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‘Don’t Let the Bastards Grind you Down’: Feminist resilience/resilient feminism in *The Handmaid’s Tale* (Hulu, 2017—)’

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Abstract

This article explores the tension that lies in the construction of resilience, which is at once, hopeful and inspiring and yet also in danger of positioning the individual as responsible for the lack of welfare and support that is available. In articulating these contradictory readings, I treat *The Handmaid’s Tale* as a ‘site where the meaning of feminism(s) is produced and contested’ (Ferreday and Harris, 2017, 240) and as a television text whose storytelling techniques reflect what Jason Mittell (2015) refers to as ‘narrative complexity.’

Keywords

Resilience, resistance, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, feminism, contemporary television

In part of its ‘great shows stay with you’ series of advertisements, Amazon Prime features a female viewer, Anna, standing by a bus stop watching the first episode of *Vikings* (2013—) on her mobile phone. On the bus she unhappily acquiesces to having her space invaded by someone ‘manspreading’ beside her. Meanwhile Lagertha’s (played by Katheryn Winnick) battle cry is heard, followed by her determined call to fight for her home at all costs. The advertisement continues as Anna’s responses to the injustices of daily life evolves as she watches further episodes: she takes back a pen that a male colleague borrows without asking,

stares menacingly at a woman who doesn't hold the lift door open for her, and hits the unyielding vending machine until it delivers. At the end of the advertisement, and prompted by watching the 'season finale,' Anna pounds her fists and lets out a battle cry because a colleague is using her coffee mug.

Although playful, this advertisement addresses the way in which the concept of resilience can be used to address female viewers who feel they lack that quality. Anna not only learns to resist certain behaviours but also to 'bounce back' from them. The advertisement highlights the ways in which television can resonate with feminist resilience and point towards forms of feminist resistance – albeit forms of resistance that remain constrained within parameters set by neoliberal capitalism. In less than a minute, the advertisement demonstrates how the presentation of resilience and resistance especially through character, can have an affective impact on the female viewer: to watch is to learn, and as this essay will argue, it is also to take pleasure in and to feel the resilience we see in television characters. The intention of the advertisement's slogan that 'great shows stay with you' is clearly to sell more subscriptions to Amazon Prime, but it also carries the notion that resilience can be learned through compelling characters.

In this article I consider both the construction of resilience and some of the ways in which it has been presented through television to augment the notion of resistance. To this end, I focus on the first three seasons of Hulu's Emmy award winning series *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017—) which first aired on 26 April 2017. Created by Bruce Miller and based on Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel of the same name, the dystopian series has garnered critical and popular attention. The first season follows the narrative of Atwood's novel and focuses on the life of Offred/June (Elisabeth Moss) in the dystopian Republic of Gilead where she serves as a handmaiden to Commander Waterford (Joseph Fiennes) and his wife, Serena Joy

(Yvonne Strahovski). The second and third series depart from the book, by extending the story of June's quest to be reunited with her daughter and husband.

Similar to Atwood's novel, the series aims to depict a woman's struggle under an oppressive regime and there are clear indications in the narrative, the visual strategies and the production culture, that the series directly engages with feminist concerns. As Amy Boyle argues, 'In its adaptation, its marketing, its reception and its political uses, the series is continually framed in relation to contemporary feminisms' (2020, 851).

The main premise of Atwood's novel is that the 'United States of America had suffered a coup that had transformed an erstwhile liberal democracy into a literal-minded theocratic dictatorship' (2017: x). The series has clearly reverberated with the resistance to the misogyny that Donald Trump's Presidency has attempted to legitimise and '[s]ince its first season, *The Handmaid's Tale* has been upheld by many women as a rallying cry for the feminist resistance' (Bernstein, 2018). This 'rallying cry' has not been universally embraced, with journalistic critics challenging elements of what they perceived to be the show's 'torture porn' and 'white washing,' (see Berlatsky, 2017; Sturges, 2018) supported by academic criticisms of its supposed reproduction of a 'post-racial aesthetic' (Crawley, 2018). For this reason, the series is best understood in terms of the 'complex and contradictory readings' that mark out many Anglo-American television shows that are given a '"feminist" stamp of approval soon after its release' (Cattien, 2019: 321-322).

After exploring the meanings of resilience and resistance, the second half of this essay will bring these concepts to bear on *The Handmaid's Tale* in relation to its use of the mantra, '*Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum*' (loosely translated as 'Don't let the bastards grind you down'), its 'resilient pauses,' and musical score. The plot points of *The Handmaid's Tale* revolve around moments when June expresses strength to pull through in whatever dark moment she finds herself, before being plunged back into a similar darkness. I explore the

tension that lies in the construction of resilience, which is at once, hopeful and inspiring and yet also in danger of positioning the individual as responsible for the lack of welfare and support that is available. In articulating these contradictory readings, I treat *The Handmaid's Tale* as a 'site where the meaning of feminism(s) is produced and contested' (Ferreday and Harris, 2017, 240) and as a television text whose storytelling techniques reflect what Jason Mittell (2015) refers to as 'narrative complexity.'

Defining Resilience

Resilience, as a concept, proliferates within the contemporary media from reality television and news reports, to TV commercials, social media ads and, of course, contemporary drama. This essay draws particular attention to the ways in which the concept of resilience is visualised within a contemporary television drama, to consider how the idea presents both pleasurable and complex incidences of resistance. That is to say a viewer can take pleasure in the moments when June overcomes the odds against her and even find them empowering or pedagogic, as Anna does in the Amazon Prime example. Yet, at the same time, the viewer can be aware of both the constructed nature of that resilience and the way in which it positions the individual as responsible for their own problems.

In their work on resilient life and the Anthropocene, Brad Evans and Julian Reid (2014) highlight the ways in which resilience presupposes, encourages and reinforces traits such as adaptability and community building. The formation of new communities and the idea of community is central to most narratives of resilience alongside the ability or inability of characters to adapt to their new environments. But this adaptability and community building is more than just what happens in ordinary scenarios, as Siambabala Bernard Manyena (2006) points towards in his work on resilience. In revisiting the concept, Manyena maps out the various ways in which resilience has been defined: ranging from the Latin

resilio, meaning 'jump back' to Mark Pelling's use of the term to describe '[t]he ability of an actor to cope with or adapt to hazard stress' (cited in Manyena, 2006: 433, 437). 'When referring to people,' Manyena argues 'the essence of resilience centres on quick recovery from shock, illness or hardship. One who is resilient may be considered irrepressible, buoyant, enduring, flexible; the person who bounces back—unchanged—from exposure to stresses and shocks' (438).

Manyena sketches out a connection between resilience and vulnerability and notes that key questions emerge concerning the relationship between them: 'Is resilience the opposite of vulnerability? Is resilience a factor of vulnerability? Or is it the other way around?' (2006, 439). Still, when we look more closely at the narrative structure, characters in the *Handmaid's Tale*, particularly June, are often at their most vulnerable before we witness their resilience.

In her work on vulnerability in popular culture, Sarah Hagelin posits the term 'resistant vulnerability' as a means of describing 'the openness and susceptibility associated with vulnerability and the counterintuitive frisson of resistance' (2013, 4). As we shall see her figuration is particularly useful when considering characters such as June. Specifically, in terms of the ways in which June demonstrates her vulnerability as part of her resilience—that is, she is resilient *because* she is able to accept that she is vulnerable to the powers she struggles against. Instead of an image of 'invincibility', images of 'resistant vulnerability,' encourage us to consider that 'vulnerability needn't be gendered female, and it suggests that we alter our basic assumption that a suffering body is vulnerable and needs our pity and protection' (2013, 4).

Resistance and resilience are, of course, different concepts. Resistance implies a very active project of opposing and withstanding a pressure, whereas resilience is about the 'bouncing back' and recovery from the impact of that pressure. And while there has been a

good deal of feminist scholarship which deploys the concept of resistance (see, for example, McRobbie, 1991; Bordo, 2004; Gilligan, 2011; in relation to Margaret Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale;* see, for instance, Staels, 1995; Stillman and Johnson, 1994; Caminero-Santangelo, 1994), there has been very little work within television studies on resilience.

An exception can be found in Rob Cover's blog on popular culture and resilience. He argues that, despite a long history of being dismissed '[popular] media texts are […] influential in how they respond to and understand policy, service provision, healthcare, social justice, belonging and wellbeing' (2016). His work considers ways in which television narratives of success and failure can serve as a source of information through which people learn about resilience, rather than seeing particular narratives as resilient by design.

Cover makes reference to ways in which romantic comedies in particular, can act 'to disseminate a pedagogical account of resilience' (2016). Similarly, there is also room to consider the ways in which soap operas offer an informal source of learning in the way Cover describes. Indeed, soaps have long been viewed as an informal way of giving viewers strategies for which to cope with a range of health and mental wellbeing issues because of their long-running format, attention to everyday life and the sense of community fostered in the storylines (see Geraghty, 2010).

One of the central claims in this essay is that a dystopian series such as *The Handmaid's Tale* offers a narrative example of feminist resilience. Episode titles such as 'Don't let the bastards grind you down' speak to the internal presence of resilience in the series. Survival is key to the design of the resilient character and it distinguishes them from the romantic comedy character who must undergo failure and disappointment before finding the happy ending promised by these narratives (Cover, 2016).

Whereas feminist scholarship in the early 1990s to mid-2000s tended to focus on the term *resistance*, more recent feminist scholarship regarding women in contemporary culture

focuses on *resilience*. For example, Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad (2018) examine the 'amazing bounce-backable' nature of the middle-aged woman who is bombarded by resilient narratives in self-help books, women's magazines and smartphone apps in contemporary capitalism. Gill and Orgad argue that 'at the heart of these very different iterations of resilience, discourse is the promotion of the capacity to "bounce back" from difficulties and shocks, whether this is getting divorced, being made redundant, or having one's benefit's cut' (2018: 478). They go further to contend that middle-class women, in particular, are addressed as ideal subjects who have the 'substance that helps them to defy the obstacles set by adversity and precarity' (480). This argument leads them to wonder at the forms of labour, experience, thinking and feeling this subject is asked to perform (481), to examine women's magazines, self-help books and smartphone apps in terms of how the 'narratives, metaphors, images, exhortations and technologies' teach women to think and feel about themselves and others in "neoliberal times"' (481).

The work of Gill and Orgad is important for the way these scholars explore not only how these narratives help teach resilience, but also how they speak to a subject: in this case a middle-class woman, about the need to 'bounce-back'. In many ways, as this essay will go on to demonstrate, *The Handmaid's Tale* also uses devices, such as a self-help mantra, self-reflection and music, to teach female viewers to think and feel about themselves and others in 'neoliberal times'. Gill and Orgad's thinking sits within a landscape of academic research to which Catherine Rottenberg refers as 'the rise of neoliberal feminism' (2018). Feminist theorists such as Angela McRobbie (2007; 2009), Sarah-Banet Weiser and Laura Portwood-Stacer (2017) and Rosalind Gill (2016), have argued about the ways in which feminism has become commodified and used, particularly within popular culture. In addition, feminist theorists, such as Leela Fernandez 'craft a feminist materialist analytic that provide an avenue

for a deeper understanding of the political, social and economic effects of policies associated with neoliberalism' (2018: 221).

McRobbie's most recent work, for instance, interrogates the 'politics of resilience' and what she refers to as the '*p-i-r*:' 'perfect-imperfect-resilience' (2020). Through her discussion of gender in popular culture and its various mechanisms, such as the notion of 'having it all,' which serve to divide and mark out women both racially and in terms of class, McRobbie sees resilience as playing an ambivalent role. She argues

> Resilience thus becomes a catch-all term, multi-functional and predicated on a logic of substitution, and thereby standing in for some things that have been lost to women as a result of welfare dismantling, while also nudging up against and displacing currently existing phenomena such as the new feminism, without entirely dismantling its field of influence, as if speculating on its terms of profitability and, if pushed, endorsing a variation of liberal feminism as a force for manageable changes to the gender regime. (2020: 62)

For this reason, McRobbie recognises the concept of resilience as taking on certain truths even as we might 'doubt them or refute them' (63). Sarah Bracke (2016: 69) also recognises the contradictory meanings bound up within our cultural understanding of resilience. She considers the close relationship resilience has with vulnerability and sees it as a necessary ground on which resilience flourishes. Both McRobbie and Bracke situate resilience in terms of neoliberalism and citizenship, with the latter arguing that: 'Neoliberal citizenship is nothing if not a training in resilience as the new technology of the self: a training to withstand whatever crisis capital undergoes and whatever political measures the state carries out to save it' (Bracke, 2016: 62). *The Handmaid's Tale* presents viewers with a dystopian future where

its characters must undergo 'training in resilience' in order to resist and survive the new state regimes imposed upon them. As Karen Crawley says

> The show's focus on Offred's lack of choice then turns us back to a desire for choice: the viewer is invited to enter the neoliberal fantasy that we have choice, without recognising the continuation of oppression in its current forms that operate *through* the fantasy of choice, rather than in opposition to it. (2019: 339)

As Crawley suggests, there is a tension produced by the examples of feminist resilience within the series between the neoliberal fantasy of choice and the current forms of oppression that operate through this fantasy. There is also tension between the presentation of resilience, which can be reassuring and empowering to viewers and the way it reiterates women as responsible for handling and resisting oppression.

'*Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum*'

Series creator Bruce Miller speaks directly to the way in which June's character embodies a sense of resilience and hope

> The most inspiring thing about her is […] her internal voice. June is very much alive in there and very much strong and still planning and scheming — and trying to live, not just survive. […] I always feel like the show is hopeful because our world is not Gilead. It always makes me feel like, wow, if Offred could make a stand and try to change things in her world, what am I doing sitting on the couch? I should be able to change things in my world. (quoted in Gray, 2018)

Miller's reflection captures one of the affects resilience has on its viewers. As he explains, watching Offred/June 'make a stand and try to change things in her world,' inspires him to think that he can change things in his world and motivates him to get off the couch. Her efforts to 'live' and not just survive encourages him to find a sense of resilience and strength in his own experience of life. Returning to the Amazon Prime advertisement with which this article began, Miller's reflection chimes with the suggestion that resilience can be learned or felt through a characters' struggle on screen.

The resilient character is seen as undertaking a series of challenges to their physical and emotional being and adapting to their environments. Returning to the distinction made earlier between resistance and resilience, Evans and Reid remind us that, 'The conflation of resistance and resilience signals the absence of any self-confidence in the liberal subject's disposition towards the world. No longer positively assured […] everywhere it appears to be under siege' (2014: 6). The emerging sense of challenge, instability and precarity that resilience signals is present in television narratives such as *The Handmaid's Tale* and suggests a desire to work through what this means for us as humans, and how we might survive and navigate new landscapes.

The following section posits three ways: the use of a mantra, 'resilient pauses' and music, through which a notion of resilience is presented within *The Handmaid's Tale* and how these texture features might be read in terms of feminism. As Miller notes, the series relies heavily on June's 'inner voice' through the use of voiceover. Not only does this provide viewers with insight into her struggles, but it constructs a sense of intimacy and self-reflection. In addition to the use of voiceover, the series repeats a phrase, '*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*,' which I will discuss in more detail as an example of what might be understood as a self-help mantra. There are two things to point out here, both the phrase itself

and how it is understood and used narratively within the series as well as the way in which it is repeated.

Repetition is a common device used within television and helps to reassure viewers that, despite any threats or concerns the lead character may encounter, the protagonist will overcome these obstacles. For example, Jason Jacobs considers the role of repetition in character development, to argue

> Where development and repetition feels more like the uncanny unfolding of fate, and is posed in direct recognition that we have, indeed, been there before, then there is something more substantial to account for. Particularly in long-running dramatic serials, it requires considerable imaginative and creative skill, as well as delicacy, to maintain the overall formula whilst allowing characters to evolve in interesting and surprising ways. The tension is between the plausibly-prepared and the opportunistically-contrived. (2001: 434)

As Jacobs notes, it is a delicate skill to visualise a character's evolution by maintaining a tension between 'plausibly-prepared' and the 'opportunistically-contrived' circumstances. There is always a danger that viewers will become weary of watching June demonstrate her resilience in overcoming yet another set of odds.

June first finds '*Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum*' written on the inside of the closet in her room (1:4). It is a moment where she is at her most vulnerable, having been confined to her room for 13 days, and the phrase gives her hope and strength just when she needs it. However, it is not because of the words themselves, as she does not know what they mean, but rather the memory of her friendship with Moira Strand (Samira Wiley) and the solidarity she finds with other handmaids.

A flashback explains to viewers that the words on her closet remind her of Moira etching 'Aunt Lydia Sux' on the toilet wall when they were training to be handmaids. She cautions Moira against the vandalism, saying 'it's not worth the risk.' Moira disagrees: 'Once we get out of here, there's going to be a girl who comes in here and reads it. It will let her know that she's not alone.' The moment highlights the difference between the two women: Moira is unwilling to follow the 'rules,' whereas June is trying to resist quietly. As viewers later learn, Moira is eventually rewarded for her rebelliousness and escapes to Canada whereas June remains in Gilead. But the moment also speaks to Moira's suggestion of female solidarity—another woman will 'learn she is not alone', and in that moment of finding the etching in the closet, this is what June feels. She recalls the moment when she is returned to Aunt Lydia after the failed escaped and punished for her attempts to leave. As she lies on her bed, with bloodied feet, the other handmaids return from their dinner and each drop a small bit of food on her bed. Not only is she 'not alone' but recognised for her heroic attempts to escape.

This memory serves to embolden June to convince the Commander to release her from the confinement imposed by Mrs Waterford. In the final scene of the episode, she leaves the house triumphant, glancing back to see Mrs Waterford watching from the window, as she joins the other handmaids. In a voiceover she says: 'There was an Offred before me. She helped me find my way out. She is dead. She is alive. She is me. We are Handmaids. *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*, bitches' (1: 4). The voiceover articulates a sense of solidarity and this is visualised on screen as the handmaids take to the street and seem to blend into each other.

In their work on *The Handmaid's Tale*, Funda Kaya and Eleni Varmazi (2020) read the episode as an example of how memory creates a resource for resistance. They argue, 'With her inner speech and remembrance of her past, June finds a way to survive her

imprisonment and go on' (2020: 240). Their argument considers how memory functions to embolden and strengthen us in times of despair. Crawley reads the episode and use of the mantra as an example of the way in which neoliberal subjectivity is reinscribed 'through a focus on the melodramatic elements of Offred's heroic subversion and resistance' (2018: 340). In examining both these arguments, there is a clear tension between *wanting* to see June as character survive through her resilience and *recognising* this resilience as a means of reinscribing neoliberal subjectivity.

This is par for the course for a feminist text, with the complexity and contradictions part of what draw in the viewer. Female friendships and female solidarity are themselves intricate and paradoxical, as demonstrated throughout the series. The mantra serves as a way to visualize, as well as define June's evolution: in the moment of vulnerability, she finds strength. In series 2 for example, June almost manages to flee on a plane out of Gilead. When her escape is thwarted, she is returned and held captive until the Waterfords agree that she can return on a trial basis. While she is sleeping, Serena Joy comes into her room and puts her hand and head on her belly and tells the unborn child that 'mama loves you'. When she leaves the room, June enters the closet and lies on the floor in her nightgown. She brushes her finger on the spot where the phrase was written but has been covered with white paint. A tear runs down her cheek as she shifts her head to look up at the closet ceiling. The camera focuses tightly on her face as she repeats, 'It's my fault, it's my fault.' Although the phrase marks a bottoming out of her sense of hope in this example, as opposed to strengthening her resolve, the mantra is used repetitively as a means to recognise these moments and demonstrate the ways in which she is able to bounce back and adapt. The mantra serves as a skillful way of maintaining a tension between 'plausibly-prepared' and 'opportunistically-contrived' circumstances that indicate her development.

It is in that marking out, returning and finding strength that we, the viewer, see her resilience flourish. In the final episode of season 2, as Commander Waterford goes to find June, we see that she has written the phrase in bold letters on her wall. Narratively it is difficult to believe that she had time to do this, however it serves as a rebellious moment and is clearly for the viewers to take pleasure in and to reify the use of the phrase throughout the series as a kind of mantra and talisman for June. The mantra is used to galvanise June's spirit and determination and it becomes a mantra for resilience: it stands for the power of collective stories to build resilience in others. The way in which June derives strength from a message from another handmaid, who had shared the room before her, gives her the courage and determination to survive. This can also be seen in the way June protects and then shares the letters from the other handmaids which eventually serves to undermine the Commander's attempt to expand Gilead's power into Canada.

The mantra and the ways in which it is repeated not only serve as a way to skillfully mark out her struggle through contrived and believable plot points, but it also demonstrates the tension between wanting to read the female character in terms of her resilience and ability to survive and as reflective of a neoliberal fantasy of heroic resistance and solidarity. Both readings are accommodated in the text and serve to exemplify the complexity both of the narrative but also of our relationship to these ideals and ambitions.

'Resilient pauses'

Another significant way in which resilience is visualised is through the ways in which the lead characters pause their efforts of being resilient and regain strength. In other words, they take a break from their actions and the narrative explores the interior world of the character by removing the palpable threat. There is often a moment within the narrative when the

character is alone or inside a safe space, when equilibrium is restored, and a sense of the domestic returns—a moment of breathing.

Returning to McRobbie's work on resilience, what we can also see there is a 'pause' in the active work required of femininity. June is able to 'pause' the active work assigned to her and simply 'be herself.' This pause can be read as a space where a person is able to reflect on who they are, what they are fighting for and why the activity of memorialising the past is so integral to their future survival. In 'Unwomen' (2: 2), for example, June is taken to the abandoned remains of *The Boston Globe* for safe keeping. She initially approaches the empty space with fear and distrust, a sense that the place holds danger, not safety. She runs through the dark building guided by a torch with sounds of sirens coming from outside. The four walls of the Waterford's home, however entrapping, are contrasted with the uncertainty of this new space. But the episode details the way in which the physical space of the building and its remains allows June a chance to heal emotionally and physically. In the daylight she wanders through the building, finding drawings by children tacked to the side of office cubicles, an abandoned shoe, dust collecting on books. As she makes her way to the bottom of the building she finds where the people who once worked in the newspaper building were executed. Empty rope nooses hang in a long row and bullet holes and blood spatter mark the concrete walls. She makes a memorial to the people killed and lays to rest much of the grief she is carrying within her. She uses newspaper clippings to piece together the early beginnings of Gilead, both for herself, and clearly for the audience.

The start of 'Baggage' (2:3) opens with June running through the abandoned *Boston Globe* building to the song 'Go!' (Santigold feat. Karen O). Hair pulled back, trainers on, June confidently runs through the corridors she tentatively made her way through in the previous episode. No longer scared of what the building holds, she now makes her way up and down the stairs in an effort to physically strengthen herself. The camera follows her as

she makes her way through the cavernous corridors and spaces until she ends up in the bottom of the building where we see the vast memorial she has erected. She carefully tacks a picture back on the wall and looks at her achievement. In a voiceover she says: "Women are so adaptable my mother would say. I've been here for two months, what have I got used to' (2:2). In this space, June has been allowed to take a pause from the active effort involved in her resilient stance against Gilead and regain her strength and sense of adaptability. She is also able to reflect on 'what she has got used to' and how this has changed her. In a final shot, we see her watching *Friends* (1994—2004) on a laptop with the rain lashing against the windows.

In these 'resilient pauses'—where characters take a hiatus from the active struggle against whatever elements they are dealing with—there is a great deal of attention to the strengthening of mind and body and many of these montages features Rocky-like sequences to reiterate that these characters are of sound mind *and* body. These scenes visualise the notion of 'the training in resilience as the new technology of the self' that Bracke suggests is key to the neoliberal citizen. But these pauses also include something to help us, as the audience, identify with the found tranquility, whether stopping to appreciate a sunset, reading a book, or in this case, watching *Friends* in an abandoned corridor (see Figure 1). These moments create a *mise en scène* that invite us to see the interior world of the character under duress. In the case of the *Friends* example, it also creates a 'ms. en abyme' (Elam, 1994) where we are part of the narrative. We, as viewers, watch June on television watching television – we become part of the frame and the doubling includes us in the process of both relaxing in the image on screen, but also the awareness that the fight or struggle is still out there. In this sense, viewers are invited into June's world and become part of her resilience and her battle against an oppressive regime.

Watching *Friends*

‘This Woman’s Work’

One of the most provocative ways in which resilience is constructed in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is through the use of music. The musical score for the series is composed by Adam Taylor who uses primarily strings, as he believes these instruments hold the closest comparison to the human voice and are the most emotive. Music supervisor, Maggie Phillips, also discusses the use of popular songs, such as Simple Minds ‘Don’t Forget about me’ as a way of offering insight into June’s character, but also into life before Gilead (Dray, 2018); as she explains

> I often ask myself what June would be listening to if she could press play in a scene. It helps the audience relate to her and reminds us that she came from our world – but it also helps illustrate the not-so-distant past during the flashbacks, amplifying the freedom felt in pre-Gilead times. (quoted in Dray, 2018)

This acknowledgment of the not-so-distant past and the freedom it held is referenced throughout the series and provokes both an emotional and nostalgic pull. For example, in the opening of the second series, Kate Bush's 'This Woman's Work,' powerfully reminds us of the handmaids' work along with a disavowal of their importance. In the final episode of the second series as Ofglen is taken away, unaware that she is going towards her freedom and not death, the lyrics from Annie Lennox's 'Walking on Broken Glass' create an eerie and yet prophetic background noise. Or, after the handmaids have blown up a room full of commanders, the episode ends with: 'Oh Bondage! Up Yours' by X-ray Spex. As the opening line of the song exclaims: 'Some people think that little girls should be seen and not heard. But I say oh bondage, up yours!'

In *Passionate Views* (1999), Jeff Smith draws on the sound processes of polarisation and affective congruence to think about the ways in which music harnesses and directs emotion: this is clear in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Not only does the music give the series a cultural resonance and locate us in the memories of our own past lives, but it also creates affective moments to disrupt any sense of calm or ease we might find in the narrative. This audible disruption is crucial to the underlying movement and rhythm of the narrative. There is a gesturing towards political action insofar as the disruption signals a need to break the sense of calm or disrupt our feelings of calm and take action.

Robin James (2015) begins her book on music, neoliberalism and resilience with an analysis of Calvin Harris's 'Sweet Nothing.' In her analysis of the music video, she takes note of the way the central female character performs resilience, writing

> The epitome of resilience, Welch's character takes her personal damage and transforms it into aesthetic surplus value for others, both within the video and beyond the fourth

> wall, to consume. Our pleasure isn't just in her character's musical performance in the club, but in her 'bouncing back' from domestic abuse. (2015: 5)

Here, as I have explored in relation to *The Handmaid's Tale*, is a narrative of a woman overcoming odds and fighting back – of being resilient. Yet, as James argues, 'Her resilience doesn't fight back against patriarchy, but feeds it' (2015: 6). Here is the rub of resilience. Though viewers may take pleasure in watching resilient characters 'bounce-back' and fight against the system, their actions are constrained within the parameters of the system, against which there appears to be, as Margaret Thatcher famously once said, 'there is no alternative' (see Berlinski, 2008). In a television narrative, this makes sense, viewers want their characters to return to fight another day so that we can take pleasure in another battle. But in life, this means that resilience can only ever strive not to allow 'the bastards to grind us down' rather than act as a platform for radical social change (as figure 2 highlights).

'New Orleans Resilient Resilience Flyer Street Art,' Candy Chang

James goes on to suggest that there is an inherent logic to the discourse of resilience which ensures that the person who is able to overcome the odds is 'rewarded with increased human

capital, status and other forms of recognition and recompense, because: finally, and more importantly, this individual's own resilience boosts society's resilience' (2015: 7).

In 'Unknown Caller' (3: 5), June is asked by Serena to call Luke (O.T. Fagbenle) and arrange a meeting so that she can see Nichole for the last time. After the call, June takes refuge in the kitchen where Eleanor Lawrence (Julie Dretzin) consoles her with the claim that 'at least the love came through'. In order to show her empathy for Eleanor, June asks her what she loved about Joseph. She replies that he used to curate mix tapes for her at university. June goes into the basement and looks through them. Leo Sayer's 1976 number one hit, 'You make me feel like Dancing,' comes through on the old cassette player and gives June new insight into Commander Lawrence as well as a mode of communication with Luke. She uses the tape to tell him about Nick (Max Minghella) and to reassure him that Nichole was born of love and that he must move on in his own way. In this episode, music is used explicitly as a means of communication, memorialisation and resilience. The cassette tapes, themselves an outmoded material object of music history, both memorialise the love that was once between Eleanor and Joseph Lawrence and between Luke and June. They are carriers of the past, present and future in their ability to transmit music that provokes memories and messages of love.

Music is also something that disrupts the darkness in which both June and Eleanor find themselves, even while being on different side of the battle. Ultimately, however, music is used, as in many others examles across the series, as a way for a character to find strength and to galvanise the spirit. In the final scene of the episode, for instance, U2's 'Pride' plays over June's defiant face as she stares straight into the screen and breaks the fourth wall. She has been lured into a live television appearance with Fred and Serena Waterford who break the silence of Gilead to plead for their daughter Nichole's safe return. 'In the Name of Love'

characterises June's feelings within the moment, as well as Serena's excuse for her continued betrayals.

Resilient Feminism

The Handmaid's Tale, as a product of popular culture and as a text that speaks directly to women, can be seen in similar terms to women's magazines, self-help books and smartphone apps that Gill and Orgad argue 'teach women to think and feel about themselves and others in neoliberal times' (2018: 481). As this essay has outlined, there are specific ways, such as the use of a mantra, 'resilient' pauses and music, in which the series presents the performance of resilience and positions June as responsible for overcoming the odds against her.

Part of the reason June needs to be resilient is that she has been separated from her husband and daughter—her family. This is made clear in the numerous flashbacks to times when they were all together. These are either designed to tell the viewer something about life before Gilead or to remind the viewer about the affective feelings of what it means to be part of a close and loving family. One recurrent flashback is of June playing under the bed sheets with her daughter. Both June and her daughter are smiling, laughing and rolling around with each other in a tangle of love and intimacy. The images are not always clear, some are fuzzy and suffused with the sunlight shining through her daughter's bedroom window. The images are designed to remind the viewer of those feelings of pure happiness engendered by the uncomplicated love one has for someone else—whether mother-daughter or other forms of love. The scene is happy, playful and joyful. June returns to these moments to help keep her strong and focused on the reason that she is staying alive despite the pressures that surround her. In so doing, the series gives the viewer a tangible reason why people are able to maintain resilience even in the most difficult of times.

The series also demonstrates that the power of female friendships is key to a woman's sense of resilience. June's courage and bravery create a growing number of women who revere her and will do what they can to both protect and follow her. Her support system of Marthas and Handmaidens is evident in the final episode of series Three 'Mayday' when June organises and executes her plan to fly over 100 children to safety in Canada. After throwing stones to distract the soldiers and then finally drawing attention to herself to allow the plane to safely take off, June is shot by one of the soldiers whom she subsequently kills. Several of the handmaidens who stayed to help June pick her up in one of their red cloaks and carry her out of the woods. The series ends with the image of the women carrying June. This image illuminates how female friendships and solidarity is mapped out in the series as forms of feminist resilience. While more can be said about this phenomenon, I highlight the ways in which women are seen to work together to overthrow a totalitarian regime controlled by white men. The timing of series three makes it likely that there are references to social media movements such as #metoo and #timesup, but also the images of women working together offer a revolutionary counterpoint to more pernicious forms of female friendship offered in series such as *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) or *Girls* (2012-2017). Revolution may be the endpoint of the series, but the resilience keeps it going.

Conclusion

Resilience, as McRobbie suggests, is in many respects a 'catch-all' (2020) and as Bracke argues 'has friends in high places' (2016: 52). As such, it speaks to a need to bounce-back and conquer life's small injustices along with more oppressive ones, as imagined in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Resilience reflects our vulnerabilities and capacity for resistance. It is both something that gives us hope and, as Miller suggests, 'gets us off the couch,' and yet is also

something to resist if it is asking us to simply 'keep calm and carry on' in the face of injustice and in pursuit of neoliberal citizenship.

One of the strengths of television is its ability to dramatise the length of time characters must endure, adapt and keep going. Their unwillingness to give up allows the audience to see and even feel that struggle and various narrative and visual strategies invite audiences to compare the characters' struggle with their own. In this sense, television is a unique and compelling medium through which to express and describe the resilience I have started to outline. It allows viewers to see character's inner worlds, it reminds us of the work that goes into being resilient, and it constructs a rhythm and movement which reminds us to keep going, even when things feel impossible. Having a female character driving this kind of narrative is especially important in terms of feminism. The gendering offers a particular fantasy in its expression of defiance, its iteration of carrying on despite the challenges and even the music is designed to stock up spirits in dark times. It creates a moment for viewers to take pleasure in the characters' successes, defiance or strength in moving forwards against the odds and in terms of their own vulnerabilities. In terms of *The Handmaid's Tale*, viewers are encouraged, through the narrative, resilient pauses and music to consider the way in which resilience punctuates and structure the series. These 'ever-changing emotions' contribute to the success of the piece as well as its accessibility to audiences (Ang, 1985: 46; see also Gorton, 2009). As Ien Ang writes, 'in life emotions are always being stirred up, […] life is a question of falling down and getting up again' (1985: 46).

However, the concept of resilience and the way it is constructed in popular culture is not only complicated by readings such as Crawley's and James's, who argue that it deceives and feeds rather than destroys, but is also something that is difficult to sustain narratively. How many times are viewers apt to take pleasure in the same kind of struggle? When will they want the character to give in or to stop being resilient or when will they stop believing in

the characters' ability to be resilient? These questions speak to the skill involved in the repetition within contemporary television, as Jacobs notes (2001).

Another limitation in terms that television often presents viewers with is the gendered and racialisation nature of the kind of vulnerability and resilience. As Hagelin argues 'that popular culture consistently and relentlessly imagines vulnerability as female, and that other bodies—usually male, often nonwhite—are moved offscreen. But we don't *just* construct vulnerability as female; we construct it as white and female' (2013: 15; emphasis in the original). Hagelin's point has been taken up not only in journalistic reviews of the series, as noted earlier, but in Crawley's sustained critique, who argues that the 'show's failure is diagnostic of the failure of a mainstream (white) feminism, as sustained by the invisibilisation (sic) of whiteness and the universalization of white experience' (2018, 351-352).

The presentation of feminist resilience through the three series offers viewers a strategy for coping with oppression under neoliberal capitalism alongside a utopian presentation of female solidarity. Carrying June in their own hands through the forest provides viewers with an image of female solidarity and support—of women working together to affect change as opposed to one working alone. In so doing, the series ends on a note which suggests that there is both hope and danger ahead, but a sense that the women will face it together. Yet, as Bracke cautions: 'Resilience does ignite a sense of possibility […] but the material, the intellectual, and emotional labour an ethos of resilience requires, as well as the temporality in which it's caught up […] undermine precisely the possibility of substantial transformation' (2016: 64). Perhaps her caution rests more easily within television, however, which needs to keep *possibility* and the promise of transformation in play and unresolved in order to keep viewers engaged. As Atwood comments: 'It's a television series. If you're going to have a series you can't kill off the central character and

you also can't have the central character escape to safety in episode one of season two. It's not going to happen' (cited in Brown, 2018).

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