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Bracke, S.

DOI

[10.4324/9781003305927-22](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003305927-22)

Publication date

2024

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

The Politics of Replacement

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Citation for published version (APA):

Bracke, S. (2024). “A Victory for White Life”: *Reproduction, Replacement, and a Handmaid’s Tale*. In S. Bracke, & L. M. Hernández Aguilar (Eds.), *The Politics of Replacement: Demographic Fears, Conspiracy Theories, and Race Wars* (pp. 262-273). (Routledge Studies in Fascism and the Far Right). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003305927-22>

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17

“A VICTORY FOR WHITE LIFE”

Reproduction, Replacement, and a
Handmaid’s Tale

Sarah Bracke

Introduction¹

On May 14, 2022, a white supremacist embarked upon a mass shooting in a supermarket in Buffalo, NY, which killed ten and injured three people, eleven of whom were African Americans. The 18-year-old killer was impelled by population replacement conspiracy theories, which insist that deliberate forces are turning white people into a minority in the U.S. and call upon different kinds of interventions to bring this purported plot to a halt. Little more than a month later, on June 24, 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the landmark *Roe v. Wade*, resulting in abortion bans that will most likely affect roughly half of the states in the U.S.² Both events caused intense grief and rage as well as public uproar and debate.

The (social) media commentaries on these events mostly existed independently of each other. The Buffalo killings elicited comments on racism and white supremacy and often situated replacement conspiracy theories as a violent pathology in which Black and Brown people, migrants, Muslims, Jews (and such categories are both overlapping as well as conflated within different recursions of replacement discourses) are seen as a demographic threat to white, Christian people. This threat is invoked through monikers like “white genocide” (see the Introduction of this volume) but also “demographic winter” (see Trimble 2013) or “demographic jihad” (see Bracke & Hernández Aguilar 2020b) that understand these demographic changes as the results of concerted efforts, purportedly organized or at least enabled by “elites” imagined as Jews, “multiculturalists”, or feminists. On their side, the media commentaries critical of the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* and the rise of abortion bans were focused on the patriarchal disciplining of women’s bodies and

the bodies of those who can be pregnant. Such commentators attended to the violence of forced pregnancies and forced births but also to the criminalization of miscarriages and stillbirths as well as the potentially life-threatening situations of clandestine abortions and ectopic pregnancies. From a biopolitical perspective, the resonances or connections between both events are tangible, as they both invoke notions of “population management” and “demographic anxieties”. Yet the contours of the public debate have not been conducive to exploring such connections: most often the events were captured by different frames, and as a result, questions of white supremacy and reproductive rights are set up as two distinct matters of concern.

Every now and then, however, crucial entanglements of these questions emerge to the surface and are caught in the spotlight. This was the case on June 25, 2022, the day after the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, at the *Save America* rally in Mendon, Illinois. Here, former president Donald Trump endorsed Republican congresswoman Mary Miller for the upcoming 2022 House of Representative primaries. In his introduction, Trump claimed the Supreme Court’s decision, “a victory for life”, as his achievement – a promise he had delivered through the nomination of judges and justices “who would stand up for the original meaning of the Constitution and who would honestly and faithfully interpret the law as written”.³ After being introduced and invited on stage by Trump, Miller began by thanking him and welcoming him to Illinois and continued with the following words: “President [*sic*] Trump, on behalf of all MAGA patriots in America, I want to thank you for the historic victory for white life in the Supreme Court yesterday”.⁴

A victory for white life – an articulation that firmly ties the question of the regulation of reproductive rights to that of racial politics and white supremacy. The statement did not go unnoticed. As it elicited immediate responses on social media, Miller’s campaign was quick to correct her words: she had meant to say, “the right to life” but misread her remarks – a misreading which was qualified as a “mishap” or a “stumble”.⁵ This explanation raises a few questions. What does it mean that the *right to life* is misread so easily as *white life* or that *white life* is so interchangeable with the *right to life*? *Right*, as a noun, encompasses two dimensions: that which is morally good and just and a (moral or legal) entitlement. On a semantic level, the substitution of *right* by *white* would then suggest that these qualities – moral goodness as well as entitlement – are also the qualities that pertain to whiteness or that *right* and *white* are interchangeable. On a (bio)political level, the conflation of the two terms points to an understanding of abortion bans as a means to secure the birth of more white babies. What if, instead of a mere “stumble”, Miller’s words were more of a Freudian slip, an error in speech that occurs due to a wish that usually remains hidden in the unconscious, or in secrecy, yet reveals itself in this error? No matter how one approaches these questions, Miller’s “stumble” is a public and political moment which invokes a

horizon of “demographic anxieties” where abortion bans and replacement conspiracy theories can and should be considered in relation to each other. Abortion bans, Miller’s words suggest, are not merely a victory for those forces that have organized themselves under the banner of “pro-life”, forces that are often an affirmation of a Christian logic which considers the injunction against taking another human being’s life to start from the moment of conception, well before that life would be viable outside of the womb. These bans, moreover, would also bring victory to “white life”, which aligns this Christian logic with a white supremacist one. Miller’s “stumble”, in other words, implies that restricting the legal possibility of and access to abortion would be beneficial for a regime of white supremacy.

This chapter explores the articulation between race and reproduction, in terms of what critical theorist Alys Weinbaum (2004) calls the *race/reproduction bind*, that is, a persistent modern ideological constellation which she posits as a central feature of the modern episteme. As reproduction in its contemporary understanding “became central to the organization of knowledge about nations, modern subjects, and the flow of capital, bodies, and ideas within and across national borders” (Weinbaum 2004, 2), it emerged as a biological, sexual, and racialized process. *Excavating* the entanglement of race and reproduction, as Weinbaum puts it, implies that the study of population replacement conspiracy theories should further unpack the question of reproduction (Bracke & Hernández Aguilar 2020a), which aligns with the call for paying more attention to gender and sexuality in the study of population replacement conspiracy theories (Thiem 2020). It also implies that the study of reproduction should further pursue questions of race and racial politics (Darling 2004; Rapp 2019; Roberts 1996, 2009; Schuller 2016). This chapter explores the centrality of the race/reproduction bind within a contemporary conjuncture marked by a pushback against reproductive rights, in general, and abortion rights, in particular, as well as by the rise of replacement conspiracy theories. To do so, I turn to a case study within popular culture: a best-selling work of fiction that has been further popularized through a prominent television series and whose iconography has become a crucial part of the feminist movement – *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

A Cautionary Tale

When the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, the Canadian author Margaret Atwood tweeted a picture of herself in an armchair, holding a mug with the words *I told you so*. A much-acclaimed author, Atwood is well-known for many of her novels, yet she is probably most associated with her best-selling book *The Handmaid’s Tale*, first published in 1985. The novel has been translated into over forty languages and was turned into a film (1990), an opera (1990), a ballet (2013), a graphic novel (2019), and a

television series (running since 2017). Both the story and its visualization in the television series have become firmly embedded in popular culture. The iconic red handmaid habit has entered what Aline Cohen (2019) calls “our visual lexicon of dissent”, and a few years ago, in 2019, the Smithsonian National Museum of American History acquired one of the dresses worn by the protagonist in the television series for its collection. Many have relied on the story as a political lens through which to consider contemporary gender and sexual politics, notably, the disciplining of women’s bodies and the state regulation of reproduction.

The Handmaid’s Tale tells the story of Offred, a “handmaid” assigned to a high-ranking Commander (called Fred, from whom her name is a derivative, “of Fred”, at least for the time she serves in his house) and his Wife, in the authoritarian Republic of Gilead. The handmaid is a captive in her master’s house; like all women in Gilead, she is forbidden to read and write, and the handmaids’ contact with the outside world is mostly restricted to surveilled trips for grocery shopping. Her sole task in this dystopian society is to bear children for the household she is assigned to, a task which includes a monthly rape by the master of the house, referred to as “the ceremony”. This ritualized rape invokes the Biblical story of Rachel and her handmaid Bilhah and requires the handmaid to lie between the Wife’s legs, with her head on the Wife’s abdomen and her arms raised above her, so the Wife can hold her wrists. Handmaids are trained to perform their tasks by the Aunts in Gilead’s *Rachel and Leah Center* and are subsequently assigned to a household. An assignment lasts around a year or two or until the handmaid is pregnant and gives birth. Handmaids can be assigned to three different households, and if, after these consecutive assignments, they have still not conceived, they are sent to “the colonies”, where they are obliged to work in toxic environmental circumstances and are sure to face death soon. Throughout the story, women are subjected to different kinds of indentured servitude and those who do not comply are tortured. Most of the novel is narrated in Offred’s voice, who has found a way to record her story on cassette tapes. This renders the story into “literature of witness”, as Atwood (2017) writes in an essay on the novel’s contemporary relevance: “Offred records her story as best she can; then she hides it, trusting that it may be found later by someone who is free to understand it and share it”.

If “nothing comes without its world”, as Donna Haraway (1997, 137) has argued, and as María Puig de la Bellacasa (2012) has taken up in her reflections on thinking and knowing with care, a careful reading of stories does well to trace the contours of the world in which a story came into being. Atwood began writing *The Handmaid’s Tale* in 1984 – the year in which George Orwell’s signature dystopian novel was set – and resided in Berlin during part of the writing. This was a world shaped by the Cold War, with totalitarian regimes on one side of the Iron Curtain, including Ceausescu’s

Romania with a reproductive regime that forced “pure” Romanian women to give birth to as many children as possible while forcibly sterilizing Roma women. The other side was shaped by the rise of Reaganite politics, which wedded economic neoliberalism to moral conservatism that found its expression in, among others, publicly affirmed pro-life stances and a chilling, necropolitical, response to the AIDS/HIV epidemic. This was the era of the rise of the religious right in the United States, with groups such as Moral Majority, Focus on the Family, and Christian Coalition accumulating power and influence. The novel, moreover, also referenced other developments that caught Atwood’s attention at the time, such as what was happening to women’s rights in the then recently installed Islamic Republic of Iran or the child-stealing of the Argentinian generals during the military dictatorship that came to an end in 1983 (Hammill 2008). There’s a sense in which Atwood’s book was its own “literature of witness” to the world in which it was conceived. Indeed, the dystopian novel, as Atwood has stated repeatedly, is a work of *speculative* fiction, not science fiction, because all the regulations of women’s bodies and reproductive rights that figure in the novel are based on historical or contemporary examples (Atwood 2017). Historical examples included the 19th-century Puritan roots that shaped U.S. society (including a reference to the Salem witch trials) as well as the institution of human chattel slavery in the U.S. and the Shoah in Europe. “There is nothing in the book that hasn’t already happened”, as Atwood (in Neuman 2006, 859) put it, “All things described in the book, people have already done to one another”.

The Handmaid’s Tale was a commentary on the social, political, and religious trends in the U.S. at the time of its writing and was concerned with what could happen with women in this emerging political economy constellation. Forty years after publication, the novel remains a significant grid of interpretation for current events – as history unfolds, this speculative fiction increasingly gains traction. In recent years, the novel has gained enormous momentum with the popular and visually stunning Hulu television series, which premiered in 2017 and is in its fifth season at the time of writing. This momentum is partially accounted for by the contours of the world in which the television series is produced: the doom of advanced neoliberalism and intense environmental crises; systematic attacks on reproductive rights (well captured in the iconic 2017 picture of Trump, surrounded by a bunch of men, signing a ban on spending federal money to international groups that perform or provide information on abortion on his first day in the Oval Office); anti-gender mobilizations in different parts of the world (with Hungary’s financial incentives for women to have more babies or Poland’s establishment of “LGBT free zones”, see Kuhar & Paternotte 2016); global *#metoo* mobilizations; and the rise of authoritarianism, including attempts to erode or overthrow the U.S. Constitution by Trump, his administration, and his followers. The momentum also prompted Atwood to write a sequel novel entitled

The Testaments (2019). The haunting force of these tales from the Republic of Gilead lies in their familiarity and the way in which the stories weave together recognizable elements from the past and the present with a dystopian future. The television series relies on flashbacks as a powerful technique to anchor the dystopian practices of Gilead in continuity with the present, and many of the flashbacks bring the viewers uncannily close to current predicaments. These flashbacks include activities – by the conspirational political movement Sons of Jacob before the political take-over through which the Republic of Gilead was established – such as campus activism in the name of freedom of speech (by a political movement who was never intent on protecting civil freedoms), as a way to build up political power, or the orchestrated pressures on LGBT academics, who eventually get labelled as “gender traitors” and are persecuted. The flashbacks also include the political take-over itself, *President’s Day Massacre*, when the Sons of Jacob seized control over the U.S. government after an orchestrated attack on the White House and the U.S. Capitol.⁶ (Strikingly, in the book they manage to blame this attack on Islamic terrorists, something which is not taken up in the television series.) As these flashbacks convey an uncanny feeling of familiarity, they render the authoritarian regime of Gilead as possible or even plausible by connecting alienating dystopian scenes with familiar contemporary ones, and thus offering a sense of a pathway from the world we currently inhabit to Gilead’s dystopian future. If “no new system can impose itself upon a previous one without incorporating many of the elements to be found in the latter” (Atwood 2010, 319) is a comment on the political overthrow from which Gilead emerged, it also accounts for the way in which, especially the television series, the dystopian future is rendered eerily close-by – around the corner, so to speak.

Unsurprisingly, feminists have relied heavily on images and symbols from *The Handmaid’s Tale*, both to make sense of and push back against contemporary gender and sexual politics that restrict reproductive freedoms. This reliance has elicited critique – some commentators have come to find the handmaid imaginary tiresome, while others emphasize that this defensive style of visual dissent positions us as having something to lose and fails to imagine the world that we might be able to gain from feminist politics (Cohen 2019). Most critical voices have focused on the question of race: the kinds of biopolitics and indeed necropolitics depicted by *The Handmaid’s Tale* have a long history of targeting the bodies of women of colour, yet as the novel and television series are centred on white women, the popularity of *The Handmaid’s Tale* seems to suggest that the violence of such biopolitical regimes is only recognized and considered as a matter of concern when inflicted upon white women.⁷ The dispossession of bodily autonomy – notably, reproductive autonomy – and the reduction of women to childbearing objects for the state to manipulate have been an integral part of (settler) colonial and white supremacist political projects,

targeting Black and Brown women in particular. Dorothy Roberts (2009) has conceptualized this as a “reproductive caste system”, in which white women and women of colour have structurally different roles, while Rayna Rapp (2019) has captured such structural inequalities in terms of “stratified reproduction”. *The Handmaid’s Tale*, however, shows and tells a story of reproductive indentured servitude with solely or mostly white handmaids – *solely* is the assumption in the book and *mostly* in the television series – and the difference between the two renditions matters. One way of approaching this focus on white women is to seek for more inclusion of characters of colour in the story. This is the direction the television series took, with a somewhat colour-blind casting, resulting in more characters of colour compared to the book. Yet this more inclusive casting raises different kinds of questions. In fact, it highlights the lack of the thematization of racism and racial politics. For instance, the presence of some handmaids of colour in the white Commander households of Gilead begs the question of what accounts for the transition from a structurally racist society of the U.S. as we currently know it (with a long history of problematizing and disciplining “miscegenation”), to a totalitarian Christian society where race is purportedly not much of an issue (and the presence of a handful of handmaids of colour is hardly commented upon) while this society also “happens” to be mostly white. Without a storyline that accounts for these racial politics, the “colour-blind” casting leaves many questions in the air, unless we are to assume that the structural racism of U.S. liberal democracy simply withered away when the Capitol and the White House were attacked, and the Republic of Gilead was established as a “post-racial” patriarchal dystopia. This does, to say the least, not seem to be a plausible assumption – at all.

The Republic of Gilead: It Was the Birth Rates

While race is at the heart of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the question is how to capture its significance well. The novel leaves us with no doubt about the white supremacist character of the Republic of Gilead, a place where “handmaids were forced to serve as breeders for elite men and their infertile wives in order to perpetuate the white race”, as Dorothy Roberts (2009, 783) comments on the book, well before the production of the television series. While the world invoked in Offred’s witness account generally radiates a white supremacist Christian theocracy, its white supremacist dimension is not made very explicit in her narration. But this changes in the epilogue of the book, titled “Historical Notes”, which is key in understanding the white supremacist politics and, indeed, the *raison d’être* of Gilead. The epilogue takes the reader to a *Gileadian Studies* academic conference, a few hundred years after the Republic of Gilead came to an end. This is an exciting moment for the scholars: the cassette tapes with Offred’s witness account had been

discovered recently, and the conference represents the first public scholarly gathering in which the findings of those working on Offred's testimony are shared and discussed.

In "Historical Notes", the reader learns in more detail how and why this dystopian society came into being: because of severe environmental crises and a sharp drop in birth rates. The authoritarian Republic of Gilead, in other words, emerged to preserve life that felt under threat. This life, however, was not life in general but was unambiguously qualified in racial terms from the outset:

Men highly placed in the regime were thus able to pick and choose among women who had demonstrated their reproductive fitness by having produced one or more healthy children, a desirable characteristic in an age of plummeting Caucasian birth rates, a phenomenon observable not only in Gilead but in most northern Caucasian societies of the time.

(Atwood 2010, 318)

Gilead, in other words, emerged as a response to *white* demographic anxieties, as it was the "Caucasian birth rates" that plummeted and "white life" that was feared to be under threat. Gilead was not only a patriarchal regime that stripped women from their reproductive autonomy but also a white supremacist regime focused on the preservation and continuation of the white population in a situation where that population understood itself as under threat. This implies that the violent gendered and sexual politics within the Republic of Gilead should not only be approached in their entanglement with white supremacist racial politics but that these racial politics – of protecting "white life" – are, in fact, the foundational force of this dystopian society.

In their exploration of the dropping birth rates, the *Gileadian Studies* academics turn to several contributing factors. The conference keynote speaker, the fictional Professor James Darcy Pieixoto (Cambridge University), enumerates the following: women's increased control of reproductive autonomy ("the widespread availability of birth control of various kinds, including abortion, in the immediate pre-Gilead period", Atwood 2010, 318), the spread of sexually transmitted diseases ("Need I remind you that this was the age of the R-strain syphilis and also the infamous AIDS epidemic, which, once they spread to the population at large, eliminated many young sexually active people from the reproductive pool?", 318), as well as ecological disaster turning livelihoods toxic ("Stillbirths, miscarriages, and genetic deformities were widespread and on the increase, and this trend has been linked to the various nuclear-plant accidents . . . and to the uncontrolled use of chemical insecticides, herbicides, and other sprays", 319). The declining birth rates, moreover, were considered a

major societal problem well before the political overthrow that established the Republic of Gilead, Pieixoto continues:

The need for what I call birth services was already recognized in the pre-Gilead period, where it was being inadequately met by “artificial insemination”, “fertility clinics”, and the use of “surrogate mothers”, who were hired for the purpose. Gilead outlawed the first two as irreligious, but legitimized and enforced the third, which was considered to have biblical precedents; they thus replaced the serial polygamy common in the pre-Gilead period with the older form of simultaneous polygamy practiced both in early Old Testament times and in the former State of Utah in the nineteenth century. As we know from the study of history, no new system can impose itself upon a previous one without incorporating many of the elements to be found in the latter, as witness the pagan elements in mediæval Christianity and the evolution of the Russian “K.G.B”. from the Czarist secret service that preceded it; and Gilead was no exception to this rule. Its racist policies, for instance, were firmly rooted in the pre-Gilead period, and racist fears provided some of the emotional fuel that allowed the Gilead takeover to succeed as well as it did.

(*Atwood 2010, 319*)

While an account of whether and why the birth rates dropped specifically among the white population is missing from the academic analysis at the conference, the *Gileadian Studies* scholars are clear about racism. Not only was Gilead shaped by racist politics – in continuity with U.S. society before the political take-over, the keynote speaker duly notes, and in contrast to a “post-racial” understanding of Gilead that the television series seems to hint at – but this racism played a foundational role in the political takeover that led to the Gilead regime. In Pieixoto’s words, racist fears were “the emotional fuel that allowed the Gilead takeover to succeed as well as it did” (319). In sum, the establishment of the Republic of Gilead was fuelled by a racist fear over declining white birth rates. Gilead is then not only the patriarchal dystopia for which it is so well-known in popular culture but also a white supremacist dystopia, obsessed with the number of *white* babies born. This dimension of white supremacy has, however, receded from view in the television series, through the lack of thematization of the racial politics that are laid out in the epilogue of the book and through the effort to create somewhat of a “post-racial” aesthetics. Admittedly, fully developing Gilead’s racial politics and “demographic anxieties” of not enough white babies being born would have made for (an even more) uncomfortable viewing of the series. Besides the violent assault on women’s reproductive autonomy, we would also be watching a violent race war waged in the terms of white supremacy. Yet, in times when replacement discourse is increasingly becoming *salonfähig*

and when violence perpetuated in its name is on the rise, omitting the racial politics of the assault on reproductive freedoms is, to say the least, a missed opportunity to create more cultural and political literacy on the operations of the race/reproduction bind.

Conclusion

There’s a particular anxiety about birth rates in replacement discourse (Bracke & Hernández Aguilar 2020b; Bracke 2020). This chapter makes a case for considering contemporary replacement conspiracy theories and violence in the same analytical and political space as contemporary assaults on reproductive freedoms. This allows us to further explore the ways in which questions of race and reproduction are entangled – an entanglement that Weinbaum (2004) has conceptualized as the *race/reproduction bind*. As the ideological operation of this bind often remains rather concealed and needs to be “excavated”, as Weinbaum puts it, this chapter discusses two instances where the bind suddenly becomes visible. Tellingly, qualifying the loss of the legal right to abortion as “a victory for white life” in a political speech is immediately framed as a “mishap” or “stumble”, and the replacement discourse frame of an iconic dystopian novel, laid out unambiguously in its epilogue, disappears in the production of a popular series based on the novel. This suggests that the race/reproduction bind that, according to Weinbaum, is central to modern intellectual and political formations is in need not only of excavation but also of sustained attention if we want to prevent it from slipping from view. This critical attention, I argue, is necessary, as the importance of understanding the race/reproduction bind and, indeed, cultivating literacy for its ideological operation cannot be overstated in times when replacement thinking is on the rise.

Notes

- 1 This work is part of the research programme *EnGendering Europe’s “Muslim Question”* with project number 016.Vici.185.077, which is financed by the Dutch Research Council (NWO).
- 2 *Roe v. Wade* was a landmark ruling that legally protected the right to abortion in the U.S. on a federal level since 1972. The overturning of this ruling by the Supreme Court effectively put an end to fifty years of legal protection of the right to abortion, by making it possible for individual states to restrict or abolish the right to abortion, which about half of the U.S. states have already done or are expected to do. Moreover, Supreme Court justice Clarence Thomas is on record as saying that, in the light of the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, several other landmark rulings should be reconsidered, including established rights to contraception access, same-sex relationships, and same-sex marriage.
- 3 The speech can be found at C-SPAN: www.c-span.org/video/?521332-1/president-trump-speaks-illinois-rally; quotes between 00:04:00 and 00:05:02.
- 4 The speech can be found at C-SPAN: www.c-span.org/video/?521332-1/president-trump-speaks-illinois-rally, quote between 00:17:33 and 00:17:40.

- 5 www.npr.org/2022/06/26/1107710215/roe-overturned-mary-miller-historic-victory-for-white-life
- 6 The attacks on the U.S. Capitol of January 6, 2021, prompted several commentators to compare the scenes taking place in the streets of Washington, DC, with those in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Anticipating the argument that is developed further in the chapter: among the many symbols of racial hatred and white supremacy that were part of the January 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol (from Confederate flags to gallows and nooses that invoked the lynchings of Black people), there were also messages that pertain specifically to the current replacement discourse, notably T-shirts with “2044”, that is, the moment when white people are projected to become a numerical minority in the U.S.
- 7 In October 2021, for instance, the Women’s March in the U.S. organized demonstrations across the country in response to the Texas law banning abortion after six weeks of pregnancy and called upon protesters *not* to wear the iconic red handmaid’s habits, see <https://twitter.com/womensmarch/status/1444302585440112648>.

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