The Handmaid's Tale

By: Sarah Atch

I have another name.
If you haven't seen the show, a quick recap:
The Handmaid's Tale came out in 2017 and it's based on a book by Margaret Atwood. It centers on a dystopian future in which fertile women are kept as breeding slaves to produce babies for the powerful commanders. The main character, June, was separated from her daughter and husband and no longer gets to use her name.

Much of the torture/dystopian systems in the show are drawn from historical realities that real women faced.

In fact, a critique of the plot is that it takes facets from the lives of enslaved black women (rape, being used like breeders, separation from children) and recasts them with a (culturally more sympathetic) white woman in the center of the story.

“Better never means better for everyone... It always means worse, for some.”
Unlike women throughout history, hand maids have had little autonomy over their own bodies. The Hand maids are raped monthly at the "ceremony" in the hopes of impregnating them. This ritualized violence has echoes of America's racial history—where black women were often subjected to the sexual "needs" of white men.

However, the show claims to be post-racial and does not address any racial dynamics or our country's racial history.
Other kinds of violence in the show reference older, less well-known tactics that patriarchal societies used to control women—both their sexuality and their speech (which were long considered to be connected).

"All you have to do, I tell myself, is keep your mouth shut and look stupid. It shouldn't be that hard."

Women have their mouths covered at various parts of the show. The most direct comparison is the mouth staples used in the 3rd season to ensure that certain handmaids are docile and obedient. As the practice spreads in Gilead, it's viewed as a threat for those who can still open their mouths—a warning.

The staples come with an elaborate face covering as well, further obscuring the woman's mouth and restricting movement.

Women were fitted with scorching bridles—painful and humiliating devices that limited speech and supposedly protected male dominance.

In the 18th century, talkative or immodest women were fitter with scorching bridles—painful and humiliating devices that limited speech and supposedly protected male dominance.
Interestingly, while the show does not address race, it looks closely at homosexuality. Being queer is a grave sin in this religious world and women found to be "gender traitors" face strict punishments that we have seen occur throughout history and into the present day— including death, clitoral castration, imprisonment, hard labor, etc.
“Nolite te bastardes carborundorum.
Don't let the bastards grind you down.”

At the heart of the matter, the Handmaid's Tale reproduces a world that sanctifies systemic and interpersonal violence against women at the hands of men, which should feel all too familiar to viewers who are paying attention. Even privileged women in the show face horrific violence for stepping out of line.

However, one last thing. I think it is worth noting is that this fictionalized world would not be possible without women (the Wives + Aunts) who are willing to do violence against other women in order to maintain their own marginal power. This of course has its roots in history just like everything else.
only religiously abhorrent but also disruptive to the natural reproductive order.

This invokes old tropes about gay people not reproducing when in fact Emily + her wife have a son before the new gov. takes over—in this way, the show critiques outdated arguments against queerness + gay marriage.
Now, I'm awake...