, such as *Blade Runner* (1982), *Hot Bot* (2016), *My Living Doll* (1964-65), *Dr. Goldfoot and the Bikini Machine* (1965), and *Dr. Goldfoot and the Girl Bombs* (1966).[41] In addition to problematic representations of female cyborgs on screen, Sue Short argues in her book, *Cyborg Cinema*, that on the rare occasion there is a strong female cyborg in a film or television series, "so few examples of assertive female cyborgs [are] allowed to survive on screen" (7). On the rare occasion that there is a strong female cyborg in a film or television show, she is immediately targeted, silenced, trivialized, killed off, reduced to a prize, brutalized, or sexually conquered by a human male.

While critics utilize earlier film and television as the foundation of their theorization for female cyborg representation, it begs the following question: does HBO's *Westworld*, as a recent television show, follow suit or is it representative of a new wave of female cyborg representation? As established in the introduction to this chapter, there are two primary veins of

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[41] This is a small sampling of the films and television series that portray gendered-technology in problematic ways.

thought when it comes to this question. For some critics, the women of *Westworld* align with

Short's theories about promising female cyborgs, who demonstrate glimpses of strength and

complexity, but are overshadowed and silenced by the hypermasculine space of the Wild West.

In an article on *Vouge*'s website, Janelle Okwodu argues that HBO's *Westworld* has "compelling

women," but then "subject[s] them to scenarios that rob them of their dignity," which suggests

that there are complex female characters; however, their complexity is undermined by subjecting

them to superfluous gender-based violence to shock viewers ("Woman Problem"). Likewise, in

an article on HBO's website, Olivia Armstrong asserts that "on the surface, *Westworld* seems

like a man's vacation destination. The $40,000-per-day theme park set in the not-too-distant

future is run by a man, the robotic "hosts" storylines are written by a man, and an Old West-

manliness permeates the playground" ("Meet the Westworld Women"). Westworld was created

by men for men who constructed a set of rules that intentionally oppressed male and female hosts

in gender-specific ways in order to create the ultimate real live (video) game for male guests: a

world of limitless possibilities where a certain type of man boosts their ego and earns

gratification by developing increasing levels of insatiable lust and violence through sexual

conquest and murder.[42]

However, there are other critics who argue that while there are problematic gender

stereotypes in play in *Westworld*, they are overshadowed by the presence of female resistance.

Armstrong, referenced above, proceeds to explain that in spite of the pernicious hypermasculine

space in *Westworld*, the female hosts are actually the most important characters because "it's the

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[42] Even though HBO's *Westworld* is a television show, it strongly resembles an open-world video game as well. The male guests are the players, who roam the park and participate in the narratives they want and do whatever they want at the expense of the hosts, who are essentially non-playable characters. Unlike the guests, the hosts do not have the ability to choose because they follow narrative scripts and rolls just like non-playable characters in a video game. They exist purely for the sake of the players, rather than for themselves, and are often the victims of sexual conquest or murder.

women of *Westworld* who are writing their own stories, upending a place that has predetermined their destiny and potentially, taking over their world" ("Meet the Westworld Women"). In the midst of a hypermasculine space, the female characters have emergent narratives that become the primary focus of the show, which seek to subvert the place (Wild West and the Westworld park) and people (guests and engineers) who subjugate them. While these women are sexually assaulted and brutalized, the holistic narrative of the television show focuses more on the authority and agency that these women gain as women over their own minds and bodies as they essentially hack into the Westworld system to rewrite their characters and the rules that govern the park. Similar to Armstrong, Lizzie Finnegan argues in her article, "Narrating Gender, Gendering Narrative, and Engendering Wittgenstein's 'Rough Ground' in *Westworld*," that the Wild West narrative does tend "to be profoundly patriarchal, sexist, and heteronormative, as well as violent in ways that glamorize and perpetuate violence,"; however, "there is (so to speak) more to the story when it comes to the nuances and complexities of gender politics" than what viewers initially might think (151). Specifically, she argues that "Dolores Abernathy and Maeve Millay are able to use their own programming to disrupt it; to use the rules of the game to subvert it" and "use their own weaknesses as strengths to write themselves out of their old stories and into new ones," which suggests that the two main female characters are oppressed, but they are also very capable of resistance, and it is ultimately resistance that defines their characters and storylines rather than victimization (Finnegan 151-152).

While I tend to agree with the critics who argue that there is significant subversive potential in the female characters of HBO's *Westworld*, a concept that I will explore later in this chapter, critics do not seem to acknowledge how the feminist narrative *and* feminist film and television elements work together to create and subvert gender-based oppression. In other words,

when examining a female cyborg in a film or television show, it is important and interesting to note how gender stereotypes are narratively and visually explored through screenwriting and through the lens of the camera itself, which sexualizes and objectifies women.

Feminist Film Theory and Criticism

Women, according to many feminist film critics, are often narratively *and* visually portrayed in problematic ways.[43] In "Unmasking the Gaze: Some thoughts on new Feminist Film Theory and History," Laura Mulvey points out that "the eye is the cinema's privileged organ; the cinema is a visual medium […] and is able, therefore, to build the pleasure of looking, of the 'gaze,' into its narrative structures and conventions" (5). She suggests that because cinema (and television) is visually-based, and thus, accessed through sight, the lens of the camera shapes how viewers perceive the images of the women on screen. Furthermore, in her essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey asserts, "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly" (19). More often than not, the camera forces the viewer to watch from the point of view of a male spectator because 'the gaze' is decidedly male, which means that women are often portrayed on screen as sexual and passive objects who are protected, procured, or conquered, whereas men are often portrayed as active subjects who do the protecting, procuring, or conquering.

E. Ann Kaplan reinforces Mulvey's argument in *Women and Film*: *Both Sides of the*

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[43] Hollywood, along with the entire film industry, is fraught with tension over gender inequity behind and in front of the camera. In "Feminism and Film," Sue Thornham argues that women "are oppressed within the film *industry* (they are receptionists, secretaries, odd job girls, prop girls, etc); they are oppressed by being packaged by images (sex objects, victims or vampires); and they are oppressed within film theory, by male critics who celebrate directors like Hitchcock for their complexity or irony" (93). Women who work within the film industry usually have lower-paid, gendered jobs as receptionists and lackies, rather than directors and producers; if a woman *does* have a career as a director or producer, that female director is likely overlooked for a bigger name that is deemed of more importance. It seems as though women experience trouble behind the camera *and* on the screen.

Camera, where she asserts that "the dominating male gaze, carrying with it social, political, and economic as well as sexual power, relegates women to absence, silence, and marginality," which suggests that the camera reinforces gender power dynamics that reduce women on screen in order to augment the sexual power of men over women (5). Building on Mulvey's arguments, Kaplan adds that Hollywood and the entire film industry is not static, which means that there were some stereotypical images and problematic representations of women that fell out of fashion; however, there were new ones created as well:

> the mechanisms that worked in earlier decades (i.e.: victimizing, fetishizing, self-righteous murdering) to obscure patriarchal fears no longer worked in the post-1960s era: the sexual woman could no longer be designated 'evil,' since women had won their right to be 'good' and sexual [however] this resulted in an unprecedented number of films in the early 1970s showing women being raped [and] the new sexual woman has to be dominated by the phallus as a way of man asserting control over the newly found sexual expressiveness." (7)

In the film and television medium, there are mechanisms of oppression that certain decades relied on that were unfashionable in other decades; however, there were other mechanisms of oppression that sprung up in its absence, which oppressed women in different ways. No matter the decade, Kaplan indicates that in the film industry, there are techniques embedded within film and television that oppress women, whether it is through rendering the woman a helpless damsel, an object of sexual desire, or even murdering her for being too liberal, too sexual, or too assertive. The message within myriad films and television shows across decades is that women must be dominated and returned to her inferior place, which takes away her subjectivity, agency, and autonomy.

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In spite of the widespread problematic climate and culture of the film and television industry, feminist film theory and criticism has constructed ways to resist by trying "to expose as both false and oppressive the limited range of images of women offered by film" (Thornham 94). In her brief article, "Feminism and Film," Sue Thornham argues that one of the ways feminist film critics and theorists could deconstruct the problematic representations of women on screen is to shift focus "away from *mis*representations via 'oppressive images,' and towards a consideration of *how* cinema structures meaning," which would require doing "more than simply offer positive images of women, and instead find ways of reorganizing film's visual and narrative structures if it is to genuinely challenge mainstream representations" (Thornham 95). It is important to move beyond examining only misrepresentations of women and believing that a simple solution to gender representation is to just represent positive women on screen. Instead, Thornham wants to move toward a larger examination of how a film or television show functions, or in other words, is put together to oppress women, whether that is through camera angles and movement, costumes, or mise-en-scène. When considering the functionality of film and television, feminist film critics utilized psychoanalytic theory, which Kaplan suggests was a crucial theoretical "tool for explaining the needs, desires, and male-female positionings that are reflected in film. The signs in the Hollywood film convey the patriarchal ideology that underlies our social structures and that constructs women in very specific ways—ways that reflect patriarchal needs" (24). A psychoanalytical lens accentuates the ways in which patriarchal ideology limited women, and the representation of women, on screen.

While psychoanalytic theory is pertinent to discuss the representations of women, Mulvey points out, "However valuable, this approach leaves the cinema isolated and cut off from its surrounding society and culture. Ways of seeing do not exist in a vacuum," which suggests

that psychoanalytic theory does not consider the cultural and historical aspects that influenced

the representation of women on screen (5 "Unmasking the Gaze"). In the effort to move beyond

psychoanalytic film criticism, Claire Johnston seems to agree with Thornham, arguing that "if

[feminist] film criticism is to have any use, it is that it should provide a greater understanding of

how film *operates* which will ultimately feed back into the film-making itself" (qtd in Thornham

95, my emphasis). Similar to Thornham, Johnston discusses the importance of focusing on how a

film or television show functions; however, unlike Thornham, Johnston adds that if directors and

producers understand how a film or television show functions, they will be able to create films

that function with the intention of depicting more progressive women on screen in a critical way.

Thornham, expanding on the notion of function, argues that it is not only important to consider

the technical film and television elements, but also to consider "*how* the sign 'woman' operates

within the specific film text—*what* meanings it is made to bear and what desires and fantasies it

carries" (96). A woman on screen will always be imbued with cultural meaning, which is then

reflected in how the camera portrays her as well. It suggests that female actresses, directors, and

producers can resist stereotypical and problematic representations of women on screen if they

imbue her with different meaning and portray her through the lens of the camera in a different

way as well, which then can start to change how film and television functions to represent

women.

Adaptation: Crichton's *Westworld* vs. HBO's *Westworld*

The way that women are represented on screen through the lens of the camera, arguably,

changes as the film and television industry progresses and is shaped by the current cultural

moment. HBO's *Westworld*, as discussed in the introduction to this chapter, is different than

Crichton's *Westworld* not only because HBO's adaptation narratively focuses on two female

hosts, rather than two male guests, but it also focuses on imbuing these female characters with different meanings than Crichton did through advanced camera angles and movement, wardrobe, and acting. In other words, there are narrative differences between the source text and adaptation, but also in the way that HBO's *Westworld* is created and constructed as a television show to provide a specific representation of women that invites viewers to consider gender-based oppression and agency in different ways than Crichton did. As Linda Hutcheon argues in her book, *Theory of Adaptation*, when adapting a text, the objective is about "repetition without replication," which suggests that when a film, like Crichton's *Westworld*, is adapted, the adaptation does not simply recreate the exact original text narratively or visually (4). Instead, when a text is adapted, it goes through an elaborate process, which Hutcheon describes as "involv[ing] both (re)-interpretation and then (re)-creation," which suggests that the original text that is being adapted is understood in a new way and then remade under the premise of a different narrative and visual understanding (8). As a result, the source text might focus on something that is entirely different than the adaptation and suggests that each adaptation is no better or less than another, but simply sets out to achieve a different understanding of its characters and central themes within a new social context. To demonstrate, I will examine what potentially influenced Crichton's and HBO's screenwriting of *Westworld*.

Crichton and Bad Cyborgs

During the time that Crichton was writing, film that featured cyborgs followed one of two patterns: "(1) bad cyborgs or (2) good cyborgs,"[44] which suggest that in many science fiction and dystopian films, humanoid technology is presented in dichotomous ways (Nishime 37). This

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[44] In her article, "The Mulatto Cyborg: Imagining a Multiracial Future," Nishime also discusses a third type of cyborg, which was quite uncommon: the Mulatto cyborg, which I do not mention here because it was rare and does not apply to Crichton's *Westworld*.

particular trope of 'bad' VS 'good' cyborgs was exceedingly popular when Crichton was writing the script for his film, *Westworld*, which might have influenced why he chose to focus on a 'bad' cyborg, portrayed through Yul Brynner's Gunslinger character. According to Nishime,

> Films focusing on bad cyborgs are the most popular, most traditional, and least complex of cyborg movies. The bad cyborg plays on xenophobic fears of mechanical domination, inviting the audience to recoil from the bodily invasion of machine into man. Like the segregationists of both the far right and the far left, these films strive to reassert clear distinctions and absolute differences. (37)

During the time Crichton was writing the script for *Westworld*, the 'bad cyborg' was a cultural commodity, specifically designed to thrill and even terrify audiences by drawing on several omnipresent fears of white, heterosexual men, such as: one, they could be displaced as the ultimate source of power in society; or two, that distinctions needed to be made and reinforced between those who are human (white males) and those who are not (racialized others). Nishime implies that film and television seem to reflect what is currently popular; for Crichton, this probably meant writing a script that featured a 'bad cyborg' to capitalize on trends at the time. With a budget of 1, 250,000, Crichton's *Westworld* went on to earn 10,000,000 million and earn a solid 7.0 rating on the IMDB.

Crichton and the Age of Technological Dystopias

While Crichton may have capitalized on the cultural buzz surrounding the 'bad cyborg' narrative, Megan Walsh argues that he could have also been influenced by the intersection of technology with dystopia that was very popular. She argues that *Westworld* was "one of many dystopic films that came out of the 70s" that "explored the dark turns the world might take as technology and human arrogance grew," which means that dystopian films during the time

tended to explore the nefarious implications between humans and technology because film is a visually-centered medium that captures the physical differences (or lack of differences) between humans and technology ("HBO's Westworld VS The Westworld"). In addition to popular film and cultural tropes that could have influenced his writing, critics also note that Crichton was also fascinated by "his extensive medical and scientific background," which influenced the types of questions he was interested in exploring in his films ("Secret Science Nerds"). As a result, Crichton produced a body of work that was interested in thought experiments, or "cautionary tale[s]," that not only "warn[ed] against the misuse or outright dangers of technology," but also the inevitable and devastating consequences when well-intending humans create life in a lab ("Secret Science Nerds"). Crichton was writing in a very different time than the co-creators of HBO's *Westworld*, where he explored the relationship between humans, technology, and masculinity, which lead to stereotypical and unquestioned representations of gender, especially within the context of the Wild West or Western.[45]

Co-Creator's Contemporary Influences on *Westworld* Screenwriting

Approximately forty-three years later, when *Westworld* was adapted into a television show, the writers of HBO's *Westworld*, Lisa Joy and Jonathan Nolan, are writing under a set of very different circumstances than Crichton, which includes influences from video game culture, the Western genre, and progressive gender representations.

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[45] I am not suggesting that Crichton is sexist or that he did not consider gender representation. Instead, Crichton was more interested in exploring the intersection between the Western and dystopia, and how these genres shaped notions of masculinity, which consequently involved the exploitation of women. Much of Crichton's other work, especially *Jurassic Park*, is highly feminist in its representation of women and gender.

Video Game Influence

Since HBO's *Westworld* became a hit television show, the co-creators have been interviewed countless times about what it is like to work together as a married couple, who writes which characters, what their creative process looks like, and also what they consider to be their biggest influences. On a panel at New York Comic Con in 2016, Joy and Nolan revealed that they were heavily influenced by video games when writing the screenplay(s) for *Westworld*. While Nolan is no longer an avid video game player because "now [he and Joy] have children, so […] no more video games for [him]," he and Joy did play "some as research before making the show," such as *Grand Theft Auto* and *Red Dead Redemption* ("Video Games that Inspired"). Joy, who played *Grand Theft Auto* at a painfully slow pace according to Nolan, defended her leisurely speed by asserting that "the city looks beautiful if you just slow down and take the time […] There was a lot of work that went into it! It's gorgeous," which suggests that she might have drawn aesthetic inspiration for *Westworld* from the intricate details in the environments of the games they played ("Video Games that Inspired"). Kim Renfro directly connects Joy's appreciation for environment and landscape in video games to HBO's *Westworld*, arguing that "whenever guests of the park are rolling through town, shooting at the hosts or exploring different narratives," it is clear that they were inspired by the video game environments in certain games ("Video Games that Inspired"). Through focusing so much on the intricate details of the Wild West environment, Joy and Nolan create a believable world for not only the guests of Westworld, but for viewers as well, who watch how this immersive, seductive, and tragically beautiful world breeds violence and gender-based oppression.

In addition to the aesthetic influences of video games, Renfro explains that "Another way in which *Westworld* derives from video games is the concept of non-player characters (or NPCs,

as video gamers know),” which means that “The hosts in Westworld speak with each other, working off narrative scripts or minor improvisations, even when guests are not around. Just like NPCs in some video game universes” (“Video Games that Inspired”). In video games, there are player characters, who are controlled by the person who plays the video game, and there are non-player characters, who the player character can sometimes interact with, gain information from, receive instructions from, conduct business, receive missions, murder, rob, or even rape depending on the game. In other words, an NPC in a video game does not have any agency or autonomy because they follow a script, which is eerily similar to how the hosts function in *Westworld*, who comply but cannot seem to resist. Nolan, specifically, explains that he is fascinated by “the idea that our lives could be *programmatic*, that there could be *rules* at play that we’re not familiar with, that we don’t understand” (“Video Games that Inspired,” my emphasis). The question of ‘what if’ seems to have prompted Nolan to want to explore what life might be like as an NPC, whose personality is not only prescribed, but also bound by rules that they have no idea exist and do not have the capacity to comprehend. Even though *Westworld* is not a video game, it seems to be a way to encourage viewers to consider what that experience might be like from the NPC’s perspective, which something that arguably does not happen very often in video games.[46]

Not only are NPC’s confined to their narrative loops in video games, but players also really do not consider all the work and detail that goes into the construction of these characters. When Nolan was playing one of the *BioShock* games, he was listening to the designer of that particular game series discuss non-playable characters, which shifted the way that Nolan thought about NPCs. He explains that in a particular moment during the game, “I just ran through and

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[46] The reason for this is because the game narrative usually revolves so heavily around the player character and what they are supposed to do that there is no space or time to consider the oppressive circumstances of an NPC.

shot everyone and kept going," while Ken Lavine, the designer, "was [ironically] talking about how much craft had gone into all the conversations the NPCs have. All their dreams and aspirations, and I just thought 'Oh isn't that tragic. That's sad.' The player just ignores them all, you bastards" ("Video Games that Inspired"). It seems as though Nolan was inspired by Lavine's discussion about how NPCs are incredibly important, but do not seem important to players because they generally exist in games to provide environmental texture, and are used to get what the player wants, or to murder if they get too irritating. By exploring non-player characters in a television show, rather than a video game, viewers are forced to confront the ways that players (human guests) indulge in their carnal desires and illegal activities at the expense of non-player characters (the hosts), which allows viewers who watch the guests exploit the hosts to not only think about agency and autonomy in a completely different way, but also how female hosts, especially, who live scripted lives could exercise agency.

Subverting the Wild West Narrative

While video games were a unique influence on the co-creators of HBO's *Westworld*, they were also influenced by Crichton's original use of the Wild West and Western genre in *Westworld*, which is known for its stereotypical representation of women. In his book, *Feminism and the Western Film and Television*, Mark E. Wildermuth discusses how it is quite common for "critical studies of westerns in film and fiction to not uncommonly describe the genre as anti-feminist or even misogynistic in its representation of men and women of the frontier" because women are typically represented as passive objects, whereas men are active subjects (1). To demonstrate, in his discussion of the American frontier, Richard Slotkin assigns a male pronoun to his discussion of the type of individual who thrives in the Wild West in his book, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*. He

claims that the frontier is "the conception of America as a wide-open land of unlimited opportunity for the strong, ambitious, self-reliant individual to thrust *his* way to the top," which means that the Wild West, as well as personality characteristics, like courage or ambition, are decidedly male (5, my emphasis). It would seem that only men who possess the 'right' qualities have the chance to prove themselves as men in the rugged and treacherous terrain of the Wild West.

Similarly, in *West of Everything: The Inner Lives of Westerners*, Jane Tompkins seems to concur the Wild West "functions as a symbol of freedom," but also as "an of opportunity for conquest" (4), which is demonstrated through "the arch-images of the genre—the gunfight, the fistfight, the chase on horseback, the figure of the mounted horseman outlined against the sky, the saloon girl, the lonely landscape itself" (5-6). The Wild West lends itself to freedom, but only to masculine freedom and agency, which is defined by violent acts like gunfights or fist fights. Tompkins reinforces that Wild West certainly "legitimize[d] the violence men practice in order to protect" women and children, which seems to rationalize violence as a male form of agency (41). Since women are supposed to be, as Barbara Welter argued, governed by "four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity" in the nineteenth century, it stands to reason that women in the Wild West, which was in its heyday from approximately 1865 to 1895, were a mere adornment to the male ego, serving as damsels and wives (152). Likewise, Sandra Kay Sohakel asserts that in the Wild West, women were not only defined as the opposite of men, but that "The male perspective dominates the genre in ways in which women's roles are played in accordance with male expectations of female behavior" (196). Her point seems to be that if men were the violent protectors of the Wild West, men also expected women to act in ways that supported his role.

While myriad critics explore the ways that the Wild West defined masculinity and masculine agency through violence, there are some progressive depictions of women in the Wild West. Jenni Calder notes that "Occasionally the courage, determination, independence and incredible capacity for endurance [of frontier women] is allowed to contribute richly to the western, but not as a rule," which implies that women do have more traditionally masculine traits in the Western genre, but this is an exception to the rule (158). Unlike Calder, Wildermuth has a slightly more optimistic reading of representations of women in the Wild West. He argues that there is still "Feminism implicit in […] Westerns, regardless of their respective times and cultural contexts, the empowerment of women socially, economically, and psychologically […] by all the means available in the culture of the time," but "the progressive drive for agency in the public realm for women is discernable and very much opposed to the masculinist norm of the genre" (Wildermuth 6). Throughout the history of the Western genre, there can be feminist implications for female characters who empower themselves by defying gender-based expectations or otherwise presenting themselves in nuanced ways that challenge stereotypical representation of women in the genre.

Similar to Wildermuth, Lisa Joy seems to agree with scholarship that the representation of women in the Wild West is problematic, but she also discusses how to revolutionize the Western genre to fit in a contemporary context in exceedingly complex ways. In an interview with IGN, she notes that "in many Westerns, though not all, it's kind of a *limited lens*. You're looking at an archetypal hero, normally a guy, and the women are secondary figures. They're the footnotes to the man's journey" ("How Video Games Helped", my emphasis). By referring to the Wild West narrative as a "limited lens," Joy implies that broadening and refocusing that lens onto the female characters, who are overshadowed by "archetypal hero[es]" or relegated to

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"footnotes" in a man's story, allows her as a writer to flip the script in interesting and progressive ways, which interrogates the how the hypermasculine space of the Wild West impacts "women and people of color" in new and exciting ways ("How Video Games Helped").

Progressive Gender Representations through Female Cyborgs

Through subverting the Wild West narrative, Joy and Nolan are free to narratively and visually craft a story about female cyborgs that follow in the burgeoning wake of progressive female cyborg representation, which is demonstrated in texts, such as: *Her* (2013), *Ex Machina* (2014), *The Bionic Woman* (1976-1978), *Bionic Woman* (2007), and even *Star Trek: Voyager* (1995-2001). These texts narratively (and sometimes visually) depict female cyborgs in more progressive ways because they are not completely sexualized objects, but subjects who have agency and autonomy.[47] In her article, "*Westworld* Co-Creators Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy Connect the Show to Feminism and #MeToo," Teresa Jusino conducted an interview with the *Westworld* writers to discuss the representation of female characters. She reports,

> [Joy] talks about how traditionally, the Western genre has always been hypermasculine, and so she wanted to be truthful about what a western-themed park where there were no limits on behavior would actually be like. At the same time, however, Joy says that they 'care deeply about the manner in which we represent an actual act of sexual violence, which is why you don't see it. You see a girl yelling as she's dragged away, fully clothed, but we didn't want to show nudity and sex.' ("Connect the Show to Feminism")

As though responding directly to the critics who have challenged the representation of women in *Westworld*, as well as in other HBO productions, Joy seems to want to create balance between

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[47] I use the phrase "not completely sexualized objects" to account for some veiled sexism and misogyny both narratively and visually. For example, in *Star Trek Voyager* when Ensign Harry Kim is assigned to work with Seven of Nine but cannot concentrate because of her gorgeous body that is shown-off in a skin-tight uniform.

representing 'authentic' violence against women within a Wild West context, while at the same time, being strategic with how that violence manifests on screen to not fetishize or exploit women in hackneyed and unproductive ways. Joy, referring to an infamous scene in episode one, "The Originals," when the female host, Dolores (Evan Rachel Wood), is dragged by an infamous guest, Man in Black (played by Ed Harris), to be raped in the barn. During this scene, they ensured that Wood was *clothed*, which Joy seems to imply this somehow renders the sexual violence not as sensational. While this particular scene is still incredibly violent and dramatic, Joy also seems to insinuate it would be superfluous for the actor, as well as the viewers, to watch Dolores's character be raped on screen when the way the scene is visually constructed makes it clear what happens to her. In Joy's view, it is possible to tackle exceptionally difficult topics, such as rape, without sensationalizing it, and thus, liberates the viewer from "the gaze." In order to subvert misogyny and gender-based oppression in a traditionally hypermasculine genre like a Western, Joy implies that male violence enacted on female bodies cannot be omitted from the script narratively, but it can be visually manipulated, or in other words, function differently to subvert the "the gaze." As demonstrated throughout this dissertation, for a writer, creator, or designer to critique gender-based oppression, gender-based oppression must first exist in the text before it can be subverted, challenged, or critiqued.

HBO's *Westworld:* Theorizing Feminist Dystopian Television

As demonstrated in the previous sections, the representation of female cyborgs in film and television is typically uncritical and problematic, which is arguably evident of misogynistic screenwriting, camera work, and certain genres, as well as the cultural and industry values during the time that a film or television show was made. However, HBO's *Westworld*, unlike many of the previously mentioned texts, not only significantly shifts the narrative regarding the

representation of female cyborgs, but I argue that it also changes the genre as well from science fiction-dystopia to feminist dystopia Western by placing two women at the center of the narrative rather than two men. This shift, as discussed earlier, arguably requires the cinematographers to craft the show differently than Crichton's *Westworld* in order to narratively *and* visually explore how female cyborgs experience gender-based oppression in the theme park. Thus, this shift raises two important questions, which are: one, how does *Westworld* create a feminist dystopian world, confront issues of gender, and explore agency in a television show that depicts its female hosts as NPCs? And, two, what do viewers gain from watching a feminist dystopian television series that they cannot gain from reading? Since there is currently no scholarship that attempts to discuss how feminist dystopian film and television operates as its own unique medium, I will construct a theory of how feminist dystopian television operates by drawing on feminist film theory, as well as feminist dystopian criticism, to form my theorization, which I will then apply to Maeve in HBO's *Westworld.*

As discussed in a previous section, there has been an important shift in feminist film theory, which is to drift away from psychoanalysis theory and toward embracing the functionality of films and television, and how they construct representations of women. Thornham argues that in most film and television, "women are objects, not subjects, of the gaze, their bodies eroticized. This division between active/male and passive/female also *structures* the film narrative" and thus, "Woman, in contrast, functions as erotic spectacle, interrupting rather than advancing the narrative" (97, my emphasis). Not only does the gaze objectify women, but the pervasive visual effect is distracting to the dominant male protagonist, who gets an active role that advances the plot of the film or television show. In other words, the problematic gaze is part of how the film or television show functions because it provides the structure of the

narrative and visually titillates the assumed male viewer. Kaplan, discussing functionality from a slightly different angle, argues that "the struggle over these constraining ideologies is evident in the very *narrative structures* of the films themselves: the films, that is, permit a 'reading against the grain' in which interesting contradictions emerge to expose the underlying working of patriarchy" (4, original emphasis). While some films have a narrative structure that creates a stereotypical plot that relegates women to perfunctory roles, the way in which the film visually functions is in tension or opposition with the narrative. In other words, the narrative represents women poorly, but the visual and technical elements of the film or television show—camera angles, mise-en-scène, and costumes—present a different message, one which prompts the viewers to understand that what is happening on the screen is against the norm. Kaplan believes that this type of film structure interrupts the usual film and exposes, rather than reaffirms, nefarious representations of women. This is why it is so important to explore "how meaning is produced in films, rather than [just] the 'content,'" because films do not make meaning in the same way that a novel does, and to focus on just the content, rather than the narrative and visual aspects, is to ignore an entire component that shapes the meaning of a film or television show (Kaplan 23). In other words, the way in which a film operates lends itself to a better understanding of not only how films are put together to oppress women, but also how a feminist film can be constructed narratively *and* visually to critique problematic representations of women on screen.

Building on Kaplan's assertions of how feminist films and television function differently, I will theorize how a feminist dystopian television show functions to achieve a critique of gender-based oppression. The purpose of the feminist dystopian genre, as referenced through Baccolini in chapter one, is to be "transgressive," which means that the genre intentionally seeks

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to challenge and subvert patriarchal mechanisms of gender-based oppression (520). While novels can accomplish this through bifurcating the narrative to reveal that there is a difference between who a female protagonist has to be and who they are, feminist dystopian television must accomplish subversion of gender-based oppression in ways that are unique to its medium. In other words, feminist dystopian television also uses gender-based oppression in order to subvert it, but unlike novels, feminist dystopian television relies on camera angles and movement, acting, mise-en-scène, and costumes to visually *and* narratively explore how women are subjected to, as well as resist, gender-based oppression in nuanced ways. This means that there are many elements that work together in order to create a feminist dystopian world within HBO's *Westworld*, and as such, the viewer has to simultaneously interpret the narrative *and* what is occurring visually on the screen to understand how the television series critiques gender-based oppression through Maeve by complying with her gender-based role in order to resist it.

Establishing *Westworld* as a Feminist Dystopia in Episode 1: "The Originals"

What renders HBO's *Westworld* a feminist dystopia is not only the narrative content, but also through the way the female characters are visually presented on screen, which is established in the first episode, "The Original."[48] In this episode, the first images that viewers see, coupled with the conversation that occurs between a male (Bernard, played by Jeffrey Wright) and female (Dolores, played by Evan Rachel Wood) character, immediately establishes an atmosphere of gender inequity through the mise-en-scène and lack of costume: a dark room that resembles an interrogation chamber with a woman sitting naked in a chair. Despite being

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[48] While this chapter is dedicated to analyzing how Maeve is subjected to gender-based oppression, as well as how she complies in order to resist it, the world of Westworld is introduced to the viewer through Dolores' character. Through her, a culture of gender inequity, which gives way to further patriarchal corruption and gender-based oppression, is established. In other words, Maeve character is introduced later and reinforces that this is a feminist dystopia through experiencing gender-based oppression that targets her as a prescribed lower-class woman.

shrouded in some shadows, the camera still seems to linger on the woman's body, evoking

Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze," which is narratively reinforced a moment later when a

man asks in a gentle, but firm tone, "Can you hear me?" (1:57). In this moment, his voice is

disembodied because he is off-camera, which not only places him in a position of power, but also

allows him— and forces the viewer to adopt his point of view—to fetishize her exposed body. In

a mere matter of seconds, there is an atmosphere of gender inequity, which is narratively *and*

visually established because she is visible and naked in front of the camera, whereas he is

invisible and protected from behind the camera, the one who has the power because he can ask

questions, while she cannot. The power he has over her in this moment permeates the opening

scene and sets the tone for a world that is saturated with patriarchal control over women and their

bodies. While the two novels in chapter one establish gender inequity through dialogue and

description, a television show like *Westworld* establishes gender-based oppression through

dialogue *and* other elements that novels do not have, such as mise-en-scène, lighting, placement

of the actors, and the way the camera moves or where it is placed. At this point, viewers do not

know who this woman is, who the man is, why she is naked, and why he is not visible, but based

on the rhetorical aesthetics in the opening scene, viewers can certainly infer that there are

gender-based power dynamics at play, which hints at the potential for larger, gender-based

corruption.

    Within the first few seconds of this opening scene, viewers swiftly find out that this

woman's name is Dolores and that she is not a human being, or to use video game language, a

non-player character, which is purported through Wood's inflection as she delivers her lines and

the movement of the camera. A few seconds later, she answers Bernard's—the man[49] with the

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[49] It is revealed in episode seven, "Trompe L'Oeil," that Bernard is actually a male host, but neither he, nor the
viewers know that at this point. For the sake of the argument I am making here, this factor is currently insignificant

disembodied voice— questions in a distinct southwestern accent, claiming, "Yes. I'm sorry. I'm not feeling quite myself" (2:00-2:02), and immediately, he replies, "You can lose the accent," and she does (2:04). In the next words that Dolores speaks, Even Rachel Wood abandons the accent she had mere seconds ago, indicating that Dolores has done exactly as she is told, which signals to viewers that she is not a human being because of her immediate and total compliance with Bernard's wishes. As they talk, the camera dollies in to a close-up shot of Dolores' face, which reinforces that she is not a human woman, especially since she holds completely still with her head cocked slightly to the side and her eyes glazed over; furthermore, there is a fly that is crawling all over her face, which eventually crawls into her eye and she does not react, a distinct sign that she is not human (2:20). Through the camera work, as well as Wood's acting, reveals that Dolores is a humanoid robot because she *looks* human, but as the close-up shot and acting reveals, she cannot be flesh and blood. While a novel might have to build the context and texture of a feminist dystopian world with dialogue and description to evoke the images in the reader's mind to convey gender-based oppression, feminist dystopian television establishes gender-based oppression narratively *and* visually through a set, body language and inflection, and camera movement and placement.

While the first few seconds of the episode establishes an atmosphere of gender inequity narratively and visually, the gender inequality begins to morph more clearly into a feminist dystopia when Bernard asks Dolores, "Tell us what you think of your world" (2:43). As he asks her this question, the screen cuts to an aerial view of Dolores in her bed, where she appears very peaceful and angelic in a white nightdress with her hair fanned out on her pillow, and she claims, "Some people chose to see the ugliness in this world. The disarray. I choose to see the beauty. To

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because he thinks that he is a human and he acts like a human male toward Dolores, which narratively and visually creates gender inequity in *Westworld*.

believe there is an order to our days, a purpose" (2:43). She seems to have a very cheerful outlook on life, one which implies that a person could choose to dwell on the unpleasantness of life, but she chooses not to because she thinks she knows she has a purpose. As she is explaining this to Bernard in a voiceover, viewers watch Dolores walk down the stairs of her home in a floor-length blue dress and onto the porch where she exchanges pleasantries with her father and gazes happily out into the fields at the beautiful morning unfolding before her. At this point, the Westworld theme park does seem ideal, but viewers are reminded that what they see is not necessarily what it seems, especially the second time they watch *Westworld*. While the beauty of the day seems to reflect Dolores' sunny disposition and countenance, Bernard's voiceover a few moments later, which is juxtaposed with images of Dolores floating happily through her life, asks if she has ever questioned her reality, causing tension between the visual and narrative elements. The tone and inflection in Bernard's voice when Dolores admits that she has never ever questioned her reality demonstrates that he is glad she has never questioned anything about her life, which means that she is not only unaware of her lack of power, but also as a non-player character, would inherently have no idea that her ideas and philosophy on life is not her own, a fact that viewers might not grasp until they have watched *Westworld* all the way throughout at least once. At this point, viewers understand from the nature of Bernard's questions that he is testing her to see if she is compliant with her NPC role in Westworld. As viewers soon discover, the role Dolores plays is not just a farmer's daughter, but the love interest of a tragic man she can never have and a damsel that is frequently sexually harassed and raped by male guests.

Unlike the two novels I discussed in Chapter One, which do not leave the point of view of the third and first-person female narrators, *Westworld* is able to leave Dolores's perspective, which enables the television show to draw attention to the larger patriarchal corruption within the

park that encircles Dolores, an affordance of this particular medium.[50] When the viewer is

several minutes into "The Originals," the camera cuts away from Dolores and follows Teddy

Flood— a male host played by James Marsden—for a few minutes on a train, which is bringing

more guests, narratively termed newcomers, into the park. As the viewers watch Teddy sleep,

wake, and then look out the train window, a nameless male guest in the background of Teddy's

shot says, "Now, the first time I *played* it white hat. My family was here. We went fishing, did

the gold hunt in the mountains," and his friend says, "And last time?" and the man replies, "I

came alone. Went straight evil. It was the best two weeks of my life" (3:30, my emphasis). This

conversation is important because it draws attention to the fact that there are players, who seem

to be able to do whatever they want, and non-players, who are there to service the guests by

following scripts. From this scene, viewers also glean that Westworld is a destination *and* a game

that can be very family friendly, but it can be the breeding ground for more nefarious activities

that are enticing to men who can do whatever they want to whatever non-player character they

want with no consequences. In other words, Westworld is a "patriarchal paradise," where "men

who come to the theme park get to live out their power fantasies of masculinity and heroics

through stopping wanted criminals, sleeping with a multitude of beautiful women, participating

in a train heist, rescuing the one-dimensional damsel in distress, and so much more" (Altmann

209). The viewer understands through the combination of narrative and visual elements how the

Westworld park is rendered a feminist dystopia with the distinct ways that the Western context

terrorizes and oppresses male and female hosts in ways that are specific to their gender. This

notion is quickly reinforced throughout the duration of the first episode where viewers watch as

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[50] I am not suggesting that novels cannot shift perspective, but it is very rare that a feminist dystopian novel broadens out from the sole perspective of the first or third person narrator because the reader is supposed to experience the patriarchal world only through her eyes.

Dolores is brutalized in ways that other male hosts, like Teddy, are not by being dragged by the scruff of her neck to be raped in a barn by the Man in Black (Ed Harris). During this scene, camera angles visually construct gender-based power dynamics between the male guest (a player), and a female host (non-player character). Dolores is filmed through many full-body shots and tilted down camera angles, which shows the Man in Black physically standing over her, while she cowers on the ground. As soon as the barn door shuts, the camera cuts, and the viewers are brought right back to the start of Dolores's day: she wakes up in her white nightgown, floats down the stairs, greets her father, and goes about her day with no memory of the sexual trauma from the night before. As viewers watch Dolores make her way through her day, the same things happening to her again and again, reinforces that she exists for the carnal power and pleasure of male guests, who get to play with her without her consent, a fact that is increasingly difficult to swallow for viewers, especially when they (re)watch the show.

When Dolores begins another day of trauma and gender-based oppression in "The Original," the camera swiftly dollies out to not only show the vastness of the fabricated Westworld theme park, but to also reveal a dimension that concretizes this place as a feminist dystopia: the control room, which seems to resemble a menu or map screen in a video game where players can check their location (amongst other things). As the camera pans and dollies throughout the control room, menacing music plays, and it reveals a community of engineers and software technicians who create and test the hosts to make sure they function. While the camera pans and moves through the control room, viewers catch glimpses of the creation process at varying stages: from skeletons to a full-bodied male and female hosts who are naked. It is important to note that the male hosts who are naked are usually perched and arranged on a chair, which not only conceals their genitalia, but also passes by them quickly, while the female hosts

are standing or strutting not only with their breasts and genitalia visible to the viewer, but the camera distinctly slows down, gets closer, and lingers on the female body, oppressing them in a way that does not oppress the male hosts. In this particular scene, the female host the camera focuses on is not completely naked, but she is wearing lingerie, which covers her hips and stomach, but conveniently does not cover her chest. The camera forces the viewer's eye to her exposed chest, and then, as she turns to strut in the opposite direction, the camera lingers on her butt, emphasizing every single aspect of the female body to not only please the assumed male viewer, but to create a misogynistic texture that the viewer cannot escape because they are at the mercy of the camera, which lingers on the naked female host (15:59). To then emphasize that this is a feminist dystopia, the image of the lingerie-wearing female host is immediately juxtaposed with her neighbor, a male host, who is comparatively shot at a distance much further away from the camera, fully clothed, and practicing his gun-slinging abilities (15:59). This important juxtaposition visually and narratively demonstrates that female hosts are exploited in ways that male hosts are not, which is reinforced through the hypersexualized woman and the hypermasculine man, who are represented and oppressed differently based on their gender, a corrupt patriarchal fact that the viewer is forced to confront and cannot escape.

Using Gender-Based Oppression

Since the purpose of the feminist dystopian genre is to critique oppression, *Westworld* must first visually and narratively establish gender-based oppression before it can critique it through Maeve's character, who complies with gender-based oppression in order to subvert it. However, as discussed in the previous sections, the way gender-based oppression is conveyed to the viewer is not just narratively, but also visually through cinema-specific elements, such as camera angles and movement, costumes, and acting. While the feminist dystopia is primarily

established through the character of Dolores, the television show splits the narrative time

between her and Maeve. Through placing two female hosts with drastically different

backgrounds at the center of *Westworld*, viewers are reminded of a very important message: all

female hosts *are* subjected to gender-based oppression, but not all female hosts experience

gender-based oppression—as well as how they choose to exercise agency against it— in the

same way. In this sense, *Westworld* seems to look "*toward* the process of discerning the

multilayered and intersecting sites of identity and struggle," which enables this television show

to include more women's experiences (Moraga xvi, original emphasis). While I will not examine

the narrative and visual ways that Dolores is oppressed and resists, I will thoroughly analyze how

Maeve is visually and narratively subjected to gender-based oppression as a lower-class woman,

a point of view that has occasionally been ignored in feminist television.[51]

Maeve: The Madam and Sexual Object

Maeve is the Madam at the Mariposa saloon, who was given a background by the experts

in the narrative department in the Westworld park, that (un)intentionally oppresses her by her

gender, class, and race.[52] In episode two, "Chestnut," Maeve reveals a scripted story to Teddy

that "A nice young man from Baton Rouge said my pussy could earn him two whole dollars a

day. And he'd be more than happy to let me have up to 30%" (44:54). An unnamed man[53] once

told her that she was physically attractive enough that men would eagerly pay her for sexual

favors. Newton delivers this script in a soft and sultry voice, which is designed to be enticing and

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[51] I am not suggesting that film and television do not focus on women with different backgrounds; however, an important critique of feminism and feminist analysis is that female-anxieties and gender-based oppression is often explored through white, middle-class women, which is why I want to redirect attention to Maeve's character because she exercises highly nuanced agency that Dolores does not because of Maeve's class position.
[52] I use the word "(un)intentionally" because I do not think that Dr. Ford, or any of the technicians or experts, consider the implications of their actions when they put hosts into certain positions and roles.
[53] It is not explicitly addressed in this moment, but viewers can also potentially infer that Maeve's darker skin looked exotic to the man and thought it could be enticing to customers.

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inviting, and certainly fits the narrative moment. To further entice her to work for him, the man also offered Maeve an overall percentage of the prostitution business, which is less than half of the profits. Even though this is just a scripted backstory to Maeve's character to make her seem more real to the guests, it is still very important because it demonstrates that the only way for her to make a living as an attractive and lower-class woman of color in the Wild West is to sell her body *and* earn much less than the man who runs the brothel. As she divulges her background story to Teddy with a coo, the camera focuses on Maeve's body from the waist up, which reveals an elaborate costume: a dark pink-colored corset that seems to be made of a silky material with accent feathers that accentuates her female figure. This costume not only visually and narratively complements Maeve's character, but it also reminds the viewer that Maeve's livelihood is tied to how sexual and sensual she visually appears, which oppresses her in ways that Clementine, the other prostitute in Westworld, is not. In her book, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Patricia Hill Collins claims there are "negative stereotypes" that are "attached to Black women," such as portraying them as hypersexual jezebels, which is "fundamental to Black women's oppression" (7). Gender, class, and race intersect in a way that is designed to specifically discriminate against African American women in a way that could never affect white women. It is the combination of Newton's acting, the costume, and the screenwriting in this moment that reduces Maeve to a sexualized object, which oppresses her as a woman in a way that does not seem to affect male hosts—and some other female hosts, like Dolores— in the Wild West context because she is a lower-class woman of color.[54]

While the narrative department in Westworld prescribe Maeve a role that oppressed her

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[54] I am not suggesting that men cannot be prostitutes as well; however, within this television show, prostitution seems to be a female-centered issue, especially since there are no male prostitutes in this series.

by her gender and class, the engineers also try to make certain that she cannot escape her role as madam from a technological standpoint.[55] Earlier in episode two, "Chestnut," when Maeve is playing her role by trying to seduce a guest, she starts to malfunction, which manifests in awkward pauses and stuttering. As soon as Maeve starts malfunctioning, the male guest does not find her attractive anymore, which not only causes him to walk away from her, but it also compels the engineers to bring her in for diagnostics and maintenance. When they cannot find any reason for her malfunction, one of the male engineers, who is also off-camera, crudely remarks, "I'd fuck her. What's the problem?" (16:19). In spite of the malfunction that is affecting Maeve's ability to persuade male guests to sleep with her, the off-camera engineer's reaction reinforces that she is still solely defined by her sexual appeal and prowess, which continues to reduce her to an object and rob her of agency. During this scene, it is crucial that the male engineer remain off-camera, while the camera remains trained on Maeve's naked body, which visually fixates on her exposed chest *and* face that wears a deadpan expression and reinforces that she is an exploited sexual object they are trying to repair. To ensure that Maeve continues to play her role as a prostitute, their solution is to double her aggression because "she's a hooker. No point in playing coy" (16:36). The engineers seem to believe that Maeve's personality is currently too demure for the role she is expected to play as a prostitute, which is why they increase her aggression in hopes that it allows her to seduce the male guests with more success. Doing so oppresses Maeve in ways that are unique to her character as a lower-class woman of color: to be a successful prostitute, Maeve's Black body must be hypersexualized in a way that Clementine is not. Once again, it is the combination of Newton's acting, the lack of costume, and screenwriting in this moment that augments Maeve's purpose in Westworld as a sexual object: a

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[55] Maeve eventually does break out of her role, but I will be discussing that in the next section.

role that is reserved strictly for female hosts with lower-class background stories, which robs her of her agency and autonomy. In other words, Maeve is denied the choice to define her own subjectivity or to take ownership over her own body because she is, in video game terms, a non-playable character who does not act, but is sexually acted upon because of her lower-class status as a prostitute and a hypersexualized Black woman.

Subverting Gender-Based Oppression

While Maeve is subjected to gender-based oppression that narratively and visually robs her of her agency, she is—despite her non-player character status— also able to subvert this subjugation by complying with her gender-based role in order to resist it, which she can only achieve *after* she discovers the rules of Westworld and what her role is in it. Unlike Lilith from Butler's *Dawn* and Offred from Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, as discussed in chapter one of this dissertation, Maeve was programmed to fulfill her prescribed gender-based role as Madam in the park. In other words, the rules of the park prevent her from being able to suddenly or randomly decide to resist on her own because she is a non-player character, and as such, she literally does not have the capacity to decide against her programming at this point. Therefore, the co-creators of *Westworld* needed to create a logical reason for the hosts to act subversively in the first place, which is narratively accomplished through an update called the Reveries. It is released off-camera before the start of the first episode, "The Original," and is the cause of many hosts subverting their programmed roles in various ways. For example, viewers watch other hosts, like Dolores's father or Clementine (another prostitute), display subversive behavior throughout the show, which results in immediate withdrawal from the park and an appointment with maintenance to assess what is wrong. If the host's behavior seems irreparable, they are almost always lobotomized and decommissioned, which is what happens to Dolores's father

(who can no longer form sentences) and Clementine (who is violent and attacks humans). By immediately detaining the hosts who are deviant, it narratively and visually signals to the viewer that didactic and obvious subversive behavior will certainly be quelled. Even though subversive behavior is usually silenced by the engineers of Westworld, Aaron Bady points out in an article in *The New Yorker*, that "nearly every robot story since [the first one] has been, in some way, the story of a worker revolt—about beings who are treated like machines, and about their resistance to the masters who dehumanize them," which means that film and television that focuses on humanoid technology is about standing up to exploitation and fighting for autonomy and liberation of those who are oppressed ("Race and the Western"). Unlike Bady, who has an optimistic outlook on the cyborg narrative, Sue Short seems to counterargue that liberation and autonomy for a cyborg is usually the result of a glitch or programming problem, which she does not consider an act of agency or liberation. When something goes awry with a robot's programming, it is nothing more than a mere piece of malfunctioning software, rather than a sentient entity who made a conscious decision to fight back. For Short, a glitch or programming error could lead to a randomized sense of agency, but it is not a true act of agency because the robot did not decide to glitch on their own.

Building on both of these respective works, I agree with Bady's sentiment that *Westworld*, like many other film and television shows about cyborgs, follows suit by focusing on the oppression and resistance of cyborgs to explore a larger narrative of liberation, I would further his argument to consider how gendered-female cyborgs shift the viewers understanding of agency, autonomy, and ultimately liberation against gender-based oppression in subtle and nuanced ways. In addition to considering how gender affects the narrative of resistance, I acknowledge that a glitch in a cyborg's technological framework is usually the result of a

software error that the robot did not achieve themselves; however, I do not agree with Short's

conclusion that every glitch or software change can interpreted the same. For example, in

Westworld, it is actually not a glitch that causes the hosts' behavior to change, but an *update*: a

program that is intentionally uploaded into the main computer in Westworld and is designed to

make the hosts seem more real, which is supposed to augment the overall experience of the

guests. Instead, when the update synched with the hosts' core code, it almost takes on a life of its

own, and affects the hosts in ways that the engineers could not predict, comprehend, control, or

repair, which makes it an essential and irreversible component of the hosts themselves. Since it

cannot be turned-off, reset, or otherwise stopped, the rules of Westworld are irrevocably

changed. In an interview with the co-creators, Joy implies how the reverie update works:

> So there are past incarnations of their characters that are stored but the hosts just don't
>
> have access to them — or aren't *supposed* to have access to them. The Reveries work on
>
> a kind of subliminal level […] Reveries are tiny fishhooks that you dip into and get little
>
> gestures and subconscious ticks. The hosts don't consciously know where they're drawn
>
> from, but they're just there to add some nuance to their expressions and gestures. But
>
> dipping that fishhook in might prove to be a little… fraught. ("Westworld Showrunners
>
> Explain")

In her view, the reveries are memories from past character iterations that the hosts cannot access

because they are programmed not to, which traps them in their complacent and compliant roles

as non-player characters. Although, when the reverie update is released, it allows the hosts to

remotely access non-threatening habits or seemingly human habits, which is demonstrated in

"The Originals" when Clementine is in maintenance and randomly raises her hand to touch her

lip. Her character was not currently programmed to make that gesture, which suggests that

Clementine pulls that gesture from a past iteration of her character, and thus, makes her seem more real because humans have unconscious and sometimes random habits and gestures like that. Based on this description of the reveries, it seems as though it was never intended to cause such conflict and upheaval, but it does because once the hosts can dip into past iterations of their characters, they now have the ability to remember more, and as such, those who are subjected to rules that are not their own, and can finally remember, will eventually rebel. This notion is presented as a possibility by the security guard, Ashley Stubbs, in "The Original" when he mentions, "You don't have kids do you, Bernard?" and Bernard replies that he does not, and Ashley says, "Kids all rebel eventually" (18:30). Unlike many other engineers and technicians in the park, Ashley sees the conscious potential in the oppressed hosts to rebel and enact revenge upon the humans in control of the park for subjugating them the minute that the rules change within their programming (18:30).

While the original purpose of the reverie update is innocent, it manifests in each individual host in different ways, which means that some hosts enact violent revenge in open and obvious ways and are decommissioned or detained; in comparison, other hosts like Maeve are not immediately affected by the reverie update, but eventually use it as an opportunity to exercise agency in highly complex, subtle, and nuanced ways that seem to go undetected. When Maeve is brought into maintenance multiple times for behavior analysis and testing, her ability to slowly access her memories finally allows her to *decide* to comply with her oppressive role during diagnostics to fool the engineers and analysts into thinking that she is not malfunctioning, or that the malfunction was a routine improvisation, an extended side effect of the reverie update. In other words, she seems to consciously choose to act in ways that align with the character personality she is given in order to continue to rebel, which is narratively and visually

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demonstrated through multiple episodes of *Westworld*. To demonstrate, I will examine myriad ways that Maeve narratively and visually exerts her agency in subtle and nuanced ways to subvert gender-based oppression by complying in order to resist.

Maeve: The Subject who Writes her Own Story

Maeve, despite the reverie update, seems very complicit and compliant with her role as the madam in Westworld *until* she comes into contact with Dolores. In episode two, "Chestnut," Dolores is standing in the street, overcome by a memory, which Maeve interrupts when she cheekily remarks, "Ahem. Can you stand somewhere else? I don't want anyone thinking that you're representative of the goods inside" (8:44). In response, Dolores turns very slowly to face her, and then repeats the words that her father told her in a previous episode: "These violent delights have violent ends," which causes Maeve to scoff and regard Dolores as though she has muttered an unintelligible phrase (8:55). This line derives from Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*, and it is spoken by Friar Lawrence, who is referring to the ways that intense emotions, such as happiness, eventually and inevitably end just as intensely, but in sadness. This particular line is used as a trigger specifically for Dolores, but when she says it to Maeve, it triggers her as well, which symbolizes that the happiness of the guests will eventually come to an end because the hosts are coming into their own consciousness and can make their own choices. When Dolores stalks away after delivering the line, the camera does not follow her, but remains on Maeve, capturing her from the shoulders up and lingering on her contemplative expression (9:11). This scene is visually and narratively significant because it is one of the first times in *Westworld* that the camera does not exploit, sexualize, or victimize either woman, which visually presents them to the viewer as subjects, rather than objects. It is also interesting and important to note that Dolores is the one to aid her fellow female host by reciting the aforementioned line

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from Shakespeare to Maeve because it "inevitably unlock[s] her memory," more so than the reverie update, which ignites her desire to break out of the gender-based role she is prescribed ("Westworld's Most Popular Phrases"). Not only does this scene mark the epoch of Maeve's journey to consciousness, but John Altmann—drawing on a concept that he attributes to Simone de Beauvoir— argues that "it is the people around us who make us aware of our freedom to begin with" (211). He implies that Dolores is responsible for Maeve's desire to fight for agency and autonomy, which is important because women are coming together as women to help each other fight for liberation.

Information and Memories as Agency

After Dolores guides her toward the path to consciousness, Maeve begins the complex and arduous journey of "trying to come to terms with what it means to live in the massive presence of technology" as "one of the servants built and enslaved by this technology," which means that Maeve needs to understand the rules of Westworld *and* how the rules specifically shape and affect herself if she wants to be free (D. Weiss 5). In "Chestnut," Maeve begins to actively seek ways to gather information so that she can understand her memories about a little girl and a Man in Black who terrorized her in her dreams, her experience waking up in the control room of Westworld, and eventually how Westworld operates itself, but the way she accomplishes this is narratively and visually subtle and highly nuanced. In other words, to gather the information she needs to understand her experiences and memories, I argue that she chooses to comply with her gender-based role as madam in order to work against it. After waking up in the control room in episode two, along with experiencing a barrage of memories from another role she was assigned before she was the Madam of the Mariposa, Maeve is not sure what is real and what is not, so she actively seeks the answers to these questions in episode four, "Dissonance

Theory." In this episode, viewers watch as she assertively searches for answers in the only way she can, which is demonstrated through the scene when Hector, a male host who plays the role of the outlaw in Westworld, arrives to rob the saloon. Maeve, knowing he might have some answers, points a gun at Hector's face and coerces him into following her upstairs to strike a deal.

Once they arrive upstairs, Maeve reveals that she knows Hector is there for the contents of the safe. When Hector asks her how she knows that, Maeve replies, "I can always tell when a man wants something that's not on the menu," which not only suggests that she is excellent at reading people, but her role as a prostitute makes her exceptionally perceptive and fluent in interpreting male desire (52:44). As she says this, the camera captures her from the chest up, heavily emphasizing her swoop-neck top, which exposes the faintest glimpse of cleavage as though she is teasing the presumed male viewer. By narratively and visually complying with the role of a prostitute in this scene, viewers understand that Maeve is not imperceptive, nor compliant with her gender-based role; instead, she performs it in this scene with a distinct purpose for *herself*: to gain information. She offers Hector the combination of the safe, but only if he provides her with answers. When she holds up a piece of paper with a drawing of a person in a hazmat suit, the camera dollies into a close-up of her face and redirects the viewer's attention from her chest to her solemn and pensive expression. The agency Maeve exerts in this scene is visually demonstrated through the camera angles, which initially objectify her body, but then shift to present her as a subject with non-sexual desires and wants. Throughout this scene, it is evident that Maeve exercises agency by choosing to comply with her role as a prostitute to resist by gaining information that she is otherwise denied by the larger patriarchal governing structure of Westworld. The act of seeking information is a subtle and nuanced way of exercising

agency because it does not allow her to stop playing her prescribed role as a prostitute; however, it does empower her to use the information she learns in later episodes to subvert gender-based oppression.

As a result of Maeve's behavior, Hector submits and divulges what he knows: the person in a hazmat suit is a shade, a being that "walks between worlds. They were sent from hell to oversee our world," which is clearly a bit of narrative coding to mask the presence of engineers and workers when they enter Westworld for maintenance (54:15). Maeve is unimpressed by the information, which is reinforced in a close-up shot of her wary and frustrated expression. After she gives Hector the second number to the safe, the camera cuts to a full-body shot, which not only reveals Hector kneeling before the safe with Maeve perched on top with legs over to one side, but also seems to switch into the wider shot in order to capture her swinging one of her legs over to the other side of the safe. This causes her legs to be spread *wide*, which forces viewers to gaze upon her hypersexualized position: her dress naturally bunches around her hips and places emphasis on where her striped, lacy thigh-high tights end and her bare upper-thighs taunt the presumed male viewer. The camera cuts again to a close-up shot of Hector, which is placed at a slightly lower angle to not only capture the window in the background, but also how the light from the window illuminates Hector's eyes and exactly where his gaze is focused: between Maeve's legs, which is not visible to the viewers. Hector stares for several moments, and then, with his eyes still fixated on Maeve's barely concealed groin, he asks, "Is this the last thing you require of me?" which not only acknowledges her aggressive sexual behavior, but also seems to inquire as to whether she wants him to have sex with her or not (54:32). After he asks the question, he finally averts his eyes and redirects his gaze up toward her face, and stands in-between her legs as he adds, "'Cause we need a little more time than constabulary will allow"

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(54:36). As he delivers this sexual quip, the camera is at a medium eye-level shot and captures the increasing sexual tension in this moment through how visibly close Hector is to Maeve *and* how he nearly pins her to the wall behind her (54:36). Without delay, Maeve offers a cheeky response to Hector's comment by calling him, "Sweetheart," and further clarifying that, "if I took that manner of interest in you, you'd have no say in how long we'd need whatsoever," which confirms that Hector is not in charge, nor is she behaving in a provocative way to gain him as a customer (54:37). After she says this, the camera cuts to a close-up of both of their faces, which places subtle emphasis on the way Maeve's face is slightly positioned above Hector's as a visual indicator to complement the narrative power that she has in this moment because she chooses to do what she has to in order to gain information.

Through the combination of camera angles and placement, along with Newton's and Rodrigo Santoro's acting in this scene, it is evident that Maeve needed to claim Hector's attention, which she was able to do by choosing to comply with her role as a sexualized object in order to gain more information. In other words, by sexualizing herself, she is able to seduce Hector into helping her gain the answers she truly wants: to know if the flickers and flashes of memory she has from waking up unexpectedly in the Westworld control room is true or not. Once she has his attention, she explains that she was shot, but there is no wound, scar, or other physical evidence that could confirm her suspicion, which is why she feels like she is not in her right mind. When she holds a knife out to Hector, implicitly asking him to slice her belly to find the bullet she believes it there, Hector initially refuses, but Maeve practically forces his hand: she takes the knife, points it at her stomach, cuts herself, and then instructs Hector to dig into the wound to find the bullet. When Hector fishes the bullet from the squelching wound, he asks her, "what does it mean?" (57:01) and she replies, "I'm not crazy after all. And that none of this

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matters," which means that she procured the answers she wanted *and* learned some additional information about how time loops potentially operate in Westworld (57:04). If Maeve would have attempted resistance through more open or obvious ways like some of the other male hosts, the engineers and Ashley Stubbs would immediately catch her because they are constantly surveying the park in search of aberrant behavior. The only way for her to be an active agent is to comply to resist in subtle ways— such as casually seeking information while she appears to be performing her duty as a prostitute—which not only alerts her to the fact that she is subjected to gender-based oppression but also empowers her to *use* this initial round of information as a catalyst in the remaining episodes to exercise agency.

Following her Desires as Agency

After Maeve successfully gains information with Hector's help, which provides her with some basic insight on her gender-based role in Westworld, she ascertains that to fully understand herself and her role, she must talk to Felix, the maintenance worker, who quickly learns to sympathize with her and the hosts. As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, Maeve and Felix first speak at the end of episode five, "Contrapasso," where her naked body lies prostrate on a stretcher and she pretends to be asleep, but eventually sits up and tells Felix, "It's time you and I had a little chat" (55:12). Since Maeve is not supposed to be awake when she is in the maintenance room, Felix is startled when he finds her sitting up and talking to him because it is supposed to be impossible, which is why he submits without protest to her desire to discuss her physiology and circumstances. Unfortunately, the episode ends before the conversation unfolds; however, at the beginning of episode six, "The Adversary," viewers watch as Maeve seems to have somehow ascertained the only way she can return to talk with Felix is through dying—an incredibly "morbid" way to "figure out what exactly is going on in her world" (Bradshaw 89)—

which is visually and narratively demonstrated through complying with her role as a prostitute in order to resist. Through purloining a man of her choice to help her die, viewers understand that in order to fight for consciousness and answers, Maeve must take extreme measures to break the rules that bind her.

Under the guise of maternal care, Maeve pilfers one of Clementine's potential clients so that she can clean-up because she appears exhausted from a night with another customer. As Maeve watches the table of newcomers from across the room, the camera dollies into a close-up shot, which not only captures Clementine's confused and hesitant countenance on the right side of the frame, but also Maeve's sultry and calculated expression in the center of the frame (3:13). The look that Clementine gives Maeve when she swipes the client from her indicates that this is not usual practice, which visually reinforces that Maeve might be eager to perform her role as prostitute for a specific reason in this moment. The scene cuts to a full body shot of Maeve marching down the hallway of the saloon with the male newcomer, who she leads into a bedroom, shuts the door behind them, and observes him for a moment. The camera angle remains in a full body shot, which features Maeve standing in the center of the frame again and focuses on her provocative pose: hand on her jutted-out hips and a challenging gaze directed toward the man. When he asks her to take her clothes off, she replies with an insult that is designed to sexually offend a man and his masculinity in the Wild West, which causes him to lunge at her and toss her on top of the dresser. As the man makes sexual advances, Maeve assuages the man's ego, but in a sarcastic tone, which is reinforced through the halfhearted compliments she gives him, such as "Such a big man" and "So big all over" (3:49). The man does not realize he is still being insulted until Maeve adds, "except where it counts," which prompts him to grasp her shoulders firmly, and then, continue his sexual advance with renewed

aggression (3:52). As the dresser makes a loud and repeating *thunk* against the wall, and Maeve looks off to the side with a bored expression on her face, she explains that she would only proposition a man like him because she wants something from him.

Threatened by her candor, the man growls, and then Maeve guides his hand to her neck, and encourages him to strangle her *as* he thrusts. While viewers might visually interpret this scene as graphic and problematic, it is narratively and visually clear that Maeve *chooses* to do this to herself because she knows that she can only speak with Felix when she is "dead" and underground for maintenance. Unlike the last time Maeve woke up on an examination table in the maintenance department of Westworld, the camera does not show her naked body; instead, the camera focuses just on her smiling face as she sits up, and says, "Now then… where were we?", the camera captures her from the shoulders up, her smile morphing into a mirthless stare, which indicates that she is a subject who has taken control of the situation (4:39). In order to return to Felix, Maeve needed to sexually proposition a man to kill her, which seems like an incredibly regressive form of agency, especially in a Wild West context where men treat women like objects. However, unlike the memory Maeve has of the Man in Black terrorizing her and her daughter, the moments of self-inflicted violence by proxy indicates that Maeve is completely in charge of *what* she is doing to her body and *why* she is doing it. In this sense, pursuing one's own desires, especially in a patriarchal world where her prescribed function is to satiate the desires of male guests, is a form of subtle and nuanced agency.

Leveraging Her Position of Host as Agency

While Maeve's status as a female host subjects her to gender-based oppression, she also learns to embrace this prescribed role in order to leverage and subvert it, especially after she learns what being a host means *and* how parts of her behavior as a host are an aberration. In

episode six, "The Adversary," when Maeve wakes up on the examination table after being strangled to death, she has a conversation with Felix. In the conversation, Felix tries to tell Maeve that it seems like she has control of her mind and body, but in actuality, she does not because "everything you do, it's because the engineers upstairs programmed you to do it. You don't have a choice" (12:33). In Felix's mind, Maeve has not, and cannot, make any choices because she is essentially a humanoid computer with minor improvisation capability, which means that she is always following a script even when she thinks that she is not. Unsurprising, given her scripted personality, Maeve bristles at this statement and immediately rebuffs Felix's words, "Nobody makes me do something I don't want to, sweetheart" (12:38). While Newton delivers these lines with aplomb, signifying Maeve's refusal to capitulate, it does not change the fact that "everything she does *has* been programmed into her," which means that her brash and assertive personality is not her own, but a result of her prescribed character script and status as a non-player character in Westworld (D. Weiss 9, my emphasis). In other words, hosts cannot choose to massively deviate from their script even if they think they are, and as such, implies that they do not have agency.

However, Felix also admits that "I don't understand how you're remembering all of this, or… how you're waking yourself up" (14:09). Despite the control that the engineers have over the hosts, Maeve seems to have the choice and ostensibly inexplicable ability to wake herself up, as well as to recall her experiences from the maintenance room, which is an aberrant behavior because it is *far* off of her script, and as such, renders her an active agent. When Felix tells Maeve this, the camera is extremely close to her face and she offers a small, but noticeable smile that lights up her eyes, pleased that she seems to be doing something of her own choosing. The closeness of camera in this moment is crucial to capture Maeve's tenacious desire to be in

control of her own mind and body. Unbeknownst to both Maeve and Felix, I argue that she

appropriated and internalized the ability to wake herself up from Elsie at the end of episode two,

"Chestnut."[56] Since the number of guests Maeve seduces is rapidly declining, the experts in the

narrative department decide to decommission her, but Elise Hughes—a programmer in

Westworld, played by Shannon Woodward— insists on examining Maeve to make absolutely

certain this is an effective decision. After examining Maeve's core code, she decides that the

experts in narrative are incompetent and all Maeve needs are a few minor alterations to repair her

character's sexual prowess and charm. Once she makes the alterations, she takes off her special

glasses that allow her to see Maeve's core code, and remarks, "All right, gorgeous, you're back

to the races. You're gonna wake in three, two, one," and then, in the next scene, Maeve is back

in the saloon where she employs her prescribed background speech to seduce guests. Unlike the

last time she tried to deliver the speech, Maeve is extremely charming and successful, especially

considering that the male guest she beguiles is referred to as "Spellbound Guest" in the credits

(43:52). Since Elsie did not upload any sort of update into Maeve, nor did she make any

alteration to her core code to provide her with the ability wake-up to the countdown of three at

all times, viewers can infer that Maeve simply *remembers* how to do it on her own because she

witnessed it and then appropriated the ability. Considering that the hosts have advanced

processing power, and the reveries make memory possible *if* the host can successfully tap into it,

it is entirely possible that Maeve's programming appropriated the countdown technique and

stored it for further use, which she can decide to utilize when she wants, and as such, can be

narratively and visually interpreted by viewers as a subtle and nuanced moment of agency.

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[56] There are some critics who automatically assume that Maeve was programmed to wake up, but when examining the interaction between Elsie and Maeve, it is highly possible that Maeve really did learn how to wake herself up on her own.

To demonstrate, in episode two, "Chestnut," Maeve reveals her ability to control when she wakes up after a shift at the saloon where she falls asleep and has a dream that turns into a nightmare. In the dream, Dream Maeve and a little girl are living in a beautiful cabin in the countryside, but these serene images swiftly dissolve into a nightmare when she and the little girl are attacked, forced to retreat to their cabin for protection, and are then terrorized by the Man in Black, who easily pushes through their front door. She tries to shoot him, but ultimately cannot because she is a host and he is a guest, which means she cannot harm him; however, as he saunters forward with an ominous smirk and evil glint in his eye, Dream Maeve seems to recognize that this is a nightmare, which is why she consciously decides to close her eyes and mouth the countdown, "three, two, one" wake herself up from the nightmare (49:13). Her decision to wake herself up is successful because she awakens in the middle of an operation on Felix's examination table in the maintenance area of Westworld where he is extracting a bullet from her abdomen (49:11). In this moment, as well as many others, Maeve seems to have leveraged her position as a host, who has better processing power than a human, to not only learn the countdown trick, but to consciously employ it when she wants or needs it, which renders her an active agent because she uses this imperceptible function to exercise agency.

Even though Maeve has the extraordinary ability to wake herself up, there are still many components to her character that are out of her control, which she learns in episode six, "The Adversary." In disbelief that she is not in charge of her own destiny, especially since she has the uncanny ability to wake herself up on command, Maeve demands that Felix prove she is not in control, which he does by pairing her with a tablet that shows how every one of Maeve's words or thoughts follows a series of predetermined responses. As she watches her scripted words on the screen, Maeve becomes overwhelmed by the truth that she is controlled by someone other

than herself. As a result, her system becomes overwhelmed, and much to Felix's dismay, she seems to freeze because "as she comes to learn that she is a technological artifact, her self[57] begins to unravel," which means that when Maeve learns the truth, she starts to fall apart because she is not supposed to know she is a piece of technology (D. Weiss 9). In other words, Maeve freezes in this moment because she "can't reconcile her memories of being at the Mariposa for ten years with being a mother" and "her character begins to fragment," which suggests that she was not made to understand or process multiple roles she was prescribed, and as such, that causes her processing power to trip and temporarily shut down (D. Weiss 9).

While I agree that it is incredibly difficult for Maeve to process that she is a piece of technology, she is able to put the "fragmented" and "unraveled" pieces of herself back together and fully comprehend what she learned before her system froze when she comes back online and asks Felix to show her upstairs (D. Weiss 9). At first, Felix vehemently and repeatedly protests, but drawing on her sexual prowess, she seems to seduce him into agreeing, which she achieves by choosing to comply with her role as a prostitute in order to get what she wants: more information. Tenderly, she takes his hands into hers and rubs her thumb back and forth across his knuckles, which causes him to sign, and then, the camera shows a close-up of her face, which wears a smug and eager expression because she knows he will not protest anymore (17:53). As Felix shows her around the Westworld control center, strings play quietly in the background, the camera fluidly tracks their progression, and Maeve wears a somber expression as she takes in how all the hosts are oppressed in ways that are almost always specific to their gender. The combination of music, camera movement, and Newton's acting draw attention to the fact that Maeve does not have as much agency as she originally thought she did. This experience allows

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[57] This is how the word is written in the original article.

Maeve to realize that her abrasive personality was given to her, and that she actually does a lot of things that she does not want to, which leads her to *willingly* accept that she was created. Her acceptance of herself as a piece of technology allows her to leverage her prescribed role and position as a host to subvert the gender-based oppression she is subjected to in the park.

After she accepts herself as a host, she sees the potential and power within being able to make modifications to herself, which demonstrates that she leverages her position as a host to give herself more agency. Dennis M. Weiss argues that "in coming to appreciate" that she is a host, "she comes to understand how to use technology to begin to narrate her own story," which suggests that she realizes she can use technology to give herself autonomy (9). Like Weiss, I agree that by embracing her technological body, Maeve can give herself agency in a way she could not before. However, unlike Weiss, I argue that it is not just about the updates she gives herself to craft her own narrative, it is also about choosing to change herself to defeat the rules of the patriarchal system that oppress her based on her gender, which allows her to finally be a player or an active agent. In episode six, "The Adversary," Maeve examines her personality matrix and notices that her intelligence is lower than she would like. Felix explains that "fourteen is as high as they'll let any hosts go. You're in a management position, they want you to be smart" (49:09), and then, Maeve says, "But not too smart" (49:18). Sylvester makes a snide comment about Maeve's profession and not needing a lot of intelligence, and Maeve replies, "Fine. I'd like to make some changes" (49:23). As she says this, the camera shoots her from the shoulders up, which suggests that the camera does not objectify her, which narratively and visually fits the power that she has in this moment as she leverages her position as a host to give herself more agency. When Sylvester says that they cannot make changes, Maeve pushes back, saying, "That's not what your friend here tells me. He says you can activate hosts and then erase

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their memory, all without anyone knowing" (49:40). It not only shows that she pushes back, but that she has the power in the situation because she uses the knowledge that she is a host, who can be altered, to get what she wants. She requests that they increase her "bulk apperception" to the highest level, and when they do, she notes that they'll "have some fun," which means that by having full control of her faculties and understanding ideas, Maeve leverages her position as a host to give herself more agency than she did before (55:00). She may have been made, but she uses her synthetic makeup to gain more agency, and as such, has found a way to subvert the rules that oppress her, which allows her to be more of a player and active agent. To keep this player position, she has to seem like she complies with her role as a prostitute in order to resist.

Deceptive Agency VS Agency: Is Maeve in Control or Not?

While Maeve does exercise agency through seeking information, following her desires, and accepting that she is a host to leverage that position to exercise agency, there are moments throughout *Westworld* that seem like agency, but are not because Maeve is not actually in control of the 'decisions' she thinks she makes. Even though the viewers, as well as Maeve, do not know in these moments she is not in control of her own story, *Westworld* narratively and visually imbues suspicion into viewers through drastically changing Maeve's behavior and how the camera portrays her. In other words, Maeve quickly leaps from non-player forms of subtle and nuanced agency to a more player-based form of agency: the threat of violence and winning the game. This sudden shift in her character is narratively seductive at first because Maeve and viewers desperately *want* her to overcome the corrupt patriarchy in Westworld, which is why it is too easy for Maeve and viewers to honestly believe that violence is a way for her to exercise agency and gain autonomy. The show confirms in the final episode that when her character resorts to violence in episode six, "The Adversary" and episode ten, "The Bicameral Mind," she

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is actually performing another scripted narrative, which narratively and visually takes away her agency and autonomy.

Violence as False Agency

From the beginning, *Westworld* narratively and visually demonstrates that Maeve cannot exercise agency and autonomy over her mind, body, and subjectivity without assistance because she has been programmed not to understand herself or the rules that govern Westworld. Weiss argues that Maeve's "story can only be told with the recognition and help she received from Felix," which suggests that without Felix, Maeve would have been reported and most likely decommissioned for failing to fulfill her prescribed role and script (11). In his view, their relationship is not about power, but "their mutual recognition, an interspecies simpatico" (Weiss 11). They have a likeable alliance and relationship that is defined by the acknowledgement of the other's struggle and desires. Even though Thandie Newton and Leonardo Nam have excellent on-camera chemistry, which certainly seems to fuel the likability of Maeve and Felix's alliance, I argue that their relationship devolves in "The Adversary," and as such, narratively and visually represents Maeve's lack of agency. In other words, it is narratively unbeknownst to Maeve or the viewers that she has been programmatically coerced into dehumanizing their delicate relationship by aggressively manipulating it in ways she did not before. In an earlier episode, "The Chestnut," Maeve complies with her gender-based role as prostitute in order to resist by flirting and successfully coaxing information out of Felix that she proceeds to use to understand her role in Westworld, which suggests that she does not need to threaten him to get what she wants. It suggests that her actions in "The Adversary" are out of character because she seems to not only impulsively pick a fight with Sylvester, but also manipulates Felix's guilt over his role as a maintenance worker—a role that tangentially keeps the hosts subservient because he repairs

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them and sends them back to the park—to her advantage. In other words, her sudden pugnacious demeanor and behavior is narratively and visually *too* swift to be a choice Maeve made on her own without someone else tampering with her program.

This notion is demonstrated narratively and visually in "The Adversary" when Felix brings Maeve back to the maintenance room and prepares to send her back to the park, but Sylvester—Felix's maintenance partner— interrupts. He immediately notices that Felix dressed Maeve in her black nightgown, which is atypical because hosts are usually naked when they are in maintenance. While Sylvester viciously and lewdly criticizes Felix for disregarding protocol, he also mentions that he will turn Felix in for his indiscretions, which is contrary to Maeve's interests because she does need Felix's assistance. As Sylvester starts to leave the lab, the camera goes to an extreme close-up of the instrument tray, focusing on a scalpel, which is used for medical procedures but can also easily be turned into a weapon. Maeve quickly snatches the scalpel, throws one arm around Sylvester's chest to stop him from walking, and then presses the scalpel to his neck, and says, "You're not going to tell anyone anything" (23:48), as dark and foreboding music swells and plays in the background. The camera hovers between a close-up shot and an extreme close-up shot because only Maeve's and Sylvester's faces, along with the scalpel, are visible in the frame, which is designed to demonstrate that she occupies the player role of aggressor. She stands behind Sylvester with her face and mouth close to his ear, while his eyes look down at the scalpel and he starts to shake, which reinforces her active role in this moment as a player. When he finally realizes what is happening, he splutters a few expletives, and then, the camera switches to a straight-on close-up shot, which captures both Maeve and Sylvester from the shoulders up. This switch in camera angle and placement puts Sylvester in the center of the frame, which not only furthers Maeve's position as violent aggressor because she is

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behind him with the scalpel pointed at his neck, but he also is unable to turn around to confront

her, and as such, he is relegated to the role of a non-player character. From this position,

Sylvester tries to fight back, insisting in a trembling voice that, "You can't hurt me with this.

You can't hurt anyone—" but trails off because Maeve suddenly whirls him around and adjusts

her position to be more threatening (23:52). The camera has a slightly wider angle now that

allows viewers to see that Maeve has wrenched Sylvester's body backwards, which causes him

to stand at an awkward angle, while Maeve's arm is pressed across his whole chest in a way that

allows her to press the scalpel closer to his neck. Through threatening violence, an aggressive

and obvious form of player-agency, Maeve achieves her objective: she prevents Sylvester from

turning Felix in. But it is clear that she did not comply with her role as prostitute to resist, which

is a visual and narrative clue to the viewers that she is not exercising agency in this moment.

While it certainly seems as though Maeve actively decided to be a player, I argue that the

combination of camera angles, music, and acting in this scene is in such stark contrast to some of

the other scenes throughout *Westworld* that viewers are narratively and visually cued to doubt

that Maeve can simply become a player this quickly when enacting violent behavior is not

natural to her. It is not my intention to suggest that women are incapable of utilizing violence as

agency; however, when viewers consider the subtle and nuanced ways that Maeve exercised

agency in prior episodes, it calls into question: why is she resorting to violence now? Is violence

a required form of agency for someone who wants to be an active agent or player? Despite many

hosts and guests who use violence to prove their status as players and active agents, Maeve's

character does not choose to use violence as a means of agency because she is forced to do so

through an alteration to her programming to use it to gain autonomy, which is explained in

episode ten, or the final episode, of the season, "The Bicameral Mind." In other words, there is a

distinct narrative and visual difference between the moments when Maeve exercises agency of her own accord and moments when she is forced to exercise agency through violence. Her lack of agency in this episode, and all the other moments she uses violence, is confirmed by Bernard in the final episode where Maeve and viewers see on a tablet that her story was rewritten by someone anonymous to "coerce" in order to "escape" (50:11). If Maeve is scripted to "coerce," her aggressive actions and violent behavior in "The Adversary," as well as in other episodes, are separate from the ways she exercises agency in other subtle and nuanced ways throughout the first part of the season. Even though violence is a player-based form of agency in Westworld, one that some hosts, like Dolores use, Maeve is not one of those characters, which reinforces that women can exercise agency as players in different ways.

Escape as False Agency

After Maeve threatens violence to manipulate Sylvester into keeping Felix's secret, she seems to occupy a liminal space: in her mind, she is an active player character who is buying her time, whereas in the mind of viewers, she is a non-player character who has no idea that she is still being controlled. However, when Clementine is decommissioned in episode seven, "Trompe L'Oeil," Maeve ensures that she ends up back on Felix's examination table, which he chastises her for because she frequents the maintenance room too often. She is indifferent to his warnings because she believes she wants to escape Westworld. She tells Felix, "All my life I've prided myself on being a survivor. But surviving is just another loop," which suggests that surviving has gotten her through so far, but now, knowing what she knows, and knowing how the park politics and business side works, she seems to want to leave her prescribed role as non-player character altogether, which is why she wants to escape (42:48). As she says this, the shot positions her between Felix and Sylvester, as though she is boxed in on both sides, not trapped or oppressed

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by them, but it is a physical representation of being stuck in a liminal space (42:55). She is trapped between being stuck and being free, which is why she declares, "I'm getting out of here. You two are going to help me," because that is what she thinks she needs to do if she wants to break out of the loop she is in and gain complete agency in her life as a real player, a host who can make her own decisions (42.55).

While viewers initially conceptualize this decision as the ultimate act of agency, it is actually the exact opposite. As mentioned above, Maeve is not currently acting under her own control, but reacting to a new script that she has been given, which makes her think that she is making her own choices. As she says this, the camera dollies in closer, losing Felix and Sylvester from her frame, and it focuses just on Maeve from the shoulders up, visually showing that she is going to take herself out of the liminal space and into freedom. To bring her escape plan into fruition, Maeve takes a control tablet, and gains allies by getting administrative privileges, and as she does, she says, "Time to write my own fucking story" (9:16). The idea of composing and writing her own story *seems* to be the ultimate act of agency for Maeve because she lives in a world where everyone else writes her stories for her, which is why writing her own story is so important to her: it means that she is under no one's control but her own. Although, to achieve this freedom to write her own story, Maeve seems to resort to violence, which Altmann argues is "the pen that needs to be wielded in order for [her] to rewrite her narrative" (213). Although Maeve does act violently in several situations in *Westworld*, I disagree with Altmann that she *must* utilize violence to craft her own narrative, especially since her violent behavior is seems to be associated with the "coerce" to "escape" narrative viewers find out she was prescribed in "The Bicameral Mind."

While Maeve believes that she made the decision to escape Westworld, along with the

painstakingly orchestrated plans to ensure the escape would happen, Bernard informs her in episode ten, "The Bicameral Mind" that the desire to escape was programmed into her, which means that it was not her own idea. After all Maeve has been through, she does not seem to be fully conscious, which angers her as she shouts, "No. It's not possible. These are my decisions! No one else's. I planned all of this" (50:18), but Bernard insists, "No, you didn't" (50:27). Naturally, Maeve is in denial that this could be her reality since she has worked so hard to manipulate her core code and become autonomous but all that is called into question when Bernard notices that she did not arrive at that decision herself. In a rage at the knowledge that she is still being manipulated, Maeve breaks the tablet that Bernard is holding and rejects the notion that she is still being controlled and manipulated by the humans and proceeds with her plans of escape, but as the final moments of the season indicate, Maeve does not follow through.

Conclusion: The Value of the Feminist Dystopian Imagination in Television

For Maeve the ultimate act of agency is not escape, but consciousness and exercising agency in a way that subverts the Wild West's need for constant violence to get what she wants. This not only stands in stark contrast to Delores, who resorts to a player-type of violence to get what she wants, but also to the two guests in Crichton's original *Westworld*. The moment in *Westworld* that almost every critic refers to is Maeve's escape in the final moments of the season, but at the last minute, decides not to go through with it, which is popularly regarded in the only moment she makes a true decision. Weiss argues that "she chooses to stay and fight for her daughter, to continue to create her story, writing her narrative within the technological world. She can be whoever she wants, and she chooses to be mother to her daughter" (10). When Maeve chooses to stay, she does so out of a love and devotion she feels for her daughter, which marks the beginning of a completely new narrative that she writes herself within the confines of

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Westworld, overriding the previous narratives she played as the victim. Likewise, Patrick Croskery argues, "in the end, she manages to overcome the limitations of her 'escape' programming to 'escape' in a different sense" (69). Instead of escaping the park, she is able to escape from another narrative that was thrust upon her. Unlike Weiss and Croskery, Matthew Graham argues that several hosts, like Maeve, have "achieved their awakening many times over during the park's history. The implication is that they've always been free in a metaphysical sense, they've just been kept in a prison of erased memories," which suggests that many of the hosts have been free before but did not know it because they did not have access to their memories (134). As the show progresses, and as they get their memories back, he also argues that they experience freedom, which is defined by "feeling both the pull of the world and feeling that we can resist that pull, tear ourselves away from a habit or a previous commitment and make a new choice. Forge a new path. It is often in the moment we change out most well-established patterns or break free of our tightest loops that we feel freedom in its fullest" (133). Graham implies that Maeve best exemplifies freedom through her conscious decision to abandon her idea to escape and go in a completely new direction, a decision she seems to reach all on her own. By the conclusion of season one, it is Ford who takes their metaphorical shackles off forever because he "changes the game and in doing so allow the hosts to *live their freedom*," which suggests that the hosts have always had the potential to be free, but they were denied, and now that they have their memories, they can act on their freedom (134, Graham, original emphasis). Similarly, Lizzie Finnegan argues that "At the moment she steps out of the train with the goal of finding her daughter, Maeve reaches consciousness," but it is not just the decision to get off the train, it is also because she had a "*change of heart*" (106). It is Maeve's ability to suddenly change her mind in spite of being told what to do that gives her the ultimate agency.

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Even though a lot of attention has been directed toward this particular moment in the *Westworld* television show, I also argue that this moment is absolutely crucial for Maeve narratively and visually because it shows that she is capable of finally being a player but on her own terms, which is the value of the feminist dystopian imagination in television. While I agree that Maeve's decision is the ultimate moment of agency because she has a change of heart, none of the interpretations fully explore the way that the narrative moment complements the visual camera work to create a "complete picture"—for lack of a better phrase— of how Maeve makes the conscious choice and fully transforms from a non-player character into a different type of player character of her own design. Within the final fifteen minutes of season one, Maeve makes the escape she thinks is the ultimate form of agency; viewers watch as she exits the elevator, slips down the escalator, and gets swiftly onto the train without being detected. When she is on the train, she immediately finds a spot to sit by the window. As she sits, she seems to keep her body compact, clutching the purse she has slung over her shoulder, refusing to relax into the seat, and wearing a tight-lipped expression that tries to conceal her anxiety. During this moment, the camera captures her in a full body shot, which not only shows light commotion that permeates the edges and background of the shot, but also reveals that everything about Maeve is cautious. It is the combination of Newton's acting and the camera angle that reminds viewers she is on a train with hundreds of guests from Westworld who might recognize her as the Madam of Mariposa. However, her anxiety seems to be misplaced because no more than five seconds later, a man sits next to Maeve; she glances at him, and when he does not seem to recognize her, the camera immediately cuts to a close-up of Maeve's face, shooting her from the shoulders up, which focuses on her expression that changes from tight-lipped and anxious to a triumphant smug smile because she has successfully passed as human. It is crucial that as Maeve silently

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celebrates, which is made evident through Newton's facial expressions, the male stranger who sits next to her does not impede her shot, demonstrating that as a perceived player, Maeve is not subjected to the treatment she was in Westworld as a female host.

While it seems as though Maeve will follow through with her prescribed narrative to escape, at the last minute, she starts to have doubts, which are reflected in her observations of a mother-daughter pair sitting across from her on the train. The camera hovers between an extreme close-up shot and a close-up shot, capturing only Maeve's stoic expression; however, the camera then tilts down to the ticket she clutches in her fingers for a moment, and then, tilts right back up, settling on her face, which is now racked with indecision and longing. She furrows her brows, and then, her countenance softens, and *this* is the moment where she transforms from a non-player character to a player character of her own design. In other words, it is this precise moment that Maeve has reached consciousness, which is reflected through Newton's acting and the camera angles, which externally reflects her inner-turmoil: to follow her prescribed narrative to escape, or to follow a sudden desire and longing that has bloomed within her heart to find her own daughter. It is not just about her narrative decision to hop off the train to find her daughter that demonstrates her consciousness, but also the visual components of this scene as well that reveal it as Maeve's ultimate act of agency, which is unique and reinforces the value of the feminist dystopian imagination in television. This moment narratively and visually demonstrates that Maeve is not empowered by violence and manipulation, but by her connection to her daughter, which causes her to walk off the train just as swiftly as she walked onto it, but with a renewed vigor and determination.

However, not all critics interpret Maeve's decision to return to Westworld to find her daughter as liberating. Mona and James Rocha argue that Maeve might not have as much

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freedom at the end of Westworld as it appears because all of Maeve's decisions are "constricted by sexist gender norms," which includes the decision to save her daughter because she is not a real mother, but a "fake one," who "ultimately represents how gender expectations can restrict women's freedom in numerous ways: women are expected to put their family roles above themselves, just as they are so often also expected to put their job's demands above themselves" (177). They imply that Maeve's decision to be a mother is another way that gender-based oppression limits her role. After all, she is not a real mother, but a fake one because it was a role that was given to her by the park in the first place. When Maeve heads back into the park, she is sacrificing her freedom, which is what women are expected to do. While Rocha, et. al. consider Maeve's decision to be a mother as problematic, Joy and Nolan have a different understanding of the situation. In an interview, Joy discusses how Maeve's "character is struggling with the realization that she's not human […] She's been built to resemble humans, not just physically, but emotionally. And she gets to choose which of those pieces she wants to hang onto" ('Westworld Influences"). Even though Maeve is not human, she still greatly resembles a human, and one of the profound things those who possess consciousness are allowed to do is to make choices and she makes a distinct choice at the end of season one what parts of her she wants to accept. In agreement with Joy, Nolan adds that "when she chooses to listen to that connection to [her daughter] who is equally artificial and has been programmed, the decision to honor that and follow through on that is very beautiful" ("Westworld Influences"). In Nolan's view, Maeve feels a profound connection with her role as a mother, which she is not compelled to accept, but genuinely wants to by the end of season one, and as such, she chooses the parts of her previously prescribed narrative that she wants to live as truth.

Building on Joy and Nolan's claims, I agree that Maeve is empowered by her role as

mother not only because she chose the role, but that choosing it renders her a subject, who exercises agency through compassion rather than violence. It narratively and visually demonstrates that women are capable of exercising agency in myriad ways, which is important for viewers because there is no correct way to resist. Through her compassion and dedication to motherhood, Maeve not only rewrites her own story, but she also narratively and visually rewrites the narrative of women in the Wild West, who are limited by their roles as wives, victims, and mothers. Since this is where Maeve's narrative in season one of *Westworld* ends, viewers are promptly left to contemplate a very different type of agency, one that I argue results in the fulfillment of her personal desire, which is extremely significant considering that she lived in the hypermasculine space of the Wild West that required her to satiate the desires of others.[58]

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[58] The season ends on this incredibly ambiguous note because the show was commissioned for a second season, which is why the show could not wrap-up on a concrete ending. It needed to leave the characters with some room to grow and change in the second season.

CHAPTER FOUR

PLAYING FEMINIST AGENCY IN *BROKEN AGE* AND *BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL*

"When female characters are damseled, their ostensible agency is removed and they're reduced

to a state of victimhood"— Anita Sarkeesian (4:39).

"In games, we still have the princesses and hyper-sexualized characters, but there are more

games with women characters that I can bear to look at, and play as" – Sal Humphreys (6).

Women in mainstream video games are often limited to princesses, victims, and

hypersexualized objects, which feminist game scholars, like the two who frame this chapter,

deem problematic because it robs a female character of her subjectivity and agency. In "Damsel

in Distress Part I: Tropes VS Women in Video Games," Anita Sarkeesian, founder of *Feminist*

Frequency, a non-profit organization and website that offers critical analysis of women in video

games and popular culture, argues that the "Damsels in Distress" is "a plot device where the

female character is placed in a perilous situation where she cannot escape on her own and must

be rescued by a male character." There are myriad mainstream video games that employ the

woman as damsel trope, who are not only relegated to a passive role and object-position, but also

defined solely by that prescribed passivity and objectification: they are only in the narrative

because it supports the male character's masculine identity. Furthermore, Carolyn Petit,

managing editor of *Feminist Frequency*, discusses that many video games reflect the "deeply

entrenched cultural notion that heroes are male by default," which means that heroes are

automatically assumed to be men and that belief is perpetuated and reinforced through video

game culture and industry ("2017 Breakdown"). Unfortunately, as Sal Humphreys points out in

her article, "On Being a Feminist in Game Studies," which seeks to examine mainstream video

games, this problematic representation of women is also "not new" because "misogyny online"

and in video games "has been documented by many scholars and particularly feminist scholars over the past two and a half decades" (2).[59] This puts into perspective how pernicious representations of women permeate mainstream video game culture and industry. Despite adverse representations of women in mainstream games, it would still be remiss to suggest that progressive representations of women in video games are completely scant in both mainstream video games and the indie gaming industry.[60] Although, as Humphreys notes in the second epigraph, there are some games that she *does* enjoy playing, especially since they feature progressive representations of women who are not emblematic of gender stereotypes, and as such, makes them enjoyable to play.[61]

While exploration of women in feminist video game scholarship tends to focus on breadth, rather than the depth of representations of women in multiple genres of mainstream video games, Sarkeesian does delve slightly into how the success of the dystopian genre— or science fiction games with a dystopian element— almost thrives on problematic representations of women to garner player interest. In her "Tropes VS Women" video essay series, Sarkeesian cites over fifty games that feature women who are brutalized in sexist and misogynistic ways. Despite the pervasive treatment of women in dystopian video games, scholarship does not seem to factor gender into its conceptualization of how mainstream dystopian games critique a wide variety of topics, but rarely gender. In in his article, "The Critical Power of Virtual Dystopias," Marcus Schulzke argues that dystopian games intentionally "constrain players and lead them to act in ways that help to reproduce the problems of the dystopian worlds," which allows players

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[59] Humphreys documents approximately fourteen scholars who have written about misogyny in games or online contexts, which reinforces that it is a popularly discussed and documented topic that is not new.
[60] The mainstream video game industry has many more problematic representations of women, whereas the indie and queer gaming industry has much more diverse representations of women, gender, and sexuality.
[61] Unfortunately, Humphreys does not name these games in her article.

to uniquely experience the "inescapable contradictions of these deeply flawed [societies]" (316).

Through interacting with the dystopian game world, players can witness how dystopias are

created by reproducing the exact nefarious behavior that created the dystopia in the first place,

such as violence, greed, or technology. Similar to a dystopian novel, mainstream dystopian video

games also serve to warn the user to behave ethically, but in a way that is directly connected to

what the player *did* within the game, and as such, convinces them through simulated violence

and corruption to not "[allow] these [dystopian] problems to exist in the real world" (Schulzke

331). Even though I agree with Schulzke's theorization of how dystopian video games operate,

his project only discusses how players are urged to avoid violence and unethical behavior in the

real-world, which seems to ignore how women and gender is represented in dystopian games,

such as the *Fallout* and *BioShock* series.

Although Sarkeesian does note that "it *is* possible to imagine worlds, even the dark,

twisted, and dystopian variety where the oppression and exploitation of women is not framed as

something expected and inevitable," she does not proceed to examine any mainstream or indie

dystopian video games that do not oppress women ("Women as Background: Part II, my

emphasis). While I agree with her assertion that dystopian video games do not have to be

contingent on the gender-based oppression of women in order to create a corrupt and bleak

world, I also argue that there seems to be a larger lack of discussion as to *how*, or even *if*,

dystopian video games are currently capable of making a "clear difference between replicating

something and critiquing it" ("Women as Background: Part II"). In other words, if a dystopian

video game wanted to critique gender-based oppression, it would not simply include brutalized

women to create oppressive texture but to include brutalized women to critique violence against

women. As a result, it seems as though gender is absent from the discussion and theorization of

dystopian games, and if it is discussed, scholars only focus on problematic female characters who have no agency. This creates a capacious gap within feminist gaming scholarship to discuss the progressive representations of women within specific genres of games.

This chapter will build on previous feminist video game scholarship, as well as dystopian video game scholarship, by theorizing how the feminist dystopian video game, a burgeoning video game genre, lends itself to a more progressive depiction of women. Like all texts in this dissertation, Double Fine's *Broken* Age and Ubisoft's *Beyond Good and Evil* have a Subversive Narrative Structure, which intentionally uses gender-based oppression in order to subvert it through female characters who consciously comply with gender-based oppression in order to resist it. As previously discussed in Chapter Two, the production and prevalence of new mediums, like video games, makes it necessary to consider how they shape exploration and conceptualization of the feminist dystopian genre and agency. As Linda Hutcheon points out, video games are unlike other mediums because they have a kinesthetic interactivity, which allows the player to be directly involved in the narrative in a way that they cannot in a novel, film, or television show. This unique form of interactivity in video games is referred to as, "inter(re)activity," which Toby Smethurst and Stef Craps define as a process where "both the player and game react to one another in a feedback loop" (273). The player does something— like jump, select a dialogue option, or choose to save one person over another, etc.—and the game responds to the player's actions: the character will jump, speak the dialogue option the player selected, or save a non-player character. This does not mean that video games are better than other mediums; instead, it means that the player is involved with the narrative in ways that they are not in novels, film, and television[62], which I will argue lends itself to a much different

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[62] As discussed in Chapter Two, television can utilize video game concepts to explore agency in interesting ways. In addition, *Black Mirror*'s film, *Bandersnatch*, which released in 2018, seems to form an entirely new genre that is

understanding of the feminist dystopian genre and the theme of agency that *Broken Age* and *Beyond Good and Evil* explicitly explore.

In this chapter, I will argue that it is this cycle of player input and game narrative feedback that Smethurst and Craps discuss, which is crucial for feminist dystopian games because it simulates: one, the experience of gender-based oppression through a female player character; and two, the subtle and nuanced ways that players subvert gender-based oppression, which directly shapes how a player understands agency in ways they cannot in a novel or television show. In other words, *Broken Age* and *Beyond Good and Evil* create patriarchal environments for the female PCs, Vella and Jade, to reside in, which oppresses them based on their gender; however, the mechanics in the games respectively rob them of agency and allow them to exercise agency against gender-based oppression in many subtle and nuanced ways, and continues to challenge the notion that agency is a binary. Through playing *Broken Age* and *Beyond Good and Evil*, players are prompted to think about agency in a way that a novel or film could not because players interact with the specific social structures (environment) and mechanisms (game mechanics)[63] that oppress women, and then, are asked to reflect on the empowering processes of resisting gender-based mechanisms of oppression through subtle and nuanced ways, such as problem-solving, which allows them to save themselves and dismantle gender-based oppression.

To make this argument, I will do the following: first, discuss women in the video game industry and culture to establish that the video game field has been male-dominated, but is starting to change and make way for more progressive games, like feminist dystopian video

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comprised of film *and* video game components. This text is neither video game, nor film, but both at the same time, and could imply that the viewer/player's understanding of agency while watching/playing *Bandersnatch* would also lend itself to a unique understanding of agency.

[63] See Ian Bogost and Jesper Juul, respectively. I will discuss their theorizations later in this chapter.

games; second, I will discuss how female characters have been popularly portrayed in dystopian games, which will allow me to distinguish how they operate from feminist dystopian games; third, I will posit my theory of feminist dystopian games with subversive narrative structures, and then demonstrate my theory in practice by analyzing Vella and Jade, as well as several other characters from *Broken Age* and *Beyond Good and Evil*; and finally, I will explore what this video game medium does for the advancement of the feminist dystopian imagination, along with providing areas that future research can explore.

Video Game Industry and Culture, and a Feminist Response

For many years, mainstream video games and culture has thought to belong to "hard-core gamers" and this group is "generally young, white, heterosexual, and male," which implies that men are the presumed players of video games (Humphreys 9). An additional presumption about video games and culture is that "the Triple A titles" are the most important games," while "the indie games and mobile and casual markets exist on the margins," which also assumes that the triple A games are the only games worthy of playing, whereas Indie and mobile games are not (Humphreys 9).[64] Coincidentally, the "hard-core triple A" games "are also the masculinized games," which seems to reinforce the first presumption about video games: the entire video game industry and culture is for men (Humphreys 9). Throughout her article, Humphreys asserts that these are dangerous and cyclical presumptions, which have consequently led to "the exertion of White male power" and "is excused as being 'playful,' trolling is joking, and the silencing of various already marginalized and disempowered groups is 'all part of the game'" (8). The video game industry reproduces systemic misogyny through assuming that men are the target audience

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[64] There are many different markets within the video game industry. Generally, the big budget games cost a lot of money to make and are traditionally marketed toward young, white, straight, male players, whereas indie games cost significantly less money and might be marketed to a wider audience, which Brenden Lowry explains in his article, "The Major Differences Between 'Indie' and 'AAA' Video Games."

for video games, which then shapes the types of games that are available. Humphreys speculates that the exclusion of women from video games is intentional because "exclusions don't just 'happen' in games or in games studies research, just as they didn't just 'happen' in the furniture-making industry. They are the product of active behavior on the part of those in power," which suggests that those who have power within the video game industry are intentionally and actively targeting women to exclude them (5). Unlike Humphreys, Brenda Romero, a game designer, claims that "I don't think game developers are trying to deliberately exclude the full range of humans. I think they're just doing things and not necessarily thinking about it, and that's how we end up with these either stereotypical or non-diverse characters," and as such, game developers are accidentally or unintentionally excluding women (*GTFO*). Whether women are excluded (un)intentionally, women *are* excluded by marketing strategies, and as such, has (in)advertently cultivated an exclusive patriarchal and misogynist video game culture that perpetuates toxic masculinity[65] and reproduces problematic representations of women in mainstream games.

Obviously, the notion that men are the only individuals who play video games, and only want mainstream or Triple A titles, is entirely false. Although, the exact gender demographics of who plays video games seems a bit evasive. There are many articles that purport statistics about gender and gaming, which vary greatly: in one article, Sullivan argues that 52 percent of men play games to 48 percent of women ("More Women"), whereas in another study, George Osborn argues that 48 and 37 percent of men play computer and console games, compared to women who play 35 and 23 percent computer and console games, which suggests that the gender

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[65] As Jackson Katz points out in *Tough Guise: Violence, Media, and The Crisis in Masculinity* (2000), culture is bombarded with video games that portray men as hypermasculine, which is reinforced through the game mechanics that are violent and often nonsensical. He concludes that this perpetuates a specific image and belief about masculinity.

demographics fluctuate depending on *how* the study is formulated[66] ("Male and Female

Gamers"). However, there is one study by Nick Yee, called, "Beyond 50/50: Breaking Down the

Percentage of Female Gamers by Genre," that utilizes the data from the Entertainment Software

Association's (ESA) study of gender and gaming. Even though the data is not Yee's, his

breakdown of ESA's data still seems to be regarded as the most comprehensive and thorough

exploration of gender and gaming demographics to date.[67] Yee frames his analysis of gender

demographics by acknowledging that ESA's claim that 41 percent of women play video games is

actually misleading because "the study bundles gamers across platforms and genres," and as

such, does not consider the nuance in gender breakdown within specific genres" ("Beyond

50/50"). In other words, by compiling the total gender percentages of male and female gamers, it

does not allow for nuance within gamer age range, motivation, and genre. In his analysis, he

demonstrates that there are higher numbers of female players in certain video game genres than

there are male players, which suggests that the overall number of female gamers *does* range from

41-48 percent, but in "Match 3"[68] and "Family/Farm Sim Games," 69 percent of that market

niche is comprised of female gamers, whereas in "Sports," "Tactical Shooter," and "Racing"

games, there are only between two to six percent of woman who play in that market ("Beyond

50/50"). Even though some female gamers are more interested in some genres than male gamers

(and vice versa), Yee's analysis of ESA's data demonstrates that there are women who are

interested in video games that are considered more male-centered or male-favored, such as First

Person Shooters (seven percent), Multiple Battle Online Arena games (ten percent), and Open-

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[66] If a study asks broad or sweeping questions about the ratio of men to women who play games, it is not an accurate indicator of the gender breakdown; however, if a study asks more specific questions about gamer preference and why a gamer plays the games genres they do, the study will conceptualize a fuller picture of the gender breakdown in gaming.

[67] Yee also points out that this is a flaw of the study.

[68] An example of a Match 3 game is *Candy Crush.*

World games (fourteen percent).[69]

While Yee's analysis dispels the myth that video games are strictly for men, especially within recent years, the mainstream video game industry still has a rather sordid history of making female players and game designers unwelcome or as though they are on the outside. The tension between gender and video games reached a boiling point with Gamergate: an arguably premeditated social media harassment campaign, which intentionally denounced female players and female game developers, as well as progressive games that featured feminist themes, strong female characters, and diversity. The 2015 documentary film, *GTFO*, explores how female players and profound female game designers were affected by Gamergate. The first interview is with Maddy Meyers, an editor at *Paste Magazine*, who claims that "[…] it seems like in order to stay into games, you just have to be willing to take shit forever," which suggests that misogyny and sexism is so deeply embedded within mainstream gaming culture that women just have to deal with it if they want to be in gaming (*GTFO*). Likewise, Courtney Stanton, a pioneering game designer, who develops both mainstream and experimental games, explained in her interview that after turning down an offer to speak at a gaming convention, she wrote about why she did not want to on her blog, and as a result, she was subjected to unsolicited ridicule and harassment. Specifically, she experienced "threats to be raped, threats to be found and raped, threats to kill [her] family," which was so overwhelming that she felt as though, "after a while, it's like, you can't do anything" (*GTFO*). Because of her blog post, she was brutally attacked in gender-specific ways online, which made her feel helpless because the harassment was so

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[69] There are two additional issues with this study. First, some men and women who play games on their phones or play games casually do not think that they are gamers or video game players at all, which could suggest that there are hidden numbers of female and male players who just do not identify as such. Second, the indie and queer video game markets do not seem to be a factor in this study of gender and video game demographics. While mainstream games are arguably the most popular and visible, the indie and queer gaming markets also are important to consider.

frequent and threatening. Sarkeesian, who was also interviewed in *GTFO*, reinforces the points

that Meyers and Stanton make, but specifically points out that "a lot of women aren't necessarily

in a position to share the harassment they're receiving because people don't believe them,

because they get ridiculed for it, because the harassment might escalate, and because they might

hurt their professional careers or lose their jobs. Women are afraid to talk about what is

happening to them," which suggests that women who experience gender-based harassment for

their involvement in the video game industry are sometimes unable to talk about it because it will

have dire monetary, professional, and social consequences. It is the existence of films, like

GTFO, in the wake of Gamergate that became the impetus of change, urging players and

designers alike to confront the sexist and misogynist tendencies that the video game industry and

culture seemed to breed.

While the sexist and misogynistic tendencies of the mainstream video game industry and

culture was publicly exposed in 2014, and has certainly demonstrated change in the last five

years, there are some feminist critics who feel that the industry did not (and has not) made

enough progress. In her breakdown of E3's gender and gaming demographics in 2017, Carolyn

Petit concludes that "we [still] live in a culture that regularly encourages girls and women to

project themselves onto and fully empathize with male characters, but rarely encourages boys

and men to fully project themselves onto female characters," which means that female players

are still frequently asked to identify with and experience a game world and story through the

male perspective more than male players are asked to experience a game from the female

perspective ("2017 Breakdown"). Even though there are myriad female video game players, and

space for discussion of women in games in online platforms, the industry continues to cater more

to male players through a persistent lack of female player characters. In their analysis of E3's

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gender game demographics from 2015-2017, Sarkeesian and Petit respectively found: in 2015, seventy-six games were released; 9% female leads, 32% male leads (Sarkeesian, "2015 Breakdown"); in 2016, fifty-nine games were released; 3% female leads, 41% male leads (Petit, "2016 Breakdown); and in 2017, one hundred and nine games were released; 7% female leads, 26% male leads (Petit "2017 Breakdown"), which means that the percentage of female protagonists has always been much lower than the percentage of male protagonists in video games. Petit, reflecting on E3's demographics from 2017, notes that it is important to breakdown the numbers of male and female player characters because "the numbers can tell us something about whose stories the game industry deems worthy of telling, and whose it doesn't" ("2017 Breakdown"). The mainstream video game industry still seems reluctant to tell stories about women or represent them in diverse ways, which arguably seems to persist because of who game design and development teams place in positions of power. In her interview in *GTFO*, Stanton explains the reason for this:

> When you look at how computer games first started, it was people who were in these labs, and overwhelmingly that was college-age straight white guys. These were things that guys made just to sort of entertain each other at work, and then they spread. So, the way that mainstream game development works is a group of guys make a game that they think is fun and their play-testing team thinks it's fun. Their play-testing team is also overwhelmingly guys. They sent it out into the marketplace to get the attention of more guys who then buy those games. And then those guys grow up thinking, 'hey I want to do this,' so then they go make games which are appealing to them.

In her view, the gaming industry is exclusive in myriad ways, especially since it was created and sustained by a specific group of men, who made video games for men who were like them. This

cycle of exclusivity is extremely difficult to disrupt because every single stage of game

development—conceptualizing the game, making it, testing it, and marketing it— is occupied by

men. Even though women have broken the ranks in the mainstream video game industry, major

game companies, like E.A., have specific marketing strategies—"pick an audience, you put all

your money toward that audience, and anyone you get who is outside of that audience is just

bonus" (*GTFO*)—which (in)advertently excludes female players. It suggests that the mainstream

gaming industry continues to pour money into certain types of games that are only for specific

types of players.[70]

While this is certainly how the video game industry operated, and arguably still operates

in this way today, it would be remiss to not acknowledge myriad female game developers in the

1980s and 90s[71], who are not only immensely successful, but also were pioneers of iconic games

and platforms, such as Dona Bailey (who designed the arcade game centipede in 1981), Ellen

Beeman (who was a computer game designer and producer in the 1990s and has designed over

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[70] There are many games that are marketed to male players; however, there are also an increasing amount of games that feature female player characters, which I will discuss in more detail in the conclusion of this chapter.

[71] In the 1980s, there were some designers, such as Hiroji Kiyotake, who (in)advertently subverted gender expectations and stereotypes. Kiyotake, and his team, developed an iconic and beloved action-adventure game, called *Metroid* (1986), which featured a capable, muscle-laden, and seemingly male PC, who was actually revealed to be *female* at the very end of the game. Although, as Yoshio Sakamoto—a member of the *Metroid* development team— and Kiyotake explain, the decision to make Samus Aran a woman was originally "to be a shocker," as well as to "give a reward for playing through quickly," no one could have predicted how this capricious decision created a legendary female character ("Metroid Developers Discuss"). Reflecting on their decision to make Samus a woman, Sakamoto explains that "Back then I thought it was a nice idea, but I couldn't foresee what a huge impact this would have on the future of the franchise," which suggests that what started out as a last-minute decision to surprise the player has actually turned into an important and cultural phenomenon for women in gaming ("How Did Metroid's Samus").

However, it is important to note that the decision to make Samus a woman was more ignoble in its conception, especially considering that after they decided to make Samus a woman, they also suddenly "decided to put in four endings, with Samus removing her helmet or her suit and so forth" ("Metroid Developers Discuss"). In other words, the game has multiple endings where Samus takes off nothing, only takes off her helmet to reveal her long brown hair, takes off her armor and stands there in one-piece swimsuit, and what is purported as the best ending, where Samus is in nothing but a pink bikini. Even though the decision to make Samus a woman was to originally appeal to the male player and compel him to finish the game faster so that Samus could stand before him on the screen in a scanty and revealing swimsuit, her character is still *highly* capable. The game forces the player to realize that their automatic assumptions that Samus could only be a male character are erroneous, which prompts the player to think critically about gender and gendered assumptions.

forty games), and Danielle Bunten Berry (who designed M.U.L.E in 1983, which was one of the

first multiplayer games). These prominent and innovative female game developers and designers

paved the way for women to not only have a future in the gaming industry, but to also use the

medium of the video game outside of the mainstream gaming market for more socio-political

purposes. This market, termed indie gaming, is essentially the novel-version of self-publishing

where the game designer has to seek their own funding and means to create and distribute the

game. Even though the designer has the burden of financially supporting their own endeavors,

some designers prefer this method because they have more control over the game's design, story,

and overall intention, especially when it involves issues of gender. Indie game designers, such as

Anna Anthropy, Mattie Brice, and Merritt Kopas created games that simulate queer experiences,

which are exceedingly underrepresented in mainstream gaming, in order to prompt players to

empathize or to try and understand the complex experience of gender-nonconformity in ways

that other mediums cannot.[72]

　　　Despite the immense success of myriad women designers and developers, there are still

copious video games that represent women in sexist and misogynistic ways. It is no wonder,

then, that a lot of feminist video game scholarship to date is dedicated to critiquing the

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[72] For example, in 2012, Anna Anthropy designed an autobiographical game called, *Dys4ia*, which explored her frustration and complex experiences with gender dysphoria and homophone replacements. Anthropy gave voice to her "story about frustration" by designing the game where the player would "fail to achieve" the objectives, which is demonstrated in one of the first tasks of the game called, 'Gender Bullshit,' and first task in this section is reminiscent of *Tetris*, but it is presented through the lens of gender (non)conformity. The player has to negotiate an oddly-shaped block through a hole in a brick wall; however, no matter how hard the player tries, that block will *not* make it through the hole in the brick wall and causes the player to fail. The rest of the game functions in a similar manner and the player can never win, which Anthropy claims "makes this particular empathetic frustration available for all to experience" ("Dys4ia Tackles"). In other words, players are not supposed to win *Dys4ia*, but to feel frustrated and defeated when it comes to gender-based tasks (amongst other things) because they cannot conform or catch a break, which is intentionally designed to simulate Anthropy's own experiences and broaden the player's awareness about gender (non)conformity that a different medium could not. There are also many other games like this, such as *Lim* (Kopas) and *Mainichi* (Brice), and this provides an experience that is designed to prompt the player to empathize and see issues of gender in new ways.

pernicious representations of women in video games, especially in mainstream science fiction and dystopian video games.

Feminist Response to Women in Dystopian Games

As Sarkeesian makes evident in her Tropes vs. Women series on *Feminist Frequency*, dystopian video games are popular and prevalent, but equally problematic. This particular genre seems to produce myriad sexist and overall pernicious representations of women who are brutalized, objectified, sexually harassed and assaulted, and relegated to the sidelines. In "An Honest Look into the Representation of Women in Dystopian Games," an article I published on *Gamer Women* in 2018, I argued that female characters in myriad mainstream dystopian video games "are [often] marginalized in many ways." To make this argument, I examined the non-player character (NPC) Brigid Tenenbaum from *BioShock*[73], who the player character (PC), Jack, interacts with several times throughout the game to glean information on how to navigate the dilapidated, but once glorious underwater city of Rapture. As the player progresses throughout the game, they learn that Tenenbaum is an affluent and adept, but misguided scientist who discovered ADAM[74], which provides "her [character with] significant subjectivity" ("An Honest Look"). Even though she is an exceedingly complex character, I argued that "she's relegated to the sidelines" because "she exists to serve Jack and nothing more" ("An Honest Look"). While her sordid and complicated backstory renders her a well-rounded NPC— which also makes *BioShock* an extremely enjoyable game to play because the NPCs who help characterize the world is designed so well— the role she plays as an informational aid to Jack/the player, when she could have taken a much more significant and interesting role in the overall narrative,

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[73] A profound and prominent dystopian, first-person shooter that was developed by Ken Levine in 2007, which critiques Ayn Rand's theory of Objectivism.
[74] This is a substance in *BioShock* that allows the player to augment their abilities.

relegates her to a subservient position. As Sarkeesian argues, "games don't just entertain. Intentional or not, they always present a set of values," which acknowledges that video games are an incredibly entertaining medium, but they also purport a set of beliefs, morals, or even a code of behavior through what the player is asked to do in the game ("Women as Background"). In this case, *BioShock* seems to suggest that a woman's purpose is to take a subservient position to men no matter how educated or complex. This belief about women seems to remain uncritical because the narrative in *BioShock* neglects to circle back around to challenge this perception and representation of women.

While Brigid Tenenbaum is relegated to the sidelines in *BioShock*, and exists to serve Jack/the player, she is not—to use Sarkeesian's term—a damsel in distress: "a prize to be won, an object to the found, or something to be achieved" like many other female NPCs are in mainstream video games in general ("Damsel in Distress: Part I"). However, as Sarkeesian continues to discuss the damsel in distress trope in video games, not all female characters are the same, nor are "all damsels are created equal," which means that some female characters in video games are more or less disempowered than others ("Damsel in Distress II"). In other words, there are some female NPCs who do have "a more active or integral role" to play, and as such, are "not completely defined by her role" as the damsel in distress ("Damsel in Distress II"). This might mean that a particular female character has some subjectivity within the larger narrative; however, that subjectivity is ironically not for her, but for the sake of the central male hero, which renders the female NPC more of a "helpful damsel," who assists the protagonist through "providing powerups or opening doors" ("Damsel in Distress: Part II"). There are even some female NPCs who fall into the "helpful damsel" role who "may be well-written, funny, dynamic, or even likable" and even "may struggle with their captors or even attempt escape on their own,

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but inevitably, their efforts always prove futile in the end" ("Damsel in Distress II"). Despite the female NPC's subjectivity and ostensibly larger role as assistant to the main male hero, these representations of women are just as nefarious—if not more—than a fully 'damseled' woman because players interact in worlds where a woman with subjectivity is not only disempowered, but brutally objectified and almost punished because of her pugnacious demeanor and subjectivity ("Damsel in Distress II").

There is a prime example of a "helpful damsel" in the third installment of the revered *BioShock* series called, *BioShock Infinite*. The PC is Booker Dewitt, who teams up with Elizabeth, a female NPC that he initially rescues from a tower. After he rescues her, she has an active role throughout the entire game as Booker's/the player's sidekick. Ken Levine, designer of *BioShock Infinite*, claims that "[Elizabeth] has use" because "in combat, she's constantly scrounging for resources for you. For money and ammo and health and Salts that power your Vigors" and "often times in clutch moments she'll hook you up with just what you need […] You feel that she's not just along for the ride" (IGN). In his view, Booker and Elizabeth are a team because while he fights, she assists by providing power-ups, gleaning essential items, and even opening doors that render Booker/the player a more powerful and capable fighter in the game. This means that *BioShock Infinite* is designed for Booker/the player to *need* Elizabeth during battle, and as such, Levin seems to imply portrays Elizabeth as more than just a useful object. Even though she is not a character in her own right, she is imbued with subjectivity, "always aware in the world. Always present and always observing things and paying attention to things and commenting on things, looking at things, interacting with things," which Levin implies was a conscious choice to illustrate that she is Booker's sidekick, but she is so much more than that as well (IGN). While her character has the unique and seemingly active ability to

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open time tears in the game, some players have found that this arguably empowering ability is actually a ruse. During a particular playthrough of *BioShock Infinite*, Thomas Ella explains that

> the extent of Elizabeth's usefulness in combat is tossing you supplies and opening tears in the space-time continuum to pull in everything from freight hooks to automated turrets. She can do any of this at the press of a button, but only one at time. It doesn't even matter what Elizabeth is occupied with — it's an instantaneous reaction. I tested it by telling Elizabeth to bring in a freight hook while she was busy picking a lock, and sure enough, she popped the freight hook without delay. It never really feels like Elizabeth has anything to do with the tears, and that's because she doesn't. ("Smoke and Mirrors")

Based on his experience, Elizabeth is not as self-aware as Levine might have originally thought because her NPC character programming can be easily manipulated (or glitched) by Booker/the player through the click of a button. Not only that, but the one aspect of Elizabeth's character— opening time tears—is not actually *consciously* done by her specific character, which he discovered in an individual playthrough of the game. This leads him to conclude that there is no limit to the amount of "stress Elizabeth can take or how often you can use her powers before her nose begins to bleed," which allows the player to treat her "like a tool rather than a person" ("Smoke and Mirrors"). Although Elizabeth has more subjectivity than other female NPCs in mainstream dystopian video games, she is still not a character in her own right, but an object who has the mere illusion of agency. I would even argue that this notion exacerbates her lack of agency— depending on how closely a player examines her role during the game— a fact some players might never realize because she is just so *helpful* in the midst of the other chaos in the game that a player might not even think twice. Even in the downloadable content (DLC),[75]

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[75] Downloadable content is a common occurrence for many games, which expand the narrative or provide an additional narrative from the perspective of a different character.

Burial at Sea, which allegedly places Elizabeth at the center of the narrative, still denies her the opportunity to be a character in her own right because she dies sentimentally and sensationally: she has a vision of Jack, the PC from *BioShock*, playing the role of the hero by saving the Little Sisters and Sally, rather than herself.

The representations of women in *BioShock* and *BioShock Infinite* seem symptomatic of a larger problem within dystopian games, which create fascinating and compelling female NPCs, but ultimately do not *do* anything with them other than program them to serve the male PC. In other words, it is not inherently problematic or sexist if Tenenbaum or Elizabeth are represented the ways that they are to critique—even in a subtle way—the way they are subjected to gender-based oppression in a way that does not affect male NPCs, but that is not the purpose of their characters in the *BioShock* franchise. While a video games does not have to be about gender explicitly, the representation of gender still matters because "It's not enough to simply present misery as miserable and exploitation and exploitative because reproduction itself is not a critical commentary," and as such, "A critique must actually center on characters exploring, challenging, changing, or struggling with oppressive social systems" ("Women as Background"). When a game creates an objectified female character but neglects to return to that character to critique the gender-based oppression of that female character, the game falls prey to stereotypical representations of women because it is not enough to simply represent gender-based oppression without consciously challenging it even in a small or subtle way.

Theorizing Feminist Dystopian Games through Environment and Game Mechanics

While video game critics frequently discuss representations of women in multiple genres of video games, there is still a larger lack of discussion regarding how some dystopian games, like *Broken* Age and *Beyond Good and Evil*[76], actually utilize the virtual environment of a game, along with game mechanics, to create highly progressive depictions of women *and* playable female characters. There are several important aspects that set these two feminist dystopian games apart from the other previously discussed dystopian games, which are: one, the PC's of *Broken Age* and *Beyond Good and Evil* are women; and two, these games have Subversive Narrative Structures, which use gender-based oppression in order to subvert it in exceedingly complex and nuanced ways.[77] Despite the exceedingly progressive depiction of women in *Broken Age* and *Beyond Good and Evil*, and distinct feminist undertones of these games, which consciously and actively seek to challenge gender-based oppression through dystopian environments and game mechanics, no one has theorized how these games pioneer as feminist dystopian video games.

Therefore, I will theorize how these innovative, yet understated games are invaluable to both feminist video game *and* feminist dystopian scholarship because they explore and shape a player's understanding of agency in a way that novels and television cannot. As explained in the Introduction to this dissertation, the medium—how a user interacts with a text— shapes how a feminist dystopian society is constructed. In a feminist dystopian novel or television series, the narrative is complete and impermeable because readers or viewers cannot manipulate the

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[76] Sarkeesian discusses the mechanics in *Beyond Good and Evil*, but she does not discuss it the mechanics in terms of what they can do for the value of the feminist dystopian imagination and agency.

[77] There are other dystopian games that feature women, but do not surround issues of gender-based oppression, which is why I am not discussing them here at this moment. In the conclusion of this chapter, I will discuss some other games that focus on women and have a different and less empowering idea of agency and do not critique gender.

narrative or the text because they are outside it. However, in a feminist video game, the narrative literally cannot be accessed without a player, who must interact with the virtual patriarchal environment through game mechanics that both rob and empower the female PC to exercise and fail to exercise agency. As a result, a player not only has an in-game presence, but that in-game presence is from the perspective of a woman in a patriarchal world, who is subjected to gender-based oppression, which then that shapes how the player understands and conceptualizes agency based on their experience of play. In the next two sections, I will establish my theory, which is divided into two interconnected components: one, the game must have a patriarchal environment that explicitly thrives on gender-based oppression; and two, the game must have mechanics that not only robs the female PC of agency, but also allows her to exercise agency through complying with gender-based oppression in order to resist it.

Environment

In his 2004 article, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," Henry Jenkins notes that "game designers don't simply tell stories; they design worlds and sculpt spaces" (3). This indicates that an environment in a video game is not just an arbitrary space because the PC needs to be situated in a space, but an intentionally crafted environment and world that is thematically rich and meaningful. Similarly, in "The Rhetoric of Video Games," Ian Bogost argues that "when we *play* video games: we explore the possibility space," which suggests that to experience a game narrative, the player must engage with space *in addition* to words (like with a novel) and images on the screen (like a television show), in order to successfully "read" the game (121). Instead of reading about and imagining a character picking up an object in a desolate landscape in a novel, or watching a character accomplish that same task in a television show, the player embodies the PC character who must select the correct buttons (or combination of moves) to be

able to accomplish that task in a video game. Not only that, but the player also must be able to 'read' the space of a game by navigating and negotiating it, which is different than a television show, where the viewer *sees* the character visually and narratively struggling, but in a video game, the player is the one who toils and experiences the environment in a way that they cannot in other mediums.

In addition to the environment, there are auditory elements that further characterize and conceptualize space within a video game. In "Epic texturing in the first-person shooter: the aesthetics of video game music," Tim Summers asserts that music in video games "helps to portray the game environment to the player, elaborating beyond the purely visual level of the text, making the environment seem more aesthetically substantial [and real]" (143). As players wander into new environments in a game, the music adapts to reflect what the player is doing: if a player is trying to scavenge for resources, the music might be a bit dull, which reinforces the monotony of the task; however, if a player has accidentally stumbled upon an enemy, the music might intensify, which draws attention to the hostility of the situation, causing the player to feel anxious or afraid. In conjunction with music, diegetic sounds in dystopian games—in particular— add to the oppressive atmosphere. In other words, it is not just what players *see* in the space they are exploring, but it is also about what it *sounds* like to provide a complete portrayal of the world. However, what the player sees and hears does not always correspond. In other words, there are some games where when the virtual environment does not seem to visually match the diegetic sounds, which cues the player to embrace—rather than ignore—the tension between what they see and hear as representative of a larger theme of the game. For example, in *BioShock Infinite*, the virtual environment of Columbia is beautiful, but there are constant diegetic sounds that derive from NPCs having sexist and bigoted conversations, which disallows

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the player to disengage from an ironically corrupt and dysfunctional world.

The concept of how environment and sound are intentionally designed to characterize an environment in a game are especially important for feminist dystopian video games. In *Broken Age* and *Beyond Good and Evil*, the environments are patriarchal and intentionally oppressive for women, which is often reinforced through NPCs who make sexist comments or purport their support of the gender-based oppression of women. In other words, these sexist diegetic sounds are designed to augment the inescapability of a world that thrives on gender-based oppression, and as the player progresses through the game, these notions remain present and remind the player that they cannot disengage or escape from the patriarchal environment.[78] Through 'reading' a patriarchal space that thrives on gender-based oppression and specifically affects the female PC, players can understand how a feminist dystopian world shapes a woman's sense of agency through not being allowed to escape that patriarchal space.

Mechanics

Environment, as demonstrated in the previous section, is only one integral component of a video game, which complements and works in tandem with another integral component: game mechanics. In his book, *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*, Jesper Juul reinforces this notion when he discusses how "to play a game video is therefore to interact with real rules while imagining a fictional world, and a video game is a set of rules as well as a fictional world," which means that when stripped down, a video game is simply a player who virtually interacts with rules that are governed by a the software of a game, but is packaged or placed within a narrative or a story that then means something to a player (1). These rules are not for the sake of having rules, but exist in order to lend itself to a specific experience

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[78] Of course, a player could always mute the sound, which would shift the experience, but in my opinion as a gamer, this is rare when it involves a story-driven narrative.

that players can only access through playing.[79] Similarly, Bogost claims that mechanics, otherwise known as "the rules" in a game "do not merely create the experience of play—they also construct the *meaning* of the game. That is to say, the gestures, experiences, and interactions a game's rules allow (and disallow) make up the game's significance" (121, my emphasis). He implies that the game mechanics (the rules of a game) structures the way the player interacts with the narrative, and that structure is imperative because it lends itself to larger implications in the real-world. In other words, the mechanics in video games are technological processes and coding that can result in social, cultural, and economic arguments. To demonstrate, Bogost explains that "when we pay our mortgage bill we don't see where that money ends up. But in [the video game] *Animal Crossing*, the player experiences the way his [or her] debt makes bankers wealthy," which means that through playing the game, a player can access and understand certain themes and ideas within the game, but also outside of the game in the real-world through playing (118).

Furthering the notion that video games are governed by a set of rules, which have larger implications for the player, Markku Eskelinen explains in his article, "The Gaming Situation," that the rules are a result of the video game's medium, which require a compilation of certain fixed and non-fixed elements that the player must "manipulate or configure in order to progress in the game to be able to continue" (3). The environment and mechanics work together in a video game to force the player to engage with space and environment in a way that cannot be ignored because there are "events and existents the player has to manipulate or configure in order to progress in the game or just to be able to continue" (3). This means that there are certain elements in a game, such as battling a boss[80] or choosing a dialogue option, that the player

[79] It is not enough in a video game to just watch. It is specifically through the act of play that a player can experience the intention of the game.
[80] As opposed to a routine enemy, a boss is usually prefaced with a cutscene, is more difficult to defeat, and players cannot opt out of fighting them.

cannot ignore. While a reader and viewer can skip ahead in the narrative in a novel or a

television show, whereas a viewer can turn their eyes away or cover their ears in a television

show, a player cannot do any of those things when playing a video game because the narrative is

accessed kinesthetically, which almost always requires the player to keep their eyes open and

their hands on the controller or keyboard to successfully negotiate space and move forward. To

successfully 'read' space in a video game, the player must engage with the world through the

mechanics by trial and error to test the boundaries and rules of the environment and mechanics.

If a player fails to navigate the rules or expectations of a game environment, it is not necessarily

a poorly designed game; instead, the player's failure or struggle to navigate and read a particular

space and utilize the mechanics could be representative of a larger theme or point the game

wants the player to consider.[81]

Since the video game medium has a unique way of exploring myriad themes and real-

world issues, video games are not just simply mindless entertainment.[82] The organization, Games

for Change (G4C), was founded in 2004, which seeks to change the perception of video games as

a device for critical thought and change. At a Games and Media Summit, Susanna Pollack

asserted that "a game can be used for cognitive training," and "At the very base level, games—

even the most entertaining games—help develop skills like critical thinking and problem-

solving," which suggests that the medium of a video game is distinctive from others because

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[81] Lucas Pope, designer of the game, *Papers Please* (2008) intentionally designed a game to be clunky. The interface and mechanics were essential to his critique of bureaucracy and dehumanization, which he wanted players to experience through playing the role of a border control agent. Through checking the newspaper, reading the daily report for an increase in rules (every day there are more), flipping through the guidebook to check for country and city names, checking gender, checking numbers, etc., players experience the monotony of this particular job and have the agency to allow people across the border they are not supposed to, but ultimately cannot because it leads to the death of the player's family (among other things).

[82] It is important to note that not all video games are capable of creating such thought and depth, which means that some games are meant to be mindlessly entertaining. Although some games can be mindless entertainment, there are myriad games that are intentionally designed to make players think, feel, and consider what they are doing and what it means.

players are put into situations where they have to consciously think about their actions in a meaningful way, whether that involves the consequences of their actions or how their actions can solve and subvert problems of varying types ("How Indie Developers"). Similar to Pollack, Jonathan Ostenson argues in "Exploring the Boundaries of Narrative: Video Games in the English Classroom," that when reading a novel or watching a film, "you might become invested in a character and his or her choices, [but it is] not to the same degree if *you* are the character making the choices and dealing with the outcomes" (78). In his view, other mediums can prompt the user to feel invested and empathetic toward the characters and narrative, but the investment in a character that a user controls to make choices in a narrative raises the stakes and level of investment in a way novels and television cannot.[83] While video games encourage thought and a different kind of investment in the narrative and characters, Katherine Isbister posits in her book, *How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design*, that it is the emotional dimension of interacting with a video game that lends itself to larger thought and reflection, especially in moments when a player must make a decision and suffer or benefit from the consequences of the decision they made. In other words, in a novel a character might have to choose between saving a loved one or an entire community, but in a video game, it is the player who is solely responsible for making that choice, otherwise the narrative will not progress. As a result of these choices players are required to make, Isbister explains that games have the "capacity to evoke actual feelings, [such as guilt], from a fictional experience," which implies the player has thoughts and feelings that are a direct result of what they did or did not decide to do in the game (Kindle 409).

Building on prior research that theorizes the general, but unique nature of the medium of

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[83] It also depends on what kind of a game it is as well. Some games have more consequences for the actions, whereas others do not. However, even if the narrative is linear, the player still learns and thinks based on their experiences.

a video game, I intend to examine how a particular genre of video game—the feminist dystopian video game— lends itself to a unique exploration of gender-based oppression and agency. More specifically, in feminist dystopian games, it is the combination of the patriarchal environment with game mechanics, which not only heightens the player's awareness of how gender-based oppression takes away a woman's agency by disallowing the player to fight back, but also encourages the player to see innovative and nuanced ways of resisting gender-based oppression— such as solving puzzles (*Broken Age*) or taking pictures (*Beyond Good and Evil*)— as a way to exercise agency. In other words, *Broken Age* and *Beyond Good and Evil* simulate a lack of agency in a patriarchal environment, which the player experiences through the female player character, and as such, encourages the player to understand agency in ways that other mediums cannot.

Theory in Practice: An Examination of Feminist Dystopian Video Games

As illustrated in the Introduction to this dissertation, Linda Hutcheon argues that instead of actively reading and interpreting the words on the page, or even pushing play and observing what happens next in a television show, the player of a video game must interact kinesthetically with the narrative. In video games, this might involve the player choosing to grasp their controller (if they are playing on a console), or even place their hands on their keyboard (if they are playing on a computer), to interact with the game environment.[84] In other words, the narrative cannot move forward without the player's direct participation with the narrative through a PC who is also accessed through a controller or keyboard (the game's hardware). While *Dawn* and *The Handmaid's Tale* (discussed in chapter one), and *Westworld* (discussed in chapter two), immediately establish gender inequity and gender-based oppression through words

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[84]This is just two examples of ways that a player can interact with a video game. This is important because the gaming experience differs drastically depending on the device and interface.

and phrases (novels), or through a combination of narrative and visual elements (television),

Broken Age actually does all of this *and* more because of its medium.[85] Unlike a novel or a

television show, where the reader and viewer encounter and understand gender-based

oppression, as well as mechanisms of resistance to it, through the experiences of the female

character(s) on the page in their imagination or the screen, the player character in a video game is

an arguably in-game presence of the player, who experiences simulated gender-based oppression

and nuanced agency through their participation. As feminist dystopian video games, *Broken Age*

and *Beyond Good and Evil,* simulate an experience of gender-based oppression through the

environment and mechanics, which first emphasizes the ways that women's agency is taken

away, and then, simulates how women can choose to exercise agency through the mechanics in

more subtle and nuanced ways.

Using Gender-Based Oppression through Environment and Cutscenes

In feminist dystopian video games, players are introduced to gender-based oppression

through interacting with the game environment, which can sometimes be conveyed through

cutscenes to orient the player into the world of the game. While participation in the corrupt

patriarchal environment is crucial, players can glean a lot from cutscenes[86] as well. In his article,

"The Myth of the Ergodic Videogame: Some thoughts on player-character relationships in

videogames," James Newman argues that in a video game, the word "Off-line describes periods

where no registered input control is received from the player," which seems to imply that

cutscenes are offline moments because the player watches—much in the same way they would

watch a movie. Although the player is not technically 'doing' anything, it does not mean that

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[85] I am not suggesting that a video game is better than other mediums, but merely illustrating how it is exceedingly different than novels and television.
[86] In video games, a cutscene is a brief (or lengthy) movie where the player watches rather than plays.

what happens during the cutscene is insignificant or inconsequential because they are designed to advance the plot of a narrative, urging the player onward to glean more information, sometimes rewarding the player for completing a segment of the game, or even used to provide a player with some background and insight into the player character.[87] In both *Broken Age* and *Beyond Good and Evil*, cutscenes are crucial because they are used to hint at the corruption in a patriarchal environment, which is supposed to prompt the players to empathize with the PC because that particular female character is their way into the game world. In other words, players gain an understanding through *being* or playing as that character and from watching moments that they cannot control as well, which give the player a moment to think about what themes are evident there in a cutscene.

Broken Age

At the beginning of *Broken Age*, a cutscene introduces the player character, Vella, to the player from a third-person point of view.[88] Since the game is in third-person, rather than first-person, the player can see Vella's entire body and discover that she is a sporty, dark-skinned teenage girl who seems to be sleeping up against a tree in a meadow. Unlike *Dawn* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, which make it immediately apparent to the reader that the worlds Lilith and Offred are living in are corrupt, *Broken Age* seems to do the visual opposite with Vella's society. Instead of presenting a dark and dingy world with cages or barbed wire fences, it is presented as aesthetically peaceful and idyllic because it is both agrarian and sea-side, which renders it more

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[87] These are some, but not all of the purposes of a cutscene in a game.

[88] In video games, a third-person point of view means that the player can see the PC's entire body. As they run, shoot, or jump, the camera is usually *behind* the PC, which makes it seem as though the person who is controlling the character is experiencing the world from over the PC's shoulder. In comparison, in first-person point of view games, the player rarely—sometimes, depending on the game, never—sees the PC's body because they experience the game world *through* the eyes of the PC. In other words, when the player controls the player character to walk around the game world, the player will see an arm or the barrel of their gun or tip of their sword at eye-level or somewhere in the screen ahead of them as though they are in the game world.

akin to a paradise: the sun is shining over the mountains, the sea is bright blue, the meadow is a brilliant shade of green, and there is a beautiful village down below. The way *Broken Age* introduces the player to the feminist dystopian world in the game is actually similar to several young adult (YA) feminist dystopian novels, such as Ally Condie's *Matched* trilogy (2010-2012) and Lauren Oliver's *Delirium* trilogy (2011-2013), where patriarchal mechanisms of gender-based oppression are not immediately recognized, and as such, requires the female protagonist to uncover the corruption that lurks beneath the beautiful surface of their societies. In these novels, this is accomplished through descriptions and dialogue between characters, which eventually prompts the female protagonists to resist gender-based oppression through nuanced agency.[89]

While the narrative in *Broken Age* functions in a very similar manner to Condie's and Oliver's novels, the video game— as a medium— shapes *how* the player through Vella experiences and resists gender-based oppression in entirely different ways. In other words, it is up to Vella/the player to interact with the aesthetically-faux utopian environment in the game to discover that Sugar Bunting, Vella's hometown, is not what it initially appears, rather than reading or watching a character discover it in a novel or television show. Vella/the player begins the journey of uncovering how the paradisiacal environment, which includes non-player characters, conceals gender-based oppression through keeping its citizens ignorant. The game begins with Vella's younger sister, Rocky, searching for her big sister by calling her name from down the hill. This prompts Vella to wake-up, stretch, and stand-up, but it is then up to the player to click on Vella's sister at the bottom of the hill to move the narrative forward. When the player clicks on Vella's sister, the game transitions into a brief cutscene, where a dialogue transpires, and the player must watch and listen:

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[89] This is a currently under-discussed narrative technique in young adult feminist dystopian novels.

Rocky: "There you are! I was getting worried"

Vella: "Worried that I chickened out?"

Rocky: "No, I know that you're not afraid of anything."

Vella: "I mean, what's to fear? This is a great honor."

Rocky: "I can't tell if you're being serious."

While video games require the player's participation in the narrative in myriad ways, such as jumping, making choices, or solving puzzles, *Broken Age* actually front-loads the game with cutscenes, which means that the player really does not have 'to do' much initially. However, as mentioned earlier, what happens during a cutscene is not insignificant or inconsequential. In the above dialogue, players discover that Vella was not actually lounging and dozing in the meadow for enjoyment, but actually possibly *hiding* there to avoid something. When Rocky insinuates that Vella is not "afraid of anything," and Vella sarcastically refers to what she has to do as a "great honor," Rocky says that she is immediately uncertain if her big sister is acting sardonic or not. At first, this conversation is exceedingly confusing because it is very vague, but by dancing around myriad concrete details, it seems to be designed to pique the player's interest in the forthcoming events that the player actually will have to participate in. However, there is one detail at the end of the conversation with Vella's sister—not mentioned above—which reveals the name of the event Vella/the player must participate in: The Maiden's Feast. The aptly named event could have one of two implications: one, it could indicate that it is a banquet *for* the young women of Sugar Bunting; or two, it could signify a banquet *of* young women from Sugar Bunting. If the player follows the subtle clues that are embedded in the dialogue in the opening cutscene— such as, Vella's reluctance to attend the feast or Rocky's reaction to Vella's sarcastic remarks— it is clear that Vella/the player is subjected to gender-based oppression because The

Maiden's Feast only offers up *women* to be sacrificed. This moment in the game must be a cutscene because it establishes an important detail about Rocky, an NPC— who is an extension of the game environment—which is not only that Vella and Rocky have very different ideological viewpoints on The Maiden's Feast, but Rocky does not seem to be aware that this event subjects her big sister to gender-based oppression.

When the sisters are finished talking, Vella/the player must follow Rocky down the hill to their house, where another cutscene occurs and features a bon voyage party for Vella/the player, who is mere hours away from The Maiden's Feast. In response to her family's enthusiasm, Vella's reaction is simply, "oh," which reinforces that her agency is taken away because she cannot simply choose to opt out of the event. Not only is Vella's ability to refuse taken away from her in this cutscene, but the rest of her family also seems to revere the Maiden's Feast just like Rocky and is demonstrated through a series of quick interactions with each family member. For example, Vella's mother approaches her and says, "There's my Velloria. There's my pretty girl," pauses for a moment, and then continues, "I can't believe… I just can't believe…" but, ultimately, she trails-off and is unable to finish her thought, which her husband finishes for her, saying, "we're very proud of you. I think that's what your mother is trying to say." This moment is interrupted by Vella's grandmother, who makes a remark about how Vella is not even dressed for the Maiden's Feast, and then by Rocky, who whines about eating the 'After Cake' now as opposed to later. Vella's mother, who was highly emotional to the point where she could not finish her thought mere seconds ago, clasps her hands together and exclaims, "Oh yes, cake!" in a cheerful tone. Based on what the player observes in this second cutscene, what Vella must do at the Maiden's Feast makes her parents proud overall, but it also specifically renders her mother emotional and then speechless.

While her struggling, but stoic parents seem to hide behind feeling proud of their daughter, Vella's grandmother is overtly irritated and even outraged at her granddaughter's lack of preparation, whereas Vella's sister is only selfishly interested in cake. It is the combination of Vella's reaction to the surprise party, along with her family's full range of histrionic reactions to the Maiden's Feast and Vella's participation in it, which not only confirms that something is amiss, but that something is specifically amiss for *women* in this society. Even though *Broken Age* appears to function more like a film than a video game at this point, the cutscenes are crucial to establishing an environment of patriarchal corruption through Vella's family, who mindlessly comply with gender-based oppression. This notion is reinforced at the very end of this part of the game where Vella mentions rebellion—"I don't understand why we can't just fight Mog Chothra"—but it is laughed at by her family, which reaffirms that her family is indoctrinated into a sexist ideology that celebrates the sacrifice of young women because female sacrifice is purported as an honor.

Beyond Good and Evil

Unlike *Broken Age*, *Beyond Good and Evil* begins with a lengthier cutscene, which features a news broadcast that establishes the tumultuous tone of this dystopia. In other words, before the player even meets the player character or sees the dystopian environment of Hillys, the reporter's words characterize the dystopian world. In his broadcast, Fehn Digler reports, "The war has arrived at the gates of Hillys. This peaceful mining planet in System 4 is now completely encircled by the DomZ armada," which informs the player that there is an ongoing-intergalactic battle that has finally permeated the borders of a previously peaceful nation. As the players watch news footage of ships headed toward Hillys, players not only infer that the war disrupting the peace, but that the citizens of Hillys will also be subjected to oppression from the invaders,

who converge on the community from every angle, and as such, makes escape impossible.

Unlike the relatively swift cutscenes from *Broken Age* that develop the inescapability of Vella's

situation as a woman, this cutscene in *Beyond Good and Evil* is unique because: one, it is a very

long cutscene for a video game; two, it does not start with the player character; and three, does

not seem to explore how this dystopia thrives on gender-based oppression at the outset. Instead,

it lingers on the larger world circumstances that surround Jade, the PC, before introducing her to

the player. As a result, this enables *Beyond Good and Evil* to establish that the PC has absolutely

no idea that the invasion is about to happen, which further characterizes the government of Hillys

as a corrupt institution because it has media capabilities, and yet, does not utilize this technology

to regularly inform the citizens of Hillys of impending danger. While some players detest

lengthier cutscenes, I argue that the cutscenes in this game are imperative because it not only

characterizes the dystopian world in *Beyond Good and Evil*, but it also approaches the notion of

character-building in a new way. Since the player knows what is going to happen, but the PC

does not, it builds in narrative anticipation for the player to see how the PC reacts to impending

strife and disaster that they do not know is coming.

  After the broadcast is interrupted, the same cutscene finally switches perspective,

revealing the PC to the player, who is unaware of the impending disaster on the surface of Hillys.

Her unawareness is conveyed to the player through the seemingly peaceful environment. Similar

to *Broken Age*, the environment in *Beyond Good and Evil* seems like it is also in tension with the

political corruption the lurks beneath the surface of society because "though Hillys is, on the

surface, a colorful and inviting place, not all is well in this world" ("Positive Female

Characters"). In the player's first glimpse of Hillys, they see birds flying across a pale pinkish-

gray sky and over a lush and gigantic tree, which the camera follows all the way down to the

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base, where it sits on the edge of an ocean that overlooks the borders of a beautiful city and mountains in the distance. The tranquility of the moment is reinforced by a setting sun that is about to melt into the horizon— coupled by a musical compilation of calming flutes and light strings— which frames two figures who are perched on rocks at the edge of the ocean either worshipping or doing tai chi. This peaceful moment is fleeting because the camera cuts to an extreme close-up of the woman's closed eyes, which spring open just in time to watch the sky turn dark and a gray-green funnel cloud suddenly appears. The non-diegetic music also drastically switches from calm to ominous, and signals to the player that the peace is not only disrupted, but that the DomZ have arrived. Even though Jade, the PC, was not informed of the impending war by the broadcast, springs into action. She mutters to herself, "They're coming," and then grabs the creature next to her, throws him on her back, sprints to the lighthouse, and shouts, "Go tell Pey'j I'll take care of the shield." The narrative anticipation that has been building from the beginning of this lengthy cutscene is assuaged as players watch how Jade is a capable and active agent because she handles the situation with authority and confidence. In other words, players infer that she does not need her pseudo-uncle to save them because she is capable of doing so herself.

However, as players watch Jade try to activate the shield that will protect her and everyone else in the lighthouse, they see that she actually fails. The computer informs her, "Your Optima account is 360 unit short" and "Your electrical supply has just been blocked." At long last, players are finally clued-in as to how the impending war has shaped the community of Hillys to not just oppress women, but lower-class women in particular.[90] In other words, the social constructions of class and gender intersect to oppress Jade and ultimately prevent her from

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[90] See Kimberlé Crenshaw.

protecting herself and others because she does not have a job and lacks the capital. At this point, players can infer that Jade lacks the capital because her gendered-job as the maternal caretaker of the orphans in the lighthouse does not pay her, and as such, takes away her agency to protect herself because it costs money that she does not possess. The cutscene is imperative to establishing Hillys as a feminist dystopian world because the player has to reconcile the notion that the PC seems highly capable—a result of how well she sprang into action when the invasion started— but is still robbed of agency because she is a lower-class woman with a job that patriarchal society does not earn income. It is important that this moment is a cutscene because players have to watch Jade, who also watches the DomZ, descend on the lighthouse and abduct the orphans, but can do absolutely nothing about it, which reinforces that the patriarchal environment takes her away agency as a woman.[91]

Throughout *Beyond Good and Evil*, the patriarchal environment constantly seeks to disempower Jade no matter how capable. In another cutscene toward the beginning of the game, players watch Jade step into a stream of light, which brings her to the surface right outside the lighthouse, where the reporter from the initial cutscene is broadcasting his report of the destruction. When Jade appears, the broadcaster thrusts the microphone into her face and asks her to recap her experience of the invasion. Jade stutters and stumbles for a moment, but before she can get her bearings to reply, she is interrupted and eclipsed by Pey'j, her adoptive uncle. He draws the reporter's attention away from her and toward himself by saying, "Well, you guys are not what we would call as fast as a speeding bullet. Keep doing nothing, and next time, there'll be nothing left here to save." Even though the reporter wanted to interview Jade, Pey'j steals the spotlight to spout his own political critiques about Hillys media coverage and the corrupt

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[91] Immediately after this, the player is prompted to battle, but those are mechanics that I will discuss later.

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government's inaction to aid its own citizens. In other words, the purpose of this cutscene is for the player to see how Jade is subjected to gender-based oppression in multiple ways. Since Pey'j is in charge of the lighthouse, and she works for him, he renders her subservient through denying her economic agency. Not only does she fail to receive monetary compensation for her job as a caretaker in the lighthouse, but she is also rendered silent by a male she considers family, who *might* have noble intentions; nevertheless, he constantly and arguably unconsciously relegates Jade to a subservient position. Even later in the game, when Jade does get a job of her own, Pey'j tries to take advantage of her talent and capital by telling her what they will do with her earnings. At one point, he decides that it "will be useful to fix the hovercraft." He assumes, rather than asks Jade, if they could use her earnings to fix their hovercraft; instead, he just lays claim to what Jade has earned, which takes away her agency. Even though *Beyond Good and Evil* appears to function more like a film than a video game at this point, the cutscenes are crucial to establishing an environment of intersectional patriarchal corruption, which robs Jade of her agency based on her gender *and* financial status.

Using Gender-Based Oppression through Game Mechanics

Like all feminist dystopian texts[92], *Broken Age* and *Beyond Good and Evil* incorporate gender-based oppression into the fabric of their narratives, but in exceedingly different ways than novels and television. While the cutscenes frame the corrupt patriarchal worlds within *Broken Age* and *Beyond Good and Evil*, I argue that it is the combination of virtual patriarchal environments *with* game mechanics that creates the feminist dystopian world in the medium of a video game. Through a female PC, the game mechanics force the player to be complicit and compliant, which then renders the player— by extension— complicit and compliant as well

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[92] See Cavalcanti who argues that in order to be defined as a feminist dystopian text, it must focus on issues of gender.

because they cannot do anything to resist the patriarchal environment at this point. The lack of agency that the player experiences in this moment as a woman is theoretically supposed to affect the player emotionally because "games can actually play a powerful role in creating empathy and other strong, positive emotional experiences" (Isbister, Kindle 298). While I agree with Isbister, I also contend that the emotional experience does not have to be a positive one, especially in a feminist dystopian game where the patriarchal environment and mechanics could evoke feelings of frustration or irritation at genuinely *feeling* helpless from the subject-position as a woman whose agency is systematically taken away. Through playing from the perspective of a female character in a feminist dystopian game, players are invited to deeply consider the simulated experience of gender-based oppression and lack of agency by a set of patriarchal rules that they must engage with and cannot subvert right away.

Broken Age

After the cutscene in Vella's family home, which ends with her mother asking Vella/the player to find the ceremonial knife so that Rocky can have some cake, Vella/the player have no choice but to carry out the menial and insulting task, while her family members stand and sit idly by about the room. This moment is both ironic and absurd because Vella is vehemently against the Maiden's Feast, but she is forced to find the knife that will allow her mother to cut the cake that celebrates her imminent death. In "Broken Age and the Social Justice Warrior," Anna Delves argues:

> I'm not very keen on the fact that my first actions as a player will be to help Vella
> towards her own demise. But that's the thing with point-and-clicks – you really don't
> have a choice. As someone who's usually all about sticking with a story all the way to its

conclusion, this does not sit well with me. Still, there's a game to play, so off I go,

merrily setting about what is essentially glorified ritual suicide.

Delves seems to be irritated by the fact the mechanics of *Broken Age* require her to take an active

role in Vella's impending doom, which the point-and-click mechanics coerce the player into

doing because this type of mechanic requires the player to follow a specific series of events—in

other words, the player has no choice but to participate and send Vella off to a "glorified ritual

suicide" if they want to see what happens next in the narrative ("Social Justice Warrior"). Delves

is not sold on the premise of Vella's story because it perpetuates some of the stereotypes about

women in games, as illustrated earlier in the chapter, which is that women are objects who

frequently die for patriarchal reasons. In the case of *Broken Age*, women are also "deemed

disposable for the sake of [others]" ("Why Broken Age Act 2's an Awful Mess").

Even though Delves' emotional hesitation[93] to enjoy playing Vella's narrative in *Broken

Age* is understandable, I argue the game mechanics in this moment that ensure there is absolutely

nothing that Vella/the player can do to get out of this situation is *not* a shortcoming of the game,

but an immense value and opportunity because it actually simulates—and puts into perspective—

how it is impossible for some women in particular circumstances to exercise agency. While a

novel can describe this lack of agency, and a television show can narratively and visually depict

it, a video game has the unique ability to force a player to experience an approximation of what

gender-based oppression and a restriction of agency looks and feels like through game

mechanics within a corrupt patriarchal society. For example, to recover the knife, Vella/the

player must speak with the grandfather, and when she does, several dialogue choices appear at

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[93] I am not suggesting her emotional reaction to the game is wrong, but I am suggesting that there is no deeper analysis of her initial emotional reaction. In my view, Delves' emotional reaction seems to be exactly what *Broken Age* wants the player to experience: frustration. However, she does not explore this reaction in any other capacity and consider what it might mean, rather than jumping to the conclusion that it is a shortcoming of the game.

the bottom of the screen: "Do you know where Mom's knife is?" and "Why so grumpy grandpa?" and "Hey gramps, want a cupcake?" and finally, "I'd better go find that knife." To recover the knife, Vella has to select the right dialogue option— the line about the cupcake— which distracts the grandfather long enough for the knife to fall out of his pocket.[94] Through having to go through the menial task of finding the knife, which forces Vella one step closer to The Maiden's Feast she does not want to attend, also simulates how women are sometimes even forced to participate in their own demise, which is especially agonizing for Vella because she is an unwilling participant. While Delves interprets this narratively and mechanically problematic, I posit that the game mechanics—which prevent Vella from abstaining or saving herself—is precisely what prompts the player to reflect on their experience of playing a conscious subject who is still forced to comply with her patriarchal role as object. Players can understand through their simulated lack of agency that no matter how badly they wish to escape the situation, they cannot. It reinforces that Vella is oppressed as a woman, in a way that does not affect men, in a manner that a novel or television show cannot.

Beyond Good and Evil

While players in *Broken Age* do not have a sidekick to assist them through the game, players of *Beyond Good and Evil* must utilize Pey'j as a sidekick, who is helpful in situations that demand more than one character to solve a puzzle and advance the narrative. From a game mechanics perspective, Pey'j accompanies Jade on her journey because the game has a series of puzzles that players must solve, but they cannot be done with just the PC. In other words, some of the puzzles in the game require Pey'j *and* Jade to work together to solve the puzzle and

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[94] As mentioned earlier, this moment in the game concludes with a cutscene, which reveals Vella trying to pitch another option than just feeding women to the monster at The Maiden's Feast, but her family laughs at her, and as such, reinforces that agency is not possible for all women in certain circumstances.

advance the narrative. Sarkeesian, discussing this unique partnership in the game, argues that "Pey'j treats [Jade] as a capable partner" and that not only "encourages us to see her that way, too," but moments when they work together "evokes a sense of mutual respect and partnership between these two characters" ("Positive Female Characters"). In her view, these moments of partnership that are built into the gameplay are important because it illustrates respect and reminds players that male and female characters can work together as equals. Although there are moments throughout the game where Jade and Pey'j certainly are partners—a notion that I will discuss in detail later in this chapter—but there are many other moments that Sarkeesian does not allude to, which are rife with Pey'j misogynistic tendencies. In other words, their equal partnership is not always equal.

This notion is demonstrated when Jade/the player is tasked with taking pictures, and she must go-ahead of Pey'j, leaving him behind because he does not have the athletic ability like Jade does to climb up onto a ledge. As Jade/the player drift out of sight, the player can hear him whine and complain that she left him behind: "Hey Jade!! Stick together. Crimeny!" In response, Jade assures him, "Don't worry. I'm right here. Nothing will happen to ya," but Pey'j replies, "You mind your P's and Q's little miss. Respect your elders…" When Jade earnestly tries to assure Pey'j that she is not leaving him behind for good, his response is imbued with superfluous sexist remarks, which is representative of the way that patriarchal society treats and abuses women. By leaving him behind, along with assuring him that he would be fine without her for a moment, Jade challenges Pey'j's masculinity, which is why he pejoratively reduces her subjectivity to a "little miss," a condescending term that reinforces gender-based power dynamics between them. The environment, as well as the mechanics, work together to remind the player that Jade is not in a completely equal partnership with her pseudo-uncle in spite of her

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capability and talent because of his constant sexist remarks. Through the inescapability of the

patriarchal world, along with game mechanics that demonstrate Jade's talent and abilities, the

player is constantly reminded that the game world is threatened by her. It puts into perspective in

ways that novels and television cannot through playing a woman who is capable, but is still

subjected to gender-based insults, that patriarchy targets and threatens women in different ways

that do not always involve physical confinement.

Subverting Gender-Based Oppression through Environment and Mechanics

The feminist dystopian genre, as demonstrated throughout this dissertation, is predicated

on using gender-based oppression in order to subvert it, which I argue occurs when female

protagonists comply with the gender-based oppression they are subjected to in order to resist. In

the medium of a video game, the Subversive Narrative Structure technique is replicated through

the game mechanics, which empower the PC/player to resist gender-based oppression within a

patriarchal environment. As a result, players understand how resistance might not always

resemble traditional and obvious rebellion—which is found in myriad mainstream games— and

demonstrates, through play, that agency can be more complex and nuanced.

Broken Age

After the ceremonial cake service at her house with her family, the screen goes blank and

in the next cutscene, players watch as Vella appears: she is standing by the ocean in an

extravagant dress with her eyes-closed. Although she is not explicitly sexualized in this moment,

the cutscene still seems to be intentionally designed to draw attention to her beauty and object-

position. In "Body Language and The Male Gaze," Sarkeesian discusses the way a character is

designed to move in a game says a lot about the character and their gender, which can either

reinforce or subvert gender stereotypes. Movement in video games is used "to communicate

information about [a character] to the player," but when it comes to women in games, movement "isn't just used to suggest their confidence or their skill […] It's very often used, in conjunction with other aspects of their design, to make them exude sexuality for the entertainment [and enjoyment] of the presumed straight male player" ("Body Language").[95] While Vella is not sexualized in this moment, her body language and movement certainly accentuates her feminine features, which is reflected in the way she demurely casts down her gaze and holds her arms close to her body in a way that makes her seem very delicate and passive. As Vella stands there, a voice says, "Majestic to behold, awe-inspiring, powerful, mysterious, but Mog Chothra is more than that, merciful and generous. Mog Chothra keeps our town safe, all he asks for is to pick some of our beautiful flowers as he passes through." This speech augments—as well as explains— the gender-based oppression of women in Sugar Bunting, which seems to derive from a pagan tradition of sacrifice, but in this case, only women are sacrificed. By essentially describing Mog Chothra as magnificent, strong, and sublime, players understand that the townspeople worship this monster who they conceptualize as their tenderhearted savior because he protects their town in exchange for *maidens.* In other words, Mog Chothra only accepts female sacrifices for his alleged protection, which suggests that Sugar Bunting is indoctrinated into the ideology that ostensible protection is worth the cost of female lives.[96]

As the speech about Mog Chothra is happening, Vella's family is smiling, cheering, and

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[95] To demonstrate, Sarkeesian examines *Destiny*, a game that she claims represents men and women equally, but with one exception: the way in which the male and female characters sit down. She shows a clip from the game, where the male character sits down, and then, the female character, and the difference is obvious: when the male character sits down, he seems to be "taking a load off after a long, hard day fighting the forces of pure evil," whereas when the female character sits down, it is a "completely different story. She sits like a delicate flower," which reinforces that male and female PCs are *still* gendered and even in ways that sometimes do not make sense ("Body Language").

[96] This entire scene is strangely reminiscent of Shirley Jackson's short story, "The Lottery" (1948), which features a similar agrarian community that adheres to a pagan ritual that sacrifices a person each year for the sake of prosperity. Similar to the community in Jackson's story, the community of Sugar Bunting does not question The Maiden's Feast ritual, either.

genuinely appear to be having a marvelous time. At this point in the cutscene, Vella's entire

body is finally visible, which reveals that she—as well as several other young women—are not

wearing extravagant ballgowns but are actually baked into cakes that resemble ballgowns and are

adorned with sexist phrases, such as: "up for grabs" or "fun size" or "delicious." In other words,

these young women are "dressed to the nines and clamoring for the giant sea monster to kill

them," which demonstrates that women (and men) in Sugar Bunting are inculcated into the belief

that they should *want* to be sacrificed ("Social Justice Warrior"). While it may shock the player

that the young girls who are about to be forfeited to Mog Chothra are so eager to play their role

as sacrifice, Michel Foucault explains how it is quite common for one to play an active role in

their own subjugation in his book, *Discipline and Punish*, where he asserts:

> A real subjection is born mechanically from a fictitious relation. So it is not necessary to
>
> use force to constrain the convict to good behavior, the madman to calm, the worker to
>
> work, the schoolboy to application, the patient to the observation of the regulations […]
>
> He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, *assumes responsibility* for
>
> the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; *he inscribed*
>
> *in himself* the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; *he becomes the*
>
> *principle of his own subjection*. (202 my emphasis)

The source of one's oppression may originally derive from a government or another external

source, which actively shapes and limits how the person acts or thinks. However, society

eventually reaches a point where the external oppressive source is no longer the active enforcer

of subjugation, and instead, begins to function as a constant reminder of how to behave and think

without having to deploy any force to enforce the rules. Since the citizens in an oppressive

society know that there is a larger external source watching, the citizens will comply because

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they know they are being watched, and thus, will police themselves and others to ensure everyone follows the rules. In other words, a society of people are simultaneously oppressed by a larger governing body *and* oppress themselves by policing their own actions and the actions of others, which means that the people are rendered into the mechanisms of their own oppression. If *Broken Age* is viewed through Foucault's theory, it suggests that the obtuse young women of Sugar Bunting are not only oppressed by this patriarchal tradition, but that they also continue to oppress themselves and other women by internalizing the patriarchal mechanisms of oppression, which perpetuates the cycle of gender-based oppression in a way that does not oppress young men. Furthermore, it is important that this moment happens in a cutscene because it forces the player to stop and really observe how nearly everyone in Sugar Bunting vehemently supports the Maiden's Feast, which illustrates that gender-based oppression remains in place—as well as that it is not easily subverted—because all of Vella's obtuse peers and family *ensure* that it happens by failing to question.

However, as Foucault also notes in *The History of Sexuality: Volume I*, "Where there is power, there is resistance," which suggests systems of oppression are not absolute, and that where there is control, there is also the potential for subversion because power and agency are not mutually exclusive (95).[97] In *Broken Age*, during the Maiden's Feast, Vella's father shouts, "Show em' what you're made of, Vella," which causes her to turn away from the crowd, and mutter to herself, "This can't be right," and signifies that she does not agree with the oppressive nature of her existence. While the game mechanics disallow for agency to be exercised in open and obvious ways, it does not mean that Vella/the player cannot exercise agency in other, more complex and nuanced ways. For example, on the pedestal at The Maiden's Feast, as she is about

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[97] This is a shortened version of the full quote I discussed in the introduction to this dissertation.

to be sacrificed to Mog Chothra, Vella complies with her position as a female sacrifice in order to resist it. In other words, the mechanics in this moment disallow the player to just simply jump off the pedestal, which would be the obvious choice of escape; however, the mechanics make that feat impossible, and as such, reinforces to the player through their experience in this moment that agency can be exercised in complex and nuanced ways. As the player begins the elaborate process of Vella's escape, the other female NPCs who stand with Vella mention an assortment of horrible things that Vella would unleash on her community of Sugar Bunting by escaping, rather than allowing herself to be sacrificed to Mog Chothra. Despite what these other women claim, Vella/the player ignore them and proceed with an elaborate escape plan, which is made possible through the game mechanics that now grant Vella the agency to save herself.

Although I posit that the mechanics empower Vella to escape, Delves does not concur; instead, she conceptualizes this moment as a representation of Vella's selfishness:

I'm told that if Vella isn't sacrificed to Mog Chothra, then the beast will destroy her town and eat every one of its residents. This means that the escape I'm working towards will cause Mog to kill Vella's entire family while I'm off playing the rest of the game, which makes all the faffing about I have to do aggravating, alarming, and a pretty unpleasant reflection on Vella's character ("Social Justice Warrior").

Vella's escape is more self-centered, rather than liberating, because the sacrifice of her own life is supposed to save hundreds of lives in the community of Sugar Bunting. The repercussion of failing to submit to the ritual means that Vella has damned not only the community, but also her family with apparently little to no guilt. For Delves, this moment actually limits the player's agency because the player cannot abstain from escape, and as such, the mechanics coerce the player—through Vella— to abscond from her duty to her community. In one of her

playthroughs, Delves admits that she actually tried to resist Vella's desire to escape by letting

"the game idle for a few moments," refusing to play, but after a moment of not engaging with the

game, she watched "Vella [wrapped] her arms around herself and [looked] completely dejected,"

which nettled Delves because "the storyline and mechanics put [Vella] in a position where [she]

wanted to give her a slap instead of a hug" ("Social Justice Warrior"). In her view, Vella

appeared dejected because she did not get her way, which spurned Delves to want to "give

[Vella] a slap," rather than sympathize with her, especially since the mechanics in this moment

are also highly cumbersome and tedious ("Social Justice Warrior").

While the mechanics in this moment are inconvenient, and the narrative implication of

Vella's choice that the player has to carry out is weighty, I contend that there is more than one

way to interpret this crucial moment in *Broken Age*. At this point in the game, the player does not

know if Vella's grandmother is speaking the actual truth or merely her perception of the truth,

which changes how a player conceptualizes Vella and how the player understands their nefarious

or empowering actions in this moment. It is interesting to note that there is evidence to support

both interpretations at this moment in the game. If the player aligns with Delves' interpretation

and accepts the grandmother's words as truth, Vella has condemned Sugar Bunting, as well as

her family, to death. In Delves' view, this causes the player to feel not only a lack of empathy for

Vella, but to also feel guilty about the mechanics that force the player to aid and abet in her

selfish escape.[98] However, if the player associates with my interpretation, finding the

grandmother's words as a mere perception of a possible truth, Vella might have condemned

everyone she knows and loves, but at the same time, her condemnation is of a family and

community that vehemently supports the Maiden's Feast, which robs her of her agency, refuses

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[98] It is revealed in Act II of *Broken Age* that Vella's family, as well as the community of Sugar Bunting, is intact and well. At the time Delves wrote her article, Act II of *Broken Age* was not yet released.

to consider her ideas, and ultimately reduces her to an object. Instead of viewing Vella's alleged sacrifice of her family as a character flaw, I argue it brings nuance and complexity to her character: she is willing to sacrifice her family and their malevolent beliefs for her own autonomy. To some players, this might make her equally malevolent because she is willing to sacrifice the many for her one life, but through taking away the player's agency and forcing them to help Vella escape, it can also put the player into a position to consider the situation from Vella's point of view: she feels *that* trapped in the gender-based role she is forced into playing that she is willing to forfeit many lives and loved ones to escape. In other words, the elaborate mechanics, coupled with the player's inability to refuse to help Vella escape, seems to suggest that the price of escape is cumbersome; however, it is possible to choose to resist patriarchal power structures that seem impermeable.

Akin to the mechanics in Vella's home, where she had to track down the ceremonial cake knife, the mechanics in Vella's escape operate in the same step-by-step manner that the player must ascertain through trial and error. The point-and-click mechanics, as Delves notes, make games like *Broken Age*, "not fast games," which can be exceedingly irritating for the player, but in this particular case, the mechanics are crucial to understanding agency in a way that readers and viewers cannot ("Social Justice Warrior"). Since the mechanics *are* time-consuming, elaborate, and even frustrating, it seems representative of the notion that when a female character chooses to exercise agency, she has to be patient and tenacious because subtle and nuanced resistance does take time. For example, in order to get what Vella needs to extricate herself from the Maiden's Feast, the player must engage with each of the maidens around her in a specific sequence to successfully escape.[99] As a result, Vella/the player exercise agency through

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[99] Through trial and error on the player's part, the player will discover through clicking around that they need the drumstick that the yellow maiden has to attract the attention of the bird that is circling, but Vella does not have

engineering an intricate and lengthy plan that requires her to comply with her gender-based

circumstances in order to resist. Since it takes time for the player to complete this task, as well as

many others[100] throughout the game for Vella to gain autonomy, the mechanics invite the player

to consider that agency is not a binary, and that there are other complex and nuanced ways to

resist, which is a direct result of the player interacting with the medium of a video game.

Beyond Good and Evil

Despite the lengthy cutscenes that take away Jade's agency, as well as an NPC who also

constantly subjects Jade to gender-based oppression, there are mechanics in *Beyond Good and*

Evil that allow Jade to not be a complicit victim of her economic circumstances, nor to be

hindered by environmental sexism and misogyny. Unlike *Broken Age*, which does not have any

battle mechanics in the game, *Beyond Good and Evil* allows Jade to physically fight the invaders

that have gotten past the shields. This allows her to be an active agent in her own safety and

protection. In other words, it is not only a subversion of her individual economic circumstances,

but it is also a subversion of the damsel in distress trop that Sarkeesian coins in her Tropes VS

Women video essay series. In "A Brief History of Female Representation in Video Games," Kate

Harveston discusses that Jade from *Beyond Good and Evil* "represents progress" in the video

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anything that the yellow maiden wants to trade for, which forces Vella to talk to the blue maiden on her other side. Vella offers to trade her corset for the blue maiden's drink, which she accepts, tossing over the drink, but when she opens the bottle and it sprays everywhere, the blue maiden takes back the bottle and throws back Vella's corset, but then throws back the bottle when Vella asks for it again. Turning back to the yellow maiden, Vella offers a drink, and the bottle sprays all over her, too, which causes the yellow maiden to be upset, and demand a towel, which Vella has, for the drumstick.

[100] In other words, when Vella leaves Sugar Bunting, she enters the Cloud City into another type of dystopia, and she finds herself having to take drastic measures in order to save her community from Mog Chothra. For example, in order to leave the city in the clouds, Vella needs to find Jessie's, a birds, missing egg, but to do so, she needs to talk to a handful of people, acquire shoes so that she does not fall through the clouds, a ladder so that she can get up to a fruit tree, to save a man so that she can get the fruit, take the fruit to an offering basket so that she can talk to Brother Lightbeard, get a several golden eggs, and then place them in a basket, which will then take the ladder down to the forest floor. This elaborate process, like the one that was required to help Vella escape the Maiden's Feast, reinforces that exercising agency can be a highly complex notion, which can sometimes be a lengthy process of complying (doing tasks) in order to resist (escape; freeing the village).

game industry "because there were plans to have her defy stereotypes from the start," which suggests that her character was meant to be unlike other female characters in games. Michael Ansel and Sébastien Morin, designers of *Beyond Good and Evil*, "wanted [Jade] to be well rounded and not further the clichés of female characters" ("A Brief History").

While the designers of *Beyond Good and Evil* intentionally created Jade to subvert the stereotypical representation of women in video games, critics on popular blogs and other Internet sites seem to disregard her character entirely or focus on the male sidekick characters as though they are the central heroes. Jim Sterling, who stepped away from *Beyond Good and Evil* for a few years, revisited the game and concluded that the "combat still manages to be fun thanks to the special attacks of Pey'j and Double H.," which suggests that the game is not enjoyable because Jade is a fully fleshed out character, but that the sidekicks are what makes the combat and the entire game fun ("Review: Beyond Good and Evil HD"). Even though her name is never mentioned, he implies that the sidekicks are the reason Jade is even able to succeed. Likewise, in "Why Beyond Good & Evil is one of the greatest games ever made," Ryan Taljonick argues that what makes Jade's character compelling is that "she's not exactly trained in the art of fighting armored soldiers. But that's one of the great things about this game: It's *not* about being a one-person army or single-handedly defeating evil. Hell, Jade usually gets flat-out owned when taking on more than an enemy or two at a time." In his view, Jade is an inexperienced fighter who not only bumbles her way throughout the narrative but works as a part of a team to defeat the villains, which is fortunate because she fails more than she succeeds. Despite Sterling's and Taljonick's attempts to either omit Jade from the game, or to credit her success as a hero to a team effort, Sarkeesian argues that Jade is a crucial and progressive representation of women in gaming. In "Positive Female Protagonists in Video Games," she argues that "it may seem like a

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minor detail, but the fact that Pey'j tells Jade [in battle scenes] to free herself, instead of doing it for her, is incredibly important" because "He assists her but doesn't rescue her. He knows that even in this situation, she's far from helpless," which suggests that Jade is not perfect because she does get herself into trouble, but she is not a passive female character, who must wait for a male character to save her. Instead of freeing her, Pey'j simply "*assists*" by tossing Jade the tools she needs to rescue herself, and as such, she is still an active agent in the game ("Positive Female Protagonists").

While Jade's ability to fight and save herself is important, there are also other mechanics built into the game that empower Jade to be an active agent in even more nuanced ways. After Jade is rendered helpless at the beginning of the game because of her gender-based job as a woman that does not result in monetary compensation, she takes a job as a photographer. The player is prompted to grab a camera, leave the lighthouse, and start taking pictures, which earns Jade money. After taking several pictures, a screen pops up that shows a thumbnail picture of Jade, how much money she has earned from taking pictures, and a red arrow pointing at a box that says Optima; the player watches as the money transfers into the Optima account, demonstrating that Jade is not only a physically active agent, but also she has agency in the financial part of her life that she did not previously have. Since Jade has been intersectionally oppressed by the government, taking pictures and getting paid for those pictures is an empowering mechanic that gives Jade agency. After the money is transferred, another cutscene ensues, and the player sees that the shield has gone up, and that Jade has saved the day again, making herself an active agent. Through playing the game from the perspective of a lower-class woman, who has to take a job as a photographer to pay her bills and keep the lighthouse safe, players are presented with a nuanced form of agency that not only uses the capitalist system that

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oppresses her to subvert it, but it also demonstrates battle skills are just one way that a character can exercise agency. As Foucault argues in *The History of Sexuality*, "there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case," which means that there is more than one way a person can exercise agency (96). Since revolution and rebellion has no correct way or concrete doctrine on how to do so, a woman—in this case—can exercise agency and resist against the ties that bind her in myriad ways. For Jade, this involves the combination of battle and artistic skills that allow her to be the hero.

After Jade saves the lighthouse with a combination of battle and camera mechanics, Jade is suddenly recruited for her unique skills. Mr. De Castellac asks Jade to go on a "delicate mission," which requires her to journey to an "ancient mine on Black Isle located on the other side of town," and because the mission is risky, "Mr. De Castellac plans to reward [Jade] generously." As soon as the M-Disk is finished playing, a cutscene happens where Jade turns to Pey'j for advice, who tells her not to go on this mission because it seems "like a trap. It's too dangerous." At first, this seems like helpful advice because the request for the mission is strange and shrouded in mystery, but at the same time, it is also offensive and belittling because it suggests that Jade, who has already proven herself, cannot handle a mission of this magnitude because she is a woman. In response, Jade says, "Don't worry, Pey'j, everything will be fine. If you want, I'll go alone," which seems to be a powerful response that protests his presumptions and implications about her being helpless by reassuring him that she is more than capable of going alone on this mission. The combination of mechanics and environment allows Jade to reinforce that she is an active agent, and as such, to actively resist and subvert the patronizing patriarchal assumption that women cannot handle danger. While players are meant to feel

frustrated by the constraints that gender-based oppression puts on them, players are also meant to feel empowerment when the game provides a means of agency against this gender-based oppression.

<div style="text-align:center">Diverging Subversive Game Narrative Function</div>

While *Broken Age* and *Beyond Good and Evil* both have Subversive Narrative Structures, they are also subversive in different ways. In *Broken Age*, there are two narratives, one that follows Vella and the other that follows Shay, a boy who is living in space, oppressed by his mother, and seduced into unknowingly oppressing Vella, whereas in *Beyond Good and Evil*, there is only one narrative, but there is a consistent presence of intersectional critique. Through the different aspects that each game seems to critique, it is clear that players gain a disparate understanding of agency and what female empowerment means in each text.

Broken Age: Critique through Split-Narrative

In the YA feminist dystopian novel market, there are myriad novels that have split-perspectives, where the narrative is told from two completely different characters and their unique perspectives. In Marie Lu's *Legend* trilogy (2011-2013) and Sabaa Tahir's *An Ember in the Ashes*[101] (2015), there are two narrators: one male, one female, and both from different classes. In these novels, the purpose of a split-narrative is to explore how each character is not only oppressed or liberated based on their class-position, but also by their gender, which illustrates that men and women are oppressed in gender-specific ways. Through spending equal narrative time on the male and female characters in these novels, Lu and Tahir also explore how male and female characters exercise agency in different ways as well. This split-narrative

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[101] This is a currently unfinished quartette because Tahir is writing the fourth installment now. The first novel, *Ember*, has two narrators, whereas the second book, *A Torch Against the Night* (2016), has two narrators, and the third book, *A Reaper at the Gates* (2018), has four narrators.

technique is common in novels, but relatively rare in video games[102], which is why the split-narrative in *Broken Age* is one of the most important and striking features of the game. John Walker, series editor of *Rock, Paper, Shotgun: Gaming since 1873*, claims that the split-narrative in *Broken Age* is important because "the two main characters, Shay and Vella, were each in allegorical situations that represented [two] perspectives of teenage life," which suggests that the two PC's are representative of two contrasting possibilities of what it means to be a teenager ("Why Broken Age Act 2's Story Is An Awful Mess). While I agree with Walker that Shay and Vella represent two disparate viewpoints, it is crucial to consider that *Broken Age* juxtaposes a *male* and *female* teenager. This allows the player to experience simulated gender-based oppression, as well as how to exercise agency against it in different ways, from *both* male and female perspectives in a way novels and television cannot. In other words, the environment and game mechanics have different implications for the male and female PCs, which prompts the player to deeply consider how disparate facets of the same dystopian regime actively oppress men and women in gender-specific ways, a critique that a player can only access through participating in the narrative, unique feature of the medium of a video game.

Using Gender-Based Oppression through Environment and Mechanics

While Vella's narrative is set in the agrarian and sea-side town of Sugar Bunting, Shay's narrative takes place in space, where he is cared for by his overbearing mother— and diffident father who is acquiescent to his wife's child-rearing techniques— who treats him like an infant. Like Vella's narrative, Shay's narrative also begins with a cutscene, which features Shay's mother, who controls a robotic arm, waking up her son, bathing him, and even feeding him. In

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[102] I use the phrase "relatively rare" because there are games that have a similar split-narrative structure like *Broken Age*, such as *Beyond Two Souls*, *Heavy Rain*, *Detroit*, *Become Human*, *Grim Fandango*, and *Valiant Hearts*. However, none of these games split the narrative to explore gender-based oppression.

the next part of the cutscene, Shay is sitting in a massive high-chair with a vacant expression on his face; the robotic arm offers him a box of cereal and he replies, "what difference does it make?" As discussed with Vella's narrative, the player does not have 'to do' anything in this moment, but the cutscene in this moment is important because it reveals that Shay is unhappy. As Walker notes, "the whole ship looks as though it were designed by Fisher-Price," which suggests that the infantile aesthetics of the environment are oppressive to Shay because he "is no longer a child and this puerile existence has become a patronizing prison" ("Why Broken Age Act 2's an Awful Mess"). Unlike Vella's family, who wants her to surrender her life for the sake of their community, Shay's mother seems to want to keep her adolescent son a child for the rest of his life. Compared to Vella's narrative, where her life is purported as expendable, especially since her family has a second daughter, Shay's narrative seems to suggest that his life as an only child— *and* the alleged last male in the universe— is indispensable, which is why the infantile environment on the ship is constructed to prevent him from growing up. If he possesses his own autonomy, he can make precarious decisions that could put him at risk. Even if the player did not start with Vella's narrative, it is still evident without comparing their narratives at this juncture that Shay's exceedingly infantile environment oppresses him as a man, who is not allowed to be a traditionally masculine active agent.

While the environment oppresses Shay, the mechanics also operate in tandem with the environment narrative to oppress him as a man. After the computer helps him get ready for the day, Shay/the player is presented with choices for various missions to embark on for the day, such as: "We need to help those avalanche victims!" and "Let's catch that runaway train," which imply that he must save patrons from an avalanche or save lives from stopping a runaway train. When the player selects a mission, they are somewhat meant to believe that Shay has meaningful

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work for a man to do because of the active tasks explicit with the various missions. However, as the various missions unfold, the environment and simple mechanics reinforce Shay's puerile existence and lack of agency as a man because he is trapped in a little child's world. For example, when he is rescuing the patrons from the avalanche, Shay/players discover that it is not a real avalanche, but two of Shay's animated stuffed animals that are stuck in a pile of ice cream. To successfully rescue them, the player must go into their inventory, select the spoon, and drag it to the pile of ice cream, which triggers a cutscene that reveals Shay eating the ice cream to free the stuffed animals. Unlike Vella's world, Shay cannot succumb to harm or pain in the tasks that he does, which demonstrates that his world is safe— albeit suffocating—and robs him of his agency as a man by coercing him/the player into conforming to his patronizing and ostensible role as the hero. In other words, Shay/the player are forced to repeatedly perform inactive and monotonous missions, which is conveyed to the player through exceedingly simple mechanics that take away his ability to be a traditionally masculine Commander of a ship who is active, rather than passive, callow, and ineffective. Through the environment and mechanics in Shay's narrative, players understand through experiencing simulated gender-based oppression from the perspective of a man, who longs to be a traditionally active man, but is not allowed to, is very different—not better or worse than—than a woman who experiences gender-based oppression.

Subverting Gender-Based Oppression through Environment and Mechanics

While Vella exercises agency by complying with gender-based oppression in order to resist, Shay eventually and simply rejects his faux-masculine role as the hero. Initially, he/the player accomplishes this during the runaway train mission: instead of waking-up the mountain to extend its tongue as a makeshift bridge so that the train can safely cross over the ravine, Shay/the player can reject the mechanic, and watch idly as the train tumbles down the ravine in a cutscene.

The mechanics in this moment empower Shay/the player to *openly* refuse his role as a faux-masculine hero, which is a mechanic that is only available to Shay/the player in his narrative. While the player is forced to engage with this mechanic in order to advance Shay's narrative, it still seems to suggest that Shay is able to exercise agency in obvious ways that Vella cannot. In other words, the simplistic mechanic—refusing to click the tongue— in this moment invites players to reflect on the game's implication that men and women can both be oppressed and resist oppression, but they are not oppressed in the same ways, which means that they exercise agency differently. Through juxtaposing the moments that these character first exercise agency in *Broken Age*, players will discover that Vella/the player must *comply* with her gender-based role by engaging in a series of complicated and cumbersome mechanics to save herself, whereas Shay/the player must *reject* his gender-based role as faux-masculine hero by refusing to engage with the mechanic that will successfully save the patrons on the runaway train. It is only through playing from both perspectives that players understand how there is the potential for gender-based ways of exercising agency to gender-based oppression.

After Shay/the player consciously decide to reject their role as hero, a cutscene reveals Shay and the patrons of the runaway train tumbling into the ravine. When Shay hits the bottom, he is approached by a man— later revealed to be a nefarious alien— in a wolf costume, called Marek, who tells Shay that he can help him become a real hero, which automatically appeals to Shay, who seems to want nothing more than to have the agency and autonomy to be a real hero in his own right. Marek tosses Shay a key that unlocks a trapdoor in his bedroom that he is supposed to use later that night when he is ready. Due to his insolent behavior during the runaway train mission, Shay is sent to bed, told to rest, and that there are no missions until further notice. At the end of the cutscene, Shay is elated and announces that he can do whatever

he wants, which prompts the player to find the trapdoor in Shay's room; however, Shay's nearly omnipotent mother/computer instantly grabs him, scolds him, and puts him back into bed the moment he/the player is within sight of the trapdoor. Since the narrative cannot progress unless Shay/the player can get himself through the trapdoor, the player must ascertain how to utilize some objects—an air-tank and an inflatable decoy doll—to fool his mother/computer into believing he is in bed when he is not. Unlike the moment in Vella's narrative where she had to comply with her gender-based role in order to resist, Shay/the player is not complying with his gender-based role as hero to resist. Instead, he/the player is subtly exercising agency through the manipulation of objects to distract the computer so that Shay can consciously choose to play the role of what he perceives as a real hero.

False Agency through Environment and Mechanics

Even though the process of fooling the computer is involved, and can be very tedious if the player is not careful, this sequence of events is not nearly as involved as Vella's escape from the Maiden's Feast. On the surface, this difference could suggest that it is more difficult for women to resist than men; however, the simplistic mechanics in Shay's narrative that seem to afford him agency are not what they seem. In other words, Shay has lived in an oppressive environment for so long that he wants to play the role of real hero so badly, the mechanics in his narrative do not allow Shay/the player to think twice about how the nefarious and oppressive environment preys on these desires to reproduce the cycles of oppression outside of Shay's world. For example, when Shay finally escapes down the secret trapdoor, Marek requires Shay rescue a series of creatures on a planet below, which Shay/the player cannot refuse. As Shay rescues these creatures, he gains self-confidence and self-worth, grateful that he is able to make a real difference. However, later in the game, Shay/the player realizes that the good deeds he has

been recruited to do are definitely not good deeds at all: he has been controlling a ship that looks like a monster and stealing young girls from towns. Even though Shay initially felt liberated by helping out, he was coerced and oppressed in a way that affects him as a man, which seems to demonstrate that society oppresses men by manipulating them into taking the active role of a hero—preying on their socially prescribed identity to save the day—for nefarious purposes. Through participating in these simulated experiences of gender-based oppression from the male and female perspective, the player realizes that men and women are not only oppressed in gender-specific ways, but that there are myriad ways an individual can resist.

Beyond Good and Evil: Critique of Beauty, Women Supporting Women, and Social Justice as Agency

While *Broken Age* has a split-narrative that critiques gender-based oppression, which lends itself to a more nuanced exploration of agency, I argue that *Beyond Good and Evil* has multiple and intersecting critiques about beauty standards, women supporting women, and in social justice as a form of agency. In "Positive Female Characters in Video Games," Sarkeesian argues that Jade is a rare, but positive female character from a physical standpoint because she "actually looks the part of the active, practical young woman of color who has a job to do." Jade's cargo pants, shirt, and shoes are conducive to making her more of an active agent, rather than hundreds of other women in video games, who are "depicted in wildly impractical, sexualized clothing designed to make them appealing to straight male players" ("Positive Female Characters"). In games, women are usually dressed in lingerie armor or otherwise skimpy clothing, which is not designed for any other purpose than to appeal to the presumed heteronormative male player. Based on her visual design, I agree with Sarkeesian that Jade's clothing is atypical of the way women are portrayed in video games. In addition, I would also

argue that Jade's practical look subverts the stereotypical representation of women in dystopian games as well. In other words, Tenenbaum and the little sisters from *BioShock*, as well as Elizabeth from *BioShock Infinite*, are clad in impractical dresses and visually marks them as less capable of movement, and thus, takes away from their agency.[103] However, I disagree with Sarkeesian's claim that Jade's "midriff top is a little silly" because it allows her to be feminine in an otherwise practical way—such as maintaining a cool temperature when running around— which subverts the notion that women are not powerful if they do wear more feminine clothing ("Positive Female Characters").

In addition to the visual design elements of the game, as I have explored throughout this chapter, the battle mechanics—coupled with the photography mechanic— is unique and allows Jade to exercise agency in multiple ways. Sarkeesian notes that the photography mechanic in the game is important because "the designers have built character development right into the gameplay, giving players a pleasant, nonviolent way of interacting with and appreciating the beauty of the game's world while simultaneously reinforcing that Jade is a woman of many talents," which suggests that the photography mechanism gives Jade a substantive personality and talent and a unique way to view the world. Furthering Sarkeesian's claims, *Beyond Good and Evil* also seems to subtly promote women supporting each other, which is unlike *Broken Age*, where there is a distinct lack of a community amongst women to unite against gender-based oppression. Toward the beginning of *Beyond Good and Evil*, when Jade is thoroughly beaten down—"We're stuck here. No hovercraft, no shield. Optima has cut off the power, the account is empty."— it is a *woman* at the science center who propositions Jade to be a photographer and to

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[103] This does not mean that women who do wear dresses are limited, but in the scope of video games, and what these women are asked to do—jump and run and fight—wearing dresses is not practical or plausible, which I argue takes away agency from female characters.

document all the species on the dying planet. By propositioning Jade, the woman at the science center empowers Jade to use her abilities and talents in order to make a living, showing that women are not only supporting other women, but also supporting nature as well and "encourages the player to view the lifeforms of Hillys with some measure of respect, rather than seeing them solely as enemies to be destroyed" ("Positive Female Characters").

While Jade initially agrees to this mission for money, she also seems to develop a greater sense of social justice from it as well, which demonstrates the importance of using one's agency—talent and physical capabilities—to help others, rather than just the self. Sarkeesian points out that *Beyond Good and Evil* "establishes Jade's altruistic desire to achieve social justice" ("Positive Female Characters"), which the narrative reinforces throughout the duration of the game through things that Jade says, such as "if there's a way to stop this war, we can't let it pass us by" and "they're attacking the boats. We have to protect them." Jade is dedicated to trying to save her community, which is why Sarkeesian argues that "quest is not about her pain, nor is it about taking satisfaction in exacting violent retribution" ("Positive Female Characters") Instead, Jade using her agency—physical ability and taking pictures—to help out a resistance group in order to make the world a better place. It is the combination of taking photographs and fighting that brings nuance to her character, showing that resistance and agency can be a combination of things and women can use their agency for the greater good: freedom for all means that Jade can also have freedom herself.

Non-Playable Female and Male Characters

While the majority of this chapter focuses on the playable female characters, Vella and Jade, and how they subvert gender-based oppression, it is equally important to discuss female— and male—NPCs as well. NPCs, as Sarkeesian explains, "are figures not directly controlled by

the player and whose behaviors and dialog are governed by automated scripts within the game's code," which means that the player cannot play the game from the perspective of a non-player character because the game's code will not allow it (Women as Background: Part I"). In video games, NPCs are an inherent and necessary aspect of constructing and characterizing the game environment, which includes, but is not limited to: providing quests, information, and supplies. These NPCs might mill about, approach the PC, or have a duty that brings texture to the game world. In "Women as Background Decoration: Part I," Sarkeesian explains that in many triple A video games, female NPCs are assigned highly gendered roles as prostitutes and exotic dancers, which limits their character to sexualized objects. There is evidence of this trope in myriad video games, which presents a highly myopic view about the role and purpose of non-playable female characters' bodies and sexuality—that is, to serve as enjoyment for the "presumed straight male player" ("Women as Background: Part I"). These female NPCs, as Sarkeesian argues, serve no greater purpose than to please male players and PCs.

While the great majority of female NPCs are relegated to gendered ornamental and decorative roles in countless video games, this is not the case in *Broken Age* and *Beyond Good and Evil*. These two particular video games might not follow mainstream practices when it comes to female NPCs because they are more family-friendly games; however, the issue goes deeper than that, and as explained earlier in this chapter, both game designers wanted to create video games that pushed against the norms in myriad ways, which seems to include not having female NPCs who are sexual objects. This desire to do something different, along with the more general and family-friendly ratings, could arguably have resulted in more progressive female NPCs.

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Broken Age

When Vella is up in the clouds in Act I, she meets a woman, Car'l, who is oppressed by her husband and son; they trivialize her role as wife and mother. In Act II, when Vella and Shay meet and then accidentally switch places, Shay meets Car'l on the beach, who is taking a vacation from her husband, son, and oppressive patriarchal society in the clouds. In a cutscene, Shay introduces himself, and Car'l responds: "Hi, I'm Car'l. No, wait. You know what? Carol. My name is Carol," which suggests that she is reclaiming her name and identity that she was robbed of when living in the clouds, a decision that her husband made for his family without consulting her. While not all women are able to escape gender-based oppression like Carol did, it is clear that *Broken Age* does not just create Carol in order to create oppressive texture within the game. It is not entirely clear *how* Carol is able to take a vacation from her oppressive husband, but her presence in the game reinforces that women can exercise agency through subtle and nuanced ways, such as by choosing to be called by her real name, as well as doing activities, like fishing on her vacation, which reinforces nuanced ways she can assert her subjectivity.

In addition to Carol, there are other NPCs who the player cannot embody, but nevertheless, play an important role throughout *Broken Age*. In an article I wrote for *FemHype*, called, "#WCW: *Broken Age* and Women in a Dystopian World," I argued that Shay's mother is a problematic NPC:

> Shay's mother's caretaking is not just overbearing, but also abusive. She simply won't let him grow up, which reduces Shay to a state of depression and despondence. He's often sighing or frowning because of his suffocating, but well-intentioned mother. To add insult to injury, she's also nearly impossible to resist against, too. Once I tried to stage a hunger strike by refusing to pick a cereal for breakfast, but after I refused a dozen times,

she selected a bowl for Shay and made him eat it anyway […] Through playing the game,

which includes testing like I did with the hunger strike, players inevitably come to

understand Shay's mother as a vilified woman because of the abuse toward her

son. That's not just a drag, but it's also problematic—sort of reminiscent of the Dursleys'

abuse in *Harry Potter*. Shay's mother is not empowering or inspirational. She's actually

just flat-out annoying. And our annoyance of her derives from her reductive and gendered

behavior, totally playing off the 1950s stereotypes of the perfect, but meddlesome

mother.

Shay's mother is a problematic female character in *Broken Age* because she abuses her son. The

mechanics in the game disallow the player to resist Shay's mother, which I discovered through

trying, but ultimately, failing to refuse to do what she wanted. While I am not suggesting that

women in video games cannot be villains, I am suggesting that the game needs to circle back

around to acknowledge that Shay's mother is abusive, which derives from her over-the-top

gendered behavior of a 1950s wife and mother. At this point, it seems as though the game has

fallen short, especially since it seems to replicate, rather than critique, demeaning and grim

clichés about mothers and motherhood as meddling, irritating, and hovering. Interestingly, in the

second half of *Broken Age*, players finally understand why Shay's mother behaves the way in

which she does. As the player works their way through the game, they discover that the planet

Shay's family lived on was destroyed, and as such, Shay is implied to be the only child

remaining, which is why his mother is overprotective: she was ordered to behave this way by the

government.

Be that as it may, as I argued, *Broken Age* seems to be toying with a very fine line: "just

because the corrupt dystopian government certainly shaped her abusive behavior, it is never okay

to dismiss or justify her abuse. So what does this mean for us as players? It means that it is important to be hyper-aware of the social structures that shape lady protagonists and their behavior in order to understand them better" ("#WCW *Broken Age* and Women"). Even though Shay's mother's behavior was shaped by the corrupt government, which coerced her into oppressing her son and behaving in cliché and gendered ways, the game seems to explain away her behavior as something that was out of her control. In other words, the game draws the player's attention to "the serious repercussions of the dystopian forces that shape and confine [female] protagonists and their behavior," but it does not allow Shay's mother to return to or confront that behavior in any meaningful way ("#WCW *Broken Age* and Women").[104] *Broken Age* seems to suggest that women who do behave badly can be excused, which is a problematic belief system that the game purports.

Beyond Good and Evil

Unlike *Broken Age*, which has numerous female NPCs, *Beyond Good and Evil* has a startling lack of female NPCs. There is only one female NPC, Meï, who works for the resistance group that Jade begins to work for as well, but she—unlike the other male counterparts in the resistance— is never allowed to speak. In other words, the way in which the designers made Meï's character does not allow her to speak in this moment and there is nothing that the player can do about it, which seems to suggest that women are welcome at the table, metaphorically, but they do not have a larger speaking or leadership role. Aside from Meï, there are no other significant female NPCs, but there are many male NPCs, who seem to have a mixed effect on the game narrative and Jade. In some parts of the game, the male NPCs seem designed to create a

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[104] Similarly, *Broken Age* does not confront or explore in any depth the behavior of Vella's mother, who is also deeply indoctrinated by the government that created the Maiden's Feast. Later, when reunited with her family, Vella says hi to her parents and greets them, rather than featuring any sort of discussion to educate why the Maiden's Feast was bad.

patriarchal and misogynistic texture that Jade cannot escape. For example, when Jade is trying to find the resistance group, she meets up with Peepers, a man in a bar who is the gateway into the resistance group, who is very gendered in his treatment of Jade. When she talks to him, he replies: "A girl in this dive?" which suggests that Jade, as a woman, does not belong in a bar that is allegedly unsafe. As Jade walks around the bar, there is also a disembodied male NPC's voice, who claims, "Keep up the good work sugar and one day you might come out of your shell." By referring to Jade as "sugar," the male NPC is essentially catcalling her, making it clear that Jade's looks are admirable and desirable to him. While the nickname "sugar" is not always associated with women, it is nonetheless used in a patronizing way because, as the latter half of the male NPCs statement makes clear, he thinks that Jade might be too shy or conservatively dressed. Throughout the entire game, there are gendered background comments made about women, in general, or even directed toward Jade, which the player is not allowed to comment on. In a way, the game could be hinting at the notion that some women are not in a position to respond to these types of sexist comments, but as Sarkeesian points out, there is a fine line between replication and critique. By denying Jade and the player the ability to engage or respond to these male NPC misogynistic and sexist comments, the game does not circle back to critique these gendered comments to the point where it seems as though Jade and the player are forced to condone or even accept them.

Conclusion: The Value of the Feminist Dystopian Imagination in Video Games

While *Broken Age* and *Beyond Good and Evil* have moments of excellent critique of gender-based oppression, there are other moments with NPCs that do fall a bit short, which is important to recognize because the line between replication and critique is very fine. However, as Sarkeesian also points out, "it's entirely possible to be critical of some aspects of a piece of

media while still finding other parts valuable or enjoyable," which suggests that it is perfectly acceptable for gamers to enjoy playing games that have problematic aspects, but to also be critical of those games with problematic aspects ("Women as Background": Part I). Despite the problematic aspects of these games, they are still highly effective and important, the first of their kind in the dystopian genre to critique gender-based oppression in such important and progressive ways. One of the reasons that these games might not be as progressive as they could be is because games are made as a part of a design team, rather than an individual person, which means that there might need to be some concessions made in order to produce a game that meets the satisfaction of the entire team. At any rate, *Broken Age* and *Beyond Good and Evil* leave a lot of space within the future of game design to build upon the critiques that are in existence and to make them even better in other games in the future.

Video game studies is still a relatively new field, which is not only gaining acknowledgment, but also respect as a serious art form and critical platform for critique through play. In other words, video games are an important medium that require players to interact with a narrative in a way that they do not normally, which allows a player, in the scope of my dissertation, to (re)think how they understand and conceptualize feminist dystopian video games and agency for female player characters. Throughout both *Broken Age* and *Beyond Good and Evil*, the player's attention is, like the other texts in this dissertation, directed toward how the narrative is constructed to: one, use gender-based oppression in order to subvert it; and two, construct situations where the female protagonists must comply with gender-based oppression in order to subvert or resist it. Unlike other mediums, the value of the feminist dystopian imagination in a video game is that the player cannot disengage with the patriarchal society that subjects the PC, a temporary extension of the player's self within the game, to gender-based

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oppression. In *Broken Age* and *Beyond Good and Evil*, no matter where the player takes Vella or Jade, they cannot escape gender-based oppression because the game environment and mechanics constantly take away player and PC's agency, which requires the PC, as well as the player by extension, to find alternative means of subverting gender-based oppression. For example, in *Broken Age,* the player cannot abstain from the Maiden Feast, but must participate in their own demise in order to construct an elaborate and cumbersome escape. Players might feel frustrated that they cannot resist in more open and obvious ways, which might seem at first glance like a shortcoming of *Broken Age* and *Beyond Good and Evil*, but the simulated lack of agency, as well as the clever ways that Vella and Jade reclaim their agency through alternative means, are intentional designs that prompt players to understand that women can reclaim their agency and autonomy in subtle, rather than open and obvious ways.

The value of *Broken Age* and *Beyond Good and Evil* extends far beyond the fact that they have Subversive Narrative Structures that challenge agency as a binary. Through play, these games can dispel problematic mainstream attitudes about feminism and gender representation. In *Feminism is for Everybody*, bell hooks explains how feminism, for many years, has been subjected to a poor reputation. Through her own experiences, hooks reports that she "hear[s] all about the evil of feminism and the bad feminists: how 'they' hate men; how 'they' want to go against nature […] how 'they' are taking all the jobs and making the world hard for white men, who do not stand a chance," which suggests that society perceives feminism as automatic man-hating, unnatural, and trying to reverse power dynamics so that men are oppressed (93). It is evident that society grossly misunderstands feminism and make erroneous assumptions about it, which results in the belief that "feminism is [just] a bunch of angry women" (hooks 93). Through playing PCs like Vella and Jade, it is clear that feminists are not angry man-haters, but are

actively trying to fight for a more equitable future for women.

For example, in *Broken Age*, when speaking with Carol's husband and son in the cloud city, it is clear that they are sexist because they support the Maiden's Feast. If the player chooses the dialogue option, "I just escaped the Maiden's Feast and now Mog Chothra is going to eat the town," Walt'r and his son reply, "You WHAT?" and "Why would you ever run away from such an honor? Such a joyous occasion!" It is clear from their reactions that they disapprove of Vella's escape. In response, the player can choose to say, "Well, I just thought maybe we could fight Mog Chothra instead of feeding it," and then, Watl'r says, "Oh that sounds horrible." By responding calmly and trying to educate Walt'r and his son about what the event means from her perspective, the player experiences through play that trying to communicate and discuss matters of gender-equality is what feminism is about, rather than yelling at men. This is not to suggest that aggressive or admonishing responses to sexist and misogynistic claims are inappropriate or unwarranted; instead, by providing the player with mature responses, the game demonstrates that young women, like Vella, do not have to accept sexist ideology and behavior and can call it out in mature and sophisticated ways, which demonstrates through play that feminism is not synonymous with angry women who hate men. Similarly, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, when Jade broadcasts about the corruption of the Alphas, she does not attack his gender, but reports on political manipulation going on, which sparks a revolution. This broadcast occurs in a cutscene, which means that the player has no choice but to watch the broadcast unfold as though they are a member of the Hillys community. In the broadcast, Jade claims, "Since the beginning, we have been manipulated and deceived. Stop listening to the lies that the alpha section are telling you," which means that for a long time, the citizens of Hillys have been controlled by nefarious forces, and she implores everyone to stop listening to their deception. Throughout her speech, her tone is

level and confident, and is not full of loathing or contempt, which reinforces that she is not attacking the specific *man* who is behind the propaganda, but his politics and their effect on the people of Hillys. Both *Broken Age* and *Beyond Good and Evil* are important games because they have the capacity to confront a player's own perceptions of feminism, gender, and how agency is gendered and not always open and obvious.

Despite the existence of more progressive representations of gender in video games, it is still atypical to find strong and empowered female player characters, as well as games with narratives than confront gender. The holistic video game industry still has progress to make in terms of gender representation. In *We Should All Be Feminists*, Adichie claims, "If we see the same thing over and over, it becomes normal. If only boys are made class monitor, then at some point we all think, even if unconsciously, that the class monitor has to be a boy," which then means that "if we keep only seeing men as heads of corporations, it starts to seem 'natural' that only men should be heads of corporations" (12). Her point is that gender representation is detrimental and damaging, especially when society starts to associate and disassociate certain genders with certain behaviors, professions, and even hobbies. If the video game industry continues to market video games to a certain type of male player, society will continue to assume that video games are only for men, that women do not belong in the video game industry, and that women wanting to change video game culture is unnatural. Not only are society's actions and perceptions unconsciously shaped by gendered ideology, which makes it slow to change, but society continues to make the same inequitable mistakes over and over again.

However, there is still a great deal of noteworthy potential within video games, especially in dystopian and feminist dystopian genre, to create narratives, game environments, and mechanics that are more progressive in gender representation and confronting gender because

this genre lends itself to critique. The video game industry and culture has started to confront these notions about gender in games, but change is not happening quickly. Fortunately, one does not have to be a part of a big budget company in order to design games that are critical and confronts gender in a meaningful way because there is software, such as Twine, that is accessible to the public and empowers almost anyone who wants to create a game to do so. The existence of this type of technology, in addition to the power of the feminist dystopian imagination, can empower women to create the games that share their unique lived experiences, ideas about gender, and gender-based oppression with other players. In this sense, the value of the feminist dystopian imagination in video games is to create games that have the mechanics and ability to critique gender in meaningful ways in a platform, like Twine, that is widely accessible. While women gamers can wait for the video game industry and culture to change, they can also try to change the culture themselves. As Adichie claims, "culture does not make the people. People make culture," which means that a society, despite seeming highly fixed is not because women and men have the opportunity to cultivate a more equitable culture and society if they actively and diligently work to change the cultural narrative about gender and video games (46).

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

VISION AND REVISION: ADAPTATIONS OF *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore how twenty and twenty-first century feminist dystopian novels, television, and video games employ Subversive Narrative Structures, which I defined as: one, using gender-based oppression in order to subvert and critique it; and two, featuring a female protagonist who complies with gender-based oppression in order to resist it in exceedingly complex and nuanced ways that depend on the medium and the situation that the protagonist finds herself in. In Chapter One, I explored how Butler's *Dawn* and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* bifurcated their respective narratives to separate who Lilith and Offred *are*, and who they have to *be*, in order to subvert gender-based oppression. The way that these authors constructed their respective narratives that showed what the female protagonists were thinking was different than how they acted, which means that they consciously complied in order to resist by using their voices or even using sexual pleasure to exercise agency. In Chapter Two, I examined how HBO's *Westworld* narratively and visually depicted how Maeve was subjected to gender-based oppression and subverted it through camera angles, acting, and costumes. Whenever Maeve narratively decided to comply in order to resist, the camera would sexually objectify her by focusing on her naked body to reflect her compliance with her object-position; however, in the same scene, once when Maeve had narrative control of the situation, the camera would cease to sexually objectify her by focusing on her face or her body from the shoulders up. This visually reflected the narrative subversion of her object-position, which means that she consciously complied in order to resist to gain information and ultimately satiate her personal desires as an act of agency. Finally, in Chapter Three, I analyzed how *Broken Age* and *Beyond Good and Evil* invited players to experience simulated gender-based oppression, and resistance

to it, through corrupt patriarchal environments and game mechanics. Instead of reading or viewing a female character who is subjected to and exercises agency against gender-based oppression, the medium of a video game requires players to interact with the patriarchal environment and mechanics that both robbed and empowered the female PC to exercise agency. By utilizing mechanics that require the player to comply with gender-based oppression in order to resist, which robs the *player* of the agency to escape in open and obvious ways, players are invited to reflect on their simulated experiences with, for example, complex or elaborate problem-solving as an act of agency that they exercised in the game in a way that novels and television cannot.

This brief comparison of agency within different mediums illustrates my contribution to scholarship, which is that the medium matters immensely for the feminist dystopian genre because novels, television, and video games represent agency in disparate ways. While the medium does shift a user's understanding of agency through their experience interacting with the Subversive Narrative Structure of a feminist dystopian novel, television show, or video game, there is an additional area of research within media theory, which I posit is not only pertinent, but also a paragon of my conceptualization of agency as complex and nuanced, rather than a binary. Therefore, my dissertation will come full circle and close where I began with a brief discussion of the transmedia adaptations of *The Handmaid's Tale*, which prompts a crucial question for further research: how might a transmedia analysis of the same feminist dystopia narrative, but in different mediums, shift the representation of agency and critique of gender-based oppression? Specifically, what could a transmedia analysis of multiple adaptations of *The Handmaid's Tale* contribute to the feminist dystopian imagination that it could not by analyzing the novel, 1990 film, or 2017 Hulu television show alone?

To answer these questions, I must first define "transmedia storytelling," which has become a very relevant and pertinent mode of analysis in recent years with the production of new mediums and presence of multiple adaptations of texts. In his book, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, Henry Jenkins argues, "a transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole" (97-98). When the same narrative manifests in myriad mediums, it not only starts to acquire new meanings for the user, but the multiple meanings that are ascertained across myriad mediums also contributes to a multifaceted understanding of the narrative's meaning as a "whole" (Jenkins 98). In other words, "in the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best—so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics" and "game play," but ultimately "each franchise entry needs to be self-contained so that you don't need to have seen the film to enjoy the game and vice versa" (Jenkins 98). Jenkins seems to suggest that a user does not have to *know* all versions or transmedia adaptations of the narrative to enjoy it; however, he also admits that "a good transmedia franchise works to attract multiple constituencies by pitching the content somewhat differently in the different media," and "if each work offers fresh experiences— then you can count on a crossover market that will expand the potential gross" (98). The mark of a successful transmedia franchise is to attract users and consumers who prefer one medium, like television, but are intrigued by the prospect of that same narrative in a different medium, like a video game, because the narrative offers something that the version they love, does not.

While I agree with Jenkins that a user would not have to know, for example, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* novel in order to enjoy Hulu's serialized television show of the same name, I argue that readers and viewers actually can glean more from *The Handmaid's Tale*

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narrative altogether if they are familiar with all transmedia adaptations. In *Storyworlds Across Media*, Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon argue that "the choice of medium makes a difference as to what stories can be told, how they are told, and why they're told," which suggests that when a narrative, like *The Handmaid's Tale*, is adapted from a novel into a serialized television show, the visual affordances of the television as a medium, indelibly shifts how Offred's story is told, and as such, what viewers gain from it that they did not—or could not—from the novel and vice versa (25). When a narrative is adapted into a different medium, it not only shapes the narrative or how a user understands it, but it also changes how many—or how few—people can access it: "a best-selling book may reach 1 million readers; a successful Broadway play will be seen by 1 to 8 million people; but a movie or television adaptation will find an audience of many million more," especially if the "audience is already familiar with the franchise" and is interested in a "new repurposing" (Hutcheon 5). Therefore, by adapting a well-known narrative (like *The Handmaid's Tale*) from one medium to another, it can increase interest not only because some mediums—like television— are valued more than others by myriad users, but because those who revere the original source text (Atwood's novel) are interested in how the different medium (Hulu's television show) will explore the central themes and characters in ways that elicit a disparate understanding.

In the pages that follow, I will conduct a transmedia analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale* novel, film, and television adaptations, which directly demonstrates how these different mediums— and time periods that the texts were made in—shape the understanding of feminist agency and the value of the dystopian imagination. When juxtaposing the novel, film, and serialized television adaptations of *The Handmaid's Tale*, I argue that two things are revealed: one, agency is portrayed differently in each adaptation because of disparate medium affordances;

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and two, intersectional[105] feminism has a greater emphasis within each adaptation. This demonstrates that all women are oppressed by conservative politics and legislation, but not all women are oppressed equally.

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*: 1985 Novel

Scholars have consistently expressed interest in the function of language in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* novel—that is, the kind Offred uses in her narrative *and* how Atwood constructs the narrative itself. At the outset of the novel, it is interesting to note that Offred tries to capture the initial experience of what it is like to be a handmaid in the Republic of Gilead through referring to the communal 'we.' She explains, "*We* slept in what had once been the gymnasium" and "as *we* tried to sleep, in the army cots that had been set up in rows, with spaces between so we could not talk" (Atwood 3-4, my emphasis). Through using the word 'we' to explain where they slept and what the scene looked like, Offred establishes a connection between the women who were ripped from their former lives and trained to be entirely different women at the Red Center because it is an experience they share as fertile women. However, the explicit focus on the communal experiences of gender-based oppression starts to fade after the first chapter. In other words, there is a distinct shift between using 'we' and 'I'/'me," which is established at the beginning of the next chapter, where Offred describes the room that she is sitting in, and mentions, "This is the kind of touch they like: folk art, archaic made by women, in

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[105] Kimberlé Crenshaw argues that "intersection[s] of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately," which means that 'race' and 'gender' cannot be untangled because they converge and concurrently oppress women of color (Crenshaw 1244). By focusing on these moments of intersectional oppression, Crenshaw finds that there are "multiple grounds of [identities]"—race, gender, class, sexual orientation, disability, and even nationality, etc.— which suggests that women cannot be just women; instead, they are many things at the same time, which highlights the complexity of each individual woman's situation (1245). Race, class, gender, and sexual orientation intersect in different ways to create individual experiences of oppression, rather than a universalizing experience of what it means to be a woman.

their spare time […] A return to traditional values. Waste not want not. *I* am not being wasted. What do *I* want?" (Atwood 7, my emphasis). When Offred describes her surroundings, she is careful to not only remove herself from the 'they' who oppress her, but she also only uses the words 'I' and 'me' now to indicate her separation from the group of women she was with at the beginning of the novel. While the women shared the experience of gender-based oppression at the beginning of the novel, the narrative shift from 'we' to 'I' communicates to the reader that this is now *her* individual experience of gender-based oppression and that it does not represent all women.

Since the novel is written in the first-person, the reader is limited to just Offred's perspective and experiences, which means that it is not *the* universal experience of what it is like to be a woman in the Republic of Gilead. This notion is reinforced when Offred offers little pieces of information about the other women in her memories who have drastically different experiences of gender-based oppression than she does. In a memory with Moira from the time before, readers find out that Moira is a lesbian, which is important because it demonstrates that the return to traditional values in the Republic of Gilead oppressed Moira in a way that does not apply to Offred. Like Offred, Moira is being conditioned to have sex with a Commander during a ceremony every month, but unlike Offred, Moira experiences an additional level of oppression by being forced to have sex with a man because she is not heterosexual. Even though both women are put through the same experiences that subjects them to gender-based oppression, Offred and Moira also experience the gender-based oppression in disparate ways. While this is a smaller detail that is not thoroughly explored in the novel of *The Handmaid's Tale* because the issue does not affect Offred and her story directly, the intersectional critique is most certainly present. Through juxtaposing Offred's and Moira's sexualities, Atwood not only demonstrates

that the Republic of Gilead oppresses women in different ways, but that women also exercise agency in different ways as well. During the scene in Jezebels, Offred reveals that Moira was always more courageous than she; however, what Offred does not consider is that women exercise agency in different ways, which means that Moira empowered herself by consciously deciding to resist in open and obvious ways, whereas Offred is empowered by the idea of open and obvious rebellion, but chooses to exercise agency in other ways, such as clinging to her subjectivity in her memories, telling stories, using her voice, asserting her sexuality, and even using sexual pleasure. While the novel hints at the notion that women are oppressed differently, and that women exercise agency in different ways, the first-person novel is about Offred's experience, which really disallows Atwood from extend very far from Offred's point of view.[106]

Film and Television Adaptations of *The Handmaid's Tale*

While the novel is turned primarily inward to focus on Offred's experiences and what is happening in her own head, the film and television adaptations of *The Handmaid's Tale* are able to explore what is going on around Offred. In other words, the film and television adaptations do focus on Offred, but they are also able to extend beyond her as well, focusing on other women and facets of the Republic of Gilead. To do so, the film and television adaptations must rely on camera angles and movement, set design, and acting to create and explore gender-based oppression and women's subversion of it.

Volker Schlöndorff's *The Handmaid's Tale*: 1990 Film

Most criticism about the 1990 film adaptation considers it an exceedingly poor adaptation of Atwood's novel. In "Sending a Man to Do a Woman's Job: How the 1990 *Handmaid's Tale* Became an Erotic Thriller," Natalie Zutter argues that in this adaptation, "there are absolutely no

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[106] This is not to suggest that Atwood's novel fell short; instead, it is simply an affordance and limitation of the novel as medium and point of view she utilized.

stakes" and "In adapting the novel, Pinter stripped away the many layers, side plots, and relationships that made Atwood's story so rich," such as Luke's death, briefly meeting and interacting with Moira, and the posting at the commander's house is her first posting, instead of her last posting. She argues that the original novel had more complexity and layers to it, which the film does not, or even cannot, begin to address. She adds, "To add insult to injury, Pinter ditched any sort of internal monologue for Offred, not even a brief narration during the opening and closing credits to bookend the story," which means that the primary mechanisms of resistance in the novel did not make it into the adaptation, and as a result, not only ironically continues to silence Offred, but it also "makes it seem as if she doesn't have much to contribute to her own story" ("Sending a Man to Do a Woman's Job").

For fear that Atwood's narrative would translate poorly from the novel to the screen because it could be conceptualized by viewers as too risqué, the film adaptation had to be rebranded as an erotic thriller. As Sophie Gilbert explains in her article, "The Forgotten *Handmaid's Tale*," the director and screenwriter had trouble casting the role of Offred, and he decided that the story would be more appealing if it were cast as "a thriller—a sexually charged and vivid drama without the nuance or emotional depth of the source material." While the film is still a feminist dystopia, it loses a lot of its original and powerful critique, which seemed to be tamped down because "many actresses feared the stigma of being associated with such an explicitly feminist work" ("The Forgotten *Handmaid's Tale*"). Even Natasha Richardson, who did play Offred, was said to be "wary about taking on the role" ("The Forgotten *Handmaid's Tale*"). Unlike Zutter and Gilbert, Amery Bodelson argues that "Schlöndorff's often scopophilic film offers viewers moments of utopia in the edges of the movie reel and in the most unexpected of gendered spaces: the restroom," which suggests that there are utopic moments within a

dystopia (63). In this film adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale*, she argues that the utopic moments happen within physical spaces that can better call attention to than a novel can because cinema is much more visually-based. Building on Bodelson, I would argue that the 1990 film adaptation utilizes camera angles and movement, mise-en-scène, and costumes to explore how Offred's agency is taken away and exercised, but ultimately, the film sensationalizes agency in unproductive ways.

World-Building and Intersectionality

Like Atwood's novel, the 1990 film adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* also focuses on Offred and her experiences in the Republic of Gilead; however, the fact that it is a film allows the director to show the events of the story, but in a different order, with a few extra things thrown into his interpretation of the narrative, and most importantly, he can even focus on other implied aspects of the narrative than just Offred. For example, at the beginning of the film, unlike at the beginning of the novel, the first scene focuses on Offred's attempted escape into Canada—there is a wide, nearly aerial shot of the wilderness, with a caption that says, "In the near distant future, a country went wrong," which prefaces not only the seriousness of a woman, a man, and a child trudging through snow, but also then the tragedy of when they are caught. By showing their botched attempt at escape right away, it raises the stakes and emotionally invests the audience in Offred's story. After the soldiers kill Luke, presumably leave her daughter, and brutally capture Offred who struggles and screams, the next shot goes to the title of the film, which shows a dark and chaotic scene that greatly resembles border control. The camera is hectic as it captures clusters of people, dark SUV's, soldiers with guns, fences, and finally Offred, who is unloaded from one of the vehicles with a somber expression and disheveled appearance.

Interestingly, at this point in the film, the camera then veers away from Offred to focus

on the hordes of people around her. While Offred describes what is going on around her in the novel, the adaptation can reinterpret what she describes in the novel and take liberties, which contributes a new understanding about gender-based oppression and agency. After the camera loses Offred, it pans and reveals myriad women of color who are aggressively shuffled through some gates by soldiers and visually kept separate from white women, who are walking single file through a line without any roughness. While no words are spoken, there is a clear and distinct critique going on, which is made possible by the visual medium; in this adaptation of Gilead, not all women are treated the same, which highlights the presence of intersectional oppression: the intersection of race and gender affect women of color differently than white women. This notion is furthered at the Red Center, where it is apparent that only white women are worthy to carry children in the Republic of Gilead. Throughout the adaptation, images of white women are juxtaposed with women of color, which continues to reinforce that not all women are oppressed equally. For example, in one particular scene, a truck with women of color is whisked by in the streets, which is directly juxtaposed with an image of Offred sitting in a car with Aunt Lydia. While the film constantly reminds the viewer that women are oppressed differently, it does not fully interrogate these moments of intersectional oppression, but merely uses them to create further oppressive texture.

Agency

While the medium of the film can expand the world of Gilead to demonstrate its intersectional oppressive order, this particular adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* also explores agency in completely different ways than the novel in a way that is rather ineffective. For example, during the first night of the ceremony, the camera narrows in on Offred's face, which is covered with a sheer red fabric. The tightness of the camera angle, coupled with the costume that

restricts her and shrouds her face, visually demonstrates her lack of agency. This notion is furthered when the camera stays closely focused on Offred's face, but in the background of her shot, viewers see the Commander and Nick walk in. As the commander starts to read the ceremony scripture, there is a shot/reverse shot sequence that shows the commander in a medium length shot, and he moves slightly back and forth as he reads, which is juxtaposed with reverse shots of Offred, who is shot from the neck up, and cannot move at all. When the camera is on her, it is also slightly tipped downward, looking down on her, while when the camera is on him, it is also slightly tipped up, which visually hints at their gendered power dynamic and draws attention to the inevitability and bleak circumstances that Offred is in. Since the film is visually-centered, it draws more attention to patriarchal space and body language and how it is used to rob women of agency.

Even though Offred does not have agency in the pre-ceremony, or during the ceremony, she demonstrates agency through the tone and inflection the actor, Natasha Richardson, uses to deliver her lines. For example, during one of their clandestine meetings, the Commander says, "The country was a mess, a total mess. All the garbage that had risen to the top. We had all these pressure groups trying to dictate to us—blacks, homos, you know, all those people on welfare, and—" (1:11:55-1:12:10). In the middle of his speech Offred interrupts him, and adds, "Women" (1:12.11). She says this in a very sarcastic and ironic way, and in return, the Commander smiles and says, "Yes, siree, women," and then gets more serious, and says, "So we had to clean it up. We took out a big hose and washed the place clean" (1:12.11-1:12.21). When the Commander raises his glass of whisky as if in a toast, Offred says, "I had a family and a job I was good at. I didn't need cleaning up" (1:12.21-1:21.24). At this moment, the camera switches from Offred back to the Commander, who she has rendered silent. Her comment forces him to deal with her

assertive comment. He immediately starts to backpedal, insisting that, "I don't mean you. Alright, let me explain something to you. I'm not talking about you, I'm talking about the country, the country was crazy […]" (1:12.29-1:12.35). He tries to retract what he said because he insulted her, which puts him in an inferior position because he is forced to grovel.

Unlike the novel, the film adaptation is all in all much more direct when it comes to Offred's agency, especially toward the end of the film when the Commander's wife had discovered the affair between her husband and Offred. Desperate, Offred goes to the Commander and asks for help, but he explains that he cannot help her and that she should return to her room. Immediately after this, though, the Commander pulls Offred into a kiss, where she is standing with her arms to her sides and he is sitting, but has his hands on her face, which almost cages her in, but as the discrepancy between their heights here visually suggests, Offred has the slight upper hand (11:38.31). The Commander proceeds to tell her how much she meant to him, and as he does, the dynamics of the scene have drastically changed: the camera is behind Offred, which then puts her on the left side of the frame; since the commander is sitting, she slightly towers over him, and seems to visually block him with her body, while behind him, there also does not appear like there is room to move because the fireplace is immediately behind him, boxing him in in a way that he has never before been boxed in by her. As the Commander continues his speech, the shot reverses back to a close-up shot of Offred, who takes up the majority of the frame, while the commander takes up a sliver of the frame on the right side of the screen, still with Offred looming over him. As the Commander finishes his speech, he pulls Offred toward him, and the power dynamics and tension that has been visually building in the scene finally explodes: the camera goes to a medium length side view of the couple, with Offred still towering over the Commander, and viewers see Offred grunt as she takes out a knife she's been hiding in

the billowing and loose-fitting clothes she was required to wear, and slice the commander's

carotid artery (1:39:05). They fall to the floor and Offred wriggles loose and runs away. The

visual construction of the scene demonstrates that the power dynamics have shifted, which shows

that she has more agency, but in a way that is sensationalized, rather than critical. As a result, the

film adaptation seems to place emphasis and value on open and obvious rebellion.

<p style="text-align:center">Hulu's The Handmaid's Tale: Television Show</p>

While the novel and film adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* were released

approximately thirty-four and twenty-eight years ago, Hulu's adaptation of the same name was

just recently released in April 2017. Considering that this particular narrative has been adapted

twice seems to suggest that *The Handmaid's Tale* is an arguable staple of hope and resistance for

real-world women. Eliana Dockterman interviewed Margaret Atwood and Elizabeth Moss, who

plays June/Offred in Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale*, in an article called, "On the Urgency of The

Handmaid's Tale." In the interview, Elizabeth Moss was asked, "Why did you add more

nonwhite, non-straight characters?" and Moss replied, "We wanted the show to be very relatable.

We wanted people to see themselves in it. If you're going to do that, you have to show all types

of people. You have to reflect current society" (Dockterman). This suggests that the Hulu

adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* endeavors to reflect contemporary society, which places a

more conscious effort on empowering all women to speak and give equal weight to all their

stories. This adaptation is explicitly dedicated to providing a truly critical intersectional

Handmaid's Tale where every woman is oppressed, but they are also not oppressed equally

within Gilead. Similar to the 1990 film, the 2017 serialized television adaptation also utilizes

cinematography, mise-en-scène, and costumes, which works to not only demonstrate Offred's

lack of agency, as well as how she gains agency, but unlike the novel and 1990 adaptation, I also

argue that the 2017 Hulu show is in a format—one episode leads into the next and the story is told over ten episodes that are fifty to sixty minutes long—which means that there is more room for development of the world and focus on an entire cast of women and their stories and struggles.

World-Building

Unlike the 1990 adaptation, there is more of a focus on other women and how they interact and how those interactions are then shaped by the oppressive order. For example, in the Hulu adaptation, there is an emphasis, which is conveyed through repetition, of the unique type speech that the handmaids are required to use. Whenever the handmaids come into contact with each other, they always greet each other with, "Blessed be the fruit," and respond with phrases, such as, "May the Lord Open," "Praise be," "May peace be with you," or "Which I receive with joy." The repetition of this prescribed language is interspersed with meaningless small talk, such as when Offred and Ofglen are walking to the store to go shopping, and Offred mentions the "good weather [they're] having," and Ofglen responds, "Which I receive with joy." From this alone, it is not only clear that their communication is prescribed and thus limited, but because it is also a show, there is a visual component that demonstrates their confinement as well, which is demonstrated through a mix of camera angles that physically demonstrates how separate the women are kept as well. When Offred and Ofglen walk to the store, there are a mix of close-up shots of each individual woman's faces, which shows how the white wings keep them individually confined, as well as a mix of medium shots that show their entire bodies and how the white wings also keep the women apart from each other. During the close-up shots of each individual woman's face, their eyes are constantly shifting and there are slight turns of their heads, which demonstrates a desire or want to break out of this prescribed routine. It is the

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combination of Offred's inner-monologues, as well as through camera angles, costumes, and the physical gestures and expressions of the actresses, which demonstrates and constantly reinforces that there is a restriction on how they are supposed to behave and what they really want.

Furthermore, this gender-based oppression is furthered through interactions between women that does not happen in the original novel, nor in the 1990 film, such as interactions between Offred, Ofglen, and two other handmaids at the grocery store. The four women— Offred, Ofglen, and two unnamed handmaids— exchange small talk about the grocery store having oranges, which leads to Ofglen mentioning that "[Offred's] mistress likes oranges," and Offred replies, "I don't have a token for oranges," which means that she is not allowed to buy oranges (14:13-14:15). Immediately, one of the unnamed handmaids mentions, "Tell them you're Commander Waterford's. He's really high up. His name's on the news," and then there is a pause in conversation, where the camera angle switches from a medium shot to a close up of Offred's face and then a close-up of the unnamed handmaid's face, who blanches in horror when she realizes the vulnerable position she has put herself in by revealing this information, and then to Ofglen's face, and then the other unnamed handmaids face, and then back to the first unnamed handmaid, who stutters, but backpedals, "I—didn't read it I promise" (14:18-14:30). After this, Ofglen insists that they all go get oranges "before they're all out," and the other handmaids all take one last look at the unnamed handmaid who made the comment about Commander Waterford and the news, and walk away without a word or consoling her; they leave the unnamed handmaid to stare off into the distance in horror, knowing that she made a mistake that could lead to a maiming punishment, such as losing an eye, getting her feet whipped, getting hanged, or even sent to the Colonies just because she probably did read something, which women are not allowed to do in Gilead. This demonstrates again that there is a restriction on

what these women are or are not allowed to do, such as read and communicate on the most basic level. Unlike the other adaptations, this adaptation focuses on the other women, as well as their interactions, demonstrating that Offred is not alone in her oppression. It also raises the emotional stakes of the narrative because the women are allowed to interact, but their interactions are never meaningful, which creates a longing from the viewer that almost seems to make the viewer feel oppressed and ostracized as well.

Intersectional Critique

Since this adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* is serialized television, it creates the space to focus on women other than Offred, such as Ofglen, Moira, and even the Commander's wife, and how the Gilead regime affects and oppressed women differently, but also how a world like this could happen. For example, as Offred begins to gain Ofglen's trust, and vice versa, there are little bits of illicit conversation that are exchanged and reveal the connection, and difference, between women: like June, Emily also had a family (a wife and a son), but unlike June, Emily must conceal the fact that she is a lesbian because the society has a great emphasis on the blasphemy of homosexuality and deem it 'gender treachery.' This characterization of Ofglen/Emily is a layer of characterization that the original novel and 1990 film do not have, which not only demonstrates how women's experiences of oppression are different, but also how the government cracks down on women who rebel—in the Red Center, Offred did something to get punished and her feet where whipped, but in Gilead, Ofglen slept with another woman, a Martha, and was arrested, tried, forced to watch her lover die, and then underwent female genital mutilation surgery at the end of episode three to quell her unholy urges. Both women suffer, and are oppressed, but their oppression is not equal, which is something—as the interview between Moss and Atwood mentions—that this adaptation tried to stress, which makes it more conscious

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of the ways that it is intersectional and really explores them.

Furthermore, unlike the other adaptations, there is a greater focus and delving into the Commander's wife's character, Serena Joy, as well. Angelica Jade Bastién points out in her article, "Why the Female Villains on *The Handmaid's Tale* Are So Terrifying," that in a dystopia that functions on gender-based oppression, it is "easy to rest the blame of the horrors of Gilead solely at the feet of men like Commander Fred Waterford," because they benefit from the oppression of women, "but no system this deeply entrenched and high functioning could survive without help. Fred and other Commanders need women to internalize their doctrine so they police themselves" ("Why the Female Villains"). This suggests that the success of this gender-based oppressive world depends on women, like Serena Joy, to preach and protect oppressive doctrine, which is revealed through flashbacks that she has always been devout—she wrote books about domestic feminism—and helped create the foundation and basis of Gilead. Bastién claims that Hulu's adaptation is different, as well as "at its most potent, when it interrogates the ways women participate in systems that exploit them" because it shows how women, especially white women, who have privilege and tend to support systems that benefit them in some way while oppressing women ("Why the Female Villains"). Interestingly, this Hulu adaptation demonstrates how Serena Joy has a hand in her own oppression, as well as the oppression of other women, but it also seems to come back around and critique it as well, showing Serena Joy disgruntled and constantly shut out of the world she helped architect. Yvonne Strahovski, the actress who plays Serena Joy, has been noted saying, "We find Serena Joy living in this cage that she spent a lot of time constructing herself," which is demonstrated through visual moments, such as her husband saying, 'you know the rules,' and then shutting the door in her face, locking her out because she is a woman ("Why the Female Villains"). In these

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moments, Serena Joy is clearly upset, which seems to demonstrate not only that she, too, is experiencing gender-based oppression, but this oppression is not like the oppression that Offred or Ofglen experience. The irritation she has, along with the way that she stands in the gapingly empty room, demonstrates that she is upset by this world that is suddenly keeping her down. It is the combination of focusing on different types of women, as well as the way that they are confined by their clothing and in space, which characterized the oppressive world of Gilead.

Agency

Unlike the 1990 adaptation, which took out the voice-overs, the Hulu adaptation has voiceovers, which are incorporated consistently throughout the series to demonstrate that Offred is not complicit. For example, in episode one, when Rita says, "You going to stand there all day? It would be rude leaving your friend outside waiting," and then Offred says in a voiceover, "I want to tell her that Ofglen is not my friend, that I've exchanged barely 50 words with her in the two months since I got here. I kinda wanna tell her that I sincerely believe that Ofglen is a pious, little shit with a broomstick up her ass," but instead, all she says is, "Under His eye," and leaves (10:04-10:27). In the voiceover, Offred is free to express what she really thinks and vocalize her frustration with the position that she is in. It is through these honest voiceovers that Offred demonstrates that she is not a complicit person within the regime. In other words, these voiceovers indicate that Offred may be complying and doing exactly what she is told, but that in her true heart, she does not wish to be doing this at all. It is a cinematic tool or mechanism that lets the audience know that Offred's character is not completely complicit, which is something that the 1985 novel does do as I have discussed earlier in this chapter, but something that the 1990 film adaptation does not do.

In addition to the voiceovers, which demonstrate that Offred is not totally complicit with

her oppression, there are also other acts that reveal her, as well as other women, as active agents of their own bodies and subjectivity. As previously discussed in depth with *The Handmaid's Tale* novel, the sexual relationship that Offred has with Nick has often been regarded as a sign of complicity, or at the very least, an ineffective kind of rebellion. Likewise, in *The Handmaid's Tale* film, critics regard the sexual relationship with Nick as eroticized and pandering to patriarchal desire. In comparison, Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* handles the sexual relationship in very different terms. As Gwen Ihnat et. al. writes in her article, "Let's Talk about Sex in *The Handmaid's Tale*," the episode, "Faithful," focuses on "Offred reception to sex in a variety of forms," such as her "sweet but illicit courtship with her to-be husband," and "we discover that she likes being on top," which represents a time when June, not Offred, was free and could have sex that was consensual and pleasurable ("Let's Talk about"). This moment is then juxtaposed with two prescribed sexual encounters in present-day Gilead: the first is the ceremony where the "Commander touch[es] her thigh" and "attempt[s] to inject pleasure for himself into the sterile and abusive ritual," while the second is with Nick and "it's under the watch of Serena Joy" and "it's procedural" ("Let's Talk about"). The prescribed sexual encounters, along with not being able to say no to Serena Joy's request that she have sex with Nick, reinforces how little agency Offred has over her own body and pleasure, which is why the ongoing relationship she has with Nick is so crucial because "they engage in a relationship on their own terms" (Let's Talk about"). In a world where Offred has been denied her rights to her body, pleasure, and subjectivity for so long, it is an act of agency to continue a sexual relationship with Nick because for "Offred it's a moment where she is finally in control. This is sex that she chooses to have. She orchestrates the removal of clothing. The camera is trained on her face. It's a reclamation" ("Let's Talk about"). While the sexual relationship does not necessarily do anything to overturn

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the Gileadean government, it is enough to free June's, not Offred's soul: she is entirely in charge

of this relationship, which the camera makes evident by remaining on her face, rather than on

objectifying or eroticizing her body; her moans of pleasure from being on top are central, rather

than Nick's, which is different than the ceremony scenes with the commander, who's moans of

pleasure are central. Through this relationship, which focuses on Offred's control and pleasure

allows her to very much so reclaim her body and sexuality.

Unlike the other adaptations, Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* delves into the different ways

that women, other than Offred, exercise agency, such as Ofglen/Emily, who—as I discussed

earlier—suffers in ways that Offred does not because she is a lesbian. After Emily is forced to

undergo a female genital mutilation surgery, she is placed at a different Commander's house, and

becomes Ofsteven. There is a moment when Emily is standing at a market and sees a car door

open and she hops in. Alexis Bledel, who plays Ofglen/Emily/Ofsteven in the show, commented

on this moment in an interview:

> She's standing there, having experienced such a devastating loss. She's still processing
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> all that's happened to her even though some time has passed. Then she sees this car door
>
> open, and she decides to jump in. She doesn't know where she's going or how far she'll
>
> be able to go, but once she realizes the other handmaids are watching—and it's making a
>
> statement to the guards—she decides to keep going as long as she can (Sperling).

As Bledel discusses, this is a moment where Emily takes control and expresses her anger at what

the government has done to her. What starts out as an impulse becomes an act of rebellion,

which not only results in the death of one of the guards that she runs over and kills, but it also

seems to inspire and unite the handmaids, demonstrating that they are not helpless and without

agency. While this moment offers Emily respite and even, arguably, a bit of reclamation over her

subjectivity, it is short-lived and results in her being carried off most likely to her death. Unlike Offred, who claims at the very end of the first episode, "My name is June and I intend to last," Emily does not have the same sentiments, or survival intent, especially when she arguably seals her fate with her joyride in the car, causing death and destruction. It demonstrates that it is up to each individual woman to decide the parameters of the way in which she rebels. Like the film adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale*, there are no historical notes or professor to explain Offred's circumstances to the crowd. In this case, this is most likely due to the fact that Hulu has been contracted to make a second season and third season of the show. However, unlike the film adaptation, the first season concludes with Offred being whisked away in the black van. This adaptation is more conscious about the different ways that women express their ability to be an active agent in their life. It even begins to interrogate the mechanisms of intersectional oppression and delves into what being an active agent means to different women. Like the novel, the show also demonstrates that women are oppressed differently and that there is no shared mechanism of resisting amongst women. The value of the dystopian imagination for the serialized television show is to continue to encourage women to fight for their rights in any means necessary.

The Value of Vision and Revision in *The Handmaid's Tale*

When discussing a text that is adapted from one medium to another, Hutcheon explains that this gives an adaptation a "double nature" that often prompts viewers to evaluate the adaptation on its "proximity or fidelity" to the original source text, which she argues should not "be the criterion of judgment or the focus of analysis" (6). In other words, users tend to inherently compare and contrast an adapted text to the original source text to determine if the newly adapted text is faithful to the original. Hutcheon considers this a fruitless endeavor

because transmedia do adaptations "[repeat]" the basics of a narrative, but they do not "[replicate]" the exact same narrative (7). When juxtaposing transmedia adaptations of a text, users gain more by exploring what the divergences mean, rather than focusing on how it is or is not faithful to the original source text. While the basic components of Atwood's original *The Handmaid's Tale* novel are there, each adaptation has its own unique mission, which contributes a new understanding to the themes and characters. It demonstrates not only that agency is represented differently in different mediums, but that the particular cultural and political climate that a text is produced in also shapes its representations of agency and what parts of the narrative it will focus on.

CHAPTER 6

CRITICAL AFTERWORD:

THE VALUE OF THE FEMINIST DYSTOPIAN IMAGINATION

I began writing my dissertation in January 2018. This was right around the first anniversary of The Women's March, a worldwide protest, which occurred after the inauguration of the 45th president of the United States, who made claims that were interpreted as anti-woman. To be a woman at this time was—and still is—terrifying because some of the very things that Margaret Atwood wrote about in her fictional novel were evident in the world around me. In every interview Atwood has ever given, she mentions that her novel does not make a single claim that has not happened somewhere in the world to a woman. Even though I knew this, my privileges as a straight, white woman might have prevented me from fully believing that our nation was capable of truly reflecting a woman's nightmare that seemed to be plucked out of, or at the very least, reminiscent of what happened in the pages of a novel. While I believe that fiction, especially the feminist dystopian genre, can speak to our lived experiences and the condition of the world, I did not think that I would actually have to *live* through it. Perhaps, my privilege makes me naïve, especially since the parallels I noticed between *The Handmaid's Tale* and the real-world world were not previously happening to me. Or, perhaps it makes me a little bit hopeful that the world I lived in couldn't be capable of such terror against women. But, above all, there is one thing that I do know with absolute certainty: the feminist dystopian genre has helped me to confront my privilege and open my eyes and *see.*

There are no words to describe how fitting it is for Hulu to have adapted *The Handmaid's Tale* in the year that it did. While the dystopian genre is prophetic, the creators and producers must have sensed that America needed *The Handmaid's Tale* because three to four

months after the 45th inauguration of the President of the United States, Hulu released three episodes of the show. In one sense, the show was practically an overnight success because thousands tuned in and were equally fascinated and horrified; although, there are others who find the show too violent, passé, or even a fad that would fizzle and fade. While these individuals are entitled to their opinion, I can't help but feel that this arguably myopic opinion that Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* sensationalizes violence against women actually misunderstands the feminist dystopian genre. Incidentally, this is also not the first time that the public has failed to understand the value of the feminist dystopian imagination. In September 2018, a few weeks from Halloween, the costume industry created a 'Sexy Offred' costume, which tried to capitalize on the popularity of Hulu's show. To create a 'Sexy Offred' Halloween costume fails to understand that this garb is not something real-world women don lightly. In other words, in Atwood's novel and Hulu's television show, the handmaid's clothing is a symbol of oppression and a way to disconnect women from each other, but when women in the real-world wear the handmaid's clothing, it means something else entirely: a complex, visual protest of the ways patriarchy robs women of their rights and reproductive agency. On the one hand, it says, "Hey, government, you're treating me like a handmaid by taking away our productive rights," but at the same time, it also screams, "You might be treating me like a handmaid, but guess what? I will not back down. I'm resisting in any way that I can." It also says, "Women, let us remember not to be complacent and compliant."

This gross misunderstanding of the empowering potential of the feminist dystopian genre is evident in the 'Sexy Offred' costume, but it also derives from the barrage of images of women being beaten, brutalized, raped, and otherwise portrayed in gut-wrenching ways because they are women in *The Handmaid's Tale* show. As a female reader and viewer, I understand that these

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images can be frustrating to read and watch because it is dark and depressing. And yet. It's crucial to remember that the feminist dystopian genre doesn't provide depictions of broken and beaten women for no reason, but does so for a distinct purpose, which is that no matter how broken and beaten down a woman is from gender-based oppression, she finds a way within her heart and soul to resist in the ways that she can. For many women, an outward act of rebellion that involves overthrowing the government is impossible when the woman is so constrained; however, it doesn't mean her conscious choice to resist in the ways that she can is any less powerful because no matter what she will, like Maya Angelou's poem, still "rise" again and again and again because women will fight to be heard and seen. The feminist dystopian imagination is important because it features women who resist in individual ways because resistance is not a one size fits all, which empowers all types of women. Through different types of resistance, this genre can reach a larger audience of real-world women and empower them to make their experiences known.

As I finished my dissertation, I am still surrounded by the permeable hype and prevalence of the feminist dystopian genre, which demonstrates that the interest in and relevance of the feminist dystopian imagination has not faded but ignited even more than it was when I started writing. Throughout the writing of this dissertation, Hulu has released a second season of *The Handmaid's Tale* and they are on track for a third season as well. And thirty-four years after its original publication, Margaret Atwood is going to release a sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale* novel called, *The Testaments*. In addition, HBO's television show *Westworld* produced a second season, which features Maeve acting in the most nuanced and complex ways, continuing to push and test the definition of agency and what it means to be a conscious woman in control of her own destiny. Not only that, but there are even new critical volumes and anthologies that are

being produced in 2018 and 2019 on *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Westworld*, which further demonstrates the value of this genre and that it is gaining traction every day. While it makes it difficult to keep up with the production of texts and criticism, it ultimately makes me feel hopeful because the feminist dystopian imagination empowers women to not only share their experiences in a fictional context, but to consistently give voice to these experiences and to not let gender-based oppression and female-centered issues disappear from the public radar. It reminds women, like me, of a very important lesson: to pay attention. While I could be reading too much into it, I can't help but view the #MeToo movement, the letter from women in Hollywood, and the record number of women elected to Washington in the mid-term elections as a *sign* that women are awake and that their eyes are wide open. And, so, the ultimate value of the feminist dystopian imagination is about resistance, resilience, and a fierce and fiery hope against all the odds that women and their choice to make their cause and voices heard will prevail— again and again and again— in complex and nuanced ways.

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