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Oppression, Speech, and *Mitsein* in  
Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

Perhaps one of the most remarkable claims to emerge from the scholarship on Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is the suggestion that the novel champions a retrograde notion of femininity (that is, a concept of femininity that tends to be associated with concepts of the woman as a passive, demure other). I challenge this claim through an elaboration of the first-person narrator's ability to engage in genuine human solidarity, even when forced to endure the most draconian measures of immiseration. Offred—in often agonizing detail—specifies how the forces of the Republic of Gilead attempt to destroy her, yet these attempts fail in the narrow sense that throughout it all, Offred manages to retain some hope. This victory is significant, in the sense that it suggests a human solidarity in the face of near overwhelming terror. A clue to the nature of Offred's heroism is found in the ubiquity of the forces that are arrayed against her—at virtually every turn, in virtually every imaginable way, Offred's identity is attacked by the apparatus of the state. Despite this, Offred manages to retain her identity as a member of a resistance movement and embodies the courage to step forward into an ambiguous future. Offred highlights this ambiguity in the final lines of her first-person narrative: "The van waits in the driveway. . . . Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing; I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can't be

helped.”<sup>1</sup> The seemingly totalizing force of the Other does not imply that Offred is reduced to the exemplar of a retrograde concept of a woman. That Offred is the subject of immiseration is a given. That Offred is a victim is not. Offred is a rebel.

The critical controversy regarding the nature of Offred's character reflects a disagreement between Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre on the nature of our being with others (*Mitsein*). In his brief elucidation of a subject's lived experience of shame, Sartre characterizes the Other as a hostile entity from which there is no escape. Simone de Beauvoir characterizes *Mitsein* in more positive terms. *Mitsein*, Beauvoir suggests, is our primary ontological relation (that is, it is the ontological given). As the ontological given, the *Mitsein* enjoys an axiological neutrality in the sense that any normative claim or evaluation is a predicate. For Beauvoir, our relation with others is ontologically ambiguous.

I suggest that Offred is a rebel because she can speak and be heard in an extremely oppressive society. This reflects the existence of a human solidarity—a solidarity that cannot be diminished, that cannot be broken. By the end of the narrative, Offred is not identifiable with the subdued, passive, retrograde concept of a woman. I claim that—contrary to the suggestions of several contemporary commentators on Atwood's text—the narrator of *The Handmaid's Tale* is a revolutionary feminist figure who, despite her immiseration by the Gileadean society, manages to tell her harrowing tale. The fact that Offred refuses to be ground down, so to speak, reflects Beauvoir's concept of being with others.

### Elaboration of the Dystopia of Gilead

The characters of Atwood's novel languish in a dystopian hellscape.<sup>2</sup> One of the principal practices in the Republic of

1. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), 295. Hereafter cited as Atwood, *Handmaid's Tale*.

2. The comparisons of Atwood's novel to other dystopian fictions are many. Davidson characterizes the novel as “a feminist 1984.” Cathy N. Davidson, “A Feminist 1984,” *Ms.* (February 1986), 24–26. Feuer offers what is perhaps one of the most thorough comparisons of Atwood's text to Orwell's dystopia. Lois Feuer, “Calculus of Love and Nightmare: *The Handmaid's Tale* and the Dystopian Tradition,” *Critique* 38.2 (Winter 1997): 83–95. Before writing *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood stated her intention to write “a dystopia, a negative utopia.” Lucy M.

Gilead is the regular, systematic, physical, psychological, and sexual abuse of its female population. When the reader is introduced to Offred, she is sleeping on a cot in a gymnasium that has been converted into a “red center,” an urban concentration camp where fertile women are taught to be handmaids. The narrative voice describes an institutionalized environment in which virtually every aspect of Offred’s interiority is stripped away from her until she becomes identified with “something without shape or name” (Atwood, *Handmaid’s Tale*, 1). In one particularly excruciating series of reflections, the narrative voice elaborates on the attempts to destroy her identity:

My name isn’t Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it’s forbidden. I tell myself it doesn’t matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter. I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I’ll come back to dig up, one day. I think of this name as buried. This name has an aura around it, like an amulet, some charm that’s survived from an unimaginably distant past. I lie in my single bed at night, with my eyes closed, and the name floats there behind my eyes, not quite within reach, shining in the dark. (Atwood, *Handmaid’s Tale*, 84)

The world of Gilead is governed by a theocratic governmental regime whose stipulations permeate every aspect of the social fabric. The novel’s various settings—the home, the market, the doctor’s office, the brothel—are sites of institutional control. Erving Goffman suggests that such overarching control effectively produces “total institutions” where individuals are cut off from every aspect of the extrainstitutional world, so that their concept of the self—that is, their very sense of identity—may be experimented on.<sup>3</sup> In addition to being deprived of their names, the inmates at the red center are subjected to various forms of physical abuse, such as being electrocuted with cattle-prods, having their arms beaten (Atwood, *Handmaid’s Tale*, 194), and undergoing involuntary medical procedures (for example, enucleation of the eye) that

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Friebert, “Control and Creativity: The Politics of Risk in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” in *Critical Essays on Margaret Atwood*, ed. Judith McCombs (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1988), 290.

3. Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961), 22.

are inflicted for punitive effect. Michel Foucault points out that totalitarian regimes—which seek to create or maintain a dystopian mode of life—tend to create a strange nexus of torture and educational practices.<sup>4</sup> The Republic of Gilead tries to make its females forget all aspects of the lives they might have led before the time period represented in the novel (that is, the time period described as the past in the novel's world). Darius Rejali characterizes the attempts to inflict misery with the aim of destroying or diminishing an individual's subjectivity as a form of *penal torture*. Rejali distinguishes between legal torture and penal torture. Legal torture is performed at the order of a judge, magistrate, or legally sanctioned administrative body such as a tribunal; penal torture is administered as a punishment during or after an investigation. Rejali explains that

in each case one must inquire whether physical torment is involved, whether the individual is helpless and detained, whether the agents who practice it are state or quasi-state officials, and whether it is put toward public purposes. If the answer in each case is yes, then it is torture, regardless of what it is called. If, in addition, the practice is legally authorized or authorized by custom, then it is a legal torture, and depending on whether it is practiced during investigation or after judgment, it is either judicial torture or penal torture.<sup>5</sup>

The particular hell of Gilead is evidenced in the polymorphous torture visited on its women—a torture whose aim is the diminishment and utter destruction of any memories that they might have of their previous identities as relatively sovereign subjects in the communities of pre-Gileadean society.

The oppressive nature of Gilead's society is further adduced through reference to the narrator's lived experience. Offred is afforded little opportunity to celebrate any sense of difference or uniqueness. Iris Marion Young suggests that social practices that diminish difference reflect an oppressive society.<sup>6</sup> Young characterizes difference as involving any of three components: (a) a felt

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4. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979), 87.

5. Darius Rejali, *Torture and Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007), 562.

6. Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990), 10. Michel Foucault suggests a similar point when he notes that disciplinary societies use enhanced

sense of particularity; (b) awareness of the diverse capabilities of one's body and the variegated nature of human desire; and (c) an awareness of "the inexhaustibility of linguistic and social relations without a unitary, undifferentiated origin."<sup>7</sup> Offred's narrative suggests that she is deprived of the possibility of realizing any of these. The way one dresses—or is forced to dress—is one of the primary means that one has of identifying oneself as different from others in one's social group. Offred points out that her clothing is assigned to her, which deprives her of one of the primary means by which she could visually represent a sense of difference from the other handmaids. Throughout the novel, Offred's sexual behaviors are rigorously codified, in the sense that the particular time, place, partner, and method of copulation are not chosen by her. Offred is raped repeatedly throughout the novel. The explicit external limitation of the objects of Offred's sexual desire is elaborated with near-excruciating detail in the scene in which Serena Joy orders Offred to take the risk of violating the laws of the explicitly oppressive theocratic regime by submitting to the advances of the Commander's driver (Atwood, *Handmaid's Tale*, 205). The restriction of social relations is evidenced by the fact that handmaids are not permitted to go out in public without a "companion" who acts as their chaperone. Atwood has remarked that no aspect of the novel is pure fabrication in that events described in the novel have historical correlates.<sup>8</sup> One all too chillingly contemporary instance of the restriction of linguistic relations is the novel's account of the

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techniques of surveillance and examination to subjugate their populations. Elaborating on the state's "ritualization" of surveillance, Foucault writes, "It is a normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to quantify, to classify and to punish. It establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them. That is why, in all the mechanisms of discipline, the examination is highly ritualized. In it are combined the ceremony of power and the form of the experiment, the deployment of force and the establishment of truth. At the heart of the procedure of discipline, it manifests the subjection of those who are perceived as objects and the objectification of those who are subjected." Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 184–85.

7. Young notes that "some feminist and postmodern writers have suggested that a denial of difference structures Western reason, where difference means particularity, the heterogeneity of the body and affectivity, or the inexhaustibility of linguistic and social relations without a unitary, undifferentiated origin." Young, *Justice*, 10.

8. Margaret Atwood, "Margaret Atwood: 'There's Nothing in the Book That Has Not Already Happened,'" interview by Katherine Govier, *Quill and Quire* 51.9 (September 1985): 66–67.

phenomenon of public book burning.<sup>9</sup> The diminishment of each of the three components of a felt sense of difference is one of the primary mechanisms by which an oppressive regime controls its citizenry. Offred's narration of her lived experience is a harrowing account of an immiserated, utterly subjugated person who is forcefully divested of her sense of individual difference.

Atwood specifies that, in the context of the dystopian literary genre, female characters tend to be portrayed as "sexless automations or rebels against the regime."<sup>10</sup> Given the explicitly dystopian aspects of *The Handmaid's Tale*, one might expect Offred to be similar to other female rebels in literature such as Orwell's Julia, Defoe's Moll Flanders, Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, Huxley's Julia, and Zamyatin's I-330, but Offred seems to have had every rebellious tendency beaten out of her. A brief survey of the critical literature on Offred's capacities for rebellion demonstrates the scholarly consensus that Offred should be identified as a rather pusillanimous character.

Sandra Tomc suggests that *The Handmaid's Tale* is best understood as the author's expression of an explicitly conservative political agenda. Far from being an exemplar of "insurgent feminism," the character of Offred, according to Tomc, should be understood as an advocate for a traditional concept of femininity. Tomc explains, "For a novel so overtly offered as a piece of feminist doctrine, *The Handmaid's Tale* delivers a curiously, and, for Atwood, an unwontedly conservative interpretation of women's exemplary social actions, advocating what looks like more traditional femininity than insurgent feminism."<sup>11</sup> Citing the novel's generally favorable reviews in Canada, and the author's receipt of the Canadian Governor General's Award, Tomc falsely suggests that Atwood's political views tend to reflect an explicit Canadian nationalist sentiment (that is, the uncontentious view that Canada should maintain its sovereign autonomy). Allan Weiss points out

9. Atwood, "Margaret Atwood," 29.

10. Margaret Atwood, *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination* (New York: Nan A. Talese, 2011), 146.

11. Sandra Tomc, "The Missionary Position: Feminism and Nationalism in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*," *Canadian Literature* 138-39 (1993): 73-87, 73-74.

that Tomc's speculation about the nature of Atwood's political views is irrelevant to any elaboration of the thematic content of the novel.<sup>12</sup> Whether Atwood harbors Canadian nationalist sentiments is neither here nor there, in the sense that the content of a literary work of art is not reducible to the author's biography. Were it the case that Atwood held a particular set of political beliefs, this would not imply that these are reflected in the writer's fictional work.

Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor argues from more coherent logical ground when she suggests that Offred is, at best, "a problematic heroine from a feminist standpoint" because her rebellions seem to be futile (that is, amounting to no concrete challenge to the oppressive regime, the alleviation of Offred's suffering, or the possibility of ascribing any noble motive to her actions).<sup>13</sup> J. Brooks Bouson cautiously elucidates Offred's putative complicity when she suggests that Offred is "the victim of circumstances, not an active agent capable of directing the plot of her own life."<sup>14</sup> Maroula Joannou suggests that Atwood's narrator is most accurately characterized as a "solitary weeper" whose existence is defined by playing the role of the victim forever in flight from various oppressors.<sup>15</sup> Though these characterizations of Offred as a broken woman seem not to be entirely misplaced in the sense that there is textual evidence that Offred explicitly claims that she wishes to be "abject"—it is incorrect to deduce from these that Offred has wholly accepted the role of victim.

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12. Allen Weiss, "Offred's Complicity and the Dystopian Tradition in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*," *Studies in Canadian Literature* 34.1 (January 2009): 120–41, 121.

13. Wagner-Lawlor remarks that "Offred herself is a problematic heroine from the feminist standpoint. She is politically complacent before the Gileadean takeover—thus to some degree complicitous in it, as she is honest enough to acknowledge, at least in retrospect. Her final step into the Eyes' black van can hardly be called a brave or political act, in as much as she has no real choice, not having in hand the means to kill herself, even if she wanted to, which she did not." Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor, "From Irony to Affiliation in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*," *Critique* 45.1 (Fall 2003): 83–96, 83.

14. J. Brooks Bouson, *Brutal Choreographies: Oppositional Strategies and Narrative Design in the Novels of Margaret Atwood* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1993), 154.

15. Maroula Joannou, "'Finding New Words and Creating New Methods': *Three Guineas* and *The Handmaid's Tale*," in *Virginia Woolf and Fascism: Resisting the Dictators' Seduction*, ed. Merry M. Pawlowski (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave, 2001), 148.

After witnessing the brutal murder of an insurgent and hearing of her companion's suicide, Offred suggests that she would be content with the mere survival of a mere object divested from all sense of human solidarity. Atwood writes, "Everything they taught at the Red Center, everything I've resisted, comes flooding in. . . . I resign my body freely, to the uses of others. They can do what they like with me. I am abject" (Atwood, *Handmaid's Tale*, 286). The key question is what Offred desires to be abject from? The content of the rest of the passage indicates that Offred does not want to be dehumanized (that is, she does not wish to be made into a "wingless angel").<sup>16</sup> Even in the direst of circumstances—even at her psychologically lowest point—Offred speaks a profound desire to survive as a member of the human community.

Objecting to the characterization of Offred as a victim, Jeanne Campbell Reesman suggests that Offred's act of recording her testimonial for future generations constitutes a concrete act of rebellion.<sup>17</sup> Reesman's defense of the claim that Offred is a rebel seems dubious in the sense that the "Historical Notes" section of the novel alludes to the fact that the Republic of Gilead survived for many years following Offred's death.<sup>18</sup> There seems to be very little textual evidence that Offred's testimony led to any sort of generalized political revolt. One's ability to foment a political revolution is too rigid a criterion by which to assess whether one is a victim. If, in order not to be a victim, one would have to start a political revolution, then all citizens living under the yoke of an oppressive regime would be victims *solely* because they did not take to the streets to lob Molotov cocktails at federal buildings—a demand that relies on a false restriction of the category of nonvictim. Carol L. Breenan suggests that the correct criterion for assessing Offred's nature involves the character's ability

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16. Atwood, *Handmaid's Tale*, 331.

17. As Reesman explains, Offred's "voice offers a moving testament of the power of language to transform reality in order to overcome the oppressive designs imposed by human beings." Jeanne Campbell Reesman, "Dark Knowledge in *The Handmaid's Tale*," *CEA Critic* 53.3 (1991): 6–22, 6.

18. Offred was a handmaiden of Frederick J. Waterford, who was a "Commander" during the early period of Gilead. Atwood, *Handmaid's Tale*, 181.

to use language to express revolutionary sentiments.<sup>19</sup> At frequent points throughout her narrative, Offred elaborates that she will “not let the bastards grind her down.”<sup>20</sup> The expression of this revolutionary hope—not the ability to start a generalized political revolution—is the correct criterion to use in the assessment of Offred’s character.

### A Disagreement about the Nature of *Mitsein*

By the end of the novel, we are led to conclude that Offred has died as a refugee. So great is the power of the Gileadean Other that we are compelled by the novel’s Professor Pieixoto to question the veracity of Offred’s testimonial. Our being with others is fraught, in the sense that Sartre seems to suggest that our being with others is (a) ontologically primary and (b) necessarily involves conflict. In his discussion of shame in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre characterizes the Other negatively: the Other reduces an individual’s lived experience to servitude. Beauvoir is a bit more positive. *Mitsein* is rehabilitated with the observation that our being with the Others is precisely what allows us to avoid succumbing to the “facticity”<sup>21</sup> of a bleak world in which the individual is relegated to the diminished status of a thing among things (that is, entities deprived of any substantive means of enacting their freedom; they are deprived of any means of communication).

William L. McBride observes that Sartre’s elaboration of the Heideggerian concept of *Mitsein* is reflective of a worldview that

19. Carol L. Beran, “Images of Women’s Power in Contemporary Canadian Fiction by Women,” *Studies in Canadian Literature* 15.2 (1990): 55–76, 71.

20. The character of Offred reflects, “I pray silently: Nolite te bastardes carborundorum.” Atwood, *Handmaid’s Tale*, 90.

21. Beauvoir illustrates the profound negativity of an existence reduced to “pure facticity” by quoting a novel written by a misanthrope: “Reduced to pure facticity, congealed in his immanence, cut off from his future, deprived of his transcendence and of the world which that transcendence discloses, a man no longer appears as anything more than a thing among things which can be subtracted from the collectivity of other things without its leaving upon the earth any trace of its absence.” Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel P, 1948), 44–45.

is almost one-sidedly pessimistic.<sup>22</sup> Sartre suggests the most explicitly negative account of the subject's relation with the Other. Sartre identifies the Other as an inexorable, ontologically primordial (that is, given) entity that continually pinions the individual under its gaze.<sup>23</sup> The extent to which the gaze of the Other defines the subject's lived experience is illustrated in Sartre's observation that the subject's (contrary) sensations of guilt and pride stem from the gaze of the Other.<sup>24</sup> Here, the implication is that aspects of the subject's identity are significantly shaped by an entity or group that is explicitly beyond the subject's control. The Other is (a) ontically extrinsic; (b) axiologically primary, in the sense that it causes value; and (c) ontologically primary. Nancy Bauer elaborates on the political aspects of the gaze of the Other when she notes that the Other effectively makes the subjects into slaves who are so completely immiserated as to willingly accept their own servitude.<sup>25</sup> So comprehensive is the nature of the power of

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22. Elaborating on the difference between Sartre's and Beauvoir's thought about *Mitsein*, McBride specifies that Sartre's position reflected an attitude of "seriousness" that is ill-fitting to any ethical project. McBride writes that Beauvoir "was essentially more optimistic about the future. . . . Hers was a measured optimism to be sure, with no promise of some 'final victory' or end to the struggle, but there are numerous texts in which she takes a clearly more positive view than he about the possibilities of human love, of some genuine human community as captured in Heidegger's concept of *Mitsein* (about which Sartre was almost never positive) and in short, about the human adventure itself. Years later, Sartre seemed to confirm that his early worldview had been the one-sidedly pessimistic type I am suggesting as a contrast with Beauvoir's." William L. McBride, "Taking a Distance: Exploring Some Points of Divergence between Beauvoir and Sartre," in *Beauvoir and Sartre: The Riddle of Influence*, ed. Christine Daigle and Jacob Golomb (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2009), 199.

23. Sartre observes that "for me the Other is first the being for whom I am an object; that is, the being through whom I gain my objectness. If I am to be able to conceive of even one of my properties in the objective mode, then the Other is already given. He is given not as a being of my universe but as a pure subject. Thus this pure subject which by definition I am unable to know—i.e., to posit as object—is always there out of reach and without distance whenever I try to grasp myself as object." Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 270.

24. Sartre explains, "Both my shame and my pride stem from the fact that I have an 'outside' or 'nature,' a self which exists for the Other and which I am unable to determine or even to know." Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, xxxiii.

25. "In the one short discussion of pride," Bauer writes, Sartre "seems to suggest that, indeed, experiencing it in response to the Other's Look leads not to a life-and-death struggle with the Other but to a complacent acceptance of oneself as nothing other than Being-for-Others. But because the self that is for-Others is inherently incapable of action—is . . . nothing other than the fixed object of the Other's perception—to accept oneself as nothing other than Being-for-Others

the Other that Sartre cautiously suggests that its “look” implies “a total metamorphosis of the *world*,”<sup>26</sup> in that it defines the conceptual lens (that is, the objectivity) through which the world obtains as something meaningful. Sartre’s claim is that the look of the Other determines the very set of criteria by which we make truth-claims about the nature of reality. Sartre explicitly claims that the look of the other involves the destruction of any sense of objectivity for the viewed subject.<sup>27</sup> There is no axiologically neutral criterion by which to assess the world. Every claim that the gazed-upon subject may make to axiologically neutral truth is diminished, in that putatively neutral criteria—such as those that are used in the measurement of spatial distance or temporal duration—are dependent upon an Other whose powers are so comprehensive that they penetrate to the very heart of the subject’s being (that is, the criteria by which the subject assesses the world are provided by the Other, which remains transcendent to her). The power of the Other to transform the nature of reality is so complete that, if remarked upon at all, it tends to be dismissed as the subject of a banal observation. This tendency is illustrated when Offred wakes up in the red center to notice that her concept of time—the seemingly objective measure of the duration of the motion of bodies—is entirely determined by the Other (Atwood, *Handmaid’s Tale*, 8). Instead of a duration measured by the regular progression of invariable units of time, Offred’s lived experience is a “blank time” (Atwood, *Handmaid’s Tale*, 70), whose indeterminate duration is defined by the orders of a transcendent other (that is, one of the novel’s “aunts”) or the irregular ringing of a church bell. In a universe so completely determined by the look of the Other, there is no aspect of reality that is independent.

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is to deny the fundamental fact of one’s own subjectivity, of one’s own Being-for-Self.” Nancy Bauer, *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy, and Feminism* (New York: Columbia UP, 2001), 109.

26. Sartre writes, “The Other’s look touches me across the world and is not only a transformation of myself but a total metamorphosis of the world. I am looked-at in a world which is looked-at. In particular the Other’s look, which is a look-looking and not a look looked-at, denies my distances from objects and unfolds its own distances.” Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 279.

27. “The Other’s look as the necessary condition of my objectivity,” Sartre writes, “is the destruction of all objectivity for me.” Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 279.

Beauvoir characterizes the subject's relation with the other (that is, *Mitsein*) in a more positive light, insofar as our relation with others is not entirely negative (that is, not necessarily immiserating). Though every concept of our world may be shaped in our being with others, these relations need not be characterized only as unmitigated antagonism. In the bleakness of the Gileadean regime, Offred still manages to retain the hope of a less oppressive lived experience by thinking that someday Mayday rebels may overthrow the Gileadean regime or transport her safely to the borders of Canada—a land that, in the context of the novel, is free from the institutionalized misogyny, malevolence, and utterly feckless leadership that typifies the remains of the American republic. Offred manages genuine human solidarity in her conversations with Nick and Moira. Were Sartre's concept of *Mitsein* wholly adequate, genuine human solidarity would not obtain.

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir generalizes the point that Claude Lévi-Strauss makes in his critique of James G. Frazer's analysis of Australian marriage customs<sup>28</sup> to suggest that the female's heterosexual relation to a male is a fundamental category of one's lived experience.<sup>29</sup> Though Beauvoir cautiously notes that an identification of being with others as *solely* constituted by "solidarity and friendship" is inadequate in that it does not afford any means of elaborating on the heinous aspects of human relationships such as wars and explicit attempts to silence, degrade, erode, or undermine the freedom of the other, she also notes that the *Mitsein* involves a recognition of the reciprocity of the relation.<sup>30</sup> Were it

28. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, ed. Rodney Needham, trans. James Harle Bell, John Richard von Sturmer, and Rodney Needham (Boston: Beacon P, 1969), 136.

29. Beauvoir explains that "the category of Other is as original as consciousness itself. The duality between Self and Other can be found in the most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies; this division did not always fall into the category of the division of the sexes, it was not based on any empirical given: this comes out in works like Granet's on Chinese thought, and Dumézil's on India and Rome. In couples such as Varuna-Mitra, Uranus-Zeus, Sun-Moon, Day-Night, no feminine element is involved at the outset; neither in Good-Evil, auspicious and inauspicious, left and right, God and Lucifer; alterity is the fundamental category of human thought." Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage, 2011), 27, ebook.

30. "The other consciousness," Beauvoir writes, "has an opposing reciprocal claim: traveling, a local is shocked to realize that in neighboring countries locals view him as a foreigner; between villages, clans, nations, and classes there are wars, potlatches, agreements, treaties, and struggles

the case that the Other constantly represented itself to the subject as a Sartrean “demonic double”<sup>31</sup> that aims at the subject’s diminishment, then one would be hard pressed to account for any relation of the self with the Other that results in flourishing—and such relations do happen.

In her detailed reading of Beauvoir’s elaboration of our being with others, Bauer elaborates on the nuanced difference between Sartre’s and Beauvoir’s concepts of *Mitsein*. Whereas Sartre has an explicitly pessimistic view of the relations with the other—that is, a view that conjures images of intractably hostile opponents who are “fundamentally at each other’s throats”<sup>32</sup>—Beauvoir tends to characterize our being with others as potentially something other than this.<sup>33</sup> Though Beauvoir is admittedly vague about the details of one’s relation to others, this should not be taken as reflective of a weakness in her conceptualization of the phenomenon, in the sense that the ambiguity of the concept is reflective of the varied nature of one’s lived experience.<sup>34</sup> *Mitsein* tends to be characterized as the inexact coupling that is ontologically primary to all processes of individuation. Beauvoir writes:

Here again, the case of the human species cannot be reduced to any other; men do not define themselves first as individuals; men and women have never challenged each other in individual fights; the couple is an original *Mitsein*; and it is always a fixed or transitory element of a wider collectivity; within these societies, who, the male or the female, is the more necessary for the species? In terms of gametes, in terms of the biological functions of coitus and gestation, the

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that remove the absolute meaning from the idea of the Other and bring out its relativity; whether one likes it or not, individuals and groups have no choice but to recognize the reciprocity of their relation.” Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 28.

31. Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Critique of Dialectical Reason, Volume 1: Theory of Practical Ensembles*, ed. Jonathan Rée, trans. Alan Sheridan Smith (London: New Left Books, 1976), 132.

32. Nancy Bauer, “Being With as Being Against: Heidegger Meets Hegel in *The Second Sex*,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 34.2 (2001): 129–49, 131.

33. Bauer gives an elegant elucidation of this point: “A careful reading of *The Second Sex*, however, reveals that the claim that human beings harbour a ‘fundamental hostility toward every other consciousness’ does not entail for Beauvoir—as it does for Sartre—the impossibility of non-hostile human relations.” Bauer, “Being,” 131–32.

34. McBride clarifies Beauvoir’s concept of ambiguity as the “recognition of the grey areas, softening of the sharp lines, and emphasis on what is between, what is ultimately unclear.” McBride, “Taking a Distance,” 192.

male principle creates to maintain and the female principle maintains to create: What becomes of this division in social life? For species attached to foreign bodies or to the substrata, for those to whom nature grants food abundantly and effortlessly, the role of the male is limited to fertilization; when it is necessary to search, chase, or fight to provide food needed for offspring, the male often helps with their maintenance; this help becomes absolutely indispensable in a species where children remain incapable of taking care of their own needs for a long period after the mother stops nursing them: the male's work then takes on an extreme importance; the lives he brought forth could not maintain themselves without him.<sup>35</sup>

Overlooking the decidedly materialist tone of this passage—which, in fairness to Beauvoir, is taken from her thorough critique of biological reductionism (that is, the misguided theoretical attempt to reduce all phenomena to biological interactions)—one notices that there is nothing ontologically prior to the *Mitsein*. In this sense, Beauvoir's concept of *Mitsein* can be seen as an analogue to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's characterization of the "flesh" as the ontologically primordial "element" of being.<sup>36</sup> In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir explicitly characterizes our being with others (that is, our "collectivity") as the ontologically primordial condition—the given—on which the varied processes of our individuation depend.<sup>37</sup> The claim that *Mitsein* is the ontological first condition implies that it is axiologically neutral. Bauer suggests that *Mitsein* is the ambiguous mode of being in which people may value others and participate in the determination of their own value.<sup>38</sup> Though Bauer cautiously notes that though an entity's

35. Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 70–71.

36. Merleau-Ponty explains that "the flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance. To designate it we should use the old term 'element,' in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is, in the sense of a general thing, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being." Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1968), 139.

37. "Between the past which no longer is and the future which is not yet," Beauvoir writes, "this moment when he exists is nothing. This privilege, which he alone possesses, of being a sovereign and unique subject amidst a universe of objects, is what he shares with all his fellow-men. In turn an object for others, he is nothing more than an individual in the collectivity on which he depends." Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 2.

38. Bauer, "Being," 144.

being with others does not imply “that beings are bonded together in some salutary way,”<sup>39</sup> neither does it necessarily entail that beings are condemned to an inauthentic existence, in which each seeks to immiserate the other. Beauvoir’s concept of *Mitsein* is more positive than Sartre’s insofar as negative values are not inscribed on it in advance of a being’s lived experience. That value subsists from the *Mitsein*, allows for the possibility of positivity in one’s lived experience. If negative values were identified with *Mitsein*, then there would be no possibility of any sort of authentic relation to emerge. One of the outcomes of Beauvoir’s concept of our being with others is that positivity—characterized as the manifold ways that beings can speak, be heard, and not have their voice drowned out by a totalizing Other—does emerge.

### Concluding Remarks

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir characterizes her project as the giving voice to the lived experience of women. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the first-person narrative voice—who elaborates her own lived experience in a world that mercilessly tries to silence her—is an expression of positivity. The fact that hers is a voice that is not silenced—to the extent that the handmaid’s tale exists as an ominous warning of how the human *Mitsein* could be diminished through the silencing of women (that is, condemning women to the facticity of mute objects without a demonstrable interiority)—is a testament to Offred’s status as a feminist icon. That Offred speaks, constituting her narrative in the most adverse of worlds, that she relates a tale, *is* her success in overcoming the retrograde concept of female as a demure other.

For Sartre, the Other is a terror in the sense that our being with others does not tend toward any liberation. Beauvoir’s concept of *Mitsein* is more positive insofar as the struggles that humans face are not *already* condemned to failure. That Offred can communicate that she does not wish to be “beaten down”—that she can chronicle the abuses that she faces while retaining the hope that she will not be reduced to a brute thing among other

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39. Bauer, “Being,” 144.

things—is reflective of Beauvoir's concept of being with others and a testament to Offred's status as a revolutionary feminist icon.

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